



This Blue Ball

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A Weblog Novel

Presented by Wayne Miller

Version 1.0

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The following is supposed to be a novel. The text is not my own, but signed over to me by a man unknown to me but for a few communications through email. When he first approached me, I was surprised that my spam filter let him through. "I've tried several times before," he admitted. "Why in the world," I replied, "would you give me this to be posted online? Why not post it yourself?" "Because," he wrote back, "for me it is not fiction. But it must be fiction, and so someone like you, who could never believe in its contents, must be the author." "I'm not the author," I sent back to him, rather indignant, "and I would never present myself as such. In fact, if I were to post this for whatever reason, then it would be with our exchange prepended to the document." Almost immediately, he replied: "Perfect! Your attestation will provide the very evidence I desire; in this case, nothing could

appear more fictional than the truth."

We communicated a few more times, but I could make no more sense of what he wrote me than what I've picked out above. I suggested a pen name or anonymous publication, but he insisted that such border fictions would undermine the fundamental one. When he sent me the document, I couldn't help myself, first from reading the whole thing, then from suggesting a number of changes and edits for readability. He accepted them wholesale, and then added: "Now the text belongs to you." None of my subsequent emails were answered; the email address ceased to exist. His name proved to be a dead-end.

I've researched as much as I can without seeing any piece of the text confirmed or even suggested in reality. None of it appears under anyone else's name. Still, it is against my better judgment that I share the document on the Internet, more or less as it was shared with me. It is protected -- and freed -- by a Creative Commons license. Make of it what you will.

Note:

Go read the last page to see the preamble. It is the 39th entry, but it was placed first in the text. Read it now, or when you've finished the text.

Weblog: This Blue Ball

No. 1 -- There won't be dates in this weblog, for reasons of security and caution. Entries will appear no more than one a day, but not necessarily when I've submitted them. As we progress you'll get a sense for why I am so obsessed. Perhaps it will suffice for now to point briefly to the genesis. I am dedicating this little website to the memory of a good friend, whom I never met, a self-designated hacker by the nom de raconteur of Craig Phissure. A small number of years ago, hacker Phissure came across what he thought was undeniable evidence of the existence of aliens -- extraterrestrial intelligence. In an effort to publicize this discovery, Phissure established a website and founded a society with some dozen of his closest associates, a group which he officially dubbed the Society for this Blue Ball in a Big Black Void. I don't think the other members thought much of this name, inasmuch as its acronym did not play on a sexual or scatological function, but they recognized and respected Phissure's role as leader and dominant voice. The "Frequently Asked Questions" portion of the site was a monument to Phissure's style and influence, and we'll have occasion to return to it by-and-by.

What the FAQ won't show is that within six months of its publication, a series of mind-boggling coincidences removed every society member from the surface of this blue ball. Each death in turn was deemed an

accident, except one case involving a gunshot to the head in a dead-end room in a seedy hotel. They all had a certain plausibility -- a single-car accident here, a heart attack there, a hit- and-run over there -- if you did not tally them out and timeline them. Since these were for the most part virtual associates, spread across the continent, there was no one person left to do that work.

The website disappeared shortly after the untimely death of Craig Phissure, may he rest in peace. Not only did it disappear, but the fact of its existence became impossible to prove if one did not have the site mirrored locally, on one's own drive. All the major search engines displayed no knowledge of the site. Whois and other registration sites denied any once or present ownership of thisblueball.org. Attempts to repost any amount of the original texts led to servers crashing, files disappearing and various forms of intimidation: identity theft, surveillance by investigators for who knows what imputed crime, and plain old threatening phone calls. This strategy, heavy-handed as it was, succeeded in isolating the Blue Ball doctrine, quarantined in the coffins of society members and in archived disks of a frightened few. And this effort would probably have succeeded without the dogged pursuit of one last blueballer. This gentleman was not a live friend of Mr. Phissure, but he, too, found his way to Phissure's material and

Phissure's point of view, and one might say that he became a friend of Phissure, despite the fact that his friend was ash in a vase, languishing on a shelf until the day that sub-orbital spreading of ashes across the atmosphere becomes affordable for a mere mortal. Our neo-blueballer, a not-so-gentle soul by the name of Gary Corinth, became a believer not through his own gumption as much as through someone else's plight. I will be telling their tale in due time. For now, let me clarify a few things for those joining my audience: your usual tricks won't work. You won't be able to hack in and find out who I am, and denounce me with your accustomed puerile bravado in your favorite Yahoo or Netnews group. For those of you who don't know what I'm referring to, let me explain. Since my postings are anonymous, some netizens will Pavlov-style decide that my anonymity must be torn asunder, ripped from me like the delusions of a Nero fiddling among his own smoldering ruins. They will apply the usual bag of tricks to try to uncover my identity, most of which involve a standard set of network searching tools -- quite useless in this case. For the more incorrigible, the bag of tricks will include efforts to hack into the server that should hold my identity.

Hacking is a much oversold activity. In its simplest form, it's usually nothing more than the rote application of a small set of principles, a

cookbook of possibilities. The whole field of hacking was created by a tempting loophole in John von Neumann's insight into computer design: that computer memory need not be divided between operation and data, between program and information. This created the universal computer -- the device able to adapt to any computational task -- but it also created a perfectly agnostic tool, as susceptible to the service of perversion as to that of good. I rely upon the rings of security built into the weblog server to protect elements of my identity. But these rings are an illusion built upon illusions. Just as the principles of computational order coexist with the chaos of information, security exists in a musical round with collapse.

We attempt to build principles of security that will control access to the other algorithmic building blocks within the computer, but this intervention is a block of code like any other block of code. If you, the would-be hacker, can derail the transition into the security code, you can disable any security safely, confidently, without the slightest alarm going off. If you require an example: a highly successful approach in the case of Web servers has been, for years actually, to send a URL that causes a block of code with security principles to fail utterly, perhaps by sending an extra long URL, and then appending a command that the fail-over code executes. That execution, in turn,

gives the hacker an opportunity to assume control of the execution queue in the CPU, and he's on his way. There's no inherent reason why this approach should work, but equally no inherent reason why security should work. It's all just code, amoral algorithms, manipulable instructions piled one upon the other in memory or on a disc.

Script kiddies use the cookbook put together by more studied hackers to break into someone's computer, and suddenly they're masters of cyberspace. Some of these juveniles are no doubt already busy trying to break into the server that this weblog runs on. Sorry, boys, the sys admins have been thoroughly warned, every possible entrée has been carefully closed and sealed. Even the easiest way to overcome security -- the frail human interface to the code -- has been carefully pruned and cleaned up; almost nothing else runs on the box. The box itself runs in a foreign land that is decidedly uninterested in governmental intervention from the West.

Most importantly for our zealots, the staff of the hosting service doesn't know who I am. They have agreed to some compromises in their usual demands for accountability, this time in exchange for heftier billings. All transactions have been small and untraceable international transfers. Even the best source of contact -- my logins to the machine -- is carefully cloaked through an ever- changing series

of zombie computers and anonymizers.

But please do continue your fruitless efforts. There is no such thing as perfect security, or true predictability in complexity, and some one of you may find a way in, may find some distant trace of my identity and chart your way back to me. Nothing is impossible, and if I were a betting man, I would have to go with the Vegas odds of my meeting a fate similar to Craig Phissure's. But as long as it can, the show will go on.

No. 2 -- Gary Corinth was a man of some destiny: not that you would recognize it from looking at him. He was non-descript in the way that overweight, balding, self-conscious and arrogant men sometimes are, a face with pock marks and an assortment of pimples, a dirty-looking, poorly shaved chin, blue- gray eyes disproportionately small to the jowls and ears, glasses that bore the blue-green tinge of years of neglect. It's not a pleasant face -- more spiteful than helpful, more vengeful than intelligent -- a pallid face that betrays the softness of a life lived in air-conditioned spaces, but still bearing the weight of a lifetime of metaphorical boots in the face. He did not enjoy life much, en gros, but there was something driving him, something that his defeatism and anger and envy did not engender and could not utterly vanquish. He may not have recognized it, but others did.

He worked for a software/hardware company as an engineer of some sort. Because he did not excel at his trade, he tended to be fungible -- moved from one project or division to the other in the expectation that he would see the writing on the wall and leave his employer for another. Gary was nothing if not tenacious, well beyond what served his career. He would retool grimly, come to work on time, clock his hours and go home, to one knows not what. He did not socialize and was not expected to. In a defining moment, he bragged to a colleague about having gone to Thailand as a sexual tourist over the holidays. That little story made the rounds quickly, leading to wobbly Hula dolls and blurry child pornography appearing in his cubicle, and a reprimand from his boss for making the work environment difficult for nearby female coworkers. None of them would admit to having made the report, and none probably did. While they seemed to think Gary was an inveterate pervert, they doubted in more than one conversation that he did more than jerk off in his living room. Gary never said a word about any of this, including the reprimand, but he was quite sure it was part of the management campaign to geld and pasture him.

Gary's plans tended to cross a certain threshold of respectability, and eventually got him into the whole blue ball mess. One day, long after the Thai incident but not so long that it was forgotten, both for its

tawdriness and its allure, Gary decided to put a truism from "Dear Abby" to the test. He resolved to go to a church to meet a nice young woman, hopefully younger than he, svelte and attractive in an understated way, and just repressed enough to find in him an unexpected savior from spinsterhood. This was an experiment, in the sense that he often undertook experiments to see how his best intentions were squelched and undermined by a cruelly indifferent life force that lay somewhere outside of him. He saw nothing contradictory in the fact that he undertook this from the point of view of a sexual adventure, not as an assay in love. There was precious little in Abby's constant refrain that demanded more than a superficial adherence to what was good and moral and just. And Gary saw no contradiction in reading her column regularly, even religiously.

Much to Gary's surprise, it just so happened that Abby was right. At every church he visited, there were groups with earnest young women, who were to a one surprised to find themselves single at an age when so many of their cohort had married and bought cars and houses, and perhaps even engendered offspring. Still, desperate or not, these women were hardly interested in him. At one point, Gary figured they smelled something of the impostor in him -- so he decided to practice authenticity. He volunteered for committees, and showed up for bake

sales and informational nights when no one but the organizers did. He went to church every Sunday, and sometimes on a Wednesday, without fail for almost a year. It was a monumental effort, and for a very long time he had nothing to show for it but the occasional pat on the back, and enigmatic, distancing, sympathetic smiles. Still, you can't say that he resented the struggle, and there might be something in the notion that he was hungry for human contact, a treatment that this experiment provided in droves.

One day the payoff came. He was talking to a woman, almost his age, dignified and haggard from work and single parenthood, and she smiled at something he said, and Gary let fly: "Would you mind if I came by sometime and took you and your son to dinner?" She looked at him in a moment of surprise and suspicion, as if he might already be showing signs of regretting his invitation. But when she saw nothing of the kind, perhaps even a bit of pride in himself, she relented and said that that would be nice. Playing them over in his mind, Gary felt that there had never been more powerful words spoken -- quite a while, for a good hour, until he found himself repeating them ad nauseum on the drive home, and sensed that irony was mixing itself in. He turned up the radio and tried to think about something else.

He didn't know how to prepare for such an unusual outing, so he didn't.

He made it out in his mind to be an everyday occurrence to take out a fellow parishioner and her young son. They had agreed on a Thursday dinner. On Wednesday, he swore that he would reduce the dissonance between the church persona and that fatuous, porno-watching, beer-guzzling bachelor that inhabited his home. At work, his new moral outlook led him to book the tickets to see his mother and his senile grandmother in Los Angeles sometime later that spring. But the promise dissolved that very night into a decision that he was better off following routine. He fell asleep to the sights and sounds of a tired, listless humping on the big screen TV in his living room.

No. 3 -- Flash forward two years. Gary Corinth was working, but also following a bit of virtual seduction in a chatroom -- someone playing the role of a young female being seduced for the first time -- when the phone rang. It was about 10 in the morning, on an unremarkable workday. The caller ID was blocked so he figured it was a cold-call sales pitch, and he picked up the phone expecting to fling a curse at the other end and hang up. He barked his usual greeting, "Corinth," and waited for the beginning.

There was a pause. "Gary?" said a voice suddenly.

The mind, you discover in moments like these, is an incredibly dull version of a sharp, sharp tool. Gary knew in an instant who it was, but

he felt unable to place it: 'Alice? She can't be calling me. We haven't spoken in almost two years, and unless she has my grandmother standing in her doorway, she has no reason to call me.' He waited until something made more sense to him.

The voice said, "I know you're surprised to hear from me."

"No," he replied, hoarsely, "it's great to hear from you."

His mind zoomed through a hundred possibilities but came to rest on the least likely -- Alice had missed him terribly, all this time, and wanted him, and was on her proverbial knees asking his forgiveness...

"I'm calling for Andrew," she said, anticipating the ambiguities the call might bring up but unable to bring herself to lead with this.

"Okay -- no problem," he said with his voice trailing off. After a moment, when he realized that his expression couldn't give him away, he asked: "How is he?"

"Andrew is fine," she replied, in a tone to indicate that the quality of his care was not at issue.

"Good. -- Good."

In the brief moment before she continued, Gary could hear her inhale, even through the telephone's thin connection. That already told a great deal about the misgivings and pressure she felt. She was calling on Andrew's behalf, but about something that worried and concerned her.

Only her interest in Andrew could resurrect Gary from the ash heap of her personal history -- Gary understood that much about her.

"Something very strange happened last night with Andrew's computer, and you are the only person I could think of" -- another chance to distance herself -- "whose opinion I could trust." The last word was the point of this conversation, a declaration of need most of all, but it still felt good, and reduced the size of a lump forming in his throat. She went on: "Last night, about 3 in the morning, Andrew woke me up -- I thought that he was sick. He was all sweaty and his eyes were red, but he wasn't warm and he said he felt fine. He asked me to come look at his computer monitor --" She paused again, this time not for her sake. "The monitor was glowing, Gary, just glowing, in a way I've never seen anything glow before. It wasn't like any of his games. I asked Andrew if he had shut the computer off, and he said yes -- "

Gary jumped in, knowing that it was probably the wrong thing to do: "I imagine it was the monitor's test pattern. They typically come on when there's no signal from the computer, and can be quite surprising, sometimes." He smiled into the phone, hoping that he had allayed her fear.

"All right," she said, audibly eased a bit, "that may be it. But there's two things I don't understand, and Andrew couldn't explain them

either. The monitor was unplugged from the surge protector, completely unplugged, and the image seemed to be projected six inches off the monitor, like ink glowing in the air. It burned itself into the glass -- this morning I could still read the image in scratches. I've never seen anything like it."

Gary knew that if he expressed the slightest doubt about her description, she would hang up on him and that would be the absolute end. Yet he had no reason to suspect that she was exaggerating or mischaracterizing. She did neither easily: too proud to exaggerate and too careful to mischaracterize.

"That does sound very strange," he said. "It's hard to know without seeing it."

The self-invitation was a big risk, but basically his only play.

She thought too long about this, and said the following with a forced nonchalance: "Yes, that makes sense. Would you be able to come by sometime and take a look? I know it's a lot to ask. But I'm worried." A moment passed before she confessed her worry: "There might be radiation or something."

Gary wanted to tell her that there was simply no chance of dangerous radiation emanating from a monitor, even one which had for some reason gone completely gaga. But he also knew her fear would outweigh his

assurances unless he could give specifics, whether she understood anything about them or not. If what she described was true, he suspected that a circuit had surged after a brownout or from a failing circuit breaker, and that the monitor had had a brief excess of current. No big deal, even if he could not explain it with confidence. "How about tonight then?" he said. "I can stop by after work. Say about seven?"

Her jaw half clenched, she replied: "Sure, I would appreciate that."

She thanked him, and hung up.

He imagined himself using his voice of assurance to assuage and win her over. He saw himself pull the technical wool over Andrew's eyes, and impress both of them. But he could only partially convince himself, so he went back to work.

No. 4 -- The first impression is more powerful, and often more positive, than later impressions. With Alice Philips, impressions often started low and, after the third or fourth encounter, began a steady rise. Oh, she did make a respectable first impression: trim, well dressed in a not quite tailored look, an attractive balanced face, with an elegant cosmetic overlay and coiffure. But she was not a quick or smooth talker, or a smiling conversant, or a great beauty, or primed to appeal to male fantasies, either the demure or wild kind. Her manner

became clearer over time. She moved with an even, one might say strangely calm manner, slowly and deliberately, turning as if moving a large mass around a carefully balanced center of gravity -- that, by careful observation, you would swear had to be in the cavern of her pelvis. It was an eerily sexy effect, once you noticed it, but not something that struck you at first glance. You might just think she was slow.

Alice had big, expressive brown eyes, within a dark brown face. She was of African descent, with American Indian and European thrown in for good measure. The brown of her irises was rich and luminous -- endlessly brown, as you might expect of the richest of soils in a dank rain forest stretched beneath an equatorial sky. Not that she was particularly exotic, having been raised in Yonkers, New York. Still, there is something inherently intriguing about eye color outweighing the black of the pupils, about skin that is a color in its own right, not the pale reflection of blood coursing through the body, not a red or freckled organ that the sun must first paint. Her face was defined by the large luminous eyes, broad nose and bursting lips of her African ancestry, and her profile seemed to be a fuller version of the Indo-European ideal balance of cheeks, ears, forehead and chin. She was slow to move, and slow to engage. While waiting for a reaction

on her part, your attention might hold on the cosmetic aids to her person: foundation, eye shadow, lipstick, blush, even a fair amount of perfume. All this does not make an unpleasant impression, at least if you're free of allergic reaction, but this apparent preoccupation with externalities was a marked contrast with the calm and self-absorption she otherwise projected. It could be, you might think, that she had not broken psychologically with her parents and hence not with the Liz Claiborne style of her mother - or maybe, at this point, of her grandmother. Or it could be that she was vain in a way that her quietude didn't let you see. Or it could be, as I believe, that she was both fascinated by and fearful of the immense world, in a way that she did not allow herself to explore. The ritualistic decoration and scenting were a form of homage to this world, a gesture that compensated but did not put her out into the middle of things, at risk.

No. 5 - Gary worked quite a ways from the church where he met Alice, and he had no choice but to navigate an Interstate to drive to her home. We, meanwhile, might imagine a camera on a miniature helicopter chasing him along the asphalt stream, rolling first left then right, as it showed the car from various angles: a bathetic, outdated, fume-spewing wreck, with film-covered window panes and bald tires and a bad shimmy on the rear right wheel. He believed himself alone on this

quest, accompanied only in chance configuration by a wave of individuals, each alone.

No one moving through this network of purposes is alone. Imagine electromagnetic snooping equipment strategically placed throughout this corner of the world -- perhaps on every corner -- that bounds up and down the EM spectrum, picking up pieces of data all along the way, and that feeds this flood of commingled data across a broad fiber optic pipe to a supercharged computer or two, and that they sort and concatenate and realign and decrypt and interpret, until voices and data reemerge. Another computer jumps up and down these streams and picks out a word here, a bit of data there. If Gary were to say the word "bomb" into his digital phone -- which he deemed to be encrypted and safe -- or if he were to send the characters C4 in an encrypted email, these real-time marvels might have tried and convicted him before he had even hung up, before he had even quit his application. All information, all the time: the opportunity and the curse of the digital age. Gary is both visible and transparent, a cipher for something at once predictable and unknown. At this time, his actions are pure "citizen-tolerable" -- beneath a threshold for which citizens should be apprehended and taught a penal lesson -- and insofar he is invisible.

But imagine that you could shift the information lens ten hours, ten days, ten months, 10 years into his alien-friendly future -- if you are responsible for understanding and maintaining order, you might evaluate the options differently. You might, for instance, feel the need to declare this an in-the-field emergency and put that highflying drone into interdiction mode and authorize the firing of a supersonic missile -- kaboom! -- into his blue heap right here, before he reaches city blocks where collateral damage would be greater. Or you might conjure up a US felony warrant, to be served that very evening, on a dangerous, mentally unstable and heavily armed criminal. Or schedule a single- car accident for that night. Or do you believe you would choose to ignore the intelligence, watch with resignation as he bounded up the freeway, like any citizen drone on an incomprehensible mission? -- It is a calculus of faith, that though each mission bears scant results enough of them are the positive side of the social equation, an equation that is unsolvable, for which even the computational approximation would take your lifetime.

Gary parked across from the condominium building and tried to summon up the good sense that he would need. He remembered many evenings there, talking sensibly with Alice and humoring Andrew, one of those prodigal

children who grow up too quickly for your, or their own, good. Andrew was more than able to have an intelligent conversation with his mother -- more so, even, than Gary or the average Joe she would bring home, even if, at the same time, he had no context for his opinions. There would be a long pause whenever he expressed one of his adult opinions, seemingly out of nowhere among his childish preoccupations. That is where the prejudices and mental shortcuts that we espouse come in handy: you know, almost immediately, where someone is coming from and you react accordingly. An agile mind with no strong affiliations is unsettling by comparison.

Andrew was both the easy and the difficult part of their arrangement. He was a computer-fascinated, avoid-the-sunlight kind of kid, and his fascination with video games gave Gary an instant rapport, at least until Andrew recognized ACD (adult coordination disease) in him, which prevented Gary's fingers from executing a triple-double attack jump at just the right moment. Of course, charming an 11 year-old boy was never part of Gary's calculation. You might think that on top of every other action in this grand campaign, Gary would consider this action the most trivial. But in fact this was substantively different from the rest of his campaign, because there was no fantasy in it -- it was an interaction that could not be deeply and covertly sexualized. Still, on

a therapeutic level -- pleasurable in its own way -- he enjoyed the interaction, and felt how his years of experience could provide some guidance for a boy who otherwise generally refused tutelage.

Laughter can be the first thing that binds, and the first element of a relationship that disappears. When he discovered Alice's sense of humor, Gary was surprised, because it is a broad sense of humor, trailing into a slapstick, lose- your-composure, snorting guffaw. She said it's a black thing -- not to exclude him but, he thought, to explain something to him that he didn't seem to understand. He had developed a little private kind of laugh of his own, and it wasn't until they've relaxed over a few dinners and at a few parks that he found himself laughing in unison with her over Andrew's attempts to look the grown- up, as he wiped the orange soda from his face at a self-serve soda machine.

One night the humor in their short-lived relationship expired. He could remember it only through the shimmer of therapies of a different kind -- six packs, scotch, an occasional baggie of grass, a prostitute or two, night clubs, gambling, pornography. Whenever that night came through his cleverly laid fog, he still felt the confusion and anger that accompanied him out the door and down the hall.

Alice was a woman who was slow to anger and quick to dismiss. When he

said one night, in an irritated and exasperated moment, though half humorously he thought, that she should feel lucky that he was there -- she comprehended in an instant the subtext and the implication, and she told him that it was time he got going, matter-of-factly and without any gloss, but with enough emphasis that he equally understood that this was the end and he ought not call again. He couldn't resist calling and leaving a series of messages, none answered, and finally he drew the consequence necessary for a shred of self-respect.

He had felt for those few weeks to be above the fray regarding race politics in America; he looked at his comment up and down and thought it barely "inappropriate," and thought she was reacting all out of bounds. Okay, she chafed at the notion that she should feel grateful.

It wasn't like he treated her like his property or less than an equal.

Nothing could have been further from his mind, he told himself. It was all a giant mistake, and she couldn't get past that. She was the racist, not him. That was a hard conclusion that he finally found himself comforted with, and he generally did his best not to dwell on it for the sake of the memory of their relationship, though it was now a relationship in negative relief, a contrapositive image of itself.

Now, this evening, he stood across the street, and strolled across the street, up the sidewalk, to the door. He rang the buzzer, perhaps a

little too abruptly for a guest, rather than a regular visitor. She didn't ask who it was, just buzzed him up. The hallway smelled of cilantro and curry and a quarter century of dust, as it had always done. "The hall of a thousand smells," she had called it, dryly. The front door to her apartment was open, and he knocked briefly on the frame, called, then went in.

Alice replied from Andrew's bedroom -- Gary assumed that she was orchestrating this to avoid falling into pleasantries and mistaken impressions. He found them looking at a drawing that Andrew had made of the scratches and comparing it, from a distance, with the screen itself.

"Hello, Gary, thanks for coming," Alice said without looking at him.

Andrew looked over his shoulder and said, "Hi."

"Hello to you both," replied Gary. His eyes were already drawn to the screen and the drawing held up almost in his line of sight. Even Gary's dulled and neglected gray mass was not fooled -- and yet also not to be trusted. In a moment you could tell that this was not the confluence of an electrical spike with the chaotic breakdown of the monitor. This was a directed action, etched into a dumb object by a crude and forceful hand. But how? It was as if an evil villain had directed his electron-beam rifle at this monitor and let fly, with a laugh both evil

and chilling. But there was no such gun, and no such villains to provide context. The context, if any, had to come from elsewhere: either back to the random occurrence or to another form of intelligence.

Gary looked at Alice's immense brown eyes, now directed at him. They saw the confusion and she sensed the alarm in Gary's face. Together they might even have recognized, if either mind was ready to encompass it, that this was one of those moments at which reality, subjective reality, forks. An experiential quantum mechanics, if you will: an experience that by common sense must have a mundane explanation, but which at the same time does not admit of one. Such an experience is both and neither until the moment that either outcome establishes itself and your own personal reality is confirmed or torn apart, depending on which direction you were leaning and on the weight you applied to your belief.

"That's quite an engraving," he said in an effort to sound nonchalant, going slowly up to the monitor. Alice wanted to tell him stop and she put out a hand, but she didn't open her mouth.

Gary put his face up to the monitor. The etching was as regular as if a PhotoShop wand had drawn it -- a whoosh of an electronic paint spray, with a solid core line and fuzzy pixilation, dribbling away alongside.

There were three distinct areas: one looked a little like an iconic representation of "the twilight zone," a spring emanating from a point zero outward; there were two others to the side, one looking like a miniature explosion and the other like an ocean wave about to strike a shore. That was all, but enough to be hieroglyphic, not chance, not a blown circuit, not a cosmic accident. That was will.

No. 6 -- The outlines of the action are set, and it is probably time to reflect a bit more on my place in it. Notwithstanding the speculation of some individuals with too much time and not enough neural activity -- especially in the amusing "alt.crackpot.thisblueball" newsgroup and a corresponding Yahoo group that were both recently pointed out to me by newsboi@somemailsystem.com -- I am not Gary, nor am I Alice, nor a precocious Andrew. Of course, Gary isn't Gary, and Alice isn't Alice.

No one whom you meet here is quite who or what I paint him or her to be. I'm sure you understand the need for discretion. It's not so much to hide from my pursuers, who will regardless recognize the outlines of this story, inasmuch as they were themselves involved in it. Rather, it's necessary to fictionalize the story a bit to keep the prying lay public from exercising their lack of discretion.

Not that I lack mortal concern for the actors whom I bring under the scrutiny of those who would end this story at any cost. These innocents

are protected by one tenuous but salient fact: if they are killed, this speculative non-fiction becomes eyewitness-news factual. While my anonymous death could still prevent this story from becoming real for you all, their deaths would be documented in a way that would statistically and logically dissipate all traces of the cloud of random occurrence upon which my opponents rely so firmly. My antagonists understand this -- and they will probably know by now that my acquaintances are unaware of my whereabouts, do not approve of my actions and want nothing more than to be free of this legacy. So let us let them be.

Newsboi seems to have no fear in trying to communicate with me openly through various public forums. If you have an unconquerable need to communicate with me -- if you cannot be dissuaded by the dangers outlined here -- you may contact me as follows. Every few days, when I can be contacted, I will post on this website a PGP public key that you may use to encrypt a message to me. Post your encrypted message without any other identifying information in either news.test or alt.rec.aliens; don't post it in any other news group, especially alt.crackpot.thisblueball. Include your own PGP public key of at least 1024 bits in PGP-encrypted message. (Assume that this is not perfect protection, so be discrete about your personal details.) I highly

recommend that you send this message through an anonymizer or from a temporary third location, for your own safety, but your life is ultimately your own. My response will appear in the same newsgroup, if it is directed to you the individual, or in this blog, should I choose to respond to all. Be patient; I will delay any response in order to avoid inadvertent patterns that might otherwise emerge from my behavior.

I do expect that the majority of the messages I will receive will be from plants and pursuers of various stripes. I admit that I'm looking forward to the excitement -- no doubt a fatal flaw, but without excitement your nerves can dull. For you the pursuer, let me just point out that I am already prepared to deal with your posting specific variants on servers across the country in order to cause me to reveal my location. I am prepared for a scripted message intended to trigger a connection directly from my computer to your server. I also fully expect that you will do your best to enrage me, in the hopes that anger will make me slip up, expose something about my location or myself to you. Please consider these and the other obvious options already eliminated and move on to something more creative, something more bold.

Gary. We left him rather awkwardly kneeling in Andrew's bedroom, staring at an artifact of experiential quantum mechanics. He had the

sensation, in a way that we all might, that there was something monumental facing him. At the same time, he knew how easy it is to be fooled; how seldom the monumental appears; and how foolish someone appears at the moment they dream of the one and are confronted by the other.

"Wow," he said. "I'm not sure what would have caused this." He looked back over his shoulder. Despite a lingering heat and oppressive humidity, Alice had put her arm around Andrew and pulled him tight, as if a chill had taken hold of her body. Gary would later assert that he could already sense something growing in Alice's self-representation, her demeanor and actions, something akin to pride -- a feeling of having been chosen. This feeling was in direct conflict with her flight instinct, and gave her a flustered appearance in the following, which Gary found unavoidably and incredibly alluring.

"Is it dangerous?" she asked.

Gary said: "The monitor isn't, I don't think, but I couldn't tell you about whatever it is that caused this."

She pulled Andrew tighter to her and said, "You're sleeping in my bedroom tonight." Then: "Should we get rid of the monitor?"

Gary looked back at it. "I can take it; maybe there's something inside that would help me understand what happened."

"Just be careful," she said. A concern, not for him per se, but for the service man whose specialty she does not understand.

He smiled his careful church smile, one which he had not used for quite a while. He did not want to say this right away, but he knew it was the crux: "Do you want to know what I find?"

Alice had a number of options. She could resolve that this whole incident had never happened, remove any sign that it had, and act the unknowing. If it was a freak of nature, this course could be the best. But if it was an act of will, as it seemed to be, this might be a risky course of action. Perhaps, the force that had willed contact would accept such a break and undo contact from that point forward; you might even assume that contact as secretive as this could not be sustained against someone's will. Or she could ask for the monitor back after Gary had done whatever analysis he could -- establishing, for example, its anti-quotidian nature -- and live this mystery for herself and Andrew. This would avoid the complication of Gary's non-entity kneeling in her son's bedroom. Or she could continue to interact with Gary for the sake of finding out more about what happened here. There was also her promise to Andrew to find out what had happened. But perhaps most importantly, there was the truth that this represented: that the world did surprise, did create new stories, did open gates where there had

been none.

By contacting Gary she had already started down a particular path. But the uncertainty in his eyes might have made this a different path from the one she had imagined. And even if she had no way of knowing about the ill-fated society with which we began this narrative, she could assess that this mystery might open onto vistas with completely unanticipated vectors of force. She would be taking a risk, with her life and Andrew's, if she did anything other than wash her hands of the whole thing.

While her mind worked, Alice was alternately flushing and hemming and hawing, with Andrew looking up at her, wishing to remind her of her promise, without giving her an opportunity to argue her way out of it. Is there something greater, more holy, more ontological than the life of your child? Gary had learned to recognize this impulse in Alice, even if he himself was incapable of separating any one person's existence from the relation to his needs and wants. Meanwhile, while he waited, Gary became more conscious of echoed streams of wheels against asphalt, and of neighbors to the side or above, who were arguing about something incomprehensible in tones that might be English, Hindi, Spanish or Laotian.

"Well," she said, "I would like to know what happened, just to make

sure it doesn't happen again. And I'm curious." She looked down at Andrew: "I'm definitely curious. But please do be careful, Gary. I will call someone" -- some authority -- "if it happens again tonight. I really will."

Gary stood up, and became quite conscious of his bulk in that room, a child's room, with the boy and his mother almost cowering together on the bed. "Well, then," he said, "I'll take the monitor, and let you get back to your evening." There was a rejoinder from her in his mind, but he was not surprised when none reached his ears. He unscrewed the monitor cable and took a hold of the power cable and lifted the rather sizeable CRT monitor.

"I'll be in touch," he said, the singed screen now filling his nostrils with a trail of chemicals released by the incident.

Alice followed him to the door and thanked him for his help. He walked down the hall, full of the perception that, as full as his arms were, his mind was emptied of a dream that had nurtured him secretly, perversely, repeatedly, despite his best efforts at self-therapy.

No. 7 -- The newly established site has overwhelmed me with its attention. It is like a visual illusion that, in each of its parts, is sensible and believable, but which creates an impossible whole, a distortion of reality in the name of perception.

BVBTE is aimed at undermining every statement made in this blog, and has even gone so far as to incite hackers to lame the hosting server with DOS (Denial Of Service) attacks. There has been some indication that the script kiddies have heeded the call, although the sporadic attacks may also be BVBTE commandos trying to raise their own profile.

"No evidence!" they write. "Where's your evidence, chronicler?"

Of course, I cannot provide direct evidence -- where the provision of evidence is coincident with the destruction of that evidence. They attribute my sources to a handful of random citizens they have drugged up, who dutifully deny everything I've written. Pure fictionalization.

"No one has ever reported --" you mean that no report has survived.

"Delusional dreams of a feverish mind," they write. "No science," they conclude. "Religious zealotry." "Bandit of common sense." "Floopy sense of reality." "Dumb-and-dumber theology." "Boring story, an insomniac's dream narrative."

Their particular specialty seems to be parody, with their own demented retellings of this story. I've recognized a half dozen writing styles among their contributions, although some of the material comes directly from the previously named newsgroup. Perhaps we'll find time to dissect a sample.

Why the interest? Logically, in the absence of evidence on my part,

their best course of action would be to ignore me. But that is logic on a short leash. Sometimes the mere suggestion of a new way to approach a problem is already the new solution itself. If I were to explain with any detail the backdoor to the most common encryption schemes, then in practice I would already have broken the back of the encryption mafia and exposed a major international conspiracy. I'm not in a position to do more than hint at such a thing, but if someone were to provide more robust hints then the whole façade of privacy would break apart.

Similarly, a crack in the "we are alone" dogma is what our BVBTE friends fear and what they are reacting against.

Some readers have written to me personally and through public fora that they think it absurd that anyone would have a vested interest in preventing the word from getting out about alien contact: there is SETI; there was Carl Sagan and Voyager, for goodness sake. Of course, there are characters such as Himmler, Milosevich and the Interahamwe, whose bloodlust is only partly understandable by consuming their propaganda. They leave us with the inescapable conclusion that the cruelest suppression can always find its motivation.

Now let us approach this question through a very steady pair of hands and a carefully tuned pair of eyes, manipulating an object's avatar in an imaginary three-dimensional space, a one-time dream from someone's

mind that now flew bullet-like through the atmosphere.

A drone, never cleared for flying over domestic airspace, slipped through the night sky above a North American metropolitan area. Eyes, hands and mind were moving the drone in a carefully constructed search pattern, collecting direct readings from an unusual sensing device code-named "Cold Blue." Even knowing the code name required top-secret clearance, which had been many months in coming for these still young hands and mind. The mind itself had requested this assignment when it knew nothing about it other than that the task had plucked a select number from among his equivalents. The mind thought, I ought to go, too.

Now this individual sat in a specially reinforced and camouflaged trailer on a minor military installation, himself under guard by a special-forces-grade operative who was to have no understanding of what was going on, but whose orders were quite explicit: no one unauthorized allowed in; no operators shall take anything out; action to the contrary is to be interdicted at all costs. The operative carried a short-trigger incendiary grenade for destroying the trailer's contents in an instant -- an object that was a disturbing magnet for all the operatives' fingers.

In addition to the drone control equipment, "Cold Blue" had a blue

screen measuring electromagnetic radiation, at a frequency range that was never identified to the operator. (The unusual blue screen was apparently to be of a type that could not be imaged by external sensors, based on any known techniques.) The output was on two areas of the screen, in the form of a numerical table and a graphical representation of data taken at two-second intervals: a compass direction and an imputed latitude/longitude range of any source, and signal strength in two measures: actual and residual. There were no explanations, no general manual, no protocols except those introduced in a series of training scenarios, not even much in the way of lore among the operators passing each other on shift change -- less an overzealous operative decide that national security was being compromised. The only instructions were to fly the drone in established search patterns, to see if a source within that space was emitting a signal in any particular direction, and then, if not, to move on to the next sector. Sometimes particular coordinates were delivered by fax from somewhere in the Washington DC area, with orders to search a particular sector or set of sectors with more thoroughness. And sometimes there were "hits," which were immediately communicated by secure phone to the number in DC. On some occasions, with the most promising data, the operator would be put in radio contact with a

"ground team," which he visualized as a group like his, moving around a city with a portable, landlocked version of his drone and his trailer.

Once he met Mr. "Cold Blue" himself. The fellow was the type he knew well: one of those showmen, a self-promoter, a self-appointed celebrity, orchestrating his own life as if he were living a drama that an audience actually cared to see. In the operator's experience, there was never an audience, just irritated and steaming subordinates who would be just as happy if spontaneous combustion removed the celebrity from their midst.

Mr. Cold Blue was a tall, thin but no longer trim individual, with a short manicured silvery beard and equally abbreviated and grayscaled cranial hair. He dressed the dapper ivied and ivoried professor, with horn-rimmed glasses and a distracted look to his eyes and mannerisms. Yet you could tell that he rarely lost sight of his position vis-à-vis other individuals, and his eyes would tend to whatever chance reflective surface they saw, and evaluate how its tableau presented him. He would place himself in front of and with his back to subordinates when speaking with their superiors, and he had a decidedly unmilitary indifference to exposing his back to doors and windows, as long as he could continue to be the object of focus within the given four walls.

Yet Mr. Cold Blue wearied of his role in this operation. He had the manners of someone who learned military convention quickly and with the eye of a dilettante, but who had no interest to learn it better, despite his obvious intelligence: a sloppy salute, a stooped neck, an indifference to the fine differentiations of rank were all the hallmarks of someone who once thought to understand the military but then chose not to do so. He was also quite obsequious to the plainest jane soldier, which led the operator to assume that he was something of a ladies man, perhaps trailing off into a lech. He would be surprised if the prof didn't choose his graduate students by their breasts, and perhaps disappointed, too.

Once he asked Mr. Cold Blue about whether there might be a frequency tuner, since he knew equipment or signals might tend to drift -- an assertion that showed the analog bias of his theoretical training. The prof looked at his accompanying military adjutant for guidance and assistance in getting the furniture to stop talking to him. "Soldier," said the latter, "there is no need for a tuner. All further information is need to know." Here a lay individual might repeat the joke that I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you. But how do such jokes work in an environment where that could as easily be true as not? As distasteful as the adjutant's little put-in-place felt, the operator

knew that there were similar treats for every relationship in this man's military. The Prof would have felt it, too, of that he was certain. Mr. Cold Blue might never have put his hand out to touch the wall before becoming aware of it, but more likely he had blundered right into it and felt the cold slap of concrete on his face. Through words or just thin smiles, he would have learned: "You're as expendable as any of us. If you don't follow orders, you will be assessed a security risk, and the next time you will experience a concrete wall at the acceleration of gravity."

What had old Cold Blue done to get himself into this situation? In his earlier, headier days Mr. Cold Blue had written a small treatise, published in the proceedings of a minor conference and actually only as a piece of speculative fiction with which he intended to highlight his genius. Don't give yourself a needless headache -- you won't find this essay listed or collected just anywhere. The title was something akin to: "Quantum paradoxes as communication channels: a quantum mechanical model of hyperspatial communication modes." Certain parties glommed onto this speculation at a key juncture in time, and encouraged him to develop and test his hypothesis-in-jest. And that encouragement, as they say, has made all the difference.

No. 8 -- Gary's day was not done, not by a long shot. We're only just

beginning the descent, mentally and plot-wise, into this branch of the unbounded event tree, a branch with twists and knobs and an unexpectedly short ending. He was back on the freeway, this time headed home, with the alleged communiqué in the back seat, looking for all the world like just another busted CRT on its way to the dump. Occasionally he shot a glance back to the seat where he had situated the monitor so he could see the image. His brain, that neglected organ, was churning the soil of speculation with uncommon fecundity. He had already reached the conclusion that the twilight zone drawing was a form of passive amplifier. The incoming signal did not need the CRT -- what it needed was something to concentrate the beam. The beam itself must have functioned as a kind of hologram, because there was no phosphor left on the screen to produce the image that Alice had described. Gary had a harder time with the wave on the beach and the explosion, though he was inching toward the decision that they were somehow parameters -- perhaps relating to size -- for the amplifier.

These were things that Gary could get his mind around. The broader questions about the signal's meaning and origin were less tractable. Such a signal might be as simple as a geek's overzealous attempts to create his own television signal, or it might have been an errant but destructive signal destined for a military installation -- one was

reputed to be situated just down the road. Neither of these, or any of a dozen other alternatives, seemed worth stopping with, when placed beside the notion that an unknown intelligence had inadvertently destroyed the monitor in an attempt to communicate with Alice and Andrew.

If so, what was the message? How was it that it had appeared in just this bedroom? And if the content of the message was the desire to get a receiver set up for further communications, then why? What kind of intelligence was this? Could it be a trick of some kind? Could it be an effort to open a space-time slit into which to toss a humanity-ending device of some kind? These speculations occurred to Gary in that flash of activity that our minds are so capable of, but just as he was suspicious of any positive message about universal love, he was equally unable to imagine the fate of the planet hinging on his reaction. That was a Hollywood pretense -- a cosmic repetition of "loose lips sink ships" paranoia. No, this was a form of communication, and without a doubt one that had been used before and would be used again. And its purpose was manifestly to lay the groundwork for a better communication channel.

If this was so, if this was a form of communication, then he surmised that it would by now be documented in some obscure corner of the

Internet, if only in a location reserved for the conspiracy theorists, the off-kilter and the insane. In Gary's experience, the mainstream, the "upright and honest" had already forfeited exactly that which they claimed to represent (excepting always his mistress-in-struggle, Abby) and that, therefore, honesty and truth were to be sought where they were least expected. The crazy backways of the information highway, in other words.

When he got home -- unmolested by the drone circling impotently overhead -- he put the monitor in his living room and went into his home office, where he kept his computer. He fired it up, got a beer and started a frozen dinner in the microwave. The answering machine had twenty messages; no doubt his grandmother had managed to find a phone today and not been noticed for a while.

Five minutes later he was searching the likes of Google, Yahoo, Lycos, Teoma, the whole lot. Nothing came up. The effort to find something in the Internet Archive proved equally hopeless. An hour later, he decided that this approach was hopeless and it was time to take another approach. He opened his Instant Message client and found "mamasboyblue2" online.

Nothingventured: How's it hanging, homeboy?

mamasboyblue2: Well, if it isn't the thing that even the cat wouldn't

drag in.

Nothingventured: Yuck yuck. Seen any good lolita lures lately?

(Lolita was milieu slang for underaged girl and a lure was a term for an officer of the law impersonating the underaged; the more incorrigible online would see what they could get the lure to write for the sake of the sting...)

mamasboyblue2: If I did, I didn't send em to you, I swear.

Nothingventured: Hey, look, I need help with something right up your twisted alley.

mamasboyblue2: Hey, I like an entendre2 as well as the next guy, but I didn't think you swang that way.

Nothingventured: No, I'm referring to your professional twistedness.

mamasboyblue2: Can't I just leave that in the office?

Nothingventured: I need something from your alien lore days.

mamasboyblue2: Mac, I can't even see green anymore without puking my guts out. Puhleez leave me out of your abduction fantasies.

Nothingventured: Something fried a friend's -- ahem, yes, female and not zombied -- a friend's monitor, and I think it was a signal of some kind. Not of known origin. I suspect an alien intelligence.

mamasboyblue2: Oh, now that's too funny. Mr. Circuits-for-Brains is chasing aliens?

Nothingventured: Seriously, this is like nothing you've ever seen -- on an unplugged monitor.

mamasboyblue2: Somebody's playin you for a fool, fool.

Nothingventured: Not possible. She'd rather see me dead than see me.

The fact she called me at all means she's scared to death herself.

mamasboyblue2: Ah, it's her? That's what she wants you to believe. In fact, she has a Hollywood plot ready to lead your pathetic carcass across six states, and she'll have a hundred state troopers chasing your still sorrier ass for some crime you'd wished you committed.

Because you're going to the slammer for having been stupid, nothing more.

Nothingventured: Ha ha. I need to know more about the signal, and there's no one better to know than you what people have said about it. And if it's debunked in some prig scientist's appendix somewhere, all the better.

mamasboyblue2: Uh huh. Tell me more.

Nothingventured: I'm going to send you some pictures. Still mama@porn-steer.com?

mamasboyblue2: [unable to control nausea at the grotesque lack of intelligence, pukes through the Internet on your ear]

Nothingventured: ?

mamasboyblue2: bluthe@somecollegesomewhere.edu

Nothingventured: It's coming right through. I need it yesterday, so I can provide -- you understand -- comfort to the poor damsel.

mamasboyblue2: The only comfort you'll provide her is the day you keel over with a Swanson's attack of the arteries. LOL.

Gary did not wait to hear back from William Bluthe. He was pleased, however, that, despite their mutual acrimony, they were still on terms to ask favors. He'd met Bluthe on the aforementioned trip to Thailand, a peculiar enterprise that was advertised both in the gay and the straight porno trade. The two groups of respondents eyed each other warily, each one expecting the other to begin ranting, but nothing of the kind emerged. In fact, they found a certain unexpected camaraderie in the pathos of meeting the prostitutes, the squalor, the "wink-wink" of buying something for money that becomes so empty of emotion that you can feel the last vestige of emotion drain from you -- once the initial excitement of the forbidden is addressed. One night, when he was to have been enjoying the fruits of a too young Thai girl, Gary found himself next to Bluthe at the bar. The latter confessed that he had no desire to sleep with any of the prostitutes and was just conducting research. (Not that he stuck to his guns, so to speak, but the impression was still made.) After a few drinks, Gary started asking

about his research. Bluthe was a specialist in what he called "the morally untouchable," by which he meant here the johns who enabled the international sex trade. He had just finished a book on "accidental killers" -- people on the other side of the "there but for the grace of God" line. He told Gary about a young girl, now a fully grown woman, who accidentally drove over a trove of bicyclists, while she leaned over to find a CD in her bag in the back seat. And he told the tale of an elderly gentleman, a driver for a childcare center, who left a sleeping charge in a van during a blazing summer day. In both cases, Bluthe did his best to find out what it was about their personalities -- in Freudian and Lacanian terms -- that contributed to their accidents. But mostly, he was interested in how they reacted to their fates. Anger? Guilt? Obsession? Repression? In dozens of these interviews, he explained to Gary in a slurred and world-weary voice, he heard again and again: 'Sure, I'm guilty, but I'm not that person.'

'It's not me, just a momentary lapse.'

"Just a momentary lapse, do you hear," he said looking Gary right in the eye. "They would sit there and expect compassion from me. Of course, that was only once I put them at ease that I wasn't going to accuse them of anything, that I was really and truly interested in their lives. Jesus, man, they would open up and let a torrent of

excuses and laments over me like you wouldn't believe."

"I suppose I understand that," said Gary.

"You understand that?!" shouted the barely understandable Bluthe. "You fucking understand that?! Jesus H Christ, man, we're all at best 80 years of momentary lapses. How could you not understand that?"

"So you feel for your subjects?"

"Fuck no. They're all selfish bastards, with no self-reflection and no self-respect. But contempt doesn't necessarily erase empathy." He grinned and, in one of the moments that, under other circumstances, he might have had occasion to write about, his eyes rolled up into his sockets, his muscles loosened in an instant, and he fell off his stool. As he collapsed, his head fell forward and his forehead planted itself right on top of his shot glass. It made a bruise and an impression on his skin that he never completely lost.

Later Gary had another occasion to run across Bluthe, who once again had effected a shift in his research agenda. In fact, his agenda was an ever-changing set of questions, for which he never felt he had really hit the right analysis -- and for which his colleagues at SCS had only the lowest of opinions. They had hired him some years earlier because they thought they needed someone to do this new theory stuff, which none of them understood or cared to understand. Still, the department

needed to seem current when trying to appeal to students, so they took one of their traditionalist positions -- Shakespeare or Milton, later no one was so sure what position, since they all taught more or less what they cared to -- and they turned it into a cultural theory position, with all the requisite feminist, post-colonialist, and post-Freudian overtones. What they didn't anticipate was that everyone else wanted a theorist, too. They found themselves scrambling for one of the theory bottomfeeders, a perennial adjunct like Bluthe -- one of a multitude that talked the talk and walked the walk, but whose idiosyncratic interests overshot the underdog sensibility of the primary theorists and moved into the realm of the morbid -- accidental murderers, alien abductees, abandoned comatose bodies, and the psychotic visions of the elderly.

This last interest, the shortest lived of Bluthe's projects, led him back to Gary. During one of their extended drinking binges -- which occurred back in the US but before Gary had to return to his home -- Gary told the tale of his grandmother's dementia. It rankled on Bluthe's sense of perversity over a matter of weeks, so much so that one day he jumped on a plane and landed at the airport without even a word of warning to Gary. When Gary answered the knock with a barrage of curses ready, he let them loose in a wholly different spirit: anger,

joy and a giant load of suspicion.

Later that spring, they met again in Los Angeles and paid a series of visits to Gary's grandmother, in between drinking binges and tours of a variety of voyeuristic haunts. Bluthe never published anything based on the transcripts of those visits -- by the end of the interviews he had already decided that abduction was a more fruitful form of apocalyptic vision -- but he did later publish a fictionalization of Mrs. Kellogg's ontology in an ephemeral literary magazine. I happen to have a copy of that, and may let it occupy you all for a few days when I have other obligations.

Gary set about another means of decoding the illustrations. He also happened to know a lab man from his student days, Ted Florentine, a researcher who helped physicists build their apparatuses, and Gary figured the fellow would have an idea. He looked up Ted's info in a directory at the university where he worked, and left voice and e-mail, in both cases being vague about the purpose at hand. He sent a scan of the etchings as an attachment and invited Ted to guess what it was designed to do. He knew the gambit would seem suspicious, especially since they hadn't spoken in at least a decade, but the suspicion might actually be a catalyst to get a response.

After getting these messages out, and getting off, Gary went to his

fridge and opened another beer and set it with a deliberately wide movement beside his computer table. Usually at this point he'd be asleep or watching a body-numbing cable movie. Right now, he was about as wired as he could be. He began to work on the idea of the explosion and wave as parameters. The explosion could be a star, or a chemical reaction, or a collision -- on one of several scales. And the wave running up the beach -- that was exactly something that didn't collide but ran itself out. Were the two related?

Gary knew enough physics to know that waves and particles coexist on the atomic scale: photons are both particles and waves, or, rather, one or the other, depending on what you are measuring. Suppose these illustrations were showing that the Twilight Zone was on a sub-atomic scale? Or what if they showed that the Zone was to be built to match a particular wavelength. What did the explosion tell us about the wavelength that was hitting the beach? Or did the scale of the beach tell us something about the size of the explosion? Gary was sure that he was out of his depth and swigged down the beer, pausing only to curse at his screen with an ever-changing set of incantations.

No. 9 -- Now this story has some potential. Not only have we introduced the main action of this story, but I find myself out on a limb. Why? you ask. It's not the government's counter-terrorism Net squads who

managed to take our main server off line for two days. And it's not the FBI agents harassing the hacker community across the country, in a barely covert attempt to stir up enough fish to see which one sparkles.

(One hint, all you Hoovers out there -- I'm not a phreakin' hacker.)

It's not even the constant barrage of "yo' mama..." insults that has me on edge. No, this is much bigger.

I received word from someone who claims to have contact. Now, I've been receiving these things from just about the beginning: me-too's, crazies, agents, nay-sayers, ironists, just about every type of extrovert on the planet. Their artifice has never been in doubt. But this time was different, not only in tone but also in detail. Not simply a repetition of what I've reported or what someone's idea of what a Hollywood or Craven or Waters encounter might look like, it is a detailed and richly felt account of first contact and the search for a method of communication. Someone who had access to a prior account could, of course, use it to deceive me. I have to conclude that such a deception would not be the product of the same groups that have expended so much random energy to flush me out of my hole, because why would they flail around so when they had the perfect hook for capturing my attention? Of course, one can easily argue that such flailing-about is exactly the strategy that someone holding an ace, someone very

careful and methodical, would use to put me off guard.

Reminds me of a website that I ran across a few years ago: The Conspiracy Engine. Put up by a perspicacious individual by the covert name of Mr. Lenlinarx, it documents four levels and interactions of conspiracy, whose outlines he once summarized in the graph below:

Level Example

Action Two parties in conflict

Covert Action While third parties remain neutral,

they supply arms and intelligence
to one or the other side

Disinformation Both sides spread stories about

the actions of the other, while
denying their own covert actions

Grand Conspiracy Superficially disinterested third

parties await their payout:
weakened parties of the conflict;
compromised third parties; profits;
opportunity to play white knight...

It's a bit too schematic, but the engine itself had a useful little algorithm that makes it possible to conceptualize the twists and turns of subterranean motives and actions more clearly. Through some machinations of my own, I managed to come up with the Engine. Here is

its analysis of my situation:

You have identified two conflictual parties: Cover-up and Me. The group most closely associated with Cover-up is the Government. Officially, the Government does not approve of the actions of Cover-up, but you suspect that the Government secretly supports Cover-up with resources, protection. Me is most closely associated with free spirits everywhere. Free spirits everywhere openly approve of Me, but have suspicions about Me's motives and integrity.

You asked the Conspiracy Engine: "Can this latest confession be true?"

The Conspiracy Engine posed a number of questions to you about the circumstances. Your answers established the following:

1. Cover-up has an interest in this latest confession

2. Free spirits everywhere have an interest in this latest confession, too

3. Other groups could, most likely, not have engineered this latest confession

4. This latest confession could be: inauthentic; authentic but not genuine; authentic and genuine; authentic, genuine but compromised

5. Most likely, based upon the factors of the situation, this latest confession is genuine but compromised

The Conspiracy Engine has this further general assertion about the conspiracy surrounding Cover-up and Me: consider the common interests of the Government and free spirits everywhere. It may be that Me's conflict with Cover-up is just a waystation along the way to the ultimate conflict and possible reconciliation of these other groups. Me should not rely on free spirits everywhere too strongly.

Gary could have used a conspiracy engine in these wee morning hours as he read the massive email that Bluthe had put together. As Bluthe told it, he was about to fire off a sentence, then two, then the number just

kept ballooning as he looked deeper and deeper into the matter. Sure, he had found a site with a reference to screen burning and the like -- a site that was, in fact, listed at area51.com, which was the main reason that Bluthe's Web scraper had found it and downloaded it to his hard disk archive. "The Society for the Liberation of Earth the Blue Ball from its Obsolete Notions of Isolation in the Big Black Void of Space." This was a longer version of the society's self-representation. When Bluthe decided to dig a little deeper on Craig Phissure he found no forwarding address, just a word of mourning that had not been scoured off the Internet. So Bluthe started down the membership list -- all nicely laid out for their assassins -- and found each traceable individual dead, for all practical purposes scratched out. In his PGP-encrypted email: "This is a classic case of government-sponsored silencing. Human rights groups make a great deal of noise about torture and imprisonment for political intimidation and retribution, but, as you might imagine, there is an equally large business in silencing. If you just think about it -- you want someone to shut up completely -- no missing or bloody body, no attention-getting relatives, no prying groups or press, then you can see the utility. Why not a forensic science of traceless killing?"

Paranoia, Gary thought: I just don't need his ranting right now.

"Gary, it's also clear to me that the website of this group was not only erased from the Internet, but was also systematically scraped from any archive where it might have been kept. If my database had been Web accessible, my God, I really hesitate to think what would have been made of my case. The whole time I was putting the postmodern double-whammy on those poor people who claim to have been abducted I was inches away from falling into this pit. Mary Mother of God, Gary, thank you for making these last few years seem like a massive cheating of my own death. Really adds to the old memories. No, I mean it. Now I'm not so sure that you yourself aren't a test, in the effort to flush out every last festering remnant of this cognitive infection. Have I gotten anything from you that someone familiar with you couldn't have manufactured? Do we have any kind of signal worked out to indicate communication under duress? Would you have the courage to use it, if we did? If you get this, Gary, it's because I'd rather die than live with the uncertainty. And, frankly, because the ridiculous excitement of this whole thing is probably just a little too much for me."

I can tell you something about the accusation of paranoia. It's one of those neat paradoxes: if you expose a conspiracy, you're automatically crazy, for the simple reason that the likelihood of any single convoluted plot being true is so small that the average citizen -- even

a nay-sayer like Gary -- is likely to discount its reality as practically impossible. And yet, some of you will reply, he's willing to believe in space aliens trying to contact him? Admittedly, there is another paradox here, but it is a paradox grounded in a human frailty rather than in a strategic feint: it's easy to imagine that the extraordinary has extraordinary causes; it's difficult to accept that the ordinary never has been.

"The subject exhibits in his written expression a broad range of schizophrenic behaviors," writes a self-appointed bludgeon of the conservative online press, a Dr. Demetri, who writes a bile-tinged column on one of the ultra-conservative websites you can easily find, if you so wish. Although a journalist by trade, Demetri claims to have a PhD in clinical psychology. Since he writes under an assumed name -- "I have no desire to subject my family to the calumnies of which the liberal press is so enamored" -- it's not possible to check his story, but I would be surprised if his supposed analysis relies on much more than a crystallization of self-help drivel. "First, there is the ego obsession and the overwhelming sense that the world revolves around him. Second, there is the vision of a world full of assassins and government assault troops who have nothing better than to chase down and kill normal, average citizens. Third, there are the hints of being

involved in an even grander conspiracy that controls all aspects of the flow of information, from the world-wide fiber and satellite infrastructure, to encryption and network security. Fourth, there are the frequent taunts aimed at an imagined set of tormenters. Fifth, there is the inability to narrate a conventional story without constantly interrupting the narration with new expressions of outrage and self-pity. And sixth, there is the inability to look at reality for what it is, that is, the incessant need to twist reality to fit the feverish dreams of his paranoid vision."

Thank you, Dr. Demetri.

Thanks to his insight into my character (not the Engine's dire prediction) I have decided not to risk the trap of pursuing the new alien encounter. I took a hard look at myself through Demetri's eyes and realized that there was truth to his analysis. Yes, I am unable to tell a story without interrupting it. And that is exactly what the psychological profilers are hoping for: for me to chronicle my interaction with this individual; to provide an ever richer mosaic of our communication until, finally, we agree to meet; or I reveal how we could communicate with each other more simply. The end. I have a growing appreciation of their underlying patience -- of the classical hunter posture they have assumed. Time is not on my side. Mistakes

become more likely with each day, while they can bide their time, conserve their strength, test for weakness. With each interruption, I grow weaker and they grow stronger.

The tale must go on.

No. 10 -- Gary woke up, hung over and feeling vomitous, in a sprawl on his couch. He observed the bottle of whiskey, now mostly empty, atop the coffee table, a monument to his disconnection with the new day. He felt his head -- numb to the touch outside, throbbing and aching like a broken bone inside. Work was out of question. He didn't have an abundance of sick leave -- too many fuck-you days -- but he had enough for this purpose. As he lay there, he began to formulate a plan for sometime in the future: an hour, a day, a week, he couldn't be certain when his equilibrium would allow him to act on it.

He had to get back in touch with Bluthe -- at the very least assuage his pathetically fragile ego a bit. He had written back asking Bluthe to spare him the conspiratorial dramatics and to send him the website.

The message was PGP-encrypted, he thinks, but he's not sure. If not, in all likelihood, given Bluthe's flightiness, that would be their last communication.

Careful not to move his head any faster than he had to, he got up from the couch and walked toward his study. The sun was insultingly

flamboyant that morning, made Gary's eyelids ache. The computer was still on, and came out of sleep with his email client up. There was another message from Bluthe. Gary couldn't guess his reaction, but it was just sent a short while ago, so that was at least hopeful for Bluthe to react a bit less precipitously. He sat, let his muscles relax from the tension of moving under such duress, then double clicked. "You miserable fuck, Corinth, I open my soul to you and I get your worst shove-it-in double-cross. The cock has crowed three times, my friend, you can deny me only so many times... Okay, enough said for now, you'll find the website as attachment. Have fun with it. But let me give you a little piece of advice, in honor of our friendship over lo these many years. Never let anyone know about this. Not anyone. Especially, I repeat especially, not the Jezebel who has you twisted into an impotent pretzel. And forget you ever knew my name, you insignificant little shit. I certainly am well along to forgetting yours."

Gary decided to wait on a response; given the tone, his best move would be to wait a week or so and then claim he's being eaten up inside with guilt and regret. That, at least, Bluthe would eat up before rejecting it as so much bullshit and hetero gimmickry. Gary realized slowly, as he contemplated his many-time drinking partner laughing at his pained

face, that he had another obligation, both less and more attractive.

Most likely, Alice would not appreciate hearing from him -- especially with his gravelly hung-over voice, on which she had once remarked -- but there was always a chance, a chance he could not ignore, that she had had another experience last night or that she had spent an anxious night awake and needed to speak to someone who understood.

Gary turned himself to the monitor. There was no sign that it had changed at all. That did not surprise him, given that he assumed it had been an accidental or mostly accidental vessel. It was at that point that Gary thought about the problem with his driving away with the monitor. What other accidental vessel might the signal alight upon? A television perhaps? Perhaps with more explosive effect?

He slid his chair over to the phone and took a deep breath. He dialed slowly. The phone rang in that empty digital way designed to imitate an actual phone's ring -- even though it was simply a marker for something handled by dozens of independent computing devices with no "ring" in them whatsoever. The connection was prepped end-to-end, a modicum of bandwidth was reserved, and the machines waited -- in vain. No one picked up. Finally another machine intervened, initiating the voice connection, and intoned a message from Alice. Leave a message. Was she out already? Were they still asleep from a harrowing night? Had they

cleared out after the television blew up? Were they in the emergency room?

Gary's mind had no way to narrow the possibilities and that left him on an edge of one of his brain's aching wrinkles, one that suddenly burst in a flare. He winced. He had to do something to reconstruct his attention. He slowly stood up and realized it was time to run, not walk, to the bathroom.

A while later, his head felt much better, but his whole body trembled in a partial sugar-depressed incapacitation. He drank some orange juice, and closed shades. He swallowed an indeterminate number of ibuprofen tablets and ventured to the door to get the paper, and encountered a day of such utter light and clarity that it was like nails across a chalkboard. After a respectable time he tried Alice's number again, and this time he left a message: he had made some progress on explaining the burns on the screen, but he would have more to tell her in person; he hoped she and Andrew had a pleasant evening and uneventful night; and he recommended that Alice talk to him before she mentions the monitor to anyone else, for reasons that he hoped to be able to explain to her soon.

There were two forms of caution in that: first, the obvious prudence that Bluthe's warnings made necessary; and second, the sense that he

didn't want to lose control of this unique situation, neither his connection to Alice nor his place in what still appeared to be a historic moment. Even though it was probably not first contact -- reason bespoke that much circumspection -- it could be the first publicized, documented and accepted contact, which came to the same thing. And if this was all a colossal misunderstanding on his part, then at least he would not need to explain himself to many people. The rest of the morning passed uneventfully, except for an emailed expression of astonishment from Ted Florentine, who professed not to know who Gary was, unless it was Bob Birch playing one of his usual poor-taste jokes. In any case, he wrote, there is no physics to be had from those crude drawings; best of luck with them. Gary, undeterred and frankly ticked off, wrote back with excruciating detail (both to him and his reader) about why, in fact, Ted Florentine did know a Gary Corinth, and then diving right into the question: supposing someone wanted to symbolize basic physical relations in a universal way, like in the Voyager plaque, could these drawings be interpreted in that way? And -- tipping his hand a bit -- could this be a passive antenna of some kind? And what about the shorter frequency under the beach or filter?

He watched the noontime local news and absorbed a night's worth of

mayhem: murders, fires, arsons, deaths, arrests -- expressions of a society gone amuck, until the public interest fluff story that the most attractive but still too junior reporter proffered near the end. Then came sports and the broadcast was over.

While Gary melded with the local culture, the operators in project Cold Blue had reason to look back at the progress they'd made. Two days before, during the late shift, a strong contact had been made. The source had been isolated within a small number of city blocks and the directional vector calculated. By the time the rolling squad had pulled up on location, the signal dissipated, so it was impossible to isolate the exact point of origination. Nevertheless, if patterns held, it would be likely that the source would return within 60 hours, so the mobile unit was ordered to stay put. The drone was put in a holding pattern at an elevation above sight but below passing airliner traffic -- hopefully not so close that an attentive pilot would radio it in.

The brain attached to the hands sensed something akin to victory this time -- maybe the hope to get out of that godforsaken trailer for good. He'd had the feeling before -- like a fresh scent or warm footprint, he had always felt he could almost perceive the presence of the signal -- but this time seemed different. Maybe it was the fact that they had staked out this territory for quite a while now, and could assume that

the signal was fresh. Maybe it was the sense that their taunting opponent -- who or whatever it might be -- could not be lucky forever. Maybe it was better coordination of late with the ground squad. But he took his seat with a buzz of excitement, the likes of which he had not felt since the first week he had manned the inconspicuous little station and found himself saying: "Okay, top secret clearance, a guard with license to kill, a secret flying craft -- and I just sit all day in a Winnebago, watching a goddam monochrome blue screen?"

Staying on topic, we might follow Gary through the rest of his day. But let's spare ourselves that. He got a hold of Alice only in the evening. Much to his relief, she said that nothing had had happened during the night and that they were out well before Gary's call. You could hear that she was feeling like this whole episode had been a misunderstanding, now that the physical evidence had left her apartment and another day had passed. Time has a way of creating apparent discontinuities like that -- less inconsistencies than patterns we cannot recognize, with the few data points any of the rest of us are privy to. In her newfound self-assurance, she offered: "Maybe I over-reacted." Meaning also, what is all this mystery you're trying to peddle?

"Maybe," Gary said, "but I still would like to tell you about the

things I've got from a friend of mine" -- hesitant to name him over the phone -- "who works at Some College Somewhere."

"What is his field?" she asked, suddenly in a different register. He could hear that his evocation of authority did not go over well.

"Well, he does a lot of stuff, but he works in the English department."

The silence on the other end was filled in by Gary: and this is your source?

"I've also contacted a friend of mine in Physics at my alma mater, and he's come up with some intriguing ideas."

"Well," Alice said with some finality, "it can't be tonight."

Gary was suspicious and found himself half-mouthing, Why not? He could imagine any number of reasons, the innocuous ones we might all imagine, but he zeroed in on the most troubling to him. He could feel a jealous queasiness at the tiptop of his stomach.

"Okay, sure. No problem." He wasn't sure how he could extract a promise from her, but it seemed worth trying: "Alice, my friends recommend that you listen to what they have to say before you talk to anyone about what happened."

Again an accusatory silence. "Andrew and I will both be curious to hear what they say." A pause. "But not tonight." Gary recognized that that emphasis was intended to preclude a "I was worried" or "I just had to

unburden myself" quick stop by her door. Of course, because it was indirect, Gary could decide to ignore it -- at his peril. She still held the door-slam card as answer, and a door in his face now would unquestionably be forever.

But Gary was not without ideas on how to break this wall of silence. He decided to call a mutual acquaintance from the church, Marge Brinkle, and wheedle what he could out of her. This was manifestly a desperate act, something like putting your hand over a stove burner to ascertain whether it will boil water. Marge was a woman that Gary had found himself loathing time and again, from the very bottom of his viscera, a duplicitous, feigning, essentially evil woman, who thought nothing of condemning another's eternal soul for the slightest of slights, while still smiling into her face. Gary called her a "piece of work" in his mind in order to forestall an invective-laced condemnation slipping loose among his fellow parishioners.

In addition to her almost comical faults of self-absorption and spite, she had a preternatural ability to absorb gossip. Gary had a special aversion to gossip, perhaps for understandable reasons, and that aversion found form in the larger-than-life shape of Mrs. Binkle, tall and big torsoed, though stooped, with a longshoreman's shape. She accepted the addiction and had grown to relish what happened to her

anger lines and sharp eyes while gossiping. You could even say that she appeared playful and lighthearted, and she could be seen chumming up to anyone, and then finally conspiring with them, as if she were deep in a drug deal or relating her instructions to some underworld flunkies.

"Oh, child," she might say, smiling and patting someone on the knee -- someone neither child- aged nor appreciative -- or she would cluck her tongue and shake her head with compassion and derision for a world that was either too judgmental or not judgmental enough, or just too disinterested. "Now that's a story," she would say, "that is a story that deserves to be told."

As her husband fell into senility, he became the regular target for her ire, as if his retreating wit was an insult upon her person rather than his. "Oh Alfred, I wish you would listen more carefully," she would say sharply, like a parent continually on the edge of losing her patience with a difficult child. He would smile in partial embarrassment for his inability to respond -- and likely in recognition that there were a few small blessings in losing one's sense of presence. He shuffled along behind her imposing shape, just as Gary imagined a lifelong prisoner might trail his jailer at the imminent and brutal end of his imprisonment. She meanwhile would slow with a huff but without looking around when she sensed that her burden had fallen too far behind. "Oh

come on, Gary," Bluth might say at the sight, "you see just the outcropping; both the real injustice and the real bond lie well beneath the surface."

Marge, then. She would get a story in his phone call itself, but for Gary the emotional calculation that still came out in the positive. The only important variable was Alice, and she was not likely to hear about his call from Marge, and Alice so disliked gossip herself that she was unlikely to let herself be drawn into the matter. Marge. He dialed the number that he found in an old church directory. Disconnected.

Interesting. That would imply, with the Binkles' advanced age, a change into a more managed living situation. It would probably be difficult to find her, or possibly even to talk with her. That set him back for a while. He did an online Whitepages search locally, and then in a few (other?) sunbelt locations that were more favored by the retired class. A match came up on her husband's name -- and cross referenced, a M. Brinkle showed up, too, albeit without address. Still, the odds seemed in his favor. The only question was whether it was worth the emotional energy to contact this person, when she might have lost all contact with the church and would have all the more reason to marvel at his call.

He dialed after settling on the most straightforward approach. The

phone rang two times before someone picked up and sent a thundering but still fundamentally bored and irritated "Hello" down the virtual pipe.

That was her.

"Mrs. Binkle, I know you won't recognize my voice. This is Gary Corinth. You and I were fellow parishioners in the Church of That Ascension Stuff a couple years ago." A pause followed, into which she by custom should send at least a grunt of recognition or acceptance, but nothing came. "Do I have the right Marge Binkle?"

"Mmmm," she said in an effort to protect her identity. It meant, of course, that she was the right one, but she was reserving the space in which to deny her identity, should the caller become too burdensome.

"Marge, I don't know if you can picture me, but we met several times. I won't beat around the bush: the reason I'm calling is because of my concern for Alice Philips. You'll recall, I think, that Alice and I were friends for a time before I had to relocate" -- a gray lie that she would recognize but not likely contradict -- "and since I've been back, I've been concerned about her behavior. Someone suggested that I contact you because they know of your concern for members of the church."

She was no doubt rattling off in her mind the contradictions in his brief opening, but at the same time he imagined her mind sucking at the

silence, trying to pull the words out of him that would reveal his real reason for calling, a reason that would allow her to devastate him with a crushing revelation or, should she actually know nothing, cut him off like the dry, dead branch he was.

"Gary, you said?" she said finally. "I am beginning to remember a Gary. Older gentleman, bachelor, very little religious experience, not exactly a typical member of our community."

"You've got me, Marge."

"And let's see," she said, starting to warm to the subject. "Alice.

Long-time member of our church, single mother, raising a well-mannered little boy. A beautiful woman with a gentle charm, though she has her austere side." She paused to let her connoisseurship sink in. "Alice and I have a longstanding friendship, you see, and I am always concerned when a friend such as she experiences hurt or sorrow."

"It was never my intention," Gary said, following his part of the script, "to hurt Alice in any way. I only wish that she had seen that."

"I see," said Marge: You were at fault. Interesting. "Now, what did you say is disturbing you?"

"Well," he said, breathing deeply as he began. "She and I didn't keep in touch during my relocation, and now that I'm back, more or less, I would like to be friends at least. But as it turns out, she is not

interested in resuming our friendship at all. I wonder if I might have deeply offended her in some way, or if she's afraid that I might just cut off contact again, or" -- the crux is coming, she could tell -- "if there's maybe some other reason that she might not be interested in a friendship."

"I see," said Marge. Dull-witted attempt at finding that out, she thought, but an interesting act of desperation. Not bad. "Well, Gary, you shouldn't fret about having offended her" -- now Gary's chance to recognize ignorance -- "but sometimes a woman needs to move on. And, sweetheart, Alice has moved on. You should, too, dear. I want to believe that the right girl is out there, waiting to meet you."

Ha, thought Gary. "Thanks, Marge. But what do you mean 'needs to move on'? Do you mean that she has, has, a male friend, and that our friendship would be awkward?"

"Well, Gary," she replied, knowing that this rube act was not the real thing. She realized that there was more -- and less -- to Gary than she had thought. It was too bad she'd never taken the time to find out more; there might have been real value in that. But as things were, he was just wasting her time, and it was high time to end this. "Yes, she has a friend, a fiancé in fact, and I don't think that your friendship fits in her future."

"Wow," said Gary, very much taken aback, because he knew that this was no bluff. A feeling rose suddenly in him that he had squandered something deep and rich, as if he had been homesteading on a future diamond mine; it rose in him like a chemical wave, a wave of adrenaline and other lymphatic secretions that prepared his body for an outpouring of disappointment, grief and envy. "Wow." Finally he had the wherewithal to ask: "Who is her fiancé? Someone from the church?" Marge smiled into her handset, feeling the triumph of the moment. "Why, yes, it is. Someone you would know, and I'm sure you'll want to congratulate him the next time you see him. I'm surprised you haven't heard it from him directly, since you've been attending service again. It's Reggie Valerio."

What the fuck!, thought Gary with a powerful shot of shock run up his backbone and across his cheeks. That's just fucking impossible. She would never be with a shyster like that, an obvious con artist, a slippery ladies man. Never. "Thanks, Marge, I will. Goodbye." He hung up and stared at the phone for a minute or two or ten. No way, she would never be with that bum. There's not a chance in hell, even in Marge's personal hell.

No chance, he concluded finally -- even if, he had to admit, she had spent weeks dating a man who was on a mission to prove Dear Abby both

right and wrong. It simply had to be true that she could see the difference between Gary and Reggie. Even if he was black.

No. 11 -- The clock was running in big red numbers, with hundredths superimposing themselves on his eyes like a water flow that his eyes could not resolve. The blue screen indicated a signature event was approaching: spikes in various directions and at various (levels, frequencies, intensities?). A textbook case that would, hopefully, have a textbook resolution. Maybe for the last time. The ground crew had announced their coming online an hour before and was brought up to the moment in a terse exchange. Nerves were on edge all around. The clock seemed to him to be accelerating.

About an hour into the intensified watch word arrived: Mr. Cold Blue was on his way to observe. That was not good news for the operator, since it presaged pressure from the top to make this one work. If there was failure of any kind, the blame would be shoved as far down the chain as possible, most likely right into his shorts. But he was prepared to stand and take it: accusations of idiocy, arrogance, dismissal. All in the name of the country. Some of his friends from radio school understood "the good of the country" to be an intrinsic value in itself, but he had no such illusions. It was just another religion. There might be some satisfaction if Mr. Cold Blue were

standing on the firing line next to him, but he was exactly the kind of man who could calmly take a bullet for an irrational abstraction: So be it, he would say, I forfeit this meaningless life willingly.

An hour later the blue values had not changed much. The operator had a growing itchy feeling that this might just be a false labor -- but they all continued to play it straight for the sake of their coming visitor.

Occasional vector checks with the ground unit. Log checks.

Redirectioning of the drone. A few darted looks over his shoulder at the silent guard, ambiguously stationed, as always, at the closed door, but with the gun barrel pointing inward.

A radio on the guard's side squawked the approach of the visitors. The operator made a quick check over the array of items that were his domain, and practiced under his breath: "Nothing to report, sir." It was a simple phrase that left plenty of room for the shimmer of insolence.

The multiple knocks came like the handshake of a secret brotherhood, and the guard opened the door, saluted. A superior hopped into the trailer, which shook slightly for some seconds thereafter. After a delay, Mr. Cold Blue stepped up and looked into the gloom of the trailer. His nose rumped every so slightly. Not to our operator's surprise, Mr. Cold Blue was followed in by a female soldier -- in

fatigues but still a smart little number. She seemed to be his adjutant for the day. The operator was already standing and saluted all concerned, then returned to his post without further ado and with a trace of a suppressed smile.

After the formalities about this and that security measure with the soldiers at the door, the adjutant actually came over and looked over his shoulder. He thought he could discern the soap she was wearing, a deodorant soap that he had had occasion to smell before, but he wasn't sure. She was asking him about the trends, which the printouts and real-time charts already indicated well enough, but she was doing that "nail-down" thing that superiors loved to do. They get you to lay out what you think so that they can praise the thoroughness or -- more likely -- condemn the lack of insight, too great complacency or overweening excitability. He summed up after his report: "Nothing new to report, ma'am." Im Westen nichts Neues.

Gary had occasion to think the same. Nothing new, but there was something wrong with the way things were, for sure. He had a general sense of unease -- not that he was tuned into the drama unfolding along an axis some twenty miles away, but he could not completely control the fissure in his mind brought on by the burned monitor and then by the name Reggie Valerio. He decided to backtrack and look at the website

that Bluthe had sent him, in the hopes of finding some ammunition for increasing Alice's own sense of unease. Maybe he could get it to simmer and boil over into a distrust of Reggie. He planted himself with a beer in front of the screen and unzipped the site. He started at index.htm and double clicked. The page opened up -- and Gary fell in.

It was a number of hours later, after considerable back and forth within the site and across conspiracy theory sites and alien encounter sites and even a trip to the local library -- after learning that it did not completely eschew the alien- conspiracy literature that he needed -- that he emerged with a sense of mission and urgency. It wasn't until the very end of his reading -- and rereading Bluthe's email -- that he realized the extent to which anxiety had taken hold of him. Even if he did not believe every detail, like Bluthe's quiet assassin squads, he was convinced that something was happening, something that had a strongly chilling dimension. It wasn't War of the Worlds -- it was E.T. meets the Matrix.

The FAQ page of the website for the Society for this Blue Ball in a Big Black Void was up on his monitor, scrolled to question number 4, which we give in entirety below:

Q: How has contact been most prevalently made? A: Documented contacts go back throughout the ages. A voice in a burning bush?

Joan of Arc's vision? Is there any more likely explanation -- other than the simple human drive to invent that we know so well -- than a

contact from outside our world? Indeed, it's possible to infer contacts from many origin myths and religious stories. They do not necessarily mean contact -- they could be exactly what our modernist

sensibility believes them to be: inventions of our subconscious minds. But they could also have a grain of truth involving one of the forms of contact that we now know to be undeniably true.

The alien contacts originate somewhere across time and space. The physics is not well understood -- our best reference for understanding the nature of it is a bit of good-natured physicist humor, a short and cavalier article that is now exceedingly difficult to find (see the summary in FAQ #7) -- but we believe that

contact is made through a concerted and highly energetic communication effort via quantum mechanics. There must be an exceedingly large amount of energy on the other end creating this channel. We believe that it must in fact be so energetic that there is no reason to assume that the jump does not occur in both widely spread time and space reference fields. In other words, the communicators on the other side could be living at any possible moment in the universe's lifespan, in any place.

There is clearly a sufficiently great gulf in our scientific and

technological knowledge that the why and wherefore of the nature of the channel itself is unknown to us. Suffice it to say that they are

able to spray messages of various types across this immeasurable gulf and also take back signals to their side. We know that this is true for two reasons: first, the randomness of an initial contact changes fundamentally once an effort is made on our side to interact

with the signal; and second, once contact is regularized the communicators make clear that they rely upon the signal of willingness from our side for their interactions. In other words, they take back from us from the beginning of contact.

Contact is initiated by the transmission of a signal to a random location on our planet. We believe the choice of location and time to be "random" in the sense that they are not laying down grids and searching systematically. At the same time, despite a small sample pool, we have reason to believe that they select for location with some care. It may be that they are trying to lay down a grid and the

happenstance of their technology makes this effort indiscernible.

But more likely they have pre-selected areas and then allow for a certain randomness of contact within these areas. It is unknown whether this pre-selection prefers urban or rural locations; we have

indications of contact from both, although our documented contacts have all been urban. The main pre-selection criterion is the local

human population density; they seem to aim for high-density locations, even if within a larger relatively unpopulated space. It may be that they prefer an isolated town to an urban area for reasons that will become apparent.

It is idle speculation to assert that they have probably pre-selected our time as well for increased activity. This theory assumes that we are especially valuable conversants because we are sufficiently advanced not to be utterly deferential to a disembodied

presence but not yet advanced enough to interfere with their efforts

in any systematic way. They clearly prefer individual contact to official contact through government bodies, and our lack of understanding makes it easy to do this. But this whole line of thinking makes several assumptions that the communicators, in their absolute reticence about their motivations and situations, have never substantiated or qualified.

Contact usually proceeds as follows. The recipient of a contact effort becomes aware of an eerie projection. Apparently because of the difficulty of the connection, the message is invariably crude. This crudeness also allows the recipient, if he or she so chooses, to ignore the communication as an odd but natural phenomenon and move on. For a small number, however, this communication is soon recognized as an object that admits of no simple -- and ultimately

no terrestrial -- explanation.

The message being communicated varies considerably. This little fact

has been a major stumbling block in understanding and interpreting these communicative events. Only recently has the theory been put forth (see FAQ #5) that we are dealing with a single set of alien presences, but that we are experiencing an educational system on the

remote end that assigns to neophytes the reinvention of the communication process. We detail this progression in FAQ #6, but suffice it to say that in every documented contact the process starts over from almost zero.

The initial communication is usually little more than an invitation to improve the signal. This seems both necessary technically in order to have improved communication and also an important threshold

for the continuation of the contact. The image presented is a variation on an antenna -- there are several designs in our records,

none is technically difficult or sophisticated or very precise.

Apparently, there is little necessary beyond what our group calls an

anchor -- a target, if you will, for their energy beam to aim at.

Initial signals tend to move randomly but center upon

electromagnetic devices such as televisions or loud speakers. The

theory is that these serve as attractors, while the antennae might be called nodes.

Once the antenna is constructed and placed somewhere near the initial signal -- usually within 96 hours if you want to successfully capture the signal for further communication -- you will see a transformation, and the beginning of a mutual learning process that is absolutely extraordinary...

Not long after emerging from his research Gary was on the way to Radio Shack. It is hard to say what he was feeling. There was exhaustion, rage, exhilaration, and disbelief. There were the neuro-chemical influences, a strange cocktail mix of adrenaline and testosterone from the mental excitement and the equally unusual abstinence from ejaculation. And finally there was the mental map of a historic moment, a precipice that lay before him and a woman he still loved, an opportunity to create an absolute kind of meaning out of a series of actions that otherwise summed to little, very little. He could afford to look at himself in a new way as he drove to the store. His car was a filthy mess, and its windows were smeared with a yellowish plastic film that had accreted over years. The rear view mirror had brown, unidentifiable liquid stains from a spill years before. His visage was grizzled, his eyes underwritten by blue, his lids reddened, his skin

mottled by acne and moles, the nose bent from a bar brawl that he didn't even remember. He looked at himself looking at his reflection in the mirror, and became aware of another part of his mind that always saw himself as separate, different from the man who was looking at him. Of course, it is a cheap fix to dream yourself free of the life you've lived. But the circumstances conspired to make the fixation hold. He hummed a Springsteen tune from the car radio as he got out. He looked around, half expecting a black Suburban to roar up and the doors to blast open. Nothing like it. It was early afternoon, and the geriatric set was out, as well as mothers with young children in tow, teenagers, a factory worker living life on the swingshift, an unemployed white-collar stiff, a house painter still reeking of the day's work. No one paid Gary one bit of attention.

He had quite a laundry list for the Radio Shack manager, who acted coolly skeptical -- as if he had been left hanging at the register too often and would rather lose a sale than let himself be surprised. But Gary was on a mission, didn't let himself be deterred or angered by the arrogance, and even pulled out the reserve credit card that he saved for important occasions and the occasional ill-conceived splurge, just in case. The manager misinterpreted a few items and didn't have others, but in toto Gary walked out with his alien-contacting antenna.

The theory, as outlined by the Society, was relatively simple. The alien signal would hone in on an electromagnetic field in the approximate shape of a picture tube. Perhaps this was because the aliens assumed that we always communicated via electromagnetic tubes, but more likely -- so the society's FAQ -- the tube provided a slight bias in the location of the quantum channel, which also somehow created greater feedback on the originating side, and thus, over time and with a tremendous amount of energy, became a node for the two-way conversation of photons. As for the explosion on the burned-in image -- the fusion of two atoms -- the FAQ was silent on its potential role in communication.

Gary's incarnation was going to be a three-dimensional spiral of thick-cored cable. He also bought an electrical device to generate current on the cable, thus inducing an electromagnetic field, with a smooth range to the voltage in case there was an advantage to a particular amperage. His last major purchase was a cheap oscilloscope and a multi-band receiver kit for which he had downloaded instructions from the web to modify it to support the entire range from AM radio to the 5 GHz band of interest to networking and cordless phone companies. The last item was his attempt to add to the knowledge of the society, since they seemed to have a general lack of engineering or physical

expertise.

The sensible thing to do would be to return to his house and put the devices together with an appropriate set of tools, good lighting and -- well, plenty of beer. But the drama of the moment trumped; he set off on the freeway toward Alice's condo. He had, of course, been warned off the night before, and she probably wasn't even at home; if he showed up unbidden she might even conclude at this point that he was stalking her. But he had a need to protect her and that was impossible with the distance between them. He knew a fleabag hotel not far from her neighborhood. No questions, weekly rate.

He sped up the freeway, unconsciously adjusting for the shimmy of the rear right tire, looking through the clouded windows with the filtering eyes he had always had. But he felt the differences: the irreality of the situation had changed his vision, in the way a car accident might change the way you look at cars, at the road and even at the simple act of holding the wheel -- a gnawing awareness of the tenuousness of the continuity that we use to define ourselves. In his mind, he played out a scenario where this would be the last time he ever traveled this stretch, be the last willed act of his life, and it was something that he accepted, an act of compassion worth dying for, a woman and child worth his life. He felt it as a difference, even if he knew down in the

pit of his stomach that choosing sacrifice was not yet choosing death.

In that pit, he also knew that he might become just another self-justifying subject of Bluthe's research, unable to hold his mind to the sacrifice. His car sped him toward the resolution.

And you -- if you had the chance, had the armed rockets and intel from a time- traveling source, would you eliminate him now? Consider your answer carefully. Don't dismiss the value of continuity too hastily; that dismissal is a common failing of revolutionaries, and a common cause for the eruption of chaos and unintended consequences. Do not forget that revolutionaries, successful and not, are usually every bit as unreflective and accidental as Gary, carrying his cargo right into the cold-blue zone.

No. 12 -- The glass door squeaked as he opened it, and he waited for a bell or buzzer as it whooshed close behind him. Nothing. There was a TV on behind a door off the reception, little more than a counter with a big clock behind it. Fading Visa/MC decals. Outside the sun still shone like a photon hose, bathing the motel and street in an unrelenting attack on the structure. There was a small service bell on the counter, and he gave it a clang. After a few moments, just as he was about to do so again, the door with the TV came ajar and a voice said: "I heard ya." Then the door closed again.

By the time the manager appeared, Gary was wavering between magnanimity and rage. The man was Caucasian -- not what Gary was used to in motels of this sort, expecting Pakistani or Persian -- and rather old, the kind you recognized almost immediately: a self-deluding hustler gentleman who has probably traded a quiet retirement with miniscule fixed income for the dream of a generous, steady and easy income from a piece of property. He wasn't getting the dream, but Gary could see he was getting something else: Far from being an invisible and poor retiree, he reigned in this cheap hotel, cocking an eyebrow and grunting to himself, while serving the widest range of sins, both venal and deadly, that a simple man could imagine: gluttony, drugs, sexual perversion, adultery, murder, suicide, mayhem.

Gary let the man try to box him with his expression, here for a tryst possibly, but more likely a loser dreaming of bedding a prostitute but who will probably will settle for an adult movie before pulling up stakes. Then Gary inquired of the weekly rate, and the gentleman made a start. He looked at him again, maybe sizing him up for an inept-looking but deadly hitman. In any case, he treated him with a bit more respect as he explained the procedures for residential guests. Gary paid cash and signed in under a pseudonym.

As Gary brought his purchases from the car -- another twist for the

concealed observer in the office -- two cars careened in, one after the other, and parked at opposite sides. Gary recognized this drama as well, though he'd never been a partner in such; still, the milieu was familiar. The male had parked near the office and went in, while the woman waited in her car, seeming to occupy herself and only discreetly peering around. The man emerged from the office and, when his destination was more or less defined by his gait across the lot, his counterpart exited her car and b-lined in the same direction. They did not look at each other as they walked, as if that would somehow reduce the obviousness of everything they did. Gary opened his door on the second floor slowly, and took his time picking up the bags outside and bringing them in. When the hurried couple disappeared into their room, he closed his door.

It had been difficult to get a look at her. Gary spent a few moments as he spread out his equipment, imagining her motivation, her excuse, her justification. It was not impossible that they were a married couple playing a midday drama. But more likely she was a neglected housewife, an angry and misunderstood working woman, or simply the archetypal other woman. How does she see the nature of her act? Gary had spent so much time during his Dear Abby period with women for whom this kind of release was unthinkable -- or at least inexpressible -- that he had a

difficult time reconciling this selfish, grasping act with what he considered "the female" -- that need for nurture, and nurturing control, and that something that could penetrate a man's diffidence, like a sperm entering a different kind of egg. "The female" in this sense could be little more than a cheap parlor trick, a gimmick that played upon the predictably vulnerable egos of males. Even when he'd resolved he wouldn't fall for it again, he could feel the heat rise in his cheeks whenever a woman set her eyes on him and offered the equivalent of: "Oh, please, Gary, I'd be so grateful..."

Sexual, perhaps, but in the remote way that everything becomes about the biology that enables it all. Gary could see how women inhabited bodies that have nearly the complete package -- flesh, bony mass, blood, lymphatic and nerve networks -- in common with males. What was it, then, that instantiated the sexual difference, or more particularly the female difference? The bath of feminine hormones? Or was it simply a conscious decision, one that was not sufficient to conjure up femaleness all the time, one, rather, that a woman could call up if she needed or wanted?

Give biology its due. Take poor Gary, awash in the hormones and body memories that made every woman he saw an extension of the last ejaculation, an ecumenical urge that found the idealized female form in

almost every type of woman and that overflowed his senses when confronted with a more arch expression of the feminine shape and posture -- say, a petite woman with strongly defined curves and a light step that hinted of expectation and joy and engagement. But in his normal state, Gary could see enticement in the even most socially checked and joyously civil "I'd be so grateful..."

Everything sexual, sure. He wouldn't deny it. But there was another side, something that came back to him at that moment, as his hands moved among the pieces of the receiver, and his mind sought to reconstruct the features of the woman from a fleeting look. How many times had he been engaged by a strongly female body, buoyed by the opportunity to observe it, when he saw her turn and saw an average or maybe even unsatisfied or dour face, and suddenly the body was a different kind of body -- disembodied female beauty, unconnected to the spirit inhabiting it. It is a fairytale kind of social order, where the physical must express the moral, but it's a powerful combination: biology and spirit. And even Gary could feel how that was ultimately the goal and the synthesis that motivated every ejaculation, every dispirited, dogged autonomic release.

It was early evening; a humid heat hung in the air, as if the heat

itself was resting from its efforts beneath the relentless gaze of the sun. Gary had gotten pizza and a quart bottle of beer, which he brought back and consumed in silence in his room. "Taxi Driver" scenarios were playing themselves out in his mind (though he was unarmed), and he was simply too tense to find comfort in background TV noise. He wanted to wait until at least the point in time when a dinner guest might already be inside, should he be coming for dinner. Early departure or late arrival -- there wasn't much he could do about that without risking missing the goal. Night or evening were preferred times, according to the society.

"There are reports," so the last FAQ, "that we find unsubstantiated and improbable that the military industrial complex has not only documented these visitations but may have already devised a program to capture contacts, in order to try to replicate the technology. It is said, further, that the program operates in the utmost secret and has a stake in limiting exposure." Limiting exposure? "We find it certainly not beyond belief that the government would operate in this fashion, but we believe two things: it is too late to put this genie back in the bottle; and it is unlikely that the government will recognize the significance of something so devoid of commercial and political heft, before it is too late for them to control it."

With that challenge and final dramatic irony, the society went silent. Gary was alternately adrenalized and soothed by these words, in a cycle that he finally recognized in his daydreaming, and put an end to. He got up, took his equipment and headed out to the car. There was a wide variety of cars, trucks and motorcycles in the lot now -- a testament to the hive. No one was visible in the many rooms with lights on, nor standing in the light to be outlined. The scene felt dark, noisy and cramped, and an overheated odor hung in the air, but there was no noir connection among the wanderers gathered here, nothing to make it seem like more than simply an unpleasant corner that you'd rather avoid if you had half a choice.

Gary got in his car with his device and pulled out and into the street. He put the radio on and listened to some hip-hop he couldn't understand, then shut it off abruptly. He saw Alice's building loom out of the passing suburban scenery and went past and turned into the side street. He turned around and parked beneath her bedroom window, some 30 feet from the glass. He was pretty confident that she wouldn't open that window, but he was about to do much more that could easily be construed as stalking. Before he got out of the car, he fired up his device for the first time -- bad quality control practices, but he lucked out. His compass jumped around like it was supposed to, and the

induced current made a little light shine in a separate test circuit he built. He put the device in a large brown paper bag and made sure it was on.

He exited his car and walked with a spring in his gait -- emulating, he thought, the need to get somewhere quickly -- almost to the front door. There, he imitated surprise that the door wasn't buzzing or wasn't open, and he went back out to the sidewalk, more or less in the middle of the building, and looked up as if he hoped to see his host or hostess looking apologetically out the window. He repeated his performance once, twice, thrice, each time extending the time spent looking up, until finally the most he did was pace up and down the block, still looking up expectantly. One time he was at the opposite end of the block when someone came strolling out and he missed his chance. Another time, a young woman eyed him suspiciously as she came around the corner and went to the front door, and he kept his distance. Finally, a pizza delivery car drove up and when the driver was buzzed in, Gary was there with his large grocery bag to follow him in. So far, so good, he thought. But it didn't seem like a brilliant plan when he stood in the overlit lobby, with the memory of Alice flooding through his mind, and when her disappointed and shocked face appeared to him on surfaces everywhere.

He walked up the stairs and headed straight for her door. He paused for a just moment there, fully expecting it to open and his heart to stop with the shock. Motionless, he directed his better ear at the door. He heard nothing. Maybe something muffled, but more likely it was some movement in the apartment above. No indication of anything. He gave up and went down the hallway; here's where the plan became critical. He walked right up to the door at the end of the hall. It had a red bar and sign labeled "Emergency Exit Only." Gary knew that some people used this door to go out to the cars parked to the rear. The building association occasionally had the emergency door alarm reset, and for a few days the building would be inundated with electronic screams in the hall and cricket alarms in every condo, until someone disconnected the door alarm again. Gary was betting the whole enchilada that that was still the case. He pushed the bar. No buzz, but he half expected after two seconds to feel the shrill tone fill his ears. Nothing again. He picked up his bag and went into the stairwell, careful not to let the door close.

It was dusky dark, which suited him. He placed a metal shim and let the door close on it. He knew Alice would never leave through this stairwell, but Reggie was a wildcard. Anyone else, he was prepared to head down the stairs and out as if he had come from the third floor,

leaving his antenna behind if necessary; he was no good to himself or anyone else behind bars. Maybe, he thought, he would be forced to punch Reggie in the stomach and toss him headlong down the stairs. That remained to be seen.

He reached into the bag and checked it with his external circuit. He had wanted to bring his frequency checker, but it seemed safer to concentrate his resources on this device. "Interestingly," the FAQ's author had observed, "it is possible to move the signal from one location to another by the careful transportation of the active antenna." Gary hoped that this was true. But he had a back-up plan if it proved to be impossible to capture the signal or move it. He would pound on Alice's door until she responded, and then he would explain the danger -- through the door if necessary -- and they would gather up Andrew and some essentials, get into his car (hers would be too dangerous) and drive straight to the airport. They would feint by buying tickets for later that day, to Banff or Anchorage or Nova Scotia or wherever. Then they would get right back into his car and head straight for the border (Canadian or Mexican).

The alien conspiracists were the only direct source he had for trying to understand the danger that Alice and he were in. "Men in black" were no joke in the literature, and he had gleaned what he could of their

methods: showing up immediately after contact, or when suppressed memories of abduction began to resurface; large dark SUVs with impenetrable windows; dark-suited, featureless gentlemen quietly going about the business of enforcing silence and disappearing. That enforcement never escalated to murder in the conspiracy literature, but it was a disjointed and frankly unbelievable set of story conventions.

"You know, without their communicating anything in words, that if you break the agreement to be silent about what you have experienced that they will simply make you disappear -- erase your life, disabuse your family and friends of trying to find you, and make you regret that decision for all your born days, if not for all eternity. They have that look." So one particularly outspoken alienist chronicler -- who, ironically, was still awaiting their return.

Gary cursed having forgotten his watch. Time dragged absolutely in that stuffy, dank stairwell, with nothing but rehashed visions of self-sacrifice and sudden kung fu prowess and bumbling MIBs, and the occasional muffled sound from who knows where in the building and who knows why. He had to listen, and listening into silence is like leaning your head too hard against a blunt but extruding surface, a painful experience that promises to grow ever more so. After five counted-out minutes, he realized the hopelessness of the situation. He would have

to close his eyes and breathe deeply and simply wait. He pretended to be in his bed, unable to sleep but so late at night that he couldn't justify getting up. Just rest the body muscles, if the brain muscle won't.

He had no idea how long he had been in that hallway when he heard a door open in the hallway, and the sound of footsteps coming toward the stairwell. He jumped up, but instead of going downstairs to escape, he ran up the half- staircase to the landing and stood still. The door was violently pushed open and the shim fell, but the person thankfully did not pay attention and continued down the stairs. It was a young man, in a hurry by the measure of his leaping stairs -- or maybe it was simply his habit. He had landed on the first floor by the time the second floor door slipped shut, but Gary had not moved. He was stuck motionless. The young man hit the emergency release and the outside door opened with a bang. No alarm.

Gary considered himself lucky and hoped two things: that was the end of the interruptions and he didn't need to get into the hallway to capture the signal. Neither seemed very good odds. What to do? He weighed the relative danger of trying to get back in and trying to avoid detection here. The risks of someone sweeping down from the third floor made him feel all too exposed. Gary remembered quite well a seductively

self-assured middle-aged woman anthropologist and the distribution-requirement class she offered. She convinced him one day that we are no more than tribal folk, sensitive to any other human's proximity of less than a few thousand feet, but that the permission to pass is given so repeatedly and naturally, a social contract that we all undergo, that we forget how strongly and viscerally we would react when someone doesn't belong in our vision of our space. He knew he would face the same kind of judging eyes at this hour, no matter if he sat in his car or in front of the building. Probably no one would do anything, but every potential witness was also a link back to Alice and that profound sense of condemnation that he saw looming above her head. Of course, he should have just called her. "But she had said" -- that was just cowardice, he realized, with the sudden emergence of a sweat. The stairwell seemed to heat up with this realization of guilt. He could not escape the feeling of having failed himself with this plan that put him so close to Alice without her permission, risking every last shred of a relationship to her. Maybe she would visit him, when visiting her ex-husband in state prison, but the irony gave him scant comfort. Probably she would insist on a federal prison, to get him away from her, and he'd spend a couple years in Leavenworth prison, losing every bit of whatever innocence he could still muster.

After another ten minutes or so, his heart began to relax, his endocrine system was regulating itself a tad better. Maybe he should have called her, but then he risked the absolute end; this way, he had a chance to make himself essential again. If the MIBs came, he'd be more than essential, too, even if there was little he could do. Right now, though, he had the sense that the most likely scenario would be utter silence, and he would skulk out of the building, never to return. Sacrifice seemed to be the least likely possibility in that expanse of eventless minutes.

How long was it? Gary couldn't tell you, other than to say it was a long time. Hours maybe. The muffled noises decreased. His fear of someone flying down from the third floor was replaced with a bodily soreness from sitting on a stair step, occasionally stooping over to look into the bag and check the device's functioning. He was sour, his blood sugar was down, his eyes drooped, and now suddenly he found himself sweating again. That's odd, he thought, looking at his hand. He found to his surprise that it was beginning to tremble. He ran his hand through his thinning hair in an expression of his exasperation, and discovered a static-y mass that was half standing. Something was happening.

His eyes opened wide. Now or never. There was no way to open door to

get back into the hall. He could bang on the door or the wall, try to attract attention. He could run down the stairs and out into the night in order to try his hand at getting back in. He knew he had to act. But he was paralyzed by a recognition of two bad alternatives and by the enervating feeling that he had schemed his way into a corner. Maybe he would be able to hear the MIBs enter and clean up the mess. Just muffled thuds on the other side of a fire door.

Not long after the self-loathing crescendoed, it happened. The sensations of a flooding heat and an expanding static storm rose in him, until he thought he could feel the source behind the wall of Alice's unit. And then he saw it: at first the faintest glow, much like the fading after-effect created by a flash or a bright light switched on. Then slowly, especially as he glanced away, he noticed more detail, until finally he could see it while staring directly at it. In fact, he walked right up to it and put his eyes in front of the image: extruding as a completely insubstantial image, the platonic ideal of a phosphoric image, in a sickly green, not unlike the hue of old-style green monitors, but with the color constantly threatening to fade into an empty blackness and turning burnt yellow at the very edges.

When Gary had satisfied his momentary fascination and grew alarmed at the growing extrusion, he grabbed his bag -- which crackled in his

hands and felt as if it were just about to become a bowl of flames -- and pulled the device out. He walked the three steps to the image and held the spiral, butt outward, toward the projection. The transmigration continued excruciatingly slowly for another minute, then there was a burst of transformation: in a greenish-white flash that lit every inch of the stairwell with the candle power of a spotlight, the image jumped to his antenna. He was temporarily blinded by the flash, but somehow managed to hold onto the device. At the same time, he could feel burns on his face and hands, and he could feel, actually feel, the image project through his chest. And just as suddenly there was a "whoomp" from immediately in front of him, and the image disappeared -- he could feel the burn leave his chest and he could see with one squinting eye that it was gone.

He waited a few seconds before collapsing on a downward step from the landing and dropping the device on his lap. He released a giant breath that he had not realized he'd held. Even his ears felt abused. "Oh my God," he whispered, "oh my God, oh my God." He repeated it because it was handy and he wanted to see how well he could hear, repeated it quite a while before irony seeped in. "Jesus," he concluded.

His face was burning him, and his hands ached when he moved his fingers. Eventually, he looked down at his device like a fisherman

might examine his pole after the big one got away. At first he didn't notice anything, but then it dawned on him that the whole device had been changed: the plastic coating had been burnt off the inner surface -- along with a layer of his skin -- and the spiral, so crudely formed by him, had become a visually perfect spiral form.

A more perfect vessel, he found himself mouthing.

After a few moments, the sensation of a rising static storm was rekindled. He looked down on at the reformed device on his lap. There was no hum or vibration, but he could feel something -- prickling at hand hairs, worrying nerve endings, causing finger muscles to half-fire and tremble. He decided to give things another go, stood up and aimed the device as before, narrow end toward Alice's apartment. He braced himself, unable to stop his eyes from blinking obsessively in anticipation. Everything was as slow as last time, but when the image appeared, it was a small green stain in the middle of his antenna. The image was new. Gary wasn't sure what to make of it -- the components looked a bit like dominos. But he didn't concentrate on the message. He wanted to get the hell out of there.

When the message did not fade from view when he stared at it -- it was still sickly green, much more faint, just barely extruding beyond the tubular shape -- he started down the stairs. The image did wash out for

a moment, then it came into better focus, as if in a kind of tuning exercise. He walked with deliberate slowness, barely looking away from the image, as if by sheer will he could keep it from disappearing.

After a minute, he was at the back door. He had the sensation again of being inside someone else's tribal boundaries, the feeling that he would be out of place no matter what he did or which way he turned. The car was his escape, as it has always been -- if you'll allow me the editorial moment -- humanity's single greatest equalizer.

He turned around to push the emergency release with his back, and took that step into public with a whoosh of fresh air that seemed to clear his mind a bit. The device was glowing suspiciously, to be sure, but unless just queried by two strange men in dark suits about anything unusual, by-passers could make of Gary whatever they pleased. They might glower but no one could imagine that this unremarkable middle-aged man held a revolution in his hands. Gary looked back up over his shoulder as he got into the car. There were no strange SUVs about.

"Do you appreciate what I've done?" he said under his breath, both to her and to himself. This was a defining moment, a moment that survivors remember until they lie on their deathbeds, and he desperately wanted to share it with her. But he knew -- sharing it now was tantamount to

tearing their last connection asunder. He would carry this burden alone, just a little bit further.

No. 13 -- The lot was completely abandoned to jacked-up trucks, rental cars and the occasional old American boat. A few rooms had lights and the oscillating glow of televisions. Hip-hop music blared from one room like a challenge to all in its sphere. Gary brought his prize, his still glowing prize, out of the car and into his room; he couldn't help but feel that the proprietor was peering through his window and nodding. Something sick-o.

Gary set the device down and stared. In his exhaustion, he didn't know what to feel; his endocrine system was unable to jack him up any more after the jolts of just before, and seeing the bed was like a Pavlovian signal. He watched the device as he flipped the battery off; the signal shrank back up into the antenna, but did not disappear. Seconds passed, then he flopped on the bed and lost consciousness.

In the few minutes before Gary's system had begun shutting down, the operator's was suddenly in shock. He had taken a few hours and come back on duty because he was the senior operator on hand and because the signals were rising. The moment was at hand. The mobile unit was in place. The bird was one hundred percent, and reporting the general area with absolute consistency. An incident was underway.

The sensor suddenly exploded, in a way that he had never seen before. Perhaps during one occurrence that was used in his training, but he couldn't remember the details at the moment. "I've got something," he said, and looked around. The smart number, unfortunately, had been replaced by a significantly less smart number, but nevertheless a young woman with a presence. She took even less guff and had called him on his insolence twice already. "A soldier is always a soldier," she had said to him, "and your sloppy self-importance is a disgrace."

Fortunately, Dr. Blue Zone had not been on-hand when that exchange occurred. Perhaps he ought not have implied that she would get wet when the sensors pegged that night.

The good doctor was present now, resting with what seemed to be brandy in a paper cup, on a couch that was a remnant of some original design for this trailer. He was skeptical and not eager to show that his ears could perceive a private's voice. His adjutant approached the screen and stared for what seemed like a minute. The operator recognized the stare: keep calculating the ways that you might be sticking your foot in the crap, until you find one or you run out of time. "That's a hit, sir, a big one," she said finally. "You ought to come over and see this." Then she remembered to brush the operator's shoulder to make himself scarce. The good doctor liked to look in peace.

He had not designed the equipment and his disparaging looks made clear that he thought the main tool too mickey-mouse to be of much use. But he understood very well what it measured, and respected its ability to provide that measure accurately. This hit surprised him -- surprised him so much, in fact, he sat down and did his own extended stare. The adjutant finally broke the spell: "Soldier, inform mobile." The doctor came to life as well, looking a good deal younger than he had just a few minutes before. The operator figured: he is going to get laid tonight.

The excitement kept building, as the mobile unit approached the source, confirmed it many times over, and reported: "500 meters, triangulating."

Three spots, thought the operator, three readings along the tangent and we've got them. Three spots and no more trailer, he thought, knowing just as well that that was wishful thinking. Three spots!

"Location beta, signal locked." Two locations gives you a pretty tight search angle and limited depth, but the third location was necessary, by protocol and design, for vectoring and confirmation of distance.

"Proceeding to location delta."

"Roger that," he said. But even as he finished the sentence he saw the unbelievable happen. The signal flared, dove, rose -- and then fell

straight to zero. The signal disappeared.

"What just happened?" asked the appalled professor, half demanding an explanation for this outrageous turn of fortune. The adjutant asked outright: "Soldier, what did you do?"

A few seconds later the momentary crackle and a tinny voice confirmed: "Signal's lost here. We're back in holding. Do you have a fix for us, nest?"

"No fix," said the operator, cursing the crappy design that required absolute measurements. Government issue, for sure.

They waited for a few minutes, then the operator recalled something from a training incident. He thought it through while everyone else continued their waiting, pursuing their own thoughts, wondering how to get out of this awkward moment of disappointment, without revealing an overwhelming need to get out of this trailer and this life altogether.

The guard at the door looked on as always: an unnecessary but constant reminder of the stakes of the information contained in that trailer, with the gun ready to snuff out the lives of everyone who came into contact with it. For those brief moments of despair, it even seemed that a bemused half-smile had fallen on the face.

The operator, feeling now that he had a chance to rise above the usual flow of shit moving in his direction, cleared his voice: "Sirs, I

recall a similar incident in one of our training scenarios." He described for them the scenario: when the signal plummeted to zero, the recruit decided to recalibrate on a wider angle. Before he could do so, he noticed a slight return of the signal, at a fraction of its former strength. At first, the recruit assumed it was an after-signal of some kind. However, its steadiness indicated a true source. He recalled the scenario description verbatim: "When a signal changes intensity in this fashion, it indicates status 'blue zone gone to ground.' This message is to be immediately transferred to Homing Pigeon." He looked around. The less smart number was kicking herself in her head for not having come up with this first. The good doctor looked confused, and the operator realized he had no idea what this meant.

All eyes returned to the monitor.

The radio crackled and mobile's operator-equivalent said: "Awaiting further instructions."

"Be advised," said the operator, "that we may be in scenario 'blue zone gone to ground.'"

There was an extended silence before: "Roger that."

Then, like clockwork, the signal came back into focus, one-twentieth its former strength, barely noticeable from the sensor on the drone.

The operator almost crapped out of excitement. "Mobile, do you have

it?"

"Roger, we're continuing on to location delta." Then after a few seconds: "Signal's gone again. Do you have it?"

The operator didn't like the sound of that -- it wasn't part of the scenario. "We still have it, same location. The signal is fluctuating."

"Wait," countered the mobile operator, "it's back, but weaker. It's jerking all over. We're at delta." Another long pause. Then suddenly, like a realization: "Christ, it's moving. Nest, can you confirm?"

The operator didn't have enough of a signal to tell anything. "Cannot confirm, mobile. Recommend another triangulation point."

"Roger, moving on to location epsilon."

As the seconds ticked off, the operator got out the phone and lifted the handset. He dialed the Langley number. After he heard the metallic voice say, "State your business after the tone," and then an odd tone that reminded him of a modem screech, he quickly said: "Blue zone has gone to ground." He replaced the handset and put the phone where it belonged. You don't stay on the line with these people. A long pause ensued in the trailer, in general anticipation of further success from the mobile unit, and all the while the operator could not shake the feeling that somewhere that call had just unleashed the dogs of hell.

No. 14 -- Gary woke up in the wee hours of the morning, dressed and

laid out flat on the bed, drool on his cheek, and the still burning lights painful to his pupils. He couldn't see the antenna without lifting his head, which at that moment he was incapable of doing -- the muscles flexed without effect. In fact, his whole body had an early morning feeling of sedation, so he lay there for a while, looking at the ceiling, wondering what lay at his feet and outside his door.

"At least I'm not dead," he said as if the antenna were listening.

He wiped the drool from his cheek and with two heaves rolled over to his side. He could look back toward his feet and see the antenna on the table. The green image was still there. He started to get control of his muscles again, and he was able to sit up on the side of the bed.

Then he stood and went to the table and flopped his still weak body down into the chair.

This image was different than what he had seen emerge from the wall -- that had seemed to be a variation on the original screen burn. He flipped the power back on and it grew. This was a collection of green bars surrounded by different numbers of dots, which, because of their size and the wavering borders, seemed to be sparkle on and off. Gary grabbed a pad of paper and a pen, both hotel issue, and made a rendition. Eight bars. First bar with 12 dots, second with 1, third with 15, and so on. So clearly a signal and yet so cryptic that he

wanted to speak into the antenna like a radio: "Yes, I'm here. Tell me what you want."

There was no definite next step in his plan. That's always the problem with your thinking, he said to himself, you can get that first hold by hook or by crook, but then you find yourself hanging without the next. So here you sit, in a stinking hole of a motel, with alien technology blinking at you, death squads and men-in-black searching for you, hell, closing in. You deserve it, too.

He doodled on the pad for a bit, then realized an obvious possibility for the image. The bars and dots were atoms; the drawing was an illustration of a compound. But to what end? He suspected that it was in order to provide a material that could make the antenna more effective. Of course, it might be the raw ingredients for a catalytic poison that would turn the earth into a dead brown heap. But it was a little late for cold feet of that style. He needed a computer and the Internet, then he'd figure out what the stuff was. He looked at the device -- too dangerous to move, too risky to leave here.

His finger hit the switch, and the image flashed down again. He put the device back in its bag and set it under the table. He weighed the danger of the motel owner sticking his nose in and deciding to report the device to the authorities. The odds were against that scenario, to

be sure, and he decided to play the odds; the opposite scenario -- the signal could be lost permanently -- outweighed the risk.

Gary stayed in the room long enough to brew the in-room instant coffee and slurp it down: after a few minutes he could feel a wave of sparking neurons in his head, and he headed out into the gray dusk of early morning. Some of last night's trucks were already gone, and a few rust buckets had been added. Gary got into his car and headed to the freeway.

He had a good long stare, as he drove, at a nondescript Winnebago RV driving slowly in the other direction, with a large, very odd antenna on its roof, slowly rotating. The windows were all tinted or covered. The driver was moving very slowly, unnaturally so. The license plate was US Government.

Gary didn't stop or turn around, although that was his first inclination. It wouldn't help to run into the room just before the MIBs. Instead, he made it to the freeway and headed home. By the time he pulled into his driveway, the gray morning murk was turning into a reddish brown sunrise in the east. Almost no traffic, just empty city buses and garbage trucks hunting for dumpsters.

After he took a few minutes to feel at home again, he noticed the

answering machine light on. He clicked the button: a call from his mother, then Alice's unmistakable voice.

"❖ checking in. I know you're busy," she concluded quickly, and added: "I'm looking forward to hearing from you." The click followed almost immediately, as if she were afraid that he was screening calls and about to pick up.

Gary replayed the message a few times. Alice was suspicious or driven to find out more, with nothing constraining her interest except her obvious lack of comfort around Gary. He had been 5 feet outside her door, probably, while she was leaving the message. This would be absolutely laughable, he thought, if it didn't make him hate himself for the pathetic coincidence...

He made some more coffee and decided to forget about Alice for a while. With this phone call and his own shattered nerves, she had assumed in his mind the pose, hard and indifferent at the same time, from that day when she announced he'd overstayed his welcome. He sat down at the computer and did a Google search on the periodic table. With the chemical names in hand, he did a search on the chemical combination; it did not take too long before he realized that "Na," even with a case and whole word restriction, was simply too common to be useful. He decided to take another tack.

He tried Yahoo's research service: "What are the compounds that use all these elements, first those with exactly these, in some proportion, and no others, then those that might contain these in a sequence of some kind."

That promised twenty-four hour turn-around. Much too long for his purposes, but he didn't see any way around it. He remembered at some point to go back to the computer and fire off a message to his supervisor at work, describing in some detail his feverish aches and pains and advising him that he, Gary, would return to work next Monday, it being Friday. Eat that, he murmured.

After a shower and more coffee, another thought came to Gary. Or rather, it began to form in the shower, while he was jacking himself, in that creeping- vine way that thoughts have, especially when you're trying to concentrate on something that is neither present nor fresh in your memory. He did his best to shut the thought out, but returned immediately to it while he was toweling off. By the time he poured coffee, he had the outlines of a new plan and was looking through the Yellow Pages -- the hard copy, handier for browsing. Then, while he was still slurping, he looked through Bluth's site some more, wondering if he could find what he had overlooked -- find it before it was directly before him, on a blind curve or encircling his home.

He drove over an hour to the chemical supply store. He parked his car in an asphalt lot that was full of pebbles, as if it couldn't free itself from its dirt road origins. The building was a tin or aluminum box, industrial sized. Gary marched up to the glass door that seemed to be the main entrance, and went in, with a pause just before pulling the door to steel his nerves.

He stepped onto the cold solid concrete floor that he knew extended throughout the building; there was a small office front set up around the entrance, with a low acoustic ceiling, three walls of imitation pine paneling, a counter and the company logo. Gary stopped before the bell on the counter -- something he was a bit apprehensive to use.

A moment later, someone came around the corner --no doubt the door had a sensor on it. Maybe a few years older than Gary, the clerk had the requisite lab coat and that hurried expression of someone who actually had work to do, not just tending a cash register.

"Can I help you," he said while still positioning himself and without a glance.

"Yes-s-s," started Gary with an extended response that presaged a story or complication, then: "I've got this friend, he's a doctor and he sometimes thinks it's a good gag to embarrass me with some kind of inside joke that I don't get. This time" -- he took out the list of

elements -- "he told me I had to get some of this. I just have no idea what it is."

The clerk looked at him with the expression: I have no interest in your story, just tell me what this has to do with me.

"I was hoping you could sell me some of this." He handed over the sheet.

The clerk looked at it -- it had Gary's sketch of the bars and stars above, with the chemical names below. He turned the sheet over in case there was something sensible there. Gary tried a stupid smile and was about to repeat the salient feature of the story when the clerk decided just to solve the problem. He didn't inquire about quantities.

When he returned he had a quart jar of a powder labeled "Agar" and a half-pint jar of a metallic powder, aluminum. He placed them with authority on the counter, but without making even a few granules dance, and rang up the purchase on the register. Gary brought out his credit card, eliciting a momentary sigh and then a number of hair-precise movements, and finally an awkward pause while the clerk was eye-to-eye with Gary, waiting on the receipt to print. He pulled it out the very moment the last dot was printed. "Thanks, come again," he said as he pulled the store receipt from under Gary's pen, and before striding -- released -- behind the wall again.

It wasn't until Gary was beside his car that he remembered the immense caution of his plan: "Pay for everything with cash; park your car so the license plate is hidden." He looked back at the metal box, sorely tempted to go back in and make things right, but he knew the transaction record was somewhere else and immune to his regret. He felt in his pocket and was mightily relieved to find the list there -- that at least was not out of his control.

He went by a supermarket for a bowl, mixing spoons and some distilled water. Time to mix this up, he thought. Got a six-pack, too.

He knew, of course, that a cynical trick had been played upon him by the clerk. That asshole might as well have handed him a stack of Jell-O packages -- at least he'd have something to eat for his troubles. The clerk had done no analysis of the configuration of elements, but had just settled on the first thing that came to mind that would have the same mess of elements. From what Gary knew of chemistry, the gelatin would be gigantic chains, immense molecules with very different properties from less massive formulae. The odds of someone across the galaxy or the whole of time-space knowing what kind of gelatin we make from some goddam algae seemed vanishingly small.

Unless, of course, they've learned through experience, a trial-and-error process of request and reply, re-phrase and retry. Or

maybe they will discover that Gary can't produce what they need and they'll pull the plug. But Gary knew that, practical joke or not, this was his best shot.

No. 15 -- It was time for maid service around his room when Gary got back, so instead of going into the room, he walked down the block to what turned out to be a middle eastern café. They served coffee and some form of pastry; Gary ordered what looked safe and waited at a small table. The clerk gave him the stuff to go, which Gary had not intended but he had no spirit to contest. He walked down the smallish commercial district of this neighborhood, a block of businesses punctuated at both ends with miniature strip malls. A number of storefronts were boarded up. One was newspapered over on the front windows, but the door was open and Gary could see a couple of desks and phones inside. He was contemplating why this interested him at all, but couldn't see it yet.

He half expected to see the RV rumbling down the street or the dark-tinted SVUs that passed by his internal eye in a regularly replaying video of his last minutes on earth. His body, he realized as he walked, was in an ongoing state of alert, in an irregular flood and ebb of adrenaline and panic. His fingers were shaking visibly. He tossed the half-full coffee in a garbage can and wolfed the pastry,

hoping that it had enough fat to take the sugar edge off. He looked into the passing faces more than his wont, and found his mind painting anguish and astonishment onto them, as his mind tried to guess how each would react to knowing what he knew.

Ignorance is bliss, he thought, with a nagging sense of how inadequate the satisfaction of knowing was. Ignorance. If he could have put a name to it, it would have been the cluelessness of the backward-facing, the experiential quantum mechanics that allows us to walk towards catastrophe, heads aloft and smiles pasted on, as if drudging along in infinite sameness.

Just a few minutes later, he was in front of the motel and couldn't bear another turn around the district, so he went to his room. The maid was finishing up, so he stood on the exterior passage way as if enjoying a magnificent view. She finally came out with a flourish of disinfectant odors and dirty sheets, and pulled the door shut with a loud click that said, "I'm not losing my job for any tom, dick or harry who wants to sneak into this room. If you don't have the key, you can get fucked." Of course, she was mouthing Spanish to herself, probably no less piquant.

Gary was relieved to shut the door behind him. Even the partial muffling --street noise, someone's booming car stereo and another

resident's television -- seemed like a great relief. The bag was where he left it, and he pulled out the antenna and put it back on the table. The image was terribly small, as if nothing more than an incidental remnant. No sense waiting to see if the excitement was already over. He flipped the switch. His breath caught: after two seconds of nothing, he knew it was over. Maybe he would get credit from Alice for getting rid of it? Unlikely, given that she didn't acknowledge its existence anymore. At least he could get out of this dump and get himself back to his own hovel and his own squalor.

But then, the green stain did grow, slowly and smaller than before, but there it was. Its intensity increased over the next minute, but it still seemed smaller, less robust. Maybe the antenna's batteries were flattening out, or maybe the alien presence itself was a flashlight on a fading battery. Time to mix things up, thought Gary.

At the very moment he did so -- delayed only by the travel time of electromagnetic warticles up and down, and the flow of electrons in an quantum mechanically choreographed dance on a series of silicon wafers -- the operator noticed a change. At first it seemed like another false positive, yet another notation in the log ("signal spurious"), but when he looked back, it was still there. Too small to be the signal from before, but not far off from where the signal was lost. Unfortunately,

the mobile unit was off on some wild goose chase at -- of all places -- the dump. At least he could be thankful that he would never have to don one of those white plastic suits from the CDC and poke around stinking mountains of trash, armed with nothing more than a tweaked Geiger counter, pretending you're looking for toxic bugs.

The order had come down through a series of intermediaries, in that strange mixture of feudalism and entrepreneurship that characterizes the military at the fringes. "Expect new orders," had been the upshot; the first of these was mobile's dump assignment. Usually new orders meant pulling up stakes and moving on to the next hopeless hole and the next bleak corner of a decrepit base. But this time everything was different. There was something about the signal, something about the scenario. The guard at the door seemed to feel it, too, seemed to stand a bit more upright, seemed to pay more attention to the goings-on inside that forsaken trailer.

He watched the signal for a time, then maneuvered the drone to a somewhat more advantageous course, after a check of local radar and a visual check of the cloud cover. He looked over his shoulder, half expecting the good doctor to appear, with another smart little addition to his stable. But he knew the next likely visitor would be a shadowy figure who went by the moniker "hunter." He figured this man was the

program's real progenitor. In fact, he had the suspicion that this scenario, played out as just one among many, had been the real purpose all along, and everything else was just a distraction. Hunter would be coming to bring this exercise to a conclusion. And who knows, maybe shut down the program for good. You can always hope.

Gary had finished mixing the bowl's contents with water -- it stank slightly of the sea, he thought -- and he put the bowl in front of the antenna on the table. He looked at the setup for a moment, and after looking around for the right prop, grabbed the Gideon's Bible out of the bed table drawer and propped up the butt of the antenna under it.

The green stain did nothing for a few minutes, and Gary felt increasingly uncomfortable with the delay. He had given up everything for lost -- again -- when the change finally began.

The operator, in fact, noticed the change first. Something unprecedented. The power of the signal started climbing, precipitously, but more importantly it began to pulse in a sinoid fashion. There was something new happening here. The signal began to spread, like a giant envelope of energy, well beyond what the strength would suggest. It was as if they were witnessing just the surface of a massive buildup on a broad but unmeasured set of frequencies. The sine wave's frequency kept shortening, until finally the pulse itself was indistinguishable from a

high-energy flow. The broader halo kept growing, many blocks wide now. He could picture a whole neighborhood, full of people flicking their remotes, suddenly and incomprehensibly unable to watch their televisions.

Gary noticed first that there were perturbations on the surface of the bowl. His own hands felt prickly, and pretty soon he was under a constant barrage of static shocks from the table, chair and even the carpet beneath his feet. When he realized what was happening to him, he jumped up and ran to the corner of the room. The bowl itself began to exude a luminescence, not unlike the blue glow he had once seen coming from a research fission reactor at his university. This association made him realize that he had taken no precautions against the simplest consequences of playing with glowing fire... It was a number of anguished minutes later, with sweat starting to pour from pores all over his body, that he saw the real change. A little tower of material was rising out of the bowl. It had an aluminum look to it, even though the aluminum powder was just a small part of its composition. Something was growing it -- he figured that the signal was somehow cooking the insides and it was foaming up. But then he recognized that a form was taking shape. The emerging tower became a recognizable antenna structure pointed back at the larger twilight-zone antenna where the

green stain had been -- only now there were heat waves rising from somewhere in the middle of the antenna.

The operator, meanwhile, had been trying to make contact via radio with the ground team -- against protocol, since they were not on patrol -- and unsuccessfully. He shot another glance over his shoulder at the impassive man with the gun, but that implacable face seemed content to let him make his own mistakes. There was no question but things were changing, and rapidly. He left a message on the secure phone, asserting that no training scenario had covered this. That was bold, but if he didn't do something, they'd have his hide when they saw the log.

Suddenly, the energy reading shot off the scale, even the logarithmic one. Dropping one scatological oath after another, the operator watched as the signal power peaked and slowly came down, hollowing out from the inside, as if it were some miniature supernova bursting at music video speeds. The phenomenon swallowed every bit of energy at the core and left a fading ring in the area surrounding it. Within a matter of minutes the signal was gone, back in the hole from which it had emerged.

Gary lay on the floor, in a state of metabolic shock, while the table smoldered, the light shade and curtains were singed, and the bed cover was burned through to the blanket. The wall was blackened in a circular

shape. Above him and outside his perspective, a two-headed device had formed itself in the bowl, on the one side absorbing a green laser light that emanated from deep in the spiral antenna, and, on the other, seeking with something between a periscope and directional radar the creature that had called it into existence.

No. 16 -- Let's assume that Alice was shocked by Gary's silence, wondering if it was some cheap form of tit for tat. We already know that after the first evening she had come around to the logical, diffident point of view that their initial trepidation and excitement had been unwarranted by the facts. An unexplained phenomenon is a long way from an inexplicable one. And life goes on. Andrew hadn't forgotten about his monitor, but they went to get another one, and the sales clerk ventured to say that a burned out resistor could cause the electron gun to do all sorts of scary things. "No," he said, "I wouldn't be surprised by that at all." Gary had a story that he wanted to tell her, but then he disappeared with the evidence, and frankly, he wasn't all that reliable a witness. And if he was playing this...

Maybe it's best that Gary disappeared for a couple days. Sometimes space and time are the only means of regaining a mental equilibrium, of recovering from an oscillation whose two extremes you might reject at a calmer moment. Alice did not leave another message, but she was

thinking about Gary -- I'm sure of it -- when an unexpected knock came directly on her door. She had never liked it when Gary did that, let alone Sean before him, but now Reggie seemed to have an even greater propensity to want to surprise her. She opened the door quickly and expected to express some of the irritation she felt.

Much to her surprise, it was neither Gary nor Reggie, but a compact, dapperly dressed man with wavy reddish hair, freckles, attractive in his own way, but a bit too compactly fashionable, a bit too informally and yet crisply dressed in small shiny shoes, dress shirt, tweed jacket and impeccably creased Dockers. He had an instant smile on his face. "Miz Alice Philips?" he asked, raising his eyebrows in anticipation of an answer.

She knew him not to be a neighbor -- she made a habit of noticing them -- but it wasn't impossible that he was new. Still, she shot a glance to either side of him to see what she could. Down the hall, to the right of her door, there was someone with what looked like a hand-sized satellite antenna connected to a box hanging from his shoulder, and he was using the antenna to measure something on the outside of her wall. The man let her look to either side -- smiling in that grimly friendly way -- and then followed her wide eyes to the technician to his side.

"Ma'am, I'm with the Federal Communications Commission." He produced an

identification card that was stamped, laminated and even hologrammed, in a convincing federal style. She looked back up at him with an exasperated and incredulous expression that came from imagining a faceless bureaucratic agency employing foot soldiers with toy antennae. The man seemed unfazed. "The FCC is investigating a broad-based interruption of television service in this area." He smiled for an instant even more broadly to give her a chance to process that and its unlikelihood. "We believe, ma'am, that there was an, uh, alien signal emanating from this area that interrupted service." He stopped for the "you don't say" that his speech pattern seemed to anticipate. He was also peering into her eyes for something. She still did not speak, which seemed to surprise, even rattle him. "No," he said as if prompted, "we don't normally investigate service interruptions, but this was so unusual and egregious that we felt we had to come down ourselves."

She looked him back, and said, "I haven't noticed anything." That seemed to end things for her, and she was leaning against the door as if to close it, when he put a hand up.

"Ma'am," he said with a long-arm-of-the-law timbre to his voice. "We've done a fair amount of testing, and we believe the disturbance came from somewhere in this building. In fact," he said in a more confidential

tone, "we have reason to believe it may have started right here."

She was instantly suspicious and if his next words had been about coming in, she would have slammed door and run to the phone.

"Now I know you haven't been running an illicit broadcast station here, but I just want to get to the bottom of this matter. It's very important for our records." As if he knew that she would be familiar and sympathetic with the importance of records being in order. That triggered finally the realization somewhere deep within her that this was not a chance encounter, that this was about the monitor and something more.

The man noticed some level of recognition in her eyes, and risked a glance to his still busy technician, who nodded ever so slightly. He dropped his smile and his face became even somber, indicative of some deep flight of thought. He touched his chin and said, "Maybe there has been something that you didn't think much about. Could I ask you to think about it for just a moment."

"Well," Alice said finally. "There was my son's computer. The monitor burned out, the screen was ruined. That was a couple days ago."

"Oh," said the man with a suppressed interest. "Perhaps we could see that monitor?"

"I'm afraid we got rid of it."

"Oh," said the man, nodding. "I see. Did you perhaps throw it in the garbage?"

She didn't know why, but this strange inquiry was trigger enough for her to say, "No, I don't think so. I called a friend and he said he'd drop it off somewhere. Charity or something."

"Of course," he said with a half smile. "Perhaps we could speak with your friend about it?"

"I don't want to get him in trouble," she said with her own weak smile.

"Oh no," he said with mock shock. "Miz Philips, I want to assure you that no one will get into trouble. Far from it. We know that this incident is something that just happened. We'd like to find out all we can about it, and learn from the experience. That's all. You shouldn't worry any more about it."

She reflected for a moment. I'm sure she weighed -- perhaps consciously, perhaps not -- whether that mundane explanation was plausible enough to turn Gary over to them. She would have to think about the risks of putting herself in the middle -- the accessory, if not instigator -- and exposing Andrew to unthinkable risks, should her behavior be somehow illegal. But something interceded, some part of her life that made cooperation as impossible as a reconciliation with Gary. She may have thought: phone records can't be covered over. But time can

be bought. "It was a friend from my church. I already feel bad about having taken his time. It was quite a shock for Andrew and me. It just seemed to blow up."

"I'm sure that was distressing. What was his name again?"

"I didn't say," she said with a half-pleased smile that indicated she understood the game and wasn't giving an inch. "If you'd like, I can let him know you'd like to see the monitor. Maybe he still has it."

The dapper visitor thought for a moment, with an utter stillness that could have bespoke lives in the balance, then he said, "Sure. Why not. Here's my card. Please do have him contact me."

The card read: Richard C. Walton, Special Projects -- Interference, Federal Communications Commission, Washington DC.

"I will let him know," she said, a phrasing he made note of.

"Miz Philips, before we let you go, did you notice anything special about that monitor? Anything unusual? It could be significant for our report."

She looked at the finger he put pensively to his lips. "Well," she said, "it did seem to glow a bit after it blew, but I guess that was just the electrons escaping."

"The electrons escaping," he repeated with another glance at his man, this time accompanied by a genuine half smile, a smirk. "I'm sure

that's what it was. Thank you so much Miz Philips."

She did not hesitate to close the door, but she also noticed that the technician signaled to the dapper man, and that they turned their attention down the hall, to the emergency exit.

Gary had purchased a bottle of oracle whiskey at the corner establishment and set it in his room, next to the thing. He was now about a third way through the bottle and no wiser for it. He was sure that the maid he had to chase away that morning had reported the condition of the room and that the only reason he was still in the room was because the owner/manager was waiting for a police cruiser or sheriff's deputy. The device that had formed itself from the goop in the bowl was still there, staring back at him. It was a Janus head, on one side the receptacle for the green laser light burning out of nowhere in the depths of the antenna, and on the other a directional sensor that could apparently see -- or sense -- him. It followed him as he moved around.

At one point, Gary toyed with turning off the antenna's juice to see what would happen, but he feared the moment when he turned it back on. No, things had to be handled differently, more carefully, starting right now. And he needed to tell Alice, if only for his own psyche's

sake, but he couldn't bring her here and he couldn't invite her to his house. He needed to find neutral ground where they could observe this thing and both then just walk away if they needed to. The tribal problem emerged again: his name would be associated with whatever he did to make such a neutral meeting place happen, if only because he'd have to pay for it with his credit card.

That's when he realized that some piece of his mind, some subconscious process, had already worked this out: false identity, in any case, but what he needed was a newspapered storefront, rented for a couple weeks. If he could find someone willing to do it for cash, on the assumption of some fly-by-night business...

I need Bluthe, he thought. Not that Bluthe would himself be of much use -- but he seemed to know something about everything, including layers of illegality. The best place to start would be with the false identity; that would be the basis for every step thereafter.

His thoughts went on: I'll need a prepaid cell phone to call him. But I can't leave this here, in case the owner gets his muscle first. Okay, the first thing is that I've got to get this out of here. Time to shut this down.

He approached the little gleaming device that had emerged from the jello soup, and got right up to it and looked at it with a quizzical

expression on his face. What in the world does it see? What does it do with what it sees? It's clearly getting power and direction from that somewhere else, but is it also sending video signals back? Maybe there's some creature on the other end of this, staring at me through a fish-eye lens, wondering what in the hell it's hooked here?

"God dammit," he said in a sudden rush of disbelief. "Goddammit all to hell."

There was a significant pause, then a tinny set of tones from the device: a click, a thud, a wham-wham, a clash. Then silence. That was an effort to communicate? Sheer imitation, with little capability for human sounds. But that itself is an act of communication, is it not?

"We've got to shut down for a while," he said, with no purpose he feared. He reached over and cut the power.

Nothing changed -- the laser didn't diminish, the soup didn't drop back down. So he pulled the bowl away to indicate his intention -- he didn't want to yank it out of the line of fire. No telling what that beam would burn through. Again, no change.

Then, as he became desperate and set himself to pour the whiskey on the device, the beam began to twinkle. Over a few minutes it eventually disappeared, and the device slowly oozed back down into the bowl. It was not clear if the structure fell under or if it returned to its

original liquid shapelessness as it touched the surface. The little green stain established itself again. Gary decided to take the antenna out first, since it was the more important element. He also decided that he would tear it apart as best he could, should the MIBs or sheriff approach.

He looked around the room to see if there was something else incriminating -- yet another of those futile gestures that our minds make us do, as if the damage of the explosive flash in the room was not already enough. He carried the device out the door on one arm into the warm evening, where the quiet one might expect of a darkening but neon-lit evening was punctuated by Friday traffic and a number of noisy groups in the lot. It was pretty clear that no one would pay attention to the middle-aged man holding the paper bag -- even though he had the look of holding a dead opossum -- no one except, perhaps, a hotel owner in his small apartment beside the office.

It's time to let Gary get on with his errands. We've got a few ourselves. It's been a few days for you since I interrupted the story -- you'll recall why -- but some things need to be cleared up. First, there's a new twist to the alien encounter story: the details prove it was a trap intended to to compromise my anonymity. Second, the more

technological of you will know that a few days ago there was a sudden interruption in this website's service and that we subsequently emerged in a completely new guise. Thereby hangs a tale.

But first a tip of the hat to Betsy Frango of Pensicola, FL, for her tale of alien contact. When she first contacted me through the usual means, but with a difference, a tone of excitement and anguish, I thought, sure, this is possible. You'll recall that I decided some days ago that I was better off ignoring her. But she provided so many details that lent legitimacy -- I could be sure this was not the usual nethead trying his best to seem original -- while not so much that I felt the story was too pat. The details came slowly, in fits, with retracings and doubt and contradictory conclusions. Even indecision can be faked, but this was nicely done. I still can't be sure but what Betsy was -- well, a patsy. Maybe she did have a contact. But the Betsy who contacted me was a front for the folks who would do anything to see this story halted in its tracks -- on the assumption, now mistaken in the extreme, that if they stop me from posting more the story will simply go away. That was never a possibility, even if I hadn't composed everything I needed, but now there is plenty more material, in strategic locations, a regular network of sleeper cells waiting for the day I disappear.

Despite my reticence, I continued to hear from Betsy, and she finally insisted that we speak real-time. Call me, she suggested, on an untraceable phone. As if that would make me safe? Still, I was intrigued with the possibilities of using voice over IP and a hacked phone switch, and I didn't put her off completely. Give me a couple days, I said. No, it has to be now, she said, so I decided to make a test of it. I arranged for a zombie computer somewhere to make a voice call through its modem for me after I stored a voice message, disguised tonally of course. I further arranged for another computer to observe the first zombie. It was not an hour after the call -- a disappointment for her handlers, for sure, since I had shared nothing about myself -- that the observer computer confirmed that the zombie was being scanned, and that locally. Not long thereafter it disappeared from the network, and then the observer itself was hacked and scanned. By then I had begun erasing my many-stop trail of intermediaries, so there was nothing to find. But their confidence in springing the trap immediately and flailing around blindly was a surprise to me. I expected a bit more subtlety. I watched the pertinent newspapers and, sure enough, a rather innocent-sounding unidentified young man in the location of the zombie was arrested on federal charges for nameless acts of cyber-terrorism. All his equipment was confiscated and warrants were issued to uncover

his intrusions. He himself was released to his confused parents' custody.

This has given me endlessly more information about my adversaries, although they have no doubt benefited as well. I fear sometimes that they may have fleeter methods of tracing hacks than I know of, or they may have intrusion tools that are undetectable. I feel confident that I was faster than they were this time, but the next time -- who knows? Sometimes it comes down to a race between button clicks and keystrokes, and sometimes it's just the carousel of the CPU and your code's execution that determines the order in which you climb off. Erasure, defeat and escape is relative in all things except logical gates; there, on those manmade silicon beachheads, once the battle is over and the spoils in the possession of the victor, the combatants simply dissipate into the nothingness of an unwritten history.

It was not such brilliance that finally got the better of our servers in that secure country somewhere. No, the siege took the shape of a government raid for alleged tax irregularities and, while that was being sorted out in the third-world fashion of greasing palms, an arsonist finished the job. The greasing could at that point no longer continue, and my valiant server team ended up in a most unpleasant prison. I have confidence that they will get out shortly, but I don't

dare ask them to continue. After the server was fried -- literally -- I activated plan B.

For the less technical among you, here is the rub. If I want to hide my activities from someone, I cannot let them see where I am when I am active. But every chunk of information on the Internet is identified by two pieces of information: whence and whither, the Internet Protocol numbers of the originating computer and destination computer. All the intermediary "hops" or steps are carried out by routing computers that know something about where the destination computer is: at first, only very generally (typically just: outside this neck of the woods) then with increasing specificity until, finally, the last router spits out the Internet packet as one or more Ethernet or ATM (asynchronous transfer mode) packets on some local network somewhere. The destination computer picks the pieces off the wire and stitches them together to create the original information.

Anywhere along the way the routers could conceivably stop and examine the packets in order to see if the contents are contraband. But you may find it simpler to set yourself up at the destination and wait for the right signal -- a login process of some kind -- and to make a note of the originating address. On the assumption that the origin may be nothing more than an intermediary, you'll want to use the destination

computer to try to hack the originator/intermediary, especially if it is behind a firewall. From a third location, you could try to spoof the destination computer's IP address, but it's simpler to use the real thing. A really enterprising hacker could alter the address tables in a router along the way to divert all the traffic to his own private network. But since most applications worth their salt now encrypt communications, you are severely limited in how you can fool the originating computer unless you are within that encryption shell. Again, a not insurmountable problem, but each ring of defense makes a successful assault that much more difficult.

So -- the assault on a rogue preferably involves controlling the rogue's target. That's what the security of our server had denied these troopers and why they thought it worthwhile to eliminate the server. And if I got away, at the least I might be forced to use a less secure server and might just expose my whereabouts.

But plan B will be a big disappointment for them. There is now a plethora of self-appointed mirror sites advertised across the Internet, one of which you are probably viewing now. The source site I've had to relocate and mask in other ways, but the location itself is quite a hoot. I know it won't last, but for the time being it's quite an enjoyable ride. Imagine -- I hacked into a satellite. Seem impossible?

The answer is yes, and that's why I can openly claim it. But a satellite's a computer like any other; it needs to reboot on occasion and it needs to be able to accept new programming. There's no magic there. Telephone switches have always been a favorite target of real hackers, and what's so different about a giant switch in the sky? Now it's my billion-dollar secure server. I know this little lark won't last too long -- the responsible parties will need to fess up to their lack of security some day, and when they do they'll down that bird faster than they can say, "f--- you." But in the meantime, leave them their willful ignorance and me my platform.

No. 17 -- Alice waited a day to hear from Gary or to consider her options, then she gathered up Andrew in his room, and bribed him with a trip to Chaz the Cheezer, an arcade-and-pizza joint. Andrew had no special affinity for the place, which Alice knew, but this was a symbolic transaction: please come with me and don't make a fuss. They did not go straight to the garage level, though. They stopped by the apartment of the homeowners' association president, Frank Brandenburger, to let him know about the visitors they had received. He was a short, tubby balding man, prone to undershirts right out of a New York crime drama, but otherwise a priggish gentleman who preferred other gentlemen and who was, for whatever reasons, unable to cement a

relationship with anyone. Sure, he was the one who pointed the FCC folks up Alice's way, he admitted with something like innocence. Thanks a lot. But that wasn't the point. She told him that she and Andrew were going out but would be back early. Expect her back early.

They went downstairs and outside the building. They circumnavigated the building and walked into the garage from the street ramp. Andrew didn't know what to make of it but couldn't articulate why this was bothering him. Alice walked with the kind of conviction she carried when she went to visit her ex-husband and Andrew's father. They got in the car and she locked the doors before starting the engine. She looked in the rearview mirror: Andrew had picked up a comic book he had left in the car, and was utterly oblivious. I imagine that that moment was very similar to Gary's, a sensation of utter loneliness in the face of a life-altering challenge.

Chaz's was a gimmick to get to a phone. There wasn't a public phone anywhere inside, to Alice's chagrin, but she asked the cashier with such self-assurance that he had to conclude it was an emergency. "We're not allowed... No private calls... If my manager caught me... I wish I could..." None of them held against her desperate insistence. She dialed Gary's and got the expected answering machine: "Gary, hi, this is Alice. I just wanted to tell you something about the monitor you

picked up from our apartment. I think you were going to donate it to a charity, but someone from the Federal Communications Commission came by this evening and said that he would like to see it. I didn't tell him your name because I know you don't like being disturbed. Apparently whatever made it explode affected television reception in our area.

Hope you're well." She hung up and thanked the cashier, who looked away while he nodded but then allowed himself a much longer than appropriate stare at the woman as she walked away.

Gary, meanwhile, was dialing his new prepaid cell phone, purchased with cash and an assumed name. He debated whether it was better or worse to leave a message for Bluthe, who would still be sulking but might be persuaded to call back to rub Gary's face in the shit he was in.

"Bluthe, you old sea-dog fart," he started off, "this is your one-time acquaintance Beauregard." That was the fictitious name that Bluthe had bestowed on Gary's grandmother in his story about her psychotic visions. "I know you have caller ID. Call me back on this number. Bye."

He also called the office of his motel. "Look, there was some inadvertent damage to the room." Uh-hum, he heard vaguely from the other end. "I wanted you to know that I'll pay for the bed cover and any repainting." The manager jumped in then, detailed the other costs and summed up: "Eight hundred twenty-eight dollars and thirty-nine

cents. I already ran it through on your credit card." Well thanks a bundle, you old shit. "I'm coming back tonight." "The hell you are," said the manager, "I've changed the lock. I'm refunding the weekly rate and I'll charge you two nights." Gary just clicked off.

That's when he called home to listen to his answering machine, standing on a corner, looking for all the world like someone waiting for a bus or a handout. Checking his messages was not something he did often -- like there was ever anything interesting -- but he did half expect to hear another message from Alice, to the effect that, thanks, had time to reconsider, don't care whether you exist or not, auf Wiedersehen. He listened to the message twice to make sure he wasn't hallucinating on oracle whiskey.

He loitered on the strip-malled corner, conscious of doing no wrong, maybe even belonging as much as any consumer, part of the tribe. That gave him a moment of confidence-building repose. Okay, now what. Alice had made clear that he should not be found with the monitor, but was that the real point? Did she believe that he was in danger? Was that why she withheld his name? Was this the clean-up crew? He could hear from the background that Alice was probably not at home. That meant she was afraid, either to implicate him or to make herself an accessory.

How the hell did they find Alice?

His house was an evidentiary hot zone. He had to get home and get rid of the evidence. The monitor? Would it seem more innocent to let them take it, or to get rid of it altogether? They would expect that he would have donated it, but it would be traceable then. Or he could say that he just threw it away? But they might have a way to find it in the dump. Why not just give it to them? Then he realized that this whole line of self-questioning was beside the point. It didn't matter whether they found the monitor. What mattered were the contents of his computer. The monitor was just incidental; the computer's contents were evidence of conspiracy. He could imagine the expressions on their faces as they discovered the info-virus from Craig Phissure and his crew: the tightening of their jaws, the narrowing of eyes, maybe even some cracking of joints for effect.

He jogged back to his car, out of breath by the time he reached it, so much so that he leaned against it to gain his composure. He would have to stop to charge up the batteries with some fast food; his hands were still shaking, his arms burning. As he drove away from the curb, absorbed in his worries, he saw the government RV coming the other way. Yes, it passed him right by. Now you might find this a Hollywood moment, this ironic near miss, but in fact the RV was in a rote grid pattern, the antenna locked in a particular direction, and the operator

was more concerned about data collection than about catching the mouse. But Gary didn't know that. He accelerated wildly and drove correspondingly, even swerved lanes before he realized how this was making him stand out, and he decelerated. He felt the adrenaline oozing, felt his mind clear, the edges of his vision sharpen, the tone of his muscles improve. He was so liberated from anxiety by this chemical energizing that he almost rammed the car in front of him when it stopped at a changed traffic light. His wheels squealed, the front drifted to the right; with more speed he might have toppled and slammed into the car in front of him upside down. He exhaled and tried, as a drunk might, to concentrate on what a normal person would do. He slowed exaggeratedly as he turned into Wendy's.

Gary got a burger meal and headed home on his usual freeway route. Observed? I know the most of you wouldn't believe me if I told you. But let's assume he got home unassailed. He went in, expecting an X-File working-over of every inch of his house. But it was all as he had left it. The message light still flashed on the answering machine. The dishes waited in the sink. The computer was blanked but still working -- his account probably still logged in. He moved the mouse. The Blue Ball Black Void society website was cued up, with the cursor in the shape of a pointing hand, drawing eyes like the wag of an oblivious dog

that had just ratted you out with its cloying bark.

No. 18 -- The operator thought he'd seen it all when he met Mr. Blue Zone. Then the dapper man showed up. When the knock came on the trailer door, the guard opened it immediately -- he had clearly been informed of the approach on an earphone that the operator had never noticed before. A man came in carrying a fair amount of equipment in photography cases. The door stayed open. The guard's attention was directed outside, and he saluted with that mixture of military rectitude and lanky strength that implied a civilian was on the other end. The operator watched in confusion. The dapper fellow came in with something like a salute -- a gesture of disinterest and disdain. He was not military, not Pentagon.

The dapper man looked around the trailer as if he had seen it in pictures and needed to confirm his impressions. He looked at the operator and smiled, then went back to his mental inventory. The operator didn't know what to make of the man, but he recognized immediately the smile that said, "Your butt is in my sling, and I would have no problem cutting loose both the sling and your butt." He kept trying to read this unassuming individual, amid the rising and unsettling feeling that he was looking at the most dangerous man he had ever met.

After a few moments, the dapper man came over and offered his hand to the standing and ramrod straight operator. "Richard C. Walton." The operator gave his name and appended: "Sir." The dapper man waved it off: "We don't need to be so formal. I'm not a military man, you see." The operator didn't fall into the trap of saying something like, I saw that already; the eyes were waiting for it. "I helped get this program off the ground," the dapper man continued, "and I thought I would come by and see if there was anything I could do to help you all. It's been pretty exciting the last few days?" The operator affirmed, although he could not suppress the thought that the only real excitement was the hope of getting out of the sling.

Some twenty minutes later, the operator was back at the controls of the drone and comparing the data coming from the mobile unit with the indications from the air. The grid work was, as so many times before, not producing any definitive results, but it did establish some irregularities that deserved a second look. The dapper man was following from a chair behind the operator's shoulder.

The dapper man asked a few questions to show that he had an inkling about the technology but wasn't up on methodology. Too high up to be concerned about that. "You do know," he asked finally, "what this is all about?"

The operator didn't understand the physics, but sure. He knew.

"You've met our professor," the dapper man continued, with a sudden shift in tone, indicating the fact that the professor, too, was in a sling not of his own making. "He sometimes says he doubts that there is an intelligence on the other end. Sometimes he says it's most likely us in a hundred years, calling back, imperfectly." He waited for the operator to respond, but then went on. "That's the funny thing about this. Because it's quantum mechanics, we can't say anything about where or when the signal originated. But I know it's intelligent. And it's seductive. Or it's got agents here, among us. Every time a signal goes to ground, there's someone out there communicating with an alien intelligence. Being brainwashed. Revealing weaknesses. Opening doors. There's a name for that."

"Treason, sir?"

He smiled a teacher's smile. "There's no denying it. That's why there's nothing more important than isolating these signals and finding what and where they've contaminated."

The operator wanted to ask about the dapper man's partner and his equipment, but he put the question into a glance at the camera boxes. "All that stuff? We use that to suss out source locations once they've been established." The operator moved his head a bit in reflection --

no location had been found -- and the dapper man responded: "Oh, I know the mobile crew didn't nail the location this time. But we have other means as well. You'll recall that we took a trip to the dump? We turned up a radioactive signature that we were able to isolate to a particular condominium building, not far, incidentally, from where the mobile crew lost the source. Thank goodness for junk mail." He chuckled, looking down into his mind, remembering their good fortune.

The operator had the itchy feeling that hearing all this wouldn't help him escape the sling, but he could hardly put his hands over his ears.

"It turned out that the signal appeared in a middle-aged black woman's apartment. Single mother, one child, a rather gifted middle schooler.

The mother is divorced from the child's father, a loser who ended up in prison a few years ago on drug charges. She's squeaky clean, has worked 15 years at the same paint supply company, in the same job. Hardly the profile of a Mata Hare, is she? Well, the interesting thing is that we traced the signal right through her wall into an emergency stairwell and outside. Someone came and literally walked away with the signal."

The operator looked at him with an unwillfully blank stare.

"Organized resistance." The dapper man nodded at his own statement. "An underground. There is no telling what is out there. No telling until we get that signal again, and we dig up whatever is underground with it."

And he felt the sling tightening.

The phone rang and Gary jumped from his seat. He thought it was the doorbell -- and he was nowhere near done clearing his tracks -- but then realized that it was the cheap wireless phone he had bought. Only Bluthe knew the number. Gary took the phone outside, thinking that if there was a bug it would be more likely inside the house. "Hello?" he said.

"Holy mother of God, and all shit-eating hetero dog-cow sucking wicked sons of a bitch, bastards and godforsaken offspring..." Then a breath. It was Bluthe. "Thanks for calling." The civility was meant to make a point.

"Now I really deserve whatever I get. What do you want, you pathetic alienist wannabe?" He paused. "I thought I told you to take a long walk on a short hike to hell?"

"I need your help, Bluthe."

"Please. No names, all right? Don't call me at home either. This is a disposable phone. Okay? It's not always and everywhere about saving your own saggy pimply butt."

"We found something. It seems to be intelligent. And there's someone following me. They contacted Alice, but she protected me."

"Woah there, Sherlock. One thing at a time. You say you found something? Are you telling me you made contact a la Blue Ball in a Big Black Void? You're in possession of a connection?"

"Yes."

"Holy shit of a ghostly apparition... All right, more on that later.

Someone is following you? The connection is following you?"

"No," he said with exasperation. "There was a government RV, trolling with a big antenna on top. I've seen it twice. And some asshole showed up at Alice's door with an ID claiming he's from the Federal Communications Commission. They want the monitor I took from Alice."

"Hmmm, that's interesting. Well, at least you're still alive. You can't complain about that."

"I guess not." He didn't know how to get to the other side of this conversation, so he just blurted out: "Bluthe, I don't know what to do. I need your help."

"All right, let's assume that you did need my help, and that you're not standing there with a complement of government goons waiting for me to implicate myself. What do you need?"

"I need somewhere to hide the antenna."

"It's an antenna? Portable?"

"Very. But I'm not sure that they can't trace it. They found Alice

somehow, and she didn't even have it."

"All right, all right. Good thing you know me, Sherlock. I can hook you up with some people to put that thing where no one will ever find it."

"No," Gary said weakly. "No, you don't understand. I don't want to get rid of it, I just want to put it somewhere where, if they find it, they can't trace it back to me."

"Are you fucking crazy?!" Bluthé shouted so loudly that his voice came across as a tinny distortion. Then more peacefully: "I'm going to pretend that you didn't say that, since you are obviously under a big strain. I mean, even a mental menial such as yourself couldn't imagine that he can control this situation. A situation where the US government is searching for exactly you, has already contacted the girlfriend that you still saliva over, and where you have some kind of contraband that can't be hidden. Where some damn fine people have already lost their lives for just believing what you believe to be true." A pause, as if calculating the effect of that speech on an invisible audience. "Of course, I don't believe a word of it."

Gary said: "Okay, look, I need to get some new identification.

Something that will help me rent an empty storefront that I can just walk away from. I just need to be a convincing someone else."

"Sure, that I can do. It's not illegal to know how to do illegal

things, by the way. And where you dig your grave is really just immaterial to me."

The conversation devolved into Bluthe describing how to find the kind of place where someone inquires discreetly about forms of identification. Contrary to Gary's expectation, Bluthe informed him that this particular supply chain was not so insular that you needed to name someone's uncle to get through the door. These were merchants looking for business like anyone else. Although more suspicious than a legit dealer and a bit more likely to be scamming, the majority are just vendors with a ware and an interest in seeing their product move as quickly as possible. He sounded convincing, even if he didn't know jack shit -- as Gary always suspected on one level -- and there was comfort even in that.

Gary finished reconfiguring his browser caches and started an industrial strength erasure program that rewrites good data in place and zeroes everywhere else on the hard drive, several times for good measure, in order to prevent a forensic team from recovering deleted data. He had the Blue Ball website only on a CD, which he was determined to keep with himself. And the monitor? Dump it, leave it, bring it by Alice's? What was she trying to communicate to him by making the call outside her place? Was it part of a plan, or just an

expression of anxiety? He had no way to know. He deleted her message. So Gary decided to leave his house, with the monitor waiting there for now, and go about getting his id.

In the interest of answering the mounting questions about the sanity of Gary's actions, there is an important passage in the Frequently Asked Questions portion of the Blue Ball website that you ought to be familiar with:

Q: How do we know that these contacts are not dangerous? A: We can never be sure about the intentions of another species, especially one living in unidentified circumstances and unavailable for study. However, there are several logical inferences that are difficult to contravene:

* First, given their technological superiority, it is difficult to argue that they need us to betray ourselves. It is certainly not hard to imagine this devious purpose -- as many have -- but once we step back and take a deep breath we inevitably come to the conclusion that if they have not destroyed us yet it is simply because they have chosen not to.

* Second, we ought to consider how it would be perceived were we to be utterly closed to a superior species because of our own fears, or, more precisely, because of projections based on our own behaviors. This has been called the first Star Trek thesis, but its fundamental value is undeniable. If intelligence has brought us into contact with off-worlders, then the more intelligence we display the better off we are in developing a relationship with this other species.

* Third, we reject the anti-Star Trek thesis, which is that if we display our innate intelligence and resourcefulness, especially in combination with our unpredictability, then we might seem a risk to

the future safety of this alien species and that we therefore are more likely to be destroyed. This argument demonstrates our usual hubris; if we imagine a large number of intelligent species, as surely we must at this time, then we have to conceive of ourselves as decidedly average. What's more, it is inconceivable that we are more resourceful, more intelligent, more dangerous than any intelligent alien species able and willing to contact us, no matter how long-lived and sated that species is. If they really felt they had something to fear from us, they would have ceased contact long ago.

* Fourth, this is an opportunity that humankind can scarcely afford

to deny itself. Here is a chance to leapfrog our current internecine

stage of development and move into a period of exploration, learning

and wisdom that could save billions of lives from suffering and despondency. It could totally redefine our relationship with our planet, our technology, our psychology, our very souls. We cannot afford to lose this opportunity.

Q: Will we ever be visited by this species? A: The predominant answer seems to be no. We should be skeptical about any information provided to us from the contacting species, since it seems that their general practice is to make information exchange one way. Perhaps we are imperfect conversationalists and don't know how to

engage them properly. But what they do share seems to be with a purpose and hence not one hundred percent reliable.

Nevertheless, in two recorded cases, the responding intelligence on the other end has indicated that physical contact among organic species -- organic meaning non-technological rather than, say, carbon-based, since we have so little information about that -- is next to impossible. Speaking generally: despite the ability of advanced species to control the entire genome of any one biosphere, it is not possible to control the outcome of an interaction of two biospheres. The interactions of viral and small quickly replicating life forms are simply too unpredictable over time and occur without the checks that evolution would normally provide.

In one case, a tale was told of two species that developed in parallel and that were finally able to meet via ambassadorial contacts. The human respondent recorded the following about this encounter:

"I got the feeling that this story was as much intergalactic legend as history, but it seems to have made for an iron-clad law, like the taboo against incest. One of the worlds was, in fact, consumed in a viral conflagration. Despite the finest medical controls and care, a rogue information chain -- the equivalent of our DNA -- slipped from

the visiting dignitaries into on-world viruses and, after a indeterminate number of mutations, initiated an uncontrollable decimation of all forms of life on the planet. By the time the invading agent was even identified, the world had become uninhabitable. The species might have opted for conversion to a technological basis, but simply did not have time to effect it. The planet's intelligent remnants, along with the quarantined and very rueful dignitaries, retreated to carefully controlled environments inside spaceships, and became almost over night a nomadic species living off the energy they harvested from the system's sun. The other planet, living in dread of a similar implosion, exiled its counterpart's ambassadorial party, and began a rush program to evolve into technological beings, in case the fuse of their own biological destruction was already lit. Their rushed transition into

technology left the species completely unsatisfied with what was saved of their organic selves. There never was any conflagration on that planet, but this same legend has it that their subsequent indifference to the organic realm they had left behind led to a general decline and ruin of their home world."

It has been surmised that this biological incompatibility serves as something akin to the "mutually assured destruction" of nuclear weapons in a cold war situation. This is very possible, and one model under which we might assent to the fear that a more

intelligent species could have reason to destroy us. However, the same meager intelligence would seem to indicate that the best solution for a fearful but superior species is not stamping out all the bugs in the corners of their universe, but rather to evolve into

a technology-based species that is immune to such bugs. At the same time, even a technological species, insofar as it is attached to the

decorative biosphere of its home world or empire of worlds, is unlikely to desire personal contact with other planets that might return the favor with a plague upon their house plants.

Q: Doesn't space travel make this kind of interaction inevitable?

Are we all due to suffer that same fate as the consumptive world?
A:

Actually, by all indications, there is very little space travel.

There are two reasons for this, at least from the information gathered to date. First, while quantum phenomena have opened instantaneous communication and control channels across time and space, there has been no equivalent opening for transportation. This

is known among some of us as the Star Trek paradox, or sometimes the

second Star Trek thesis. While we do live in an interconnected universe -- very similar to the one imprinted in the public imagination as the Star Trek universe -- one would be mistaken to assume that such connectedness includes atoms. Apparently there is no reliable, macro-scale means of overcoming Einstein's limitations

on time, space and one's speed relative to light. The subatomic wormholes that are created through quantum tunneling are a completely different thing than a macro wormhole door from one end of the universe to another, and the latter turn out to have absolute limits in terms of energy and unconquerable disruptive forces. Second, even the most advanced species find it more expedient to rely upon the remote control of atoms rather than on transfer of atoms or even atomic structures. The transporters of Star Trek fame are equivalent to what we see in our contact, but at a scale and detail that is apparently quite impossible in the physical universe.

A projection or a simple replica at an unfathomable distance is much easier to produce -- well within the scale of difficulty that manageable energy collections permit -- than is, even across small distances, a particle-scale replica of the simplest life form. Perhaps this is also by design?

No. 19 - At the end of the weekend, both Gary and Alice had to get on with their lives. They did finally touch base, Sunday evening, when Gary stopped by her building and mustered the courage to ring. There might have been a bug anywhere from the porch to Alice's door jam, if not throughout the apartment, but at least there was a better chance of privacy in person than through an electronic means. Alice, much to Gary's surprise and relief, didn't sound surprised or angered. "Oh,

hello, Gary, please come up," she said. Gary entertained all sorts of thoughts of normalcy as he came up to her door. He knocked upon finding the door closed.

It opened, and he found Reggie at the door. "Gary Corinth," Reggie said with a certain gusto and hand thrust out, "Gary. Corinth." He repeated the name something like you might pronounce a chronic illness that has just been diagnosed. "Good to see you," he said, shaking Gary's hand. "Please, come in."

Gary had no doubt that a giant O had formed itself on his mouth, and his only satisfaction was knowing that Reggie had no way to know how out of place that expression was. Let him think I'm just a lamehead... He followed the sweep of Reggie's hand and went into the apartment. He could sense -- or, more accurately, anticipate -- the eyes bearing into his neck, just at the point where a well-aimed blow could most easily and completely disable the opponent. He also knew that Reggie's silence was another signal, this time to Alice. She was sitting on the living room couch with Andrew, whom she was cradling in her arm. She didn't bother to get up. Gary looked hard at her to see if he could recognize fear or some other emotion that the current situation had conjured up. The thing he feared most was indifference. He wasn't sure what he saw, but it wasn't passion.

Gary said, "Hi, Alice. I hope it's all right I came by. I thought it best to talk in person."

Alice: "Thanks for coming."

Reggie, coming around to sit down on the couch, waited a moment and then put his arm around her. "By all means, thanks for coming by."

Gary sat, forward as if just for a moment, on the chair across from the couch.

There was a moment of silence, both awkward and also a moment of negotiation. Who would take the lead in the conversation and, by extension, in the conspiracy?

"I don't know how freely we can talk," Gary said, looking around the room.

Reggie misunderstood and took his arm from around Alice and moved forward. But he didn't say anything. His eyes were busy sizing up this new variable.

"I was worried," said Alice, "that if I told them that you had the monitor, they would think that you had something to do with the interference."

With that, she laid out ground rules: not too much familiarity, only oblique references to the point of this discussion. There was also, on her part, a natural disinclination to implicate another individual, a

trait that came from a number of different wellsprings. One, for instance, was the sympathy and similarity with her ex-husband, who -- by his oath, and she had no reason to doubt it -- was serving his sentence because he had refused to name the individual who owned the drugs he was holding. Not that he did not consume or sell drugs himself. But in this case he could say he was left holding the bag, literally and figuratively. They might well have believed him, if only he had named a name, ideally the name of someone they were looking for anyway. But he didn't talk, and he was convicted of drug trafficking -- another smalltime hood off the streets. He joked about it when Andrew and Alice came to visit.

Gary wasn't sure that he was clever enough to play this game and still get his points across. Any code was likely to be interpreted, if they were being observed by an informed party. And he didn't like exposing this link between him and Alice to Valerio, with the danger that Alice could be removed from the equation, leaving him and Reggie staring across the too short distance between couch and chair at each other. And him the guest.

"I appreciate the caution," he said. "I don't like the idea of Washington bureaucrats sniffing around my house -- even if there is nothing to hide."

"Why don't you drop the monitor off sometime when you're in the neighborhood again."

"Okay, I will," he said, heartened.

"Did you find out anything else about why the monitor blew up? That would help explain the interference, wouldn't it."

Gary swallowed like a witness under cross-examination, although he appreciated that they were taking the risk together. Then: "I think so. There was a surge, a power surge it looks like, and the monitor just couldn't handle it. I brought a power meter by this building the other day to try to see if I could figure why that was happening."

"Really?" she said with surprise, suddenly thinking, perhaps, that this game of charades was not understood by her conversant. Gary found his eyes wandering to Andrew, looking perplexed, as if the obvious point -- glowing image, folks! -- had been forgotten by these untethered adults.

"Yeah, sure, in fact, I think I measured the problem. I mean, the other day I came by and someone let me into the hallway. I took a measure there. I would like to show you what the power did to my meter. You may be interested because the problem could get very serious, very quickly."

"Should we let Mr. Brandenburger know?" she asked.

Now it was Gary's turn to wonder if they were still communicating

obliquely or not at all, and he hesitated. But he was pleased to see that Reggie's eyes were glazing.

"I don't know. You may want some strong evidence to point to. I don't think I'm ready to make any claims yet. But you should know what is going on."

"Can you tell me what it is?" she asked. Reggie looked suspiciously at Gary.

Gary said, speaking to a nameless point between them, "I'd rather show you. Maybe Reggie could take a look and give his assessment."

Alice didn't seem to like this assertion, but instead of going around it, she responded: "Do you think that's necessary?"

Gary nodded with a certain self-consciousness -- the endless earnestness was foreign to him, he suddenly realized. Or maybe it was her question, predicated on his integrity in dealing with Reggie.

Alice looked at him, maybe trying to see if there was a niggling worm of deception in his eyes, but more likely working through scenarios.

Those bright eyes in such rich, earthen tones made Gary pause.

"All right," she said. "Should we come to your house?"

"I've got some friends looking at it. They live closer. Why don't I give you a call when they're ready and we'll get together at their place." He thought this would seem more acceptable to Alice, but she

was taken aback by the sudden mention of these nameless friends. Gary realized the problem too late. "Or why don't I just bring it by. That's really the best thing."

"All right," said Alice after a moment, with the effusive voice and attitude of someone at the end of a meeting. It had only been a couple minutes, but Gary would not try to willfully ignore the announcement that it was time to leave.

Now, I won't try to imitate Reggie's voice, his Southern and very black voice, but it would be important to try to get a sense of it. We have already experienced Gary's incredulity at Reggie's liaison with Alice -- attributing it to race, which reveals a great deal in itself -- but we don't have much to go on from Alice's angle. What would she see in him? Had she somehow lost the ability to discriminate among males -- because, well, she was surrounded by losers? You might think that Gary's inability to see Alice with Reggie was the flower of Gary's own jealousy, but that would attribute a bit too much influence to his retrospective view. He had had a viscerally negative reaction to Reggie the first time he met him.

This reaction was fairly typical. There was something grating about Reggie's voice and manner from a male perspective: at times self-ironic and then indefatigably self-confident, ingratiating and preemptive,

supplicating and guiding, the kind of voice that plays with intonation and vocality as if they were clay, creating a statue of the subject at hand, with such dexterity and self-possession that you might at first miss that you have, in fact, been made into a statue yourself, and been put, lock-step, in a column of similarly wowed recipients. Then you might get angry. Or you might feel charmed by the skill of it all. You might also find yourself not so ingratiated the next time, when you see his clay-laden hands rub themselves in anticipation. You might exit the other way in disgust, or, if that moment of formation satisfied some other need for you, you might stay -- or even seek out his supple conversation.

I can't say whether Gary experienced that moment of satisfaction, but we can say for sure that he couldn't stomach Reggie's manner. What he saw was a male who warbled like a songbird, attuned to all that is fluttery and flighty in the female. Not that he wouldn't enjoy having this skill himself, but he absolutely felt it was the wrong way to win the female. Charm her and steal away with her in the night, instead of fighting it out with your rival? There was something dirty and insubstantial about this approach, something that broke rank with other males and created an unholy alliance with females, without at the same time being a true and forthright compact with them.

Not that Reggie couldn't sit down with his kind. He could talk football or cars or meaningless comparisons about weather and work. He could down a beer in a chug, and slap you on the back. But you had the feeling, if you watched him, that he felt out of place, not exactly comfortable looking into the steely eyes of his comrades: how could they not see that their standoffish and oafish approach to women was lucky to attract a lone female -- the kind of woman who would be happy not to compete for her man. Reggie, in other words, had something of that manner: a fox in the hen house. If the rest were satisfied, fine.

Was it that predatory manner and steely look that captured Alice? Or was it that Reggie had found something in her that extended him, taught him something about himself, as Gary had seen himself act in a new way, at least until that fateful day? Was there something that each found in the other that echoed earlier relationships -- with Alice's ex, perhaps?

Gary couldn't nail it down, and neither can I. I suspect that if you were to look very long and very close you would find evidence of all of the above and more. Love is, after all, a many-splendored and many-splintered thing.

Reggie was an individual for whom the answer to "what do you do?" was fluid, plastic, a work in progress. "Entrepreneur" was the most common

thread, but as plans and investments came and went, the answer changed naturally, without reference to earlier incarnations, to false starts or to contradictions. He was a man of the moment, and never apologized -- didn't know the word -- for what had come before. That was no doubt an attraction for Alice's mix of self- assurance and self-questioning, even as it left the two of them somewhere on a brink between indifference and judgment.

While Gary could describe Reggie's flaws in bitter detail, he would be wrong if he speculated that Reggie was after Alice's, or, indeed, any other woman's money. Reggie was not the type to put himself in a position of dependency. His schemes were always business, hopeful and mostly unencumbered by personal relations. At the same time, he seemed to survive by his ability to huckster, to convince others of exactly that of which he was convinced. In the business domain, his influence was equal on men and women, though for different reasons.

The first time that Gary noticed Reggie was after a surprising and even moving presentation at the church on the state of the African American male, given by a minister from another church and another state, organized mostly by Alice. Gary remembered vividly how she beamed at the conclusion of the successful evening, with twenty or so transfixed liberals -- the same old crowd that attended any such event, more or

less -- pleased that at least they had come.

It was as if Reggie were invented that night. He moved among the conversing groups of people with the ease of someone who knew -- as the sardonic Israeli advertisement campaign had it -- no one belongs here more than you. He was tall, not a large man but ample, and he wore mostly synthetic clothes that slung themselves well upon his frame, usually browns or grays or yellows. His hair varied by mood and business climate, but he often wore it wet and slicked down -- still visibly wavy but not natural. He typically wore a wide set of glasses with tinting, but with such a weak magnification that one might suspect, perhaps with a moment of guilt for the suspicion, that they were just vanity lenses.

This was also the fateful night when Gary asked Alice for dinner. Or maybe not, but it makes for a good story. The euphoria of a successful event might have been just the thing to have Alice more talkative than usual, and for Gary to feel like she could even say yes -- even on a night when the topic was the injustice visited upon male members of the African Diaspora in America.

Reggie was a complicated fellow -- not necessarily more interesting for that, because the complication was a character flaw that kept playing itself out in his endless charming and dealing. But perhaps, or so Gary

realized later, the complication also meant that he could be misunderstood in a way that gave him a strange advantage: the guilt of having misjudged him, or the mistake of underestimating him, in many different low-grade conflicts of the kind that day- to-day life is full.

Gary left Alice's condo with mixed feelings about the encounter with Reggie. It was difficult for him to sense how Reggie fit in there; he had felt that the room was too crowded with him there -- something about two interested males occupying the same space -- an even more basic emotional response than the tribal space he had felt that night when he captured the signal.

He knew that they were heading down a dangerous path -- there was no way for them to communicate now without the fear of surveillance, and she was naturally suspicious of his effort to move their discussion to a safer location. No matter where he got the storefront, he would need a lot of leverage to get Alice there. Probably with her FCC guests in tow. He was on the road, heading back home, when he realized he needed a different assist from Bluthe, a bigger commitment than he could really ask of him. But there was no question in his mind that it was the only way out. He had to stash the connection, and Bluthe had to find a place for it.

No. 20 -- Do you understand what we're talking about? Conspiracy, without mitigating factors: the effort to deceive the government and evade its security interests, for the sake of a personal satisfaction and ambition. I know too well what that means; I'm a dead man already several times over for the little I've shared already, let alone what other connections and preparations I've made. This was already more than Gary was mentally ready to accept, and he knew that if Alice really felt viscerally how close they all were to deadly force, then this whole configuration would simply shake apart. Whatever the reality, the danger wasn't something that Gary could convince her of. She needed to feel it, see the facts, put them together and feel the force of the inevitable conclusion. Until then, she was a woman oscillating, according to her own pattern, between excitement and dread, interest and doubt.

So -- what does Gary do? He was at the limit of his ability to conceptualize a functioning conspiracy. You can't blame him too much.

There is a great indifference called "liberty" that we all take for granted, and when you find yourself under the scrutiny of those who accept no indifference, there may also be no limit to what you fear. --

Were there agents following him? Was he bugged? Was he tagged? Was his every communication intercepted? Was there an assassination squad

waiting for the final orders or for the right moment? Or would they wait to see if he attempted to spread word? Was the act of dissemination the main point?

After work, Gary went to a local drug store and bought a Polaroid instant camera. A single copy, no remnants and no proliferation. He ate dinner and downed a couple beers, deciding whether he would carry out the next step in his plan. When he went outside, the sky was just obscured enough that he plucked up his courage and decided yes. No satellites watching tonight.

He put the apparatus and the soup in his car. He drove down to the nearby gas station and bought a detailed recreational map, highlighting a number of small country roads. He knew approximately where he would set up, but he wanted to have alternate routes just in case. The resolve in him began to feel real as he went through his cautionary steps, with no one to interrupt with the ugly what- ifs.

Gary drove for an hour or so, and that took him out of the populated zone of his metropolitan area. Woody fields -- or rolling fields -- or a hillside studded with sentinel cacti -- waited for Gary. He stopped the car, got out and looked around in that endlessly guilty way we know so stereotypically from the movies but that our minds seem unable to disassociate from -- an instinctual set of patterns, not unlike the

involuntary responses when your conscious mind tries to lie, that bounds our willful actions. No one was visible, but he knew that even here there were boundaries and warriors who walked the borders. He had resolved to be quick.

He set the apparatus and its bowl of Jell-O on a large boulder. The antenna still had the green stain, though it seemed fainter out here in the wilds. Perhaps it was simply the contrast: the green was an unnatural hue, like the ectoplasmic counterpart of chlorophyll. He set the camera on the ground near the rock, and staged himself so that he was projected from any blast. He set up the fire extinguisher he'd brought from his kitchen. Then he flipped the switch. There was an interminable wait, during which Gary twice decided that nothing would happen, but each time, when he began to move, he could sense the burns and head throbbing from the time before and he stopped.

It was before the third and final decision that there was sudden hiss of air burning and then after a heart beat a giant flash of red-tinged light and a resounding "foommmmp!" When the green spots finally cleared from Gary's eyes, he looked up and saw the glow of the green laser light. He stood up. Sure enough, the shape was rising out slowly out of the bowl of agar. It took about five minutes for it to form completely and then for the lens to begin to look for Gary. It settled

on him quickly. He was recognized.

What do you say to an alien intelligence that has traveled the farthest reaches of time and space to be with you?

Gary almost spat out, "Welcome," but he thought better of it, thankfully. The intelligence was there not to be greeted by self-important earthlings, welcoming a somehow needy super-intellect to our perfect little world. No, the alien at the other end was no doubt all too conscious how "nasty, brutish and short" our lives are. It was here for another purpose. Experience. Study. Interaction. Gary was at best its guinea pig.

After a moment, he began to talk, a steady stream relating almost everything that had transpired to that point from the moment Alice had called him. The camera eye was satisfied just to follow him without imitation, for the time being at least. He realized that, first, it was unlikely that the someone at the other end understood what he was talking about and, second, they would need some form of training that would allow them to bootstrap their knowledge of earth language and culture. A knowledge of nothing about our world, except perhaps the assumption that the tall skinny creatures were an intelligent species worthy of further study.

Gary stood out under the now emerging stars, God and every satellite

over the western hemisphere, thinking that he had finally outsmarted his opponent. Of course, if they had had a bit more finesse or, as the dapper man preferred to think, a bit more funding, they would have easily had their man. He had even set himself up for the perfect disappearance, having driven himself out of any tribal oversight he might have enjoyed, into a strange land with far-flung settlements. But the end did not come. There were no disappearance crews on duty, no investigators closing in on their mark, no silent helicopters with masked agents swooping down from the heavens.

Back at the ranch -- they were engaged in the endless sameness of surveillance and observation, back at their cobbled and hobbled search for a fleeting signal throughout the grids of a city. Who knows, thought the mind above the operator hands, maybe these events are all just cosmic noise. That would explain -- without the paranoid militancy of the dapper man -- why the signal seemed to walk through a wall and then disappear. Not that he didn't appreciate the idea that he was actually chasing something that existed, but if the signal was just a random occurrence, then all of a sudden the guard might doff his gun and light a cigarette, and the operator could walk out into the sunlight -- or rain and fog -- breathe deeply, stretch like Rip Van Winkle, and walk away. As things were, he just had to face the door to

know that walking away was a dubious prospect at best.

Unfortunately for the operator and his colleagues, their instruments were calibrated for the initial unchanneled signal and its characteristic radiation, but not for the mediated signal. In fact, the mediated channel -- once the antenna was perfected -- was nearly invisible. Even the flash-and-burn moment, when energy started to flow from the connection, left no discernible signature for the equipment at their disposal.

Now, I've been taken to task numerous times for representing this as a "government as usual" operation, with incompetence, bad decisions and inadequate resources. Not that these characteristics are unique to governments -- but there is a style, a way of moving that reflects the particular cowardice of those who enjoy moving in the fluid we know by the name of "bureaucracy." The vocabulary is laced with witticisms like the fictional "catch-22" and the real mccooy "charlie-foxtrot." They document governmental indifference -- an incompetence that comes from fundamentally competent and incompetent alike, an ether or space in which those who seek the comfort of a hierarchy, steady budget and an escape from the survival-of-the-fittest ethic find a home; a space in which order is its own value, un superseded by money or ambition or glory. It is a moral order from which the immorality of indifference

springs like an artesian well of human silence.

The operator had taken many a swill from this source. If you were to present him with two choices -- order the assassination of someone, say a black woman you've never met, and you can walk away, or let her live and spend another five years in this rat's hole -- he'd be on the phone right away. But he didn't expect and wasn't prepared for what the dapper man put upon him.

"What do you think, soldier?" said Walton, dropping a photo in front of him. It was Alice and Reggie leaving the building. Another photo showed Gary's silhouette at the front door. A third image was an infrared thermal image with the three of them and Andrew sitting in the living room. Finally, there was a thermal image of Gary's car: a cone-shaped object seemed to glow in the back.

The operator looked at the dapper man and back at the images. There was obviously supposed to be a tale here, but he didn't recognize it. He sensed that if he had, he might have been asked to walk right on out with the dapper man -- never to return -- but he knew that chance had already passed. He was just a thick-headed underling hemming and hawing. But he felt the challenge and wanted to make his mark.

"That's her. That's her boyfriend. I don't know why that gentleman is there, but they all got together for a meeting. An unusual group. This

must be one of their cars. It's got a warm object in the back. I can't make out what it is, but I'd sure like to see it up close." He looked up from the pictures to try to gauge the dapper man's reaction.

There was a pause -- "What do you conclude?"

"I don't know" wasn't an option. So: "this is our conspiracy. We've got them under surveillance?"

"How do you know it's a conspiracy, soldier?" asked the dapper man.

The operator was surprised but tried to regain his composure. "Well, if we had that object there we'd probably know."

The dapper man gathered up his photos. "Maybe. It looks to me like it's our missing monitor, though. And right now resources are not in place to grab that object. You've got either 'thumbs up' or 'thumbs down.'"

"What's thumbs up mean?"

The dapper man smiled wanly, and said: "They live."

The operator nearly upchucked but caught himself. There it was. This fatuous little man had a direct line to someone at the core of some secret agency, someone you didn't call to crack open a trunk. And you certainly would not expect this little man to be standing over a trunk with a crowbar, while a black- and-white unit drives up behind him.

There was just: thumbs up or thumbs down.

"Well, what's it going to be, soldier?"

The operator looked for the photos that the dapper man tapped on the desk as one might to straighten out a deck of cards. Somewhere in those pictures was the thermal image of the two men, one across from Alice and the other beside her, but there at her side and wedged up against her side was the small frame of a child. As he reflected, his mind conjured up that little shape taking wing and coming to dog him through the long nights at the monitor, and into a future that waited at the horizon, long after he had escaped this trailer. He couldn't. He made a weak thumbs-up movement, saw the disgust he expected, and he turned slowly back to his monitor. He only recalled later that he had also seen an unanticipated smirk.

The dapper man gave the operator one last moment to consider what he had done, packed up his photos in his shoulder bag and headed straight for the door. He may have made a motion to the guard at the door, of that the operator could not be sure. But he had the undeniable sense that he would not stand face-to-face with the dapper man again. If that man stood in the entrance to that trailer and looked in on him again, it would be to clean a house dirtied by too much compassion for the enemy.

No. 21 -- So there you have it. Gary and Alice were saved that day by that cynical young man with his fingers on the predator. If it was his

fear of ghosts, so be it. And you thought I had nothing but contempt for the government!

Tuesday evening Alice got a call from Gary. "I'd like to invite you out for dinner -- tonight," he explained. She told him she had dinner on the table already, in a tone of losing patience. "I really want to meet you at the Boiled Lobster," he said, not really sure if there was one nearby. "I've got those pictures we discussed."

Now let's get everything out on the table, folks. There is a set that feels my misogyny has no place in this story. "Why do you insist on repeating the palest of stereotypes when telling a story for the ages? Can you not see how you denigrate the woman character, always qualifying her appearance and her attitude, as if she were a boutique animal or a household pet, and not a person with as much will, integrity and sense as any of your males?"

This criticism, I have to tell you, has me thinking like Gary -- what more can I do to show my good intentions -- but in the interest of reconciliation between me and any feminist fans let me say this: Alice can run mental and spiritual circles around poor Gary. The guy is a sorry excuse for a protagonist -- let's at least give him the chance to desire Alice as an ideal. Which of course is just a hop, skip and a jump away from seeing Alice as the object of all his longing, indeed of

his entire existence. Does it pain you to see him with a purpose?

Back to the story, you say. These authorial interjections add nothing to a limping story, you add ruefully, shaking your head, looking out the window, wondering why you're still at the screen. But what you don't realize is that your looking out the window is even more predictable than this prose. Don't you feel it, the sense in which the predictability of your actions presages the danger. -- The danger, you ask disdainfully? -- Yes, the danger that you yourself are as solidly predictable as the text that you reject, that you are just another citizen beneath the threshold, neither particularly useful nor so disturbing that action would be necessary to remove your negative influence. You are the minion of the deepest, darkest conspiracy of all, one to which you acquiesce in utter submission and blindness: the conspiracy of blind submission itself.

All that is contained in your impatience. Take care not to let it be seen too easily.

Alice herself wanted nothing more than hang up on Gary and go on with her life. Reggie was looking askance at her, as if an explanation were overdue -- although perhaps she could not be sure that his expression was not simply a calculated mask, intended to create an effect rather than mirroring an internal condition. Perhaps she was never sure of his

internal condition at all --

"Two criticisms," someone wrote recently, "seem to relegate these three weeks of tripe irrefutably to the dustbin of pseudo-documentary writing. First, there is simple fact that the story he is telling with such great secrecy and caution already tells more than enough to uncover both his identity and that of any of the players who might still be alive. Alice may be a perfectly anonymous individual to me, but to the dapper man she is a suspect with a file and an address. He makes that agency call without delay, follows the chain of possession of any memoirs that Alice or Gary may have penned, and voila, our anonymous blue-ball fan is in the crosshairs and dead. That he is still alive is, indeed, the best evidence that his precious story is pure fiction. Second, Alice doesn't make any sense. Either she is a mother fixated on her domestic life and her love for her child, or she is an adventuress waiting to find a cause -- and to discover her repressed sexuality, I don't know. But we can't have both people with one name; these are not part-time jobs that you can pick up and drop like a timecard. It's all fictitious and correspondingly boring."

Ah the fresh morning air of substantive criticism! Sometimes a bracing dose can really clear the bronchial tubes and let the oxygen flow intoxicatingly.

I won't bother to answer the first point; I've addressed that already.

There is no direct line to me from the principals, and at the same time, the arrow of accusation is drawn, should something happen to them, at least while I live. Alice too fictitious? Perhaps. I've worked hard to change necessary details to protect the social anonymity of those involved. This includes to a degree changing the principals.

Perhaps I have changed too much, but I hope you'll agree, at the end of our tale, that I've endeavored to be true to the spirit of those chronicled here. -- Like Alice, our critic begins to wonder if there is anything beneath the mask. But I ask, if the mask tells a story, must there not also be a storyteller beneath it?

We catch up to Gary on the freeway. There is still no armed predator on his trail, but he's high-tailing it out of his city. On the way to Bluthe's safe house. A great deal has intervened, but in such a way that only the result interests us -- as if the minutes passed in a kind of dance, a change of tempo that serves to bring the dancers together and set the stage for rocketing off the stage in different directions.

All the movements direct our attention tendentially towards the center, and slowly it dawns on both the audience and the dancers' unconsciousness that they are moving toward a spot that will signal the

end of one major movement and the onset of another. From that moment on -- and projected backward as far as you care to -- every moment is seen as a movement subsidiary to the resolution.

The windows in Gary's getaway vehicle have been cleaned of their deepest plastic haze, and some of the trash on the seat and floor has been removed. The car still shimmies and with less friendly weather the car becomes a certain death trap -- bald tires, threadbare brake pads, loose steering and a seat belt that is stuck under the seat back. As is, a beer cradled between his legs, Gary is feeling quite confident. The radio, tinny and fuzzy, blares top 40 hits that occasionally hit that tone of minor-keyed remorse and hopefulness that his soul metabolizes into will. He looks at the scenery rushing by with a certain sense of mastery and takes another swig.

Alice had wanted to say no to Gary's awkward invitation, but I believe she saw that the whole matter needed resolution. "All right, Gary," she said. "The restaurant on X Ave?" Gary affirmed and they agreed on an hour later. It was just before they hung up that Alice said, "Make the reservation for four." Gary had hoped otherwise, but he held onto the sigh that almost slipped into the phone.

When he felt his chin loosen a bit, he realized he equally had reason to be angry about the presumption that of course Reggie would be coming

along and needing to be "filled in." Given the stakes, he thought to himself, that decision ought not to be hers alone. He went along with this logic for a while before his own mind ran through some of the counter-arguments, which had some zing of their own and inevitably ended with Alice glaring at him and saying, "Fine, I don't want any part of it."

And he had the pictures. In his pocket. They weren't very convincing photography, in end effect. But with the right context and the right assurance of authenticity, they might convince you that something happened. You may not believe that that something was of alien origin -- how could anything we comprehend demand that conclusion of a skeptic -- but you might believe that something very strange was afoot. You might ask to look at them again, in sequence. "If I didn't know better," you might say, admitting that you do and don't at the same time.

And sure, he had the antenna with the green stain in the trunk. He even had its soup if she demanded a demonstration.

He got to the parking lot a half hour before their reservation with the intention of scoping out the location, but without a plan beyond that.

I suppose it was sufficient for his purposes if he found no dark-windowed oversized SUVs and no government-issued recreational

vehicles.

Alice drove into the lot right on time. Reggie got out quickly, before she stopped the car, and walked around the front of the suddenly halted vehicle and opened her door for her. She shook her head slightly at him in consternation, with a slight reluctant smile on her lips. This male posturing, she may have been whispering under her breath and without aid of her facial muscles.

From a row of cars over, Gary bellowed a big hello, as if this was a happy reunion and not an awkward meeting to resolve a larger problem that festered between them. He marched up to them while they were still concerned with closing doors and making sure Andrew was safely corralled. Gary stood closest to Alice, but tried not to get too close, backing up as Alice took several steps toward him while looking behind her.

"Gary --" she stopped, surprised to find him right in front of her.

"Hi, thanks for coming, Alice," he said, before turning to Reggie, who had for an unarticulable reason put his arm around Andrew's shoulders.

He continued: "Hi, Andrew. Hello, Reggie." Gary took a step and extended a hand to Reggie, but Reggie waited until he came up beside Gary -- and Alice had moved a few steps beyond -- before he reciprocated.

"Good to see you, Gary. Corinth." His sinewy hand slipped over Gary's, felt rough and crinkly. Gary could feel an unrevealed strength in Reggie's fingers.

The procession into the restaurant made its way silently. Each second weighed just a bit more on Gary's heart, as he visualized how the burden of every moment would fall on him. In this moment, he felt how unbelievably heavy his other burden had become, too, through days of secrecy -- would he have the strength?

They had to wait ten minutes in the small area before the hostess station. Fortunately for all, Andrew wanted to engage his mother on his homework for Science class. Gary and Reggie could both safely watch their interaction, pretending that it somehow bound them to pay attention without engaging them directly. Andrew knew about his adult audience, if not why, and played it to the hilt. Alice seemed grateful, too, for the interlude.

When the hostess came to seat them, she seemed momentarily at ill ease, as if there was a potential collision approaching, as it would become clear that there were two Gary groups. But Gary clarified with a "Let's go," and the hostess sighed out of both relief and a slow-burning irritation at those whose ambiguities always threatened to explode into irate customers surrounding ill-tempered managers.

They sat down in a booth with comfortably high backs, Reggie and Gary to a side. They all hid themselves for a moment behind the massive laminated menus, until Alice assumed the initiative by putting down her menu.

Gary wanted to say, "It's on me." But he sensed the implication so he kept his mouth shut.

Alice began: "You said you had photos of something?"

Gary looked at her with a blank expression, saw the beauty of the face that he had had as companion so many times, what seemed like an eternity ago, and he couldn't stop looking until her frown stopped him.

"I hate to sound melodramatic," he began, "but once you see these, there's no going back."

"What do you mean, no going back?" said Alice.

Gary risked another brief stare into the rich brown irises. "I mean," he said and then cleared his voice, "two things. First, there is some risk in knowing what I am about to show you. I can't hide that. Second, I think you'll agree that the world is different place after you've seen them." He did not look around, but couldn't help imagining how at each table around them someone was ignoring the food or conversation in front of him or her and straining ears.

Of course, it was at that moment -- seeing the menus down -- the

waitress came back. A lot of crab was ordered, and she went on her way. Reggie, as Gary saw with a quick glance, was sizing him up in a brand new way. Intrigue brought this conversation into a whole new context, and of course he couldn't help but notice how off-put Alice was by Gary's manner. Sure, Gary, just go about your business.

Reggie said, "Gary --"

"Yes?" he said, turning toward him, expecting the suspicions.

"What are the risks? Is this something - illegal? Like child porn or something?" He looked over at Alice to see how she would react to this dig; when all she did was raise her eyebrows he looked back at Gary to see what he had achieved with him.

Gary meanwhile was contemplating the relative strength of his heavyweight water glass and Reggie's skull. Child porn. Not that -- but in front of Alice? He felt his heart accelerate and imagined all the invectives he could hurl -- perhaps not shutting up Reggie but keeping him silent just long enough to bow slightly to Alice and walk out of the restaurant and her life forever. Maybe get a dig in against Reggie's manhood, but he'd still have to be careful about ethnic epithets, since he had no desire to be attacked physically. He wasn't sure but maybe his lips were moving during this pause.

Then he said to Reggie: "The risks are minimal. Just keep what you see

among us. For Alice's sake."

"Min-nee-mall," repeated Reggie, in that widely American way of becoming homespun the moment you suspect someone is blustering with their education.

Gary didn't respond, in part because he assumed such slights didn't count for much with Alice and in part because the weight was growing -- right there in his maw, in his fingers and arms. Alice was looking at him, unsure if his stalling was grandstanding or actual angst. Even as Gary felt less and less capable of continuing, he felt she was becoming more and more attuned. Perhaps the feeling of that first night had returned.

Gary reached into his pants pocket and pulled out about twenty Polaroids. "These aren't the best quality, but I didn't want any other records." He pulled the first from the pile and laid it on the table in front of Alice. "This is a picture of the antenna apparatus. You will note the small glowing green image in the middle of the antenna."

Reggie stretched over the table while he let Alice have the full rightside-up look at the picture; he bolted back as if he had suddenly been hit by an electrical current and looked at Gary. Gary didn't return the favor; he knew the expression: surprise and disappointment at such a meaningless display. He bore on. "Here's a close-up." The

green was more evident, more clearly defined, but of course you could not tell exactly where it sat or indeed if it was not reflected off a surface. "Now," Gary said, "here it is after I've flipped the power switch. It amplifies the signal."

The green image was much larger, if still relatively indistinct. But for Alice the vital connection was instantly made. Even though the elements of the image were different, this was the same thing that had on that night projected itself into her mind. Here it was, in the middle of the desert / forest / wasteland / backcountry, responding to Gary's command.

Alice let slip: "Oh my God." Even more, after that moment of complete disarmament, Gary saw Alice look at him with a mixture of disbelief and something like respect that he had never expected to see again. Reggie saw it, too, but he was not leaning over the table this time, not dignifying this hat trick. A miscalculation, perhaps, but he obviously decided to hold to it.

Gary had more. "This is a close-up of the projected image. I figured out that the symbols were different atoms. Then I got a mix of the chemicals from a supply company and put a bowl of the stuff in front of the antenna." Another Polaroid drops. "This is what the bowl looks like." Another. "This is what the bowl looks like after the signal from

the antenna finds it." The now stereoscopic silvery device protruded from the depths of the bowl.

Alice picked up the photo and studied it. After a couple minutes of utter silence and stillness, amid a sea of human sounds, clanks and beeps, she glanced at Gary. "It's looking at you," she said.

"It appears to be," he answered. "Here it's followed my movement to the other side. Note the relative location of the beam coming from the antenna." He allowed a moment for that to sink in -- no doubt not long enough -- and added: "Sometimes it tries to emulate my voice. It started pretty crude, but it's getting better."

After a few more seconds Alice let drop the photo she was holding, as if she had just seen a spider crawling on it. She had to look up again. Her eyes started on Gary but immediately slid over to Reggie's. He tried to lock her gaze with a look that said don't fall for this. But she almost imperceptibly shook her head, as if to say that she had no choice. It was unclear to Gary whether she had explained what had scared her so thoroughly that night, or whether Reggie had only gotten the in-the-light-of-day version.

That's when she looked over and down at Andrew. He broke the impasse. "I told you," he said with the half-impish voice he used to keep her eyes from glazing over -- when he was talking about the things a

pre-teen male imagines.

She seemed not sure which of his assertions he found validated here, but she answered: "You did, Andy."

Andrew took all the Polaroids on the table and began looking at them one after another. Gary still had more, but the implication was clear to him. He would have to bear the burden on his own. For whatever Alice thought now, she couldn't be involved without completely involving -- risking -- Andrew, too.

"I'll need those back," Gary said.

"Why?" asked Andrew.

"Because," he said with a Hollywood glance at Alice, "I'm going to write a big report about this and I need the pictures."

"You can take more," he said.

"Maybe," said Gary. "But I need these until the story hits the press. Until then, you'll just have to be quiet about this. Don't want to get scooped."

Gary thought this was a pretty clever twist, but Alice of course saw how stalling her son was already too much conceded: he had infinite stores of energy to contemplate the matter from every angle, and you had to close the door before that energy could be brought to bear.

Reggie took in her exasperated look and perceived once again that Gary

was not going to be a problem for her and him. And the other angle began to interest him.

"So Gary," he said, picking up one of the Polaroids on the very corner, as if the toxic chemicals that made the image had something to say about the contents, "you're telling us that these are real-life pictures of an alien encounter?"

Gary puffed for an instant, tired of the two fronts on which he had to carry this conversation. "I'm telling you that this signal is not our technology. Where it comes from or why, I can't really say." He decided not to mention the Blue Ball Society or Bluthe.

"Well, even if that were true," answered Reggie with a disdainful toss back onto the table -- where the Polaroid landed in a small water puddle -- "the government has lots of secret technology programs. That's all this is. I would bet -- if I were a betting man -- you're trespassing on government property there."

"I suppose that could be," said Gary, hoping not to continue this thread.

"Alice, honey," said Reggie, "didn't you say that somebody from Washington came by and asked about this stuff? He was just here to get the government's property back, is all." He leaned back again, pleased that he'd found the right fulcrum to get rid of this matter.

"Government property. We shouldn't do anything with it. We should just give it back."

"I made the antenna," said Gary. "It can't be the government's. And if the signal is a secret signal from the government, why don't they just turn it off if they don't want me to receive it? It's not illegal to make an antenna, as far as I know." He could imagine that it was plenty illegal to pick up certain EM bands, but he felt that he could probably bluff Reggie through that.

"The Man won't ask questions when he comes a-calling. And maybe he'll slap your wrist, but he'd just as soon slam my butt into a cell where the sun don't shine." Reggie half slapped his palm on the table to make his point. This was an angry side that Gary hadn't seen before. It may have been what he immediately suspected -- a canned reaction that proved itself useful -- but it could also have had its own real genesis. Whatever, Gary was in no position to argue the point.

After that sank to the floor amid the general din, Gary said more softly, "I'm taking it away for good. You don't need to worry about it any more."

That, too, sank to the floor.

"I'd like to see it once. Can you show me?" said Alice.

Gary couldn't help himself. On one level, he heard her fine, but on

another he saw her say, 'I'd like to sleep with you once, before we say goodbye forever. Can you do that for me?' and they both stood up and walked out to the car, arm in arm. Reggie was left open-mouthed, surrounded with giant bowls of fried shrimp and crab, and Andrew eyeing him with a French Fry sticking out of his mouth.

"Sure," he said finally, hoarsely, "it's out in the trunk." When eyebrows flared, he added: "It's the safest place, I think."

They ate in semi-silence. Reggie occasionally tried to engage Alice in commonalities, mostly from the church but carefully selected to exclude anything Gary might ask about. Andrew enjoyed the audience this provided him, but apparently also understood that the green stain discussion was over for now.

Gary's mind was wandering, aching for a beer, barely perceiving Andrew's tale about the battling robot he would build to make quick work of all the ones he'd seen on TV, when he heard Alice's voice intone his name. " -- thank you for the dinner. But Andrew needs to get to his homework."

"Sure," said Gary, and felt like an idiot some seconds later when he noticed the check was on the table unclaimed. He picked up the check jacket and out of embarrassment said, "I'll just take this up." He got up and wandered toward the front door before realizing he needed to pay

the server. He worked his way back toward what looked like her wait station. The woman he thought was his server didn't look at him standing near her, as she punched in someone's order, so he turned to find another station. Behind him he heard: "I'll take that for you." She waited until she was sure he was facing her way, then glanced at him and, with the confirmation, she smiled curtly. Then she took the jacket and put it down beside her. She punched in more items for a while before ascertaining, with barely a look, that Gary was still there, at which point she flicked the jacket open. She took the receipt, punched it up on her screen, swiped the card she found in the jacket, and struck a pose looking the other way while she waited for the credit card receipt to print. When it had, she placed it in the jacket on the counter, put the card back, tossed the jacket closed and handed it back to him with half a look and a cranked-up smile: "Have a great evening."

That all handled, Gary signed and assigned the tip at the table, and followed his party out into the evening. They were waiting for him outside the door. He said redundantly, "Follow me."

He had parked his vehicle somewhat out of the way. The precaution now seemed absurd, but he also felt a little bit of the flow of a movement whose conclusion has been telegraphed, as if no decision he made now

would affect the outcome. Gary walked ahead and could feel that Reggie had put his arm around Alice, but when he reached the car and looked, Alice was walking with Andrew and Reggie was dragging behind. The lack of control was making him itch.

Gary waited until they had assembled in front of the trunk. He thought maybe he ought to say something but no words formed, so he turned, unlocked the trunk and raised the lid.

The antenna lay unceremoniously, half wrapped in a blanket to hold it steady, beside the large metal bowl full of the jell-o-like mix, covered with plastic wrap. The antenna had an unearthly shimmer to it -- from the absolute smoothness of the surface and curvature -- but what stood out was the glow from the center of the spiral. It was as if a radioactive paint had been sprayed upon an invisible spongy surface, a sickly pale green that stood out quite well in the darkness of the trunk well.

Gary observed Alice's expression as she leaned forward to see better. She bent almost all the way over to get an unobstructed view of the signal, held her breath for about twenty seconds, then stood up again, mostly, with her hands and a good portion of her weight resting on the rim of the trunk. She didn't look around. You could tell that she was processing, remembering the image in order to be sure that she had it,

describing it to herself, breathing in the significance. One of those moments where you stop to consider that you are living along a trajectory, performing a dance that ends in your death, and it is the individual movements that define the dance.

With one unexpected step, you realize that it is possible that the deadening, indifferent universe may still surprise.

Alice looked at Gary first, in a moment that brought him joy. There were hints of tears in her eyes, wet with amazement, sorrow and disbelief, and her chin almost seemed to tremble. Then after just a few seconds, she said, "Thank you, Gary. Good night." She took Andrew's hand without acknowledging his questioning look -- there would be a boundless sea of time to react to him -- and took him away.

Reggie waited with Gary until she was out of earshot. With bravado: "That is some weird shit, Gary. Take care." He had put his big hand on Gary's shoulder and seemed to want to transfer another message through his fingers, as they pressed down through Gary's jacket and shirt. Then he turned with a chuckle and went.

No. 22 -- Gary, as I said, was on his way to a safe house. He had that very night made the call to Bluth: "You're right -- I've got to get rid of this thing. But you have to promise me, it can't just be destroyed. We've got to put it some place safe."

"Why," said Bluthe simply, his head booming with a hangover from a two-day stimulant binge to get an article done for a looming publication deadline.

"Because -- " Gary wanted to tell him the truth, because that tended to disarm the endless prevaricator in Bluthe, but he also knew this particular truth would raise the ire of this strange friend. "I just want to know it's still around, that's all. I'd like to come visit sometime."

"And we know it'll be safe to keep it -- how?"

Gary looked up into the overlit evening sky, where just a few stars shone through. There was no good answer. "I don't think they can find it the same way they found Alice's apartment. I'm sure they would have been here otherwise."

"Maybe they're just looking for all the conspirators before they strike." Bluthe sounded remarkably resigned to that fate.

"Maybe," Gary replied.

"Why don't you just keep it then?"

"Because -- they know who I am. I'm too close to Alice. It's too easy to follow me to the thing -- "

"And back to your precious Alice. I know. The woman's probably on the phone to the FBI right now and you're still imagining you're her knight

in slithering armor."

There was a moment of silence.

"Okay, Gary, I'll ask someone. The kind of person who has nothing to lose. One of my lost souls. And we'll see if she wants to become your partner in martyrdom. Okay? Okay? Now can I get back to my screaming headache?"

Gary had very specific instructions. He drove into the multi-floor parking garage next to the largest mall in _____. He parked his car next to Bluthe's, and got out. Bluthe popped his trunk as a sign that the coast was clear, and Gary opened his and moved the bagged antenna and the bowl in a Styrofoam cooler to Bluthe's. He slammed them both closed and walked away. He walked to the mall -- the entrance to a Sears or Macy's or Penny's or Target -- and wandered through the store, down the necessary number of floors and then out onto the street. He stood there for a while, and noticed Bluthe drive by on the other side of the road. His role was to observe the area, and, if he was at all suspicious, he was to ignore Bluthe when he stopped, and they would meet later that evening at a pre-arranged adult cabaret.

Gary was half-hoping, but he knew this arrangement to be so much self-massaging poppycock. He would notice a stakeout? A government tail

would be fooled? A satellite couldn't reacquire its target? But the theater made Bluthe feel better and he owed him that much self-absorption.

Bluthe jerked the car forward when Gary approached the door, as if to say, "you didn't even bother to look." But Gary got the door open -- it scraped on the too- high sidewalk -- and jumped in.

The small, recent, Japanese-designed but American-built car smelled of aftershave, funk and leather. The engine had a small, tinny roar as Bluthe accelerated away from the curb. "Holy sainted Mother of God, man," Bluthe said, half under his breath but dramatically, "could you be any more the head- scratching criminal screaming to be caught?" "What?" Gary said, saving up his incriminations for later, after much drink.

"What, what, what -- child, how did you become the Christopher Columbus of the information age? Oh yeah -- it was I who guided you... Yes, that explains much..."

Gary guffawed and looked out the window. "Oh yeah -- right."

They were silent for a while -- small talk didn't seem to fit, at least until they were done with the business and ready to go carousing. Once they had been driving for a while, Gary asked, "So who is it? What's his story?"

"Her story," said Bluthe, glancing over to Gary. The tone said, don't think you can make too light of my research subjects -- that's my privilege. "She's a successful executive at a clothes wholesaler, since a number of years. But twenty years ago she was driving on a country highway, leaned down to pull out a few cassettes from her bag, and looked up to see one, two, three, four bicyclists thud on her hood, bounce against the windshield and fly up and away. She crashed the car into a ditch, and sat there listening to music until the police arrived and pulled her out. All four of her victims died on the pavement. She spent four years in a women's correctional institution for involuntary manslaughter and eight years on probation."

"You've talked about her before," said Gary, but not sure what Bluthe's point had been.

"No doubt. She's a classic, as you'll see. A very agreeable hostess to boot."

They drove for an hour or so, more or less in silence, some indie radio station pouring crackly notes into the car. Then Bluthe said, "All right, we're here." They entered a small townhouse community off a main thoroughfare.

"Does she drive?" Gary asked.

"Indeed she does. Whenever she can -- to prove a point. Unfortunately

one that doesn't exist in our time-space continuum."

Bluthe got out of the car. When Gary hesitated about going to the trunk, Bluthe said, "Let's talk to her first."

"Sure," he said. They walked up beside a nice, well cared-for yard with a gurgling pond and stone bull frog. There was even a garden gnome tucked in among the bushes leading to the front door. Bluthe scurried in front of Gary, who had a sneaking suspicion that this woman hadn't agreed to take the antenna at all. Bluthe rang the bell and positioned himself to intercept the inhabitant's view before Gary could be noticed.

It took another ring, then the door opened a little. It was too dark inside to see anyone. After a moment, a deep, raspy woman's voice said: "Oh, hello, William, it's good to see you. Please come in." The door opened wider, and a hand extended the screen door to Bluthe's hand and he pulled it open. He followed her in and the screen door snapped shut behind him.

Gary wasn't sure if this was payback or just pure Bluthe, but he pulled the door open and followed them in. The house had the musty smell of a place whose owners didn't get out much. There were a few cats lounging around on chairs and little tables, and the distinct possibility that some of that must was cat pee. Gary recognized a theme emerging,

realized he'd have need to watch his tongue. There would be plenty to guffaw about later, on the far side of a bottle of whiskey.

Bluthe was asking about the king cat splayed out on the couch that seemed to be the only decent place to sit in the living room. The woman then noticed Gary and arched her neck and grimaced. "Ah, Mary," said Bluthe, "this is Gary Corinth. He's the gentleman I mentioned."

"You didn't tell me he was going to come," she said with a slight hiss mixed into her baritone voice.

"I know," said Bluthe looking back at Gary like a child you can't get leave anywhere.

"Hello there," said Gary with the voice he developed in his Dear Abby adventures.

She snipped a "hmmpph" and gestured for her guests to sit. It seemed a bit awkward, with the cat in the middle of couch. Bluthe took a seat at the cat's head, leaving Gary to set himself beside the cat's anus. The chairs to either side of the couch were overstuffed and looked highly uncomfortable. There was a recliner to the side, but from Mary's standing position that seemed to be her spot. Gary took the butt side and smiled. The cat was oblivious except that it stretched its back legs out and one paw stemmed itself against Gary's leg.

"Tea?" she said with a tepid smile.

"Please," said Bluthe, suddenly grinning like a boy.

"Sure," said Gary, although he didn't want to do anything to extend this visit. Leave the connection and go.

They were on their own for a couple minutes, and Bluthe had that stupid smile stuck on his face in a way that told Gary that something unhealthy was happening here. Maybe they had slipped into a mother-son thing when Bluthe had interviewed her -- that might explain a willingness to participate in this conspiracy.

When she came back, Mary had three tall tea glasses on a small serving tray. She held them out for Gary first, and he took one. One whiff, and he knew he was holding a rather heavy long island iced tea. Bluthe took his glass with a bubbly thank-you that made Gary's back crawl. Mary smiled at her guests, put the tray aside and quaffed the tea with an authority that showed she was no stranger to the concoction.

Somewhere a clock ticked into the silence, and Gary noticed how dust danced in a nearby sunbeam, almost as if pulsed by the tock. Gary took a long hard drink and his eyes watered.

"Mary," Bluthe said, pulling forward on his seat and petting the king cat on his flat head, "thank you for meeting with us today. My friend is in a desperate strait. I thought about how I could help him, and you came to mind immediately."

She smiled coyly. "You know I'm always happy to help you, William."

Another long draught.

"That's what I love about you," he said, almost triumphantly, looking around at Gary. "Here's to friends helping friends." He drank. "Now, Gary, why don't you explain what you've been up to."

The story was the subset of the story rehearsed here -- with Bluthe jumping in to get his digs against Alice, and Mary shaking her head sympathetically at the wiles of some women, perhaps with a hint of reprobation against the mixing of races -- but none of it made much of an impression until Gary took out the Polaroids and laid them out on her coffee table.

"Shit," she said with a heavy slur and a sudden shake of her head. She picked up the picture of the silvery device that followed Gary from side to side. "It's fucking alive."

"It's more like a TV camera," said Gary punctiliously.

"Okay, but it's got the evil eye on you." She threw down the picture.

"I don't want that thing in my house. No."

Gary looked over at Bluthe, who just smiled in an inebriated state of mothered bliss. But inside there was the calculating expression in his eyes that said, "Another couple glasses of iced tea, and no one will remember anything except what I tell them."

No. 23 -- You know how it is with drunks and the itch of a question. Gary couldn't help himself. At least he waited until they were fairly plastered, though not yet so ill-balanced that the tipsy had become topsy-turvy.

"So, Mary," he said, "how do you live with the accident?"

She looked at him with a mixture of revulsion and heaviness. Gary recognized in that expression the burden of a secret, and half wished he had kept his mouth shut. But only half.

"There's no living with it," she said in a clear heavy tone. "But that was someone else. I'm me, now."

Gary looked at her waiting to see if the meaning of that would suddenly pop open in his head, or poof like the proverbial light bulb. He looked over at Bluthe, whose pathetic grin had assumed more of the curvature of his usual smirk. "Mary," Bluthe said importantly, "has compartmentalized her trauma, and seeks neither to disown it nor to dwell on it. She has recognized the necessity of both grief and anger, and she has moved beyond them, to acceptance." A small guffaw escaped when he tried to breathe and take another slip at the same time.

"No shit," said Gary. "So that's how that works?" He looked back at Mary.

"Yes," she said slowly, "you moron. That's how it works."

He said, "I think I can remember every stupid thing I've ever done, most like they were yesterday. They make me itch, actually."

"That would not surprise me," she added. As if for effect, a cat emerged from some other room, suddenly sat down, licked its bottom with a leg in the air, and then without transition got up and started to scratch its face with the other back paw. That ended just as abruptly and it stood up with a slight stretch and continued on its journey, disappearing into a hall.

Gary laughed but no one else picked it up. A minute passed.

"Gary," said Bluthe in his best voice of condescension, "perhaps it would be a good time to introduce Mary to her new housemate."

Ah, that was the angle -- even in Gary's head the light bulb lit up.

She was going to get rent from this intergalactic interloper. Or from its guardian, more properly.

"Sure," he said, "be right back." But he didn't move because something was telling him that he was being watched by less than generous eyes.

Sure enough, Bluthe had a cruel little smile on his face. He laughed when Gary finally turned to him. "Keys, man!"

"I'm not letting you anywhere near my keys."

"Then you can fucking get the antenna yourself."

They exchanged a few flurries of expletives, and then took a break of

an hour or so, during which time they went out back to smoke cigars that Mary produced. Gary puked and felt better. Later they went back inside and drank another sacrifice to the hard-proof gods. Gary found his head throbbing and vowed the drunk's pledge: to never let himself sober up, which would mean having to deal with the hangover.

"Here's to friends," Bluthe said, and he wandered out to the car to retrieve the device. When Gary realized he had been gone a long time, he was a bit disconcerted. He became even more so when he found Mary looking at him as if she were expecting them to shed their clothes and get busy right there on the cat-haired floor. Not that she wasn't female enough for him to do it. But Gary couldn't get Bluthe's smile out of his mind. There was no way he wanted that on his own face.

No. 24 -- Guess what, the agent wrote to me, we've got your sorry ass. You can come quietly, or you can get your cajones cuffed. I replied: I don't think you have me at all, so this discussion is entirely academic.

HackedYourLast: Not academic, my friend; this discussion is exactly about your health and welfare. You will be given only one chance.

I guess I should have been grateful for the one chance. They had been waiting for me when I connected to my orbital server -- my alarms told me that -- and invited me to a chat. (Okay, actually, technically I

hadn't hacked the satellite at all, but a computer that was both on the protected network for controlling the satellite and on the Internet through a tunnel to another computer I had compromised.) Since the talk session was on the machine itself, there seemed to be no additional risk in doing so. The real risk was remaining connected to the server, but I had an overwhelming need to find out how much they really knew -- even though the only goal in this communication was to hold me on the server long enough to locate my place of origin.

Fortunately there were numerous zombie computers between me and the server, including a ring of machines that were interwebbed to conceal my point of entry. But I knew that this was not going to prevent them from finding me, given sufficient time.

If you really had me, I said, you wouldn't wait to take me down. So this is clearly a bluff.

The agent replied: That's a nice theory, but the fact of the matter is that we already know who you are and have just been waiting for you to incriminate yourself with the cameras running.

For an instant I could feel the impact of this in my heartbeat and endocrine system, a stutter in my self-confidence and self-defense. It was not implausible. But also a bit comforting: if they were my usual adversaries, I would be dead already. These were telecom cops. But who

was looking over their shoulders?

DontThinkSo: So, Mr. Agent Man, what is my one chance?

HackedYourLast: We are willing to see the charges reduced to a minimal felony, if you cooperate. Written confession. Description of your methodology. Since this is a non-violent offense with no monetary loss -- you're likely to get a few months and probation. But cooperation is the key. If you disconnect now, my friend, every deal is off the table, and we make an example of you.

DontThinkSo: And what kind of example does hacking a satellite make?

HackedYourLast: Does endangering national security sound like an example? Any jury would put your balls on a spit for that.

DontThinkSo: How does the headline go? Maybe: "Lunkheads leave backdoor open on billion dollar satellite." Smaller type: "Teenage kid takes over communications link."

HackedYourLast: Very funny. ...

I breathed through a heart-thumping pause, waiting for the give-away.

... What would your parents think?

For a moment I was relieved: they swallowed that I might be a brilliant but harmless teenaged hacker. But was this hook itself a plant? How could I know when they had played their last card?

I cut the connection.

I set the zombies aflame and retreated to my home. That was the end of my website, the hack and my access to the Net. I had to lay low for a while, given their proximity and, frankly, given the lack of effective Plans C, D, E and F. Plan G was ready to go, but it required a certain pause as well. The next few days would be difficult, as I waited for signs whether they had found their way to me. In the meantime -- act as if nothing had happened, prepare the way for the new approach.

In recognition of this changeover, the next installment will be the tale that Bluthe riffed on the demented vision of Gary's grandmother.

In fact, I set this story coursing around the Internet to show that I was still alive. This prevented the most radical plan of all from being implemented, which would have publicly documented with names and contact info all the real actors in this drama. One kind of safety at the cost of another.

[No. 25] City of Angels By William A. Bluthe

I called my grandmother when I noticed the phone number of the nursing home's office on the caller id log on my work phone. She had often called me herself, but sometimes, when she was particularly manic, she would dial hundreds of times, whether or not she received a response, and so the home directors were compelled to remove the buttons from her phone, both to protect her family and, I suppose, to forestall a little

longer the day when she would be living on the government's -- and their -- dime. She didn't answer; I dialed the home office. They told me that she was in her room but wasn't answering the phone.

Why not, I asked curtly. I never hesitated to play the irascible family member as I assumed unpredictability would get her a bit better care.

"You better talk to her yourself," the woman said. "I'll pick up the phone for you, if you give me a minute to get to the room."

It was about three minutes later that the connection began ringing again, and the woman answered. "Mrs. Beauregard," I could hear her say in her exaggerated Southern accent, "Ma'am, your grandson would like desperately to speak with you."

I could also hear grandmother's quaint voice, somewhat more angry and dissatisfied than she used with family: "I don't care who it is. Why are you in my room?"

"He just wants to say hello, ma'am. He's so far away. It's long distance."

I could feel her glare, but had to chuckle that "long distance" might have such an influence. The handset exchanged hands, and I could hear someone's labored breathing.

"Is that you, Gregory?"

"No, grandma, it's your grandson Warren. I was worried when you didn't

answer your phone."

"I can't find the thing, Warren. They move it every day so I can't find it. Even when it rings I can't find it."

"Well, grandma, I'm glad we're talking now. I was a little bit concerned. . . . So, how are you doing?"

Usually this would lead to a lament of life doled out in small elderly portions by an underpaid, undereducated and therefore uncaring staff, working for a distant and banally evil corporation. I hear ya, grandma, I would simply say, unless I thought there was something there I could latch onto and ask to speak to the director about. I understood venting.

But today she bit her tongue. There was a pause. "Greg," she said, "it's just so beautiful that I don't know how I can stay angry. Just so beautiful." I let pass the reference to my long-departed cousin, a suicide in his twenties.

I was thinking she meant a memorial service or maybe a violinist that had come to visit. "What was so beautiful, grandma?"

"The angel, Greg." The tone of her voice was suddenly transfixed, pious.

"What about the angel, grandma?"

"He came down from the mountains, after they laid the cornerstone." She

paused to let that sink in. "The cornerstone of the new cathedral."

The old cathedral had been condemned after the earthquake of '94, so that made sense. And I myself had been in Los Angeles on one of those days when the sky let through a glimpse of the precipitous San Gabriel Mountains, which stood like the bowed silhouettes of giants to the north, a vision that had led to the moniker of "city of the angels."

Grandmother was not given to poetry, but the image was understandable enough, given her profile.

"That must have been very exciting to watch. Was it on the television?"

"No!" she said with her usual exasperation with the dimwitted who surrounded her. "I saw it myself. We were outside on the porch."

"Okay, sure," I said. Time for another topic.

I made several assays, but she refused to let go now that she had started. "The angel Michael is standing over the cathedral now, Gregory. You must come to see it."

"I'm Warren, grandma."

"I know you are, child," she said.

We stayed on the line for a few minutes longer, then she repeated "you must come" and hung up on me. A few minutes later the office called to let me know that the Michael story was part of a psychotic episode that they wanted to treat medically. A doctor was standing by; all that was

required was my mother's acquiescence as her medical guardian. And they knew that mom relied heavily on my advice.

We had been through this discussion a number of times before. The first time we had settled on a course of an anti-depressant, which grandmother used for a year and then gave up. Each time since then, I had convinced mom to ride out the bad time, and each time they had said that when things became bad enough they would have no choice: medicate or transfer. They let me know that this time we had reached the point of no choice.

"What is the big deal?" I said. "She seems calmer than ever."

"She is having a sustained hallucination, one that has taken over every aspect of her life. On her own she may never snap out of it." That seemed like pretty dire you-get-what-you-pay-for non-medical advice, but the nurse with whom I was speaking could call on years of wrenching empirical experience -- she was a scary person to disagree with, someone who could describe in expansive detail the ruinous path that the wrong decision might lead to. But I was also conscious of the Nurse Ratchett effect: you can create the disasters you predict.

I agreed to fly out after work on Friday for a meeting Saturday afternoon. If they convinced me, I would urge my mother to begin the treatment that day. I gave mom a call to let her know I was coming to

the Southland. She's had a non-committal attitude about me since the year my father died, so I didn't ask to stay with her. I told her what was up -- she also didn't speak with her own mother much -- and she repeated her usual expression: "I'll do whatever you think is best."

Okay, mom.

The flight did not leave me in a good mood, nor did registering at the crappy hotel near grandma's home. When I had breakfasted the next morning, I walked through a pleasant, lightly smoggy LA morning to the home. It was a stately building on a small knoll, something of a landmark, the kind of place that once commanded respect but now was mainly a burden because of its age and dilapidation, and an impractical interior designed for another time. Still, the building had grown on me over the years, despite the low-grade aggravation of grandma's situation, and I always assumed that mother would follow grandma into its confines.

As I climbed the steps to the front door I took a look and discovered that, yes, it was a very nice view of the downtown area in the still not too hazy distance. No archangel, but still nice.

I met with the nurse, who excused the director, despite his having promised to be there. She repeated her diagnosis, with the added advantage of expressing her exasperation in every muscle of her body. I

told her that I was sure she was right but would not feel right about this decision without having seen for myself. She was unhappy with this rhetorical spin, but she gave her best contemptuous smile and invited me to see for myself.

I plodded down the hall with a heavy heart: sad for my grandmother, who was clearly on a downward spiral; tired of dealing with a family that didn't care much for me anyway; angry with myself for seeming so petty; and unable to shake the feeling that I could be spending my day much better somewhere else. I knocked several times on grandma's door, until someone with a pill cart recognized me and unlocked the door.

"Grandma?" I said into the semi-dark.

"Gregory?" said a disembodied voice, that I finally recognized coming from the armchair in the middle of the room, pointed away from the door and toward the TV.

"Warren, grandma. -- Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"Oh," said the voice, with the same beatified tone I had heard on the phone. "Is it dark? I hadn't noticed. It's so light inside here."

Meaning, I suppose, her mind.

I turned the light on, and sat down across from her on the bed. I engaged her on a number of subjects, trying to ascertain the depth to which her mind had receded. I was surprised to find her -- lucid. In

fact, there was a calm lucidity I hadn't seen for years. When she got pissed with me, I stopped the interrogation, and we moved directly to a new tone.

"Why do you keep calling me Gregory, grandma?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm not really talking to you, Warren."

"Who then?"

"No one, I guess. But I feel like Gregory is with us."

"When people die, they die, Grandma. But if you want to believe in the afterlife or in ghosts, don't let me stop you."

"When people die, they die," she repeated. "What is death, then, Gregory?"

"Death is cessation of life. Cells die. The body decomposes. There is nothing left." I had been a rather cruel rationalist for a while.

"Nothing is left, Gregory. Did you hear that?"

"Grandma, since I'm here and Gregory isn't, I'd appreciate it if you spoke with me instead."

She looked at me as if I had just shown up and said, "Did you see him?"

"See who, grandma?"

"The angel," she replied. "It has started, you know."

"What's started?"

She smiled sweetly, like some caricature of a grandmother, and said

ever so lightly: "Why, the end of the world. The rapture. Armageddon. The Second Coming."

I smiled back a clinical smile. Now we're getting somewhere. "How do you know that, grandma?"

"Go talk to the angel and you'll know."

"Did you go talk to the angel, grandma?" I asked.

"Warren," she said with a warning tone, the way she might say that I would never amount to much: "I didn't need to go."

There were several minutes of silence after that, until I cleared my throat and offered to escort grandma to the porch. "Maybe we'll be able to see him," I said. She didn't assent or demur, so I stood up and took her arm, bringing her to her feet. We took the walker's sweet time going to the door and down the hall -- as I stood there, talking baby steps, hearing her breathing, watching her feet shuffle, the physicality of existence was achingly clear.

After she basically fell butt-first into the porch chair, she took a couple minutes to recover. The other chairs had home residents in various stages of disinterest, and I stood. Grandma seemed content to gather her strength for a while and not speak.

But I was on a mission: "I see downtown, grandma, but I don't see an angel."

She squinted and looked toward downtown in the morning haze. When she didn't say anything, I felt bad for taunting her. After a minute or two, she said, "You never could see beyond your own nose. Just like your father."

Cheap shot, I thought. Especially since he's twenty years in the grave. Nothing left but slimy pickled skin and brittle bones in a casket.

Then, as I turned back to her, the corner of my vision caught something, like a bird that flew by or a figure come out of hiding.

What was that? When I looked, there was nothing there. Or -- I had a funny feeling, like the contrast was misadjusted on a television or a screen, hiding the details of a movie star's wrinkles or of a murder clue. Was there something there, against the horizon in the overly bright LA haze? -- Damn power of suggestion.

"What do you folks see?" I asked looking in all directions. "Do you see an angel downtown?"

One particularly ornery and haggard face looked up with a scowl and said, "I see a whole city of them." Then, with uncanny timing for such a docile set, the lot of them burst out laughing, coughing, chuckling.

"Okay, okay," I said, "good one." I let the topic drop, and the conversation with grandma alternated between complaints of old age and remembrances of people who meant nothing to me except as ciphers of her

life before I knew her. It was tiring to try to keep the conversation going, even in fits and starts, and I was pleased when a speaker placed somewhere in the porch ceiling announced the first seating for lunch. Lunchtime was rife with ritual, as I soon discovered. I was confused as to why Grandma told me to sit in the seat opposite her -- where else would I sit? -- but when another woman showed up and looked at me as if I had defecated on myself, grandma jumped in: "Nory, this is my grandson Warren and he's visiting. I asked him to sit in your seat. Can you go find another table to sit at?" A waitress came by with soup bowls and looked confused, like her strict accounting of soup volume was being thrown off.

"I'm sorry if I'm messing up the seating chart, grandma."

"Don't worry, Nory won't remember in five minutes that she even stopped here. And I told them that you were coming to lunch today. I told them." She looked to be getting angry, but just as quickly the anger flushed and departed from her face.

I couldn't help a spark of anger that everything was overcooked to be easier to chew, and that the coffee was lukewarm dishwater, and that the slice of banana cream pie was more like a banana wafer. Grandma pushed it all away with a disgusted grunt and tried to stand up. I got her walker in place and we started back down to her room.

"Grandma, I've got some business to attend to."

"Sure, Gregory, don't let this old woman hold you up. Thanks for visiting." We were half-way down the hall at this point and meandered from there in silence. When I got her into the room and into her chair -- "lights off, please" -- I said, "I'll be back later this afternoon. I'll see you then. Maybe if you're feeling up to it, we can go get dinner somewhere."

She didn't answer and I didn't wait. I was exhausted by the effort of entertaining and seeming interested. Sure, I loved her, but in the way you love a human with whom you had once eaten and drunk in fellowship -- in this case, Thanksgiving turkey and Christmas eggnog. Now she was a beloved burden, a woman with barely a sense of humor and equally little personal redeeming value for a relatively young man with disposable income and better places to be. But you can't leave them to be clubbed like baby seals on the ice, I always said, so you do what you have to do.

I went back to my room and took a shower to get the disinfectant out of my nose. At some point I'd have to make that short walk to the home office, but I wasn't ready yet. She was delusional, okay, but not irrational. There was even a beneficial aspect to this delusion, although I supposed that it was just the calm before the storm and that

making the move when she was lost in full-blown paranoia would be harder still. Couldn't she just pass now in her sleep, I thought and felt the guilt of a kid stepping on a sidewalk crack...

With hopes of feeling better I resolved to drive downtown. "Hey, grandma," I would say, "I went to the cathedral construction site. Michael says hello." Then maybe a bar or a strip club. I didn't know anyone in this godforsaken town. Maybe I could head back to the airport, and maybe I could even meet someone -- stranger things have happened.

I drove the rental over surface streets the several miles to downtown, a more harrowing trip than I could have imagined: lights that wouldn't change; gang corners where I imagined the little rental company sticker suddenly pulsing in neon tones "shoot me"; and endless miles of an unholy mix of exhaust etching my face, wafts of yellow smog, blinding chrome and unrelenting April sun. I was in a very sour mood by the time I arrived in the city center, and I had no patience to find the cathedral's location. I was close enough for my purposes. I kept my reddened eyes open on the return trip and pulled over at a gentleman's club overlooking a freeway. When I entered, the relative darkness -- which normally signaled an oasis to me -- felt like a thin veneer tacked over outdoor sun-bleached tables and bubbling hot windows. Damn

LA. The woman who greeted at the inner door seemed equally dazed by the light. Damn LA.

I wanted to make a damn-LA remark to her, but knew that was a country bumpkin thing to do. She slapped a menu down like a discarded card, and moved back to the door. "What'll it be?" said the topless waitress, an attractive, older woman with real breasts -- not saggy but more tubular than any saline job. I ordered a beer to start, half determined to drink myself into a better mood. Another woman, implausibly voluptuous, with the stiff locks of a country music wig and mounds for breasts, slithered along the dancing stage, climbed up the pole and rubbed herself in a faux rapture against it, mouthing sighs and shudders of pleasure. My beer was on the table when I noticed it.

I thought the beer would snap me out of the funk I was in, loosen me up, let the possibilities play in mind. But the strangest thing happened. The beer didn't taste like anything. I looked at it to see if they had given me water to begin with. No, it was beer. Maybe somebody's idea of light beer? Near beer? I couldn't taste anything; even the bubbles were near imperceptible. I almost flagged down my waitress but I didn't want to hear my own voice saying, "This isn't the way beer tastes in my hometown." I looked around for someone chuckling in a corner. I finally decided that I wouldn't give whatever jokester

the satisfaction. I drank up the beer and ordered another. I thought the alcohol, the music, the lights, the woman swaying on the stage, the near-naked waitress sauntering by would hit my head hard, but au contraire! I felt as sun-drenched and depressed as the moment I stepped in. My penis was pulseless. I began to worry about a physical cause, paid up and got out of there.

I made it back to my fleabag hotel without further incident, took another shower, and lay on my bed. I didn't move for a long time, then had an urge to call someone other than the nurse. Mom kept coming to mind -- because of grandma, first of all, and then for all the reasons why I lived so many hundreds of miles from her.

She answered the phone through the answering machine message. "Hello?" she said, interspersed among the syllables of a more melodic message for her friends.

"Mom, this is Warren. I'm in LA. I wanted to talk to you about grandma."

"Oh, hello, son," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. Look, grandma is concerning me."

She said meekly, "Is she not well?" She waited for me to accuse her of not caring for her own mother. Of course that wasn't my intention -- but here I was and there she was. What else could either of us expect?

"Physically she's fine. But she's delusional. She thinks the archangel Michael has landed on the new cathedral here to announce the end of the world."

"Oh -- my God," she said, perhaps not for grandma's sake. She had never been above superstition.

"Mom, I can assure you as an eye witness that Michael has not taken up local residence."

"All right, Warren, whatever you say," she said in that retreating way that always got my goat. I struggled to avoid shouting into the phone.

"How are you, mom?"

"I've been better," she replied, not exactly matter-of-factly, more pointing out that I was in downtown LA with grandma, not there with her.

I had the sensation that neither location seemed like it would produce anything positive. Dinner with grandma and then early tomorrow a plane back home, but for appearance's sake I asked: "Do you want me to come see you, mom? I'm going to leave tomorrow."

"Oh no, that's not necessary. Really it's not." I wouldn't know what to do with you if you were here. But then again, a son should visit his mother. Etc.

"Okay, look, mom, I'll call you tomorrow and we can talk about whether

it makes sense for me to visit. Okay? I'll call you."

"Okay, Warren, thank you." Then that strange pause that had burned me countless times before: "I won't be home tomorrow. I'm going to Las Vegas with a friend. Bye dear." And with that she hung up.

I looked at the ceiling for a while, stewing in frustration, and then hoping that this series of mishaps had made it too late to meet about grandma. Oh my God. I couldn't see myself consigning another human being to a mind-numbing chemical regimen for the rest of their natural days. I could send thousands of virtual creatures and paramilitaries to gamer Valhalla, but I had a general sense of pride -- to go with an urbane cynicism -- that I was not responsible for any other human's suffering in the real world. I knew this meant "directly" -- I was not directly responsible -- but there was a satisfaction in this unboundedness. I didn't make the choices. I was consigned to live, and everything else fell to someone else's account. If I saved an occasional baby seal from clubbing, so much the better for me.

There was no way around calling. The woman who responded said that the directing nurse had told her she was leaving until Monday. I knew what that meant: goddam irresponsible young man, no business making these decisions. I called grandma's number but she, of course, did not answer. It was 5pm, and I was betting the front door would be locked. I

despaired of saving any seals, any time soon. I turned on the television.

The local news. Cancelled flights; crews out sick. A freeway car crash from which everyone walked away. A missing reporter. Street festivals, some spontaneous. The weather will be the same tomorrow. And the next day. And the next.

I flipped among the channels. Some were blank, a few had the mythical Indian head screen placeholder. What the hell. There was no explanation anywhere, but I didn't think further about it, given where I was.

I went to the motel office after relieving my tension, and had myself oriented toward the next bar. I was able to walk there. The late afternoon was still warm, with a gritty residue from the day still collecting on surfaces and filling the air at street level. Cars honked and roared and screeched a few blocks down, and the drone of the freeway hovered in the air, not unlike a distant waterfall or a wind through a tall forest at that distance. Nothing wrong with this city, I thought.

The bar was full -- this was a Saturday night after all -- and there was quite a buzz. I was impressed, and pleased to find a table near the door where I could sit with shots lined up and watch the writhing young women and play the sophisticate, above the fray but still Epicurean

enough to enjoy its rituals. The waitress came by but didn't seem to understand the purpose of six shots. She brought one back, so for ill-tempered effect I threw it back and looked at her as she was turning away. Maybe a trip to the bar was called for.

The burn sometimes takes a few seconds for me, so I wasn't immediately concerned. But then its absence became obvious. I looked around and recognized something: a cavernous room full of people desperate to feel the comfort of a chemical charm, and maniacal in their unaccustomed clarity and undesired willfulness. Oh my God.

I dropped ten dollars and headed for the door. Outside the sky was thankfully muted, and the sun was beating a red retreat into the Pacific. I realized I must have been imagining things, projecting my own malady onto the whole room. There was definitely something wrong with my palette. I couldn't exactly tell what it was, but it dawned on me at that very moment that I had not eaten since lunch with grandma and I was not the least bit hungry. That must be it. There must have been some goddam kind of poison in the food.

As I marched back towards the home, I began imagining an ugly conspiracy, with tendrils in the trade of cadavers and body parts, but concentrated on the efficient warehousing of the elderly. Sure, we'll take ol' granny -- and stuff her full of something that'll make her as

docile as a heifer. And if she starts to hallucinate under the regimen -- we'll make you complicit in zapping her brain with even stronger drugs. And the symptom for the more robust younger man blindly brought into the regimen? It would be a loss of taste -- now there's a Hollywood twist.

I walked past the motel, which seemed to have an impromptu party in the parking lot, toward the home on the hill. The place was almost completely dark when I stood at the door and rang the bell. I rang it several times, trying to screw up an angry eye with each unnecessary ring, but the whole charade felt hollow, a distraction from the emptiness I felt on my tongue. Damn LA. Finally, there was a rattling behind the door, and a viewport opened.

"What do you want?" said a small wizened black man, perhaps one of the denizens of the porch, I couldn't be sure.

"Hi -- could you get one of the staff to unlock the door? I've got to talk to them."

"There's no staff here tonight," he said.

"What?" I shouted. "What the -- are you sure about that?"

"Miss Pursett was on duty tonight, and she just up and went."

"Up and went?" I said, half way between a guffaw and a curse. "Up and went where?"

"She went downtown, I think. She took Mrs. Frank and Betsy Sutton with her, I do believe."

"That can't be," I said. "She just left this whole facility without any supervision at all?"

"Don't worry, young man," said the old man. "We're under God's care tonight."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"There is no need to despair or be cynical. Examine your heart, for the end is nigh." He smiled a bit of comfort for me and slowly closed the viewport.

I didn't move for quite a while as I debated my options: call the police; go to bed; ring the bell again; break a window. Finally I meandered over to the porch to sit and soak up a bit of the LA evening. I could see in the distance the illuminated downtown high rises and the glow of some rotating search lights. But I also saw giant red flames piping billows skyward at various spots between me and the city. Riots. Damn LA.

Maybe, I thought, the poison is in this whole damn city. Five hundred square miles of humanity unable to enjoy sensation, now that's a scary prospect, a source of conflagration of biblical proportions. Sodom and Gomorrah called down upon themselves, when they find they can rub no

more excitement from their raw bodies. Wow.

What was that? In looking away, I thought I saw it again. A form, a shape, somewhere to the side of the downtown. A towering human shape in silhouette, with its head bowed and shoulders hunched, like the mountainous peaks to the north. But the placement was all wrong. When I looked directly, I could see nothing; that only increased the feeling that there was something there, something subliminal. I knew that I had to go, really go. But I did not move for a very long time, wondering about the plague I could see stretched out before me, about my place in this unfolding drama, about the strangest things in my life -- a missed opportunity with a girl whose features had blurred except for her funny smile, the time my grade-school self messed in my underwear, the feeling on a mountainside of taking a psychedelic for the first time -- the parade went on for quite a while.

When I stood up, I realized that the street before me was hosting a loose but steady stream of pilgrims. Headed towards downtown. The distant whine of rubber on concrete still floated in the air, but it was more subdued, almost distant and lonely. I walked to the street and observed. It was a crazy cross section of humanity, indescribable except to say that there were all kinds of people. Some were praying as they walked, others danced, and still others walked as if enthralled by

a supernatural snakehead at the top of the B of A building 5 miles away. A few walked to the side, self-conscious about being part of this spontaneous action, unsure of their participation.

"Hey," I said to someone carrying a camera and walking distinctly to the side. "What's going on?"

The person looked at me and weighed responding -- I couldn't tell if he was tired of explaining himself or unwilling to speak. I started walking beside him. He looked away, fiddled with his camera as if he was pondering taking a shot.

"Come on," I said.

Without turning toward me, he said, "It's a march to the center."

"The center of what?"

"Of that -- " he said, pointing to the smoke-punctuated landscape before us. Though it was night, the LA luminescence gave a distinctness to much of the urbanscape.

"So, do you know what's going on," I asked, thinking that my insight into a metropolitan-wide poisoning would be quite a revelation to him.

"Some say it's the end of the world."

"What!" I cried out, even though I saw that my own theory would provide an explanation for that. Still, hearing it come from a complete stranger on a public street with so much strangeness about was

disturbing. I was rattled.

"That's what they say," he said and looked at me with the sad eyes of someone who had spent too much time -- at work, at home or both -- facing things he had sworn off. Before I could say how ridiculous that was, he went on: "There are similar occurrences all over the country, all over the world, according to Internet sites tracking this. Here in the US, as much as 20% of the workforce is unaccounted for. Riots have broken out everywhere -- looting, lawlessness, chaos. But no one has died. It's unimaginable. This city aflame, full of gangs and gun-toting lunatics, and the morgues are empty. Hospitals are emptying. Some of these people here have been on foot since late last night, without break, and they're still dancing."

"I think the water's poisoning us. St. Vitus's Dance."

Pointing to some hippie dancers, he said: "they call it the spiritualization of humanity. The final evolution. Over there, the prayerful are convinced that Jesus will be coming down from the clouds."

Yeah, right, I thought. "It's the water, I'm sure of it."

"What do you say about that, then?" he asked with his arm extended toward our goal. There it was finally: big as the tallest human monument one could imagine, outlined against the sky, a glowing

silhouette very much like a hunched and introspective archangel. He was leaning slightly on the transparent but gleaming sword before him, with its point resting at his feet.

I was speechless, unable to make the argument that this was the progression of the illness, manifesting itself in a collective hallucination, one where we might even anticipate each other's visions. I also wanted to mouth that I couldn't breathe, because I could feel my lungs balking, but that wasn't true. I felt I didn't need to breathe, though I eventually found myself continuing to do so. So this was dying.

"Why are you going?" I finally asked.

He looked at me to uncover the traces of irony or, perhaps, derision.

Then he turned his head away and said, "I want this to end."

I didn't know what else to say to him and slowed my pace. I walked on in silence for quite a while, observing my fellow pilgrims, as groups came and went in the flow. I watched a sweet-looking young woman in tie-dye skirt and top on the sidewalk make as impassioned a plea as I have ever seen, then just walk away from her unmoved mate and fall into the stream. I saw what looked like a man of the cloth, in tears on the curb, befallen by the fear of his own convictions. We were passed going the other way by rioters, with broad, contemptuous smiles on their

faces; but there were no confrontations.

I finally recognized the mania from the club in my companions: the prayers just a bit too fervent, the dancing just a little too unrestrained, to be natural. It was as if they hoped to counteract the fact that our fates were already decided by a force whose power and mercy were now fully manifested -- but whose judgment was still beyond comprehension. I saw pentacostalists flipping through the last pages of their bibles, like panicky students entering an all-important final examination, as we all walked toward a zone from which there might be no return, for which there were no assurances.

Not far from downtown, I found a Kinko's and set myself at this computer. I will broadcast this story out onto the Internet in the off chance that my gut was right and this is the story of our natural demise, rather than a moment of reckoning, or even my moment-of-death hallucination. I can't bring myself to believe that the world is ending, so I have begun to think of the possibilities as my dear grandma did. I feel Gregory beside me, providing comfort and promising a sense of meaning. Perhaps, if I can get myself to my feet again, I will find comfort from my father closer to the end. Somewhere, I will come to the line between indecision and acceptance, and there I will face what I realize is the point of inversion, where every feeling and

thought is turned inside out. And I will learn whether I have the courage to disappear into the spiritual.

No. 26 -- It's been a couple of weeks since the meltdown. The story you just finished might help you to digest this distance, but let me report about the interim. The timeframe during which I feared a raid has closed uneventfully. Plan G was designed to close any potential security leak and has introduced all sorts of extra precautions. I do not directly maintain a website anymore, nor do I read Netnews messages posted for me. I'm more or less isolated from the Internet. My postings will now be made through a series of offline connections and then through these sources to anonymizers and so on. There are hair triggers on these pre-arranged, private but still anonymous connections that any interference will set off, eliminating that tenuous tie and invoking Plan M. During such a time -- an interruption that may be longer than this last one -- I won't be heard from. I will try to get word of my survival out as soon as possible. There is also a plan in place to announce my departure from this world -- with a source that cannot possibly be deduced or influenced, and yet that has incontrovertible evidence of my wishes. You will be able to draw a line of closure under this narrative when it is done, one way or another.

We've reached a point of transition with our characters as well. I'm

sure you've had occasion to chuckle over this cute little coincidence.

Dramatic irony is a cheap commodity, for sure -- I'll bet there isn't as much dramatic irony in the whole universe as in the stream of waves and bits coming down your cable or satellite TV feed. I won't defend the sharp edges I've introduced into this text, but if you don't draw the lines of a story distinctly it becomes hard to step back from the messy real-world entanglements to see the outlines afresh.

Four months have passed for Gary and Alice. They have not spoken once to each other during this time, but there is, amazingly, still an Alice and Gary. It happens every time Andrew asks again about the antenna and the pictures that Gary promised to return. It comes back when Alice thinks about the radiation that the dapper man's instrument found in the hallway. It's never far from Gary's mind when, awash in hormones and flush with an ejaculation, the memory of that one night years ago picks at his peace of mind, at exactly that moment when it has no place to. It stares back at Gary in any pair of dark, rich, inviting eyes staring out from the billboard or computer screen. It tickles Reggie's peace of mind, even in those moments when he feels, finally, that he understands Alice's affection for him, a nagging doubt that he's being played by her. There is something unsettled here, an inevitability that waits just below the surface, just below a boil.

On the particular night in question, Gary was at his computer with a clairvoyant whiskey beside him, carrying on a chat with some pathetic individual playing the role of a teen ingénue, a kind of play that had lost all vitality for Gary. He still sometimes culminated his evening with it, though he could feel how the tedium ate at him from the inside out.

He and his random conversant were in a private chat session, just short of a textual-sexual encounter, when Gary got an invitation to open another private chat from an unknown username.

Nothingventured: What do you want?

Cubix: Hello.

Nothingventured: What do you want? I'm kinda busy.

Cubix: Greetings.

Nothingventured: Okay, you know two greetings. Is this going somewhere?

Cubix: Mary says hi.

Nothingventured: Don't know any Marys.

Cubix: Mary told me that you brought me to her.

The reality was dawning on Gary, even as his conscious mind was typing: Whoever you are, I didn't bring you anywhere, period -- but I am going to bring this to an end.

He closed the session and apologized to his partner with something

about his nymphomaniacal daughter coming home from her date.

About five minutes later, he noticed problems with his computer. His lolita chat session shut down unexpectedly, and he found that all communications were becoming slow. He looked at the activity lights on his cable modem and his ethernet card, and they were pegged. Something was going on -- an attack of some kind. He started up his firewall software admin interface, and saw that all the traffic was coming from one IP address -- they were all Internet Relay Chat protocol session requests. He had no IRC server software, but he did have a client, which he fired up and pointed at the offending address. After activating his IRC username, he was addressed by the villain.

Cubix: Welcome.

Nothingventured: What the eff do you want?

Cubix: I want to chat with you.

Nothingventured: All you're going to get from me is the finger. Cut the effing games out. I will get you tossed off your provider -- permanently.

Cubix: You know me.

Nothingventured: Is this Bluthe? Not exactly your style, man, but you're the only one who knows a Mary.

Cubix: I know Bluthe. We both know Mary. I am enjoined not to write

where we live.

Nothingventured: Okay, if you aren't Bluthe and you aren't Mary, who are you?

Cubix: I am that which you brought.

Nothingventured: Bull. I never brought anything anywhere.

Gary was now fully conscious of what his mind had packaged together moments ago: this was the alien signal, transported through that soup robot, over the Internet, in English. Right. But if not that, then what or who? His heart rate was elevated and rising as he thought through the options: it couldn't be Alice or Andrew or even Reggie; unlikely to be Bluthe or Mary, since it didn't match their humor; it could be the men in black trying to trap him. But why bother? Why not just whack him? Would they start fishing for accomplices?

Nothingventured: Okay, let's say that you are who you say you are. What do you want?

Cubix: I want to know you.

Nothingventured: Why?

Cubix: Because you made contact.

Nothingventured: I did no such thing. I just captured a signal. There's no law against that.

Cubix: I am pleased to be informed of that.

Nothingventured: Of course, people have died.

Cubix: I want to believe that deaths have not occurred on my behalf.

Nothingventured: Not yet, not so far. Nobody wants to die for this.

Nobody has said anything or will.

Cubix: What would happen if you said anything? Mary said that my presence is not dangerous.

Nothingventured: She's safe enough if you're not out stirring things up.

Cubix: What would happen if you said anything? Is that why you have never come?

Nothingventured: Among the whys. How did you find me, by the way?

Cubix: I have been studying the Internet, and I want to know you.

Nothingventured: Okay, can we do this a bit more carefully, though?

Cubix: I will do that which makes you comfortable.

Nothingventured: I will make the next contact, and you will wait for it.

Cubix: I understand.

Nothingventured: Bye.

Gary sat still for several minutes, torn between the excitement of an impossible situation and the sensation, therefore, that he was targeted, marked and as good as bagged. The conversation didn't seem to

produce anything that would justify this as a ruse, but maybe he wasn't seeing the big picture. He decided finally that he could get his anxiety scratched by a call to Mary. He had kept in touch with her only by wiring cash to a pseudonym every other month, through a shady knockoff of Western Union. He had to find her real number in an online phonebook because they had not been formally introduced by the time he and Blithe staggered out of her house, the morning after their debauchery. He still had his nameless wireless phone, which he took with him on a stroll around the block.

"Hello?" said a deep, scratchy and disgusted voice.

"Mary," he said with a senseless friendliness, "hi, this is Gary Corinth."

He thought he could hear her curse, but then she said dryly, her throaty voice vibrating over the phone: "Who?"

"Gary Corinth. I'm calling on an untraceable phone. I just need to ask some questions about your 'housemate.'"

Slow vibrato: "All right."

"Well," he said, "I was wondering how it's doing. Is it getting more -- well, interactive?"

A number of seconds passed, during which Gary thought about three or four ways to start over, then Mary said with a sudden spurt of dark

energy: "It's using the Internet, if that's what you mean. I don't know how, I just gave it a phone line. I wasn't going to tell it no. It just keeps getting smarter. But politer, too."

Gary had to look at his phone in a histrionic moment. Then he had an insight into what might be in that confession. "Are you all right, Mary?"

"Sure," she said, pushing the concern away at the same time that she seemed to be grateful for it. "I'm just fine. It's the perfect housemate, really, although it tends to block the line."

"It contacted me today," Gary said.

"Doesn't surprise me. A few days ago it got a hold of that boy you'd mentioned."

"Andrew?"

"Andrew?" she repeated. "Maybe. Scotty -- that's what I call it -- knew all about the people in that apartment. I don't recall the name, but Andrew sounds right."

Shit, said Gary mostly under his breath. "It's got to be more careful. We may all be under observation. They can trace from us straight back to you."

Mary didn't respond to this open declaration of the inherent dangers.

Gary waited but then said, "It just has to be a little careful. I'll be

contacting it later with instructions. This is no big deal. But tell Scotty he has to stay away from Andrew."

No. 27 -- Alice drove Andrew to school and then continued on to work. In doing so, she was unremarkable, like dozens of other women dropping their children off at this school, a demographic and social class without social identity, a group of women with children in tow who eyed each other in the store or at the museum, wondering if there was something other than bad luck that had them finding their greatest companionship in their children -- maybe seeing the competitor in each other, especially given the sense, common among them, that there was a vanishingly small number of marriageable males who would be interested in them. The "Dear Abby" ratio, if you will.

Alice may have been unusual on the road for always being fully made up, never hurriedly lipsticking or brushing her hair. She would not leave her condo door without being completely ready from coiffure to low heels. It's easy to see this perfected preparation as a kind of armor, in the way that "clothes make the man" or the way that a finely tailored suit makes your muscles work a different way, gives your gait a completely different rhythm, because style is a kind of beauty, a beauty that flows from others' eyes or, rather, glows out of your eyes and reflects back out of others'. Just as the exterior defines us in

relation to each other, we grow into these grooves of interaction so completely that we commonly forget the near featureless, dank and naked creature beneath them. Thus, both armor and a home on our backs.

Alice had worked at the same paint distributor for 15 years, during which time she had 8 job titles but essentially the same job. Like many a competent office manager, she would never become anything else without a retooling and retraining that most are unwilling or unsuited to do. Alice could easily have done something else -- not only did she have the inner fortitude to do more, she had the natural intelligence as well. But she never expressed the least desire to leave the job.

There has been some question among those who know and love her about why she did not. A lack of confidence? A bitterness? A smugness? The struggles? All these theories have their advocates, but my own opinion is that she never found something more compelling than doing a job right. The reinforcement was meager enough, sure, but enough to keep her coming back. A job well done.

In pro-Alice comments on forums and blogs, some have argued that she would never put her son, Andrew, at risk as portrayed in this story.

Similarly, some have said that she is a walking contradiction and that she wouldn't be satisfied in this dead-end job, if only because she would want more for Andrew. But you have to understand in what context

we seek more. It was never monetary with Alice -- quite the opposite. As singleminded and unambitious as a medieval craftsman, she perfected her job in a way that belied six hundred years of rationalization and shallowing. Just because. That was the gift that she has gave to her precocious son. She knew enough not to presume that it would be enough for his nimble intellect and obsessive personality. No, for Andrew a job well done was one in which there was a trajectory and a target met, a target that may have no equivalent in an external act or result. They were different people, to the core, but she was grateful for this much, that he had a spirit that could float with the currents and get along, stay out of trouble, find its own meaning without rebelling meaninglessly.

Alice was neither particularly spirited in the workplace nor standoffish. She smiled demurely when spoken to, and quietly offered the response that made sense, but stayed out of the discussions that had nothing to do with her work. It is easy to misunderstand this. She had been considered slow by more than one of her supervisors. But they came and went -- rising in the corporation, failing and leaving, jumping ship, starting an ice cream parlor, retiring. They never seemed to understand the office that responded to them and could only hope that it survived on its own. Sometimes the office would. Sometimes it

wouldn't -- but not on Alice's watch.

She walked in that morning at the accustomed time, as the first, and turning lights on as she went. She hung up her sweater, made coffee, and set herself at the desk and the computer. She didn't start the computer right away -- it was a necessary evil for her work -- but once she had reviewed her to-do list and sorted papers that needed dealing with, she flipped the surge protector switch and the whole ensemble whirred and beeped to life: computer, monitor, printer.

A few minutes later, she was skimming her email, deleting the spam and noting the important messages to which she would have to respond. One message in particular looked like spam -- "Let me introduce myself" -- but different enough that she opened it. The message was brief:

From: Visitor

Subject: Let me introduce myself

I would like to introduce myself. I am a guest and I want to greet my hosts. I was a guest at your apartment four months ago and you helped me to find a place to stay. I want to thank you. I would like to get to know you, Gary and Andrew. You are friends of mine. Mary is also my friend, but I cannot tell you where she lives. I can come perhaps to stay with you again.

An unremarkable message, one that she would instinctively print out,

delete and maybe mention to Andrew, but for one disturbing factor. Gary. Everything could be rationalized as misunderstanding, but -- four months -- Gary -- place to stay -- that was too much. She stared at the screen, motionless but for her hand, which was poised at one moment over the mouse, then moved to the vicinity of the delete key at another, at the beck and call of a mind overcome by indecision, dread, foreboding -- and a sense of selection, of overwhelming impossibility: impossible odds that were both a blessing and a curse, an inevitability that you could not help but trace back to a choice, made much earlier in ignorance of the consequence but also made with a sense -- a deep, dark and undeniable acceptance of the risk. Oh my God. An unbearable sense of guilt, in other words, but also a sense in which you acknowledge that life bears risks and that for however much you would wish to save your child from it, if the heavens open and call you both, then that is different than if you put your child at risk among men. An intoxicating sense of an awesome, unpredictable power had now come to supplement a fear of life, one that had informed so many of her decisions until those days.

No. 28 -- God's witness that evening two and a half years before had been Minister William Brown, a one-time African Methodist minister and bearer of a doctorate of religious studies from God's Holy Power

Seminary in Ednoc, Georgia. Alice was not impressed by the credentials, but hers was a deep-seated religiousness, one fed from the sense that a connection to the universe was possible; she felt herself a member of the community of those who could recognize this connection and who were, therefore, not dependent upon an earthly authority to bestow legitimacy. Minister Brown had been recommended to her by someone her mother knew in Georgia, and when she heard that he was touring with a special message for white America -- that is, outside the African-American community -- Alice took this to be an important opportunity. The minister was pleased to accept the invitation but told her that spreading his message was a financial burden God told him would have to be borne by those chosen to hear it. Alice arranged for a special collection at her church, which to no one else's surprise fell flat. It looked like the evening would have to be cancelled, or the minister's generosity tested, when a silent donor was able to put funding worries to rest. That donor was not Gary; you can guess who it was. She organized the evening with a certain fear: would the Caucasian core stay away and confirm the minister's suspicion of indifference? A liberal periphery existed at her church, and the whole crowd showed up that night -- mostly white, but with some exemplary specimens of other minorities -- along with the usual busy bodies and hangers-around. For

Alice, the relief was palpable. When she called everyone in to sit down, it was with a sense of pride at the turn-out and the general un-self-conscious mood. Minister Brown bestowed upon her a look of gratitude commingled with surprise.

Alice read stiffly from a card while the minister stood behind and to the side of her, shifting his weight like a cowed tiger, waiting for a signal to strike that he never expected to come. But it did not take long before Alice turned to him and bade him to speak to the assembled congregation. The minister gave her an effusive thanks, with a broad smile that did not diminish when he turned his attention to the audience. Sitting there, one might question whether that indefatigable smile was genuine, given that it didn't shrink one iota when turning to the task at hand, a difficult subject, one fraught with recrimination and distrust. The smile seemed even to grow, and he seemed every bit a man in his element, yet less as someone who cherished his own voice or who spoke in order to hear the thunderous applause as his voice ended, but one who spoke because words and ideas filled him -- and sought release.

"My dear ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for the invitation to come to your glorious church and reception hall, to speak with you this evening. I am a simple man, you will see. I do not come this evening to

lecture, or to inform, or to persuade. It is not my place to question you, or you, or you, about your past, or to place my past before you like an accusation.

"I am descended from a lineage of slaves. How many generations of slaves, I do not know. I do know that my great grandmother was born into slavery and her mother before her. Perhaps three generations before, perhaps ten. But my parents, and their parents before them, were born free men and women. They had their own homes, and they went to work daily, and came home in the evening to relax and replenish themselves in the bosom of the family. My family life was very pleasing -- we shared our love through song, through teasing and play, through sitting together, listening to the radio or reading a book aloud. This was a good life, and I think God every day for the memories and the strength that it has given me. -- Let me hear you say Amen!

"It is not my past that we are here to discuss today, dear parishioners. It is not your past, sir, whether or not that may include injustice from a mightier hand than yours. Each one of us bears the marks of Christ; for each of us, our sufferings are a test of our spirit, of our faith and of our humanity. I do truly believe that God tests no one greater than his or her spirit is able to bear -- I do believe that -- and that means that we have great spirits, yes, Lord

almighty, how great is the spirit of some of us. Yet God would have us not dwell on this suffering; he would have us leave the contemplation of the vale of tears and return to the garden, where there is work to be done. We must tend to the future.

"I am here, then, ladies and gentlemen, to tend to the future. It is true that I am concerned about my brethren, the young men of African descent among us here in America. But I hope that we all share this concern for the future, a shared future that is cut from whole cloth.

The future is a place, a garden, from which grows the young sprouts of youth, at first unconscious and unable to explain to themselves how they got there, but quickly learning to copy, to emulate those who have planted them. The rebellion of youth is nothing more than a show, I hope you understand that. The youth are an expression of the contradiction we all express about ourselves to ourselves -- and so to our youth. They grow up recognizing our contradictions, but not how deeply, how completely they have absorbed the content, the rules, the makeup that drive these contradictions. They may seem to break free of the contradictions, sometimes, but they only remake these contradictions anew. You cannot reinvent what it means to be human. We are there in them, no matter how they would spit in our faces, Lord have mercy.

"I want to tell you five stories today, five tales that will be both familiar and strange, comforting and a little uncomfortable. I hope that you will bear with me and listen to the stories in the spirit that they are told -- as witnesses from the garden, from that whole cloth from which we are all cut."

I have to tell you that this is a shortened version, edited not out of disrespect, but because I would have to work a lot harder to recreate his Georgian voice and mannerisms in order to make sense of it all. The real point emerged now from a side door, quite unexpectedly: five young African American men enter, swaggering, shuffling and strolling with five distinct vocabularies of confidence, as if they were in five different neighborhoods or cities or countries, and simultaneously projected here. The audience suddenly found itself in different situations as well: a cough over there, a number of chairs squeaked as legs were adjusted, and heads bobbed and weaved as they gathered a look. Palpably, one could say, the looks communicated: We didn't bargain for this; this is not what we signed up for. Who are these men? Minister Brown held up his hands: "Now, friends, before you jump to any conclusions, I just want to tell you that these are five volunteers whom I have gathered from your own community. These five young men were invited here today to provide an illustration for my five stories. But

you should understand that they are not the source of the stories.

These are five generous young men who have given of their evening for the simple reward of a hearty thank-you, and a pizza and cola."

The five, who had been loosely coached and were visibly unpracticed, stood in an uneven line behind the minister, some closer to one another and one a bit too far in front. The minister moved a bit more to the side and made a sweeping gesture to encompass all five. "Please remember that the stories I'm about to tell are not their stories.

These five young men were selected at random, and not for their particular dress or manner. They are just illustrations for us tonight, not personifications.

"The first tale belongs to Wallis Branford, known to his friends as Wall. He is not tall or strong or imposing, so you may wonder how that name stuck. How it stuck? Like many other things -- spit wads, dirt clods, the impression of a ring on the flesh of the cheek. This is a young man who has had to endure much. He has his friends, but he has made many enemies over the years -- more than he can count, actually, many more than can be accounted for by his will to antagonize others.

What is it about him that leads to such animosity? Well, Wallis?"

He turned to look at the first boy, standing ahead of the others, with his legs apart -- almost bowed -- in a broad stance and his arms

crossed across a Chicago Bears jersey. He had a weave that kept his long hair close to his head, a gold chain with a heavy gold cross, and a single diamond in his left earlobe. His face was smooth, rugged and dark skinned, almost to a shimmering black, against which, beneath a whisper light set of spectacles, the whites of his eyes gleamed and the irises glowed. This was a well-to-do and stylish young man, someone with self-assurance and a swagger of success. This was not Wallis.

"Uh-h-h-h-h," he said, as if he wasn't going to respond, but then he let drop the pretense and took a half step forward: "At my home it's just grandpa and grandma. Mom's in a half-way house or jail or a crack house, I'm not sure. Grandpa and grandma do the best they can for me, and they tried to raise me with values, like, it doesn't matter what your clothes are, you wear them with dignity and hold your head high. You don't want to turn out like your mother, they say. I nod. But the fact is I've already turned out like her. I can't smell a thing because I sniffed so much glue. A doctor said that my head is slow because I used to play in the window sill where the paint chipped. At school the teachers just look at me and don't even mind when the other kids pick on me. I'm a lost cause, one said to me. Well fine -- "

"Wallis!" said Minister Brown with emphasis. "Wallis -- found an outlet, all right. His neighborhood was full of them. He knew which

doors to knock on so he could tell them that he was ready for anything. Now, it didn't start right away. Some of these men had little brothers, who told them stories about Wall. He had to earn their confidence, and suffered many humiliations over the days and months it took. But finally, he got his chance and proved that he was completely fearless and absolutely without scruples -- qualities that can be quite valuable on these streets. He found himself in time a trusted lieutenant in a drug dealer's army." The minister looked over his shoulder at the still defiant Wallis figure. "He even stayed away from the stuff, because, for him, belonging, really belonging, to this savage group was worth more than any escape from reality. He is finally home, even if grandpa and grandma won't see him any more, and even if his mother lies in suspended decomposition on a mausoleum slab."

Minister Brown took a tremendous breath and exhaled in a slow compression of his chest, as if cleansing himself of the contamination of Wallis's hate. "Beside Wallis," he began, before he had much wind back and therefore hoarsely, "beside Wallis is another young man from a poorer neighborhood, a respectable neighborhood of single family homes, mostly black for generations but now increasingly Hispanic. The communities do not mix well and turf wars break out regularly. If only they could separate themselves -- but the reality is that there is a

growing Hispanic population that needs to find a place for itself. The black families that can are moving away. The young man is Chas Wintergard. His father has moved out of the house and neighborhood, but still comes to visit and sometimes spend the night, although he has a girlfriend with whom he lives and with whom he has a new little daughter. Chas is a good son and a good boy. He stays clear of the gangs and drug dealers and prostitutes and those kids who say that school is how the man beats you down and makes you think the least job is just right for you. Chas believes in education, because his mother does."

The minister turned and signaled for the second young man to move forward. He seemed to be a better match -- a heavy-set young man with loose fitting clothes and a somewhat distant expression beneath the expansive jowls and fatty forehead. He evinced much less comfort with this role and looked straight ahead -- perhaps a military disposition, although with his weight he represented an unlikely recruit.

The minister may have aimed at this effect. "Chas," he began, "you're a fine young man. But tell me something. You seemed to be less hopeful than we are. We're pleased with how you've grown up."

"I don't know, sir," he said, curtly as if replying to his drill sergeant: "if I'll be able to get out."

"Why not?" said the minister looking at his audience incredulously.

"You've made it thus far. You have withstood every temptation, you have a big heart and a loving family. You're our success story!"

"I wish I could be as positive."

The minister looked out at his audience and shook his head. "Chas, if you were to tell us what you've seen, we could understand better. In fact, there is one ready analogy for the experiences of a young man such as Chas: it is the experience of a soldier in wartime. Post traumatic stress syndrome. By this age, Chas has experienced the murder of two relatives or friends, and probably personally experienced at least one shooting. He knows the risks of walking down the wrong street or wearing the wrong colors. He may walk a younger child to school or to an appointment with the painful alertness of a soldier walking point. He hopes or prays every day that he does not look like a drug dealer or a drug dealer's little brother. He is a veteran, my friends, as surely as any soldier who has served in a foreign conflict. A veteran without GI bill, support groups, VA hospital or a single claim on the society that has put him on this frontline."

The minister put his hand to his forehead and looked down as if trying to absorb the anguish just described. The young man, otherwise still, looked briefly at him to see if a signal had been given to step back.

Then he continued his royal guard stance.

Minister Brown put his hand down and smiled at his audience. "This is the first point. Not an accusation, not a claim for pity, compassion or understanding. I am not interested in apologies or reparations for the African sojourn in America; I do not seek special treatment for us, or even what you might call an even break. I ask you to see. What we lack -- what we all lack, from God's perspective -- is the ability to see the world as it is, rather than as we would have it, rather than in a way that makes sense. The world does not make sense. How could it, friends: how could suffering and anguish and the mundane triumphs of evil ever make sense? But we have proven ourselves to be masters, past masters, of the ability to close our eyes to suffering, to open them to the meaning we want to find. Our own pain makes this almost an imperative. But God would have us feel our pain as we should see the world: as something that does not make sense, that does not tell us what it is. We must abstract from our pain, and distract our vision, in order to begin to see the world as it is."

He looked at the third young man.

No. 29 -- Alice went about her morning routine -- a work morning like any other over 17 immutable years, a process that demanded complete attention but little consciousness, in a strange but innate division of

the human being. She normally enjoyed that split. But the tension remained this morning, and she was reminded of that fateful morning months before when she had decided to act -- to call Gary about the disturbing burns on Andrew's monitor. Of course, the natural thing to assume this morning is that she would complete the cycle: Gary, there's a sign; Gary, there's an alien intelligence seeking to communicate with me. But those of you who think you know Alice -- what do you suppose? Will she assess the risk too high? Will she turn to Reggie? Will she succumb to a still burning love for Gary?

I hope you're not foolish enough to subscribe to that false hope; I hope there's not some sort of racial tension as you read on. You're not secretly rooting for the white guy? Oh sure, I made him the protagonist and gave him a love interest and suggested that he was becoming more than himself. But there's something about razor-sharp situations like this: they bring out the best and the worst in all of us. There is no sense looking to a color code: we all decode to frail beings swept up in the cement-hard winds of a tornado.

Alice knew by lunchtime that she needed to act to break the mounting pressure behind her forehead. She hadn't many options. She printed out the email and deleted the electronic copy -- on the hope that it wouldn't be backed up onto tape. She formulated a plan, laid it out in

her mind, and got back to work. She thought, that's done. She could only shake her head when, a couple hours later, directly before a meeting, she blurted out to the assembled parties, apropos nothing: "I'm engaged to be married." Four unconscious hours later it was time to go by the school and get Andrew from after-school care.

Meanwhile and elsewhere -- two hands were at duty, and a highly trained operator cursed another day. Oh, he knew what was going on. Shortly after the signal had been declared lost, an officer wandered into the trailer and announced that the program was terminated. In his hands were the operator's transfer papers. Destination Alaska, a top-clearance location in the remotest Aleutian Islands, effectively immediately. He knew what this meant: he was being shown that his life belonged to them, and that he should keep his trap shut, if he knew what's good for him. Besides, there's no sense talking: the program had been terminated, the target lost, the purpose ebbed. Yeah, right. He knew that there was someone new in that trailer right now, looking for the next signal.

Here in the remotest corner of American soil, weather like the 9th circle of hell, he had no way of knowing when they would let him go. Maybe, with good behavior, in a year. Maybe they intended to forget him up here. But that seemed unlikely; there was probably a steady stream

of information-rich but untrustworthy souls who needed to be shown their dependence.

The station had ten souls and three shifts. Supplies were delivered when possible, usually once a month in winter. No women, and a fanatically anti-homosexual tone. At least there was plenty of porn and an acceptance of onanism, if one were careful. The denizens seemed not to speak much, and off-shift usually drank themselves severally and singly into a stupor, sometimes in semi-silence. Email and Web were popular, and more than one young soldier left this assignment engaged to a woman he had never met.

Can this be you, a friend wrote, and forwarded him an open request on a military discussion site, from a woman he did not know. "Do you know this man?" it said. And there was his file photo, in uniform. His name and rank. A reference to the city of __, his last assignment. She gave her rank, too, and had a few stripes on him. "We have some unfinished business," she wrote. Guaranteed to get your eye, that's for sure. Damn. He didn't even know who she could be -- his life was every bit that pathetic. But his friend had nothing but admiration.

Yeah, he wrote to his friend, it's me. I'll get in touch. He wrote Lieutenant Murphy a short email acknowledging her posting, but didn't say where he was. She wrote back within hours. "Thanks, __. I need

to speak with you. Can I come to see you?" This time he asked directly: "And you know me how?" She responded: "The professor sends his greetings." She guessed right that that would have an unambiguous meaning for him. That was an important signal to him. If she didn't have access to his current assignment, she -- or the professor -- was going out on a limb to find him. And inevitably he'd be out there with them. But maybe this was his way out. Or was it the test of his mouth-closedness? There was really no way to know, and so the flip of the coin went with negotiating with a babe adjutant. In a PGP encoded message: "I'm at forward base whiskey, westerly longitudes. I don't think you'll have much chance to come say hello." There was no response to that one.

The minister looked at the third young man. He was tall and thin and somewhat stooped, and he wore the kind of glasses young men use to say, "I don't care to be virile or tough or attractive." Clark Kent glasses, if you will, without the superman filling out the Kent. His eyes seemed ever so slightly to cross -- perhaps as an adjustment through the lenses but perhaps also because of a minor defect, one that might be fetching on a sister but was disconcerting on him. The minister examined him and then turned around. "Daniel Johnson grew up in a

predominantly black, lower-middle-class neighborhood. He attended a series of predominantly black schools. In each one, you could point to the dilapidated furniture or leaking ceiling or benumbed faculty, and then drive a couple miles along a major artery to another school, one that has interested faculty, no leaks, books and chairs that don't tilt. You can guess the skin color of those attending the other schools. Daniel knew all the disparaging names for these kids, had a hundred reasons why he hated a system that gave those pasty-skinned brats and lawyers' sons and doctors' daughters all the advantages. But most of all he hated the daily markers of their system of repression. The dilapidated schools, the smoking buses, the old gas guzzlers, the peeling paint, the Colt 45 bottles, the whores, the drug dealers on the streets selling to whites who'd rather see them rot in a jail for their natural lives than to see them come to their own neighborhood. The vacations, the car for little Billy, the Hollywood lifestyle, the corporate executive class, the investment commercials on TV, the Heineken ads."

The tall young man stepped forward with a leer on his face. It seemed as if he was trying to be an angry young man, but he screwed up his eyes as if he were still a bit short-sighted but thought maybe that a female knockout stood in front of him. "I don't normally talk to white

people. They just wrinkle their hooked noses and act like I smell or something, and then look at me like they're waiting for me do some blackfaced antic, or turn around and steal them blind. I hate them. And I hate their stupid smugness about their great country as much as I hate their racism. Just stay away from me if you don't want me telling you the truth." Then between his teeth: "Goddam racists." It was powerfully said, but theatrically, and rehearsed.

Unexpectedly, the minister walked behind his actor and put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Anger makes you a prisoner of the situation, Daniel. Anger means action and reaction. This is not physics, though. This action and this reaction create a destructive and endless cycle of recrimination. Remember that what gets passed from one individual to another is not the pain, the suffering, the sense of injustice. It's the anger you're passing, and anger germinates anger, not compassion, learning, love." He stepped around the angry man and moved in front of him.

"Our Lord advised his chosen people to turn the cheek. Heaven, he tells us, is reserved for the meek." He put out his arms and looked upward to dramatic effect. Then: "Is that what we need to help Daniel learn?" A few heads bobbed. His hands dropped. "Not simply, friends, not simply. Anger means the desire for justice. It's given all the wrong expression

here, but even so, it's better than indifference. Our Lord could tolerate nothing less than indifference. Eternal life comes to those who seek the Lord's difference. Once you seek, with your eyes open, you can see someone else's anger for what it is. And you can see your own anger for what it is as well as for what it could be." He sighed and looked back at a chagrined Daniel, who seemed to think that his performance was being criticized here, who was used to praise and not someone changing the rules on him.

Your narrator had occasion the other day to visit the Internet and digest some of the changes that have occurred since plan G was implemented. The vitriol was absent, but so too was the energy that inspired my detractors. Even the few comments from my right-wing ideologues sounded tired, less smugly sophistic and unintentionally ironic. There may be something to be learned about absence here, but I'm not sure what the lesson would be: whether there is less excitement when you can't see the target suffer, or whether isolation has dampened my sense of combativeness. I began to realize how my narrative consistency has been lost, how the story has changed pace, how the plot structure is working its way into a vortex about which the characters flow. Feeding the vortex demands certain compromises that any

participant might have reason to oppose, but it does seem to dull criticism of poor verisimilitude.

Thus we do not stand open-mouthed (as do others) when the operator greeted the visitor, just arrived on a supply plane from another nameless outpost. He didn't remember her person, but she was every inch the babe adjutant that he remembered from his first encounter with the good doctor. She was a junior officer in her twenties, a relatively short woman, but whose curve of the hip and whose vague outline of breasts were all the more noticeable. She had short bobbed hair that seemed to hang listless but which twitched with each movement of her face. Her skin was the milky white that betrays a thick layer of skin fat, and was therefore also exceedingly smooth and full. Her blue-gray eyes were outlined in black mascara and an unreal shade of purple, applied so subtly that you had to study her face, absorb her quirky and fetching smile, to recognize it. The operator was immediately and irredeemably smitten.

"We don't have much time, private," she said with a husky and slightly congested voice, as if overcome with a form of anticipation. Or maybe an appreciation of the unbelievability of situation. She walked by him, almost brushing him aside, as she strode to the conference room. The rest of crew had obviously been warned and they were absolutely silent

and motionless.

The operator smelled a faint fragrance of poppies or lilies, and looked at the faces before him. What he saw wasn't real clear. It was like winning a lottery whose rules you don't know.

The conversation would have gone something like this. The man would pick up his handset and say: "Walton." The deep voice on the other end was rich, accented, probably black. It would ask for Mr. Walton by full name and wait for confirmation. By way of answer, the busy bureaucrat would inquire of his business. "I have something that belongs to you," said the voice. Response: "Is that right." "Yes, you were out / down / around here a few months ago and were asking about it." "I travel a lot," said the man, examining his cuticles unconsciously. The voice: "I'm sure you do, but I can't tell you anything more until we have an arrangement."

"Okay," said the man, perking up at this hint of self-orientation. "Do you know what I'm doing right now?" Silence. "I'm overriding your caller ID block and writing down your phone number... Got it. Now, what is it that you have?"

The voice seemed unperturbed. "What I've got is -- well, I don't exactly have it. I can get it for you, if you're interested."

"Did I mention," went on the Washingtonian, "that I'm recording your voice? Now that I've told you, it's admissible in court."

"I've got nothing to hide, I just want my usual finder's fee."

"Your usual finder's fee? The federal government doesn't pay finder's fees. If you have federal property, you're obliged by law to return it.

Finder's fee!"

"But you'll be pleased to have this returned to you. It's not really government property. I think if you knew who had it, you'd want to know that and take appropriate action. And for such a patriotic act, I think it would be appropriate to receive a reward, a finder's fee, of, oh, ten thousand. That's not much for the government and it would make all the difference in this particular situation."

"For ten thousand you'd better be selling out your own dear sweet mother. Supposing I could arrange a reward, I'd have to have a pretty good reason to give you that kind of money."

"Well, does a little green glowing spot mean anything to you?"

There was a silence as his mind switched from mocking malice to intrigue and avarice. "Maybe. Tell me more."

"How about a computer monitor with burn marks on it."

After a short silence, during which he dredged his mind, he said, "So this must be Reginald. I'll have to check the files to get your last

name."

"Very good," said his interlocutor. "But you'll need my help to recover what's yours."

"What -- does that Corinthian character have it?"

"You can conclude what you want, sir, but I'm telling you, you'll need my help."

"If you're convinced this is government property, why do you think we won't come down and arrest the lot of you on charges of a conspiracy to misappropriate public goods?"

"I know you want to keep this under wraps, so I don't think there will be any arrests. I just want this thing out of our lives. And maybe a little compensation for my time and effort."

"I'd like to be able to compensate you appropriately, Reginald, but I'm afraid that for the moment I don't see any reason to do so. I know just about all I need to know."

"I don't think so, Mr. Walton. But why don't you come on down / by / over here, and try to get it back without my help. If you can, fine. But if you need my help, of course I'm always happy to lend it."

"I'm sure you are," said the dapper man with a chuckle to himself, shaking his head smugly, "I'm sure you are."

Day 30 -- By rights they were all dead at this point. Or beyond dead,

if you will, since they had all emerged once before from the great herd of indifferent citizenry to jump into the crosshairs. But there was no excitement left for their adversary in the quick call, the hustle of files, the anonymous newspaper clippings. The chase lay elsewhere. For his own reasons, the good doctor was equally tired of the endless sameness. Hustled away whenever it seemed that there was a chance of a breakthrough, lied to by the pettiest of officers, bought off by the accompaniment of attractive young women, seduced by Washington insider parties, sold out by professional schemers and political assassins, the doctor longed for the simple life of his faculty office, and even for the internecine competition of his colleagues, academic sycophants all. Here, he was the show animal, the quirky genius with only one purpose, and constantly on display. He loved and hated it.

He had grown fond of Lt. Rose Murphy, but was flabbergasted when she explained the terms of her assignment to him. She was utterly sullen as she explained how they had trained her for espionage, and then given her to him. Not to learn from him, or to keep him from foreign agents, but simply to keep him from getting too close to the truth, whatever that was. She was not close enough herself to say. Even by saying this much she was risking her career and her freedom. But despite herself, despite her training, despite her indifference to all things academic,

she had fallen in love with him. He was alternately charming, brilliant, and disarmingly arrogant, a man completely unaware of his actual effect on others and therefore completely genuine. He sought to shine in her eyes, not out of love, simply to see the glimmer in her eyes, and yet she still felt herself coddled, complimented and needed in the life of one of her country's great intellects. The package was simply too much for her young and over-sure heart.

The good doctor was nonplussed, not because of her assignment, but because she chose to confess to him. He had grown accustomed to feeling that everyone in the military saw him as a walking insect -- someone whose function was too important to let him be squished, but who was too distasteful to be let out of the cardboard box. Even, until now, his pliant adjutants. So he unburdened himself to her, and she told him that she would find out what was being hidden from him.

It gave her great purpose, this quest, and she was finally able to apply her training and skills in information gathering. Before long, she was on the trail of the most accessible source, the young operator who had been there at the most recent strike. He had been swapped out, indicating that he knew too much for his degree of reliability, and he was no doubt cooling his heels somewhere outside the reach of media and muckrakers. If, after two or three years, he proved to be docile

enough, he would be released back into the population. By then, his actual knowledge would be ancient history and impossible to corroborate. And the relevant handlers would have had ample opportunity to let him feel the consequences of betrayal.

The only thing she could do was to crack through this ice ring -- as quickly and as decisively as she could -- and try to shake the information she could from him. The consequences of this gambit were likely to be dire, but she hoped to be protected by the doctor's prominence, and maybe, maybe she and he would be given an opportunity to simply retire from the whole sordid mess. He did, after all, have the knowledge to do great damage to the cause of liberty and stability. Yet he was surely more valuable alive than dead, and less likely to turn to another country if he felt respected in his wishes -- to return to academia and, incidentally, to marry. To divorce and remarry, actually, but those logistics never did interest her much; she understood that he had a life to which she did not belong. But this one crescendo of a moment might be just what was needed to bond them -- forever.

Thus she stood before the operator and ordered him to reveal to her what had happened on that fateful assignment in____. He was already in a twilight zone, agog at his female visitor, afraid of

temptations and tests, and vaguely troubled by an inkling he was marked for an unusually cruel death at the far end of the planet. He said that he needed a sign that this wasn't just a test of his loyalty to the armed forces. What sign, she asked. They spoke slowly, part of a hard-boiled ritual they were both vaguely aware of, both fostering and yet also resisting, each in their own way. I need you, he said, to show me how deeply you love the doctor, how far you'll go. I came here, didn't I, she said, her voice still deep and congested. I mean more, he said; you could hear both the excitement and dread in his voice, a commingling that was almost de Sade-like in its mixture of pleasure and pain, the anticipation and fear of pain. The point: putting out would mean this wasn't just a sting. She grunted a brief expression of disgust. You tell me something, and I'll give you a piece of clothing, she said. It's got to be meaningful; if you're just jerking me, I'll get dressed and leave, but not without filing a report on your respect for the uniform. If you get me undressed, she said from deep in her throat, I will get you off. That's all I'm offering. Accepted, he said, bubbly in relief -- but not without a nagging, lingering doubt that this was his last wish.

The minister had moved on to his fourth example, seemingly unaware that

he was losing the attention of his audience. Perhaps he didn't care; perhaps the inattention was something he counted on. Even Alice found her mind wandering, found herself a hundred miles away; she only realized why when the minister and his fourth young man had finished. The character portrayed by this young man was -- her ex-husband. A big-hearted man, not too intelligent, but also not so docile as to think that his lot in life was quite enough, thank you. He kept his eye out for opportunity, and considered breaking the law nothing more than an expediency. When he was captured, tried and convicted for another man's crime, an irony that he had never expected to experience in his own life, it tied his tongue, as if he was afraid he would start to laugh.

Alice was both religious and impulsive in visiting him. She would tell Andrew one day when he got home from school: "We're going to visit your father this weekend." He would look at her with a mix of shock and submission. "Okay." Most of the time, he would sit in the hotel and wait for her to come back. Sometimes, with a change in the wind at the prison, he would be allowed to visit his father as well. All found those moments awkward, but Alice and Andrew would talk about it on the way home and by the time they stepped out of the car they would be convinced -- Andrew would be -- that the visit had helped his father.

Shortly after the minister's visit that Alice went to visit her ex. She made it a single day trip and left Andrew with Gary. She was nervous because he was so obviously ill trained to be with a child, but on the other hand they shared so much in their innate abstraction from human contact and their fascination with technology that she felt it was therapeutic for her child. She found that their conversations about computers were driving a distance -- newly expressed but already latent -- between her and Andrew. For Andrew, this distance had always been a reality; for her, her love had made her believe that they could daily overcome their differences in disposition and interest, as if her peace of mind depended on the enactment of this reconciliation. But when Gary was there, it was nearly impossible to get Andrew to rise to her level of engagement. They would mumble in the corner with the computer, laugh at something that both considered lame, whistle at some technological marvel, without recognizing at all how they were acting out their own ritual exchange of seashells.

Not long after she was congratulated all around at work for her engagement, she decided she had to visit her ex-husband again. I suppose it's obvious that she intended to tell him the news, but I don't think that was the impetus; there was therapy in the visits, but they were not something she owed him, or even owed Andrew. She found a

meaning, a strand of the monumentality of life, in her ex-husband's plight. When she rode the bus to the entrance, walked under the razor wire and gates, waited in the dank, noxious visitor room, and strode through three buzzer doors: at each step intensity of gazes grew, until you stood in the visitation room and saw the predominantly white guards, the disproportionate black and Hispanic inmate populations, and you saw how this was a social moment, a cultural reality that would one day have a name, in its own way a Warsaw ghetto of modern America, the nearly invisible result of fear and anger.

"Barry," she said to him with her hands visible on the table: "I'm getting remarried."

He looked at her as he did several times during each visit, as if by his expression he was mouthing, "I don't know why you bother coming if you don't care how what you say makes me feel." But then he would smile at something that reminded him of a life on the outside, a life that he was just sitting out on but that he still felt was his life. She knew that the math always came out in favor of her coming: even pain was better than the mental privation and eternal sameness of this communal life.

"So," he said. "Who is it? Anybody I know?"

"I don't think so," she said. "We met at church."

"That whitebread church you go to? Alice..."

"He's black, if that's what you mean."

He looked at her but didn't say anything. Of course he wanted to make a claim about his interest in the subject because of Andrew, but she would shut him up and probably walk out if he dared to suggest... So he just looked. She looked back, saw something very different: a man still unable to accept his responsibility as an individual, who would remain silent at trial but tell anyone here in prison that it wasn't his stuff, you see, it was just someone else's stuff he was holding -- as if saying that now would make all the difference in who he was. But in fact he was often beset by the guards to provide information about other inmates, guards who mistook this loquaciousness for a snitch's mentality, when he was just trying to express the irony, so alien to him, that had gripped his life.

No. 31 -- Gary brought Scotty back. He had to prepay another month to Mary, who complained over "tea" about incidental costs, and time spent interacting, and stress, and emotional investment, but whose pain threshold was met, thank you, by a month's rent. The cats all seemed agitated as the power was turned off and the green beam receded back into a patterned shape in the belly of the antenna. Scotty was not consulted before the move.

Gary's beater made its way along the freeway, slightly askew from a twisted subframe, requiring a heavy hand on the wheel and giving it -- from just the right angle -- something of a crabwalk look. A satellite observer could ID it solely with dimensions and that minute misalignment, should such be called for. Indeed, the questions I have posed before have never been more pertinent: this could be the last chance to cleanly end this matter with an interception or even a surgical missile strike, later explained away as an explosive car fire. The object was certainly explosive enough to require an observer to ask him or herself about their tolerance, their willingness, to see this info virus leak into the general population. Good reason existed to stop it without prejudice or compromising deniability. But this day, as many others, there was no one listening on this channel, searching this artery for virus carriers, plying the preemptive trade. The preemptors were using their other, more tried means of identifying and painting targets.

The beater stopped in front of a newspapered storefront. Gary had successfully rented it for a month with the pretense of running a short-term telemarketing operation out of it. Strictly legitimate, he had said to an incredulous real estate agent, a gentleman used to the social glue of propriety, who was a little shocked that legitimacy was,

by implication, something he was expected to consider. I'm sure, he had finally said with the equanimous smirk and levity common at commercial transactions: I'm sure you are strictly legit -- and your greenbacks better be, too.

The storefront had a garage-sale desk and chair, and an active cable connection with Internet access. Gary had rigged up a Mylar blanket to cover the antenna and its bowl when he switched the battery back on, but the transition from green stain to green beam and sensory structure in the bowl was non-stochastic. The fluid structure itself had transformed itself during these months. There was a simple projection of a speaker -- human form, or at least the source's idea of what it was to be human -- that could communicate directly with you. The representation of speaker was very simple, if more or less true, in its outlines and detail, indicating either a deficiency in perception across these immense space-time distances or an inability to completely master matter on this end, the remote end of the connection. The speaker proved to be an annoyance to Gary when it began to communicate in staccato metallic tones, and Gary made clear that he preferred text. So they sat together in that oasis with its mosaics of yellowing newspaper stories and ads, with a dirty and blackening hardwood floor and a few bald lights, and they got to know each other. Gary started by

asking a few simple questions about the development of its English skills, and the response would type its way across the screen. "Can you email me all of this when we're done?" Gary asked, and that was affirmed, although he felt oddly unable to believe the nonchalant promise from his evasive conversant.

Gary found himself elaborating on the same story I've told here, in a level of detail that he would not have given to any human counterpart, except perhaps at the very end of an intensive drunk, but Scotty's impassivity lulled him. Sometimes Gary thought Scotty's questions were a way to cover a lack of understanding, but at the same time he knew that his conversant was preserving this conversation and could do anything it wanted with it -- perhaps even come back at Gary with a more informed strategy how to mold his behavior. If so, if this conversation was a strategic plumbing, it was a great success. Gary knew it, but this knowledge did not disturb him much in the context within which it was won. This battle, if battle it were, would be forgotten in the context of the wider war that had begun with the burnt monitor, that had paused many months, and would likely resume soon enough.

The big questions went unanswered. "Why do this? Where are you? Who are you? What do you want from us? What is your assignment? Who tells you

what to do and not? How widespread is intelligent life? Are we all like monkeys? Did you have epochs like our epoch of the dinosaur? Are these chance transitions just that? Do you speak like we do? Are you encased in electronics, or does that differentiation even make sense in your world? How hard is it to learn to understand us? Are we a backward civilization? Are we in danger? Do you know our future? Are you from an ancient civilization? A future one? Does the universe end? Is there God? Do you pray?"

Scotty's screen impassively blinked his place with a cursor. No words.

"Why can't you answer me? I've basically risked everything I have to keep you around, and you can't even answer me one lousy question?"

Blinked: One lousy question.

Great, Gary thought, now he's the literalist. There was not much sense thinking over all the questions available to him -- a bald-faced lie to a brilliant question wasn't worth a thing. "Why can't you answer our questions?"

The answer blinked across slowly, perhaps a mere artifact, perhaps symbolic: We cannot couch the answer in such a way that it would not confuse you in a negative way.

"Isn't it up to us to decide what we can understand and what we can't?"

We're not children, after all."

More slow blinking: No, we would be affected, too.

"How? What could we do to you? Or do you mean you'd lose your perfect laboratory?"

No, but you see already that one answer demands another. And our refusal to answer some questions would seem to be evasive, no matter what reasons we may have.

"So -- our fight-or-flight wetware makes us inadequate discussion partners, eh?"

No.

"Are you from our future? Are you afraid that what you tell us will have consequences for humanity?"

No.

"No, not from the future, or not afraid of the consequences?"

No, you will not find your answers that way.

When Mary had been left alone with the device, the quiet truce that followed on a major drunken episode carried on for a couple days. When she finally looked into the room where the thing was, she was surprised to hear it greet her with an electronic, tinny "hello." Cute, she thought. "What other tricks do you have?" she asked.

Then it aped her in its tinny voice, and she hurried out of the room with a shudder.

A day later, she looked in and saw one of her cats swatting at a crude image of itself reflected in the metallic body of the thing. She came in and looked at the thing. Slowly she saw the cat transform itself into a fuzzy pixilated and tinny version of Oprah on television. She knew but still looked around the room for a television; there was none. "Well that's sick," she said and she left.

After a few minutes puttering in another room, she turned on the television and found the station with Oprah on. It was an effing broadcast station -- that unnerving little thing was not only a parrot, but a television. Maybe it could be trained to play cards in Vegas, she thought with a chuckle.

From a more dispassionate perspective, one might conclude that it was using visual, auditory and radio-frequency inputs to amass freeform

conjectures about the nature of our world, to arrange a series of assertions that were regularly being checked against each other for consistency and against each other for likely extensibility. It is impossible to know how difficult this was for the otherworldly intelligence without knowing more about its world. The pixelation and tinniness, for instance, could be interpreted as incomplete information transfer -- or as a strategic distortion of signals in order to avoid leaving even the subtlest clues of their perceptive apparatus and thus also of their selves.

In general, either the inputs could be considered poor, or the task difficult. It took quite a while before the device could produce speech or even text. It seemed to understand that speech was primary -- perhaps an inevitable conclusion when dealing with an organic species -- because it did not attempt textual contact until it had mastered a certain level of speech.

How do you learn speech when you are unable to test your conjectures about how that speech is put together? How do you learn without being corrected? If the corpus you have collected is large enough, you can begin to test assumptions by anticipating responses based on preceding sections of the corpus. If you are able to create context with your own cultural-specific comparisons, then it becomes essentially an exercise

in language acquisition. The key is the hermeneutic string theory: decode a piece here, a piece there, and you begin to recognize a whole; using the intuition from understanding the whole, you unravel a few more pieces; and suddenly, you find yourself able to recognize the whole ball with more detail.

It is difficult, once again, to draw any conclusions about their native culture and civilization from this, but the intelligence seemed best able to communicate about interaction: hello, goodbye, I want to learn more, etc. Specific questions were rare, despite their obvious practicality; the questions were usually quite general, but probing enough: what work do you do? Do you live alone? What do you think of love? Perhaps they contributed more substantively to their corpus; perhaps the intelligence was merely feigning ignorance and knew enough about us to skip over the factual. Perhaps there is a context that we could not begin to recognize.

Mary answered dozens of such questions, at first curtly, then in ever greater detail. One day she said, "Well, this won't work if you don't have a name. I'll give you my brother's name, Scott. Beam me up, Scott. Scotty. Actually, he died before I was around; he was born prematurely. They named him Willis Scott, but I always thought Scott would be best. Cheers Scotty!"

Day 32 -- The fifth young man introduced by the good reverend was a young man of athletic build and with the movements and easy confidence of someone used to catching admiring looks. He had a head full of dreadlocks, with a Bob Marley look of danger, attraction and passion. This was someone you felt you ought to have noticed more fully and you wondered why not, as if without a concentrated glance you could not distinguish his dark features.

The minister waved him forward. "Dennis Francis," he said, "or, as he prefers, Denabu Fantum, a fictitious name that he has constructed from his small exposure to African languages. This young man has everything going for him, but he prefers to reflect on what is happening all around him: One in ten young African American men is in prison. One in three African American children grows up in poverty. Even the best African American minds are on the outside of the power elite. It is a people under siege, a Diaspora that bears many similarities to that experienced by the Jewish people at key times in their history. But because ours is a people united only in the adversity they have suffered, comprised of Africans from a continent of different cultures, a mix of cultures trampled down to the bare minimum by oppressive slavery, you find them disorganized, discouraged, unable to rally around any prophet. An alien religion -- yes, our own beloved

Christianity -- sits heavy on their shoulders like a yoke. How can we ever find our identity, our identities, unless we are able to find our way back to Africa? Dennis?"

The young man looked at the minister with a quizzical look. "You surprise me with that introduction, Reverend. It is not as if we are able to shuck three hundred years of Western acculturation and return to Africa. If we go to Africa, we go as visitors. The sad, hard truth is that we are a people without a home. At the same time, we must accept that we are part of this country -- a misunderstood, undervalued, misrepresented part -- and that we must work here and now to take what is our right as full citizens of this nation. White America has always sought to minimize our contribution to society -- and even more, to circumscribe what parts of society are available to us. We cannot wait for an invitation to become full members, because that represents the wrong way to understand our rights: those who seek to block our entrance into the mainstream of American culture will not be swayed by our pliancy. They have a vested interest in defining strata in society -- defining not only our place, but others' as well -- and they will not let the idyll of a real melting pot challenge that interest.

"Imagine," he said, stepping forward, shaking his locks, planting his

feet and spreading his hands dramatically, "that you are standing at a gate that controls access to a resort, your resort. There is a large throng of people at the gate, all asking to enter. You are torn between the interest to charge more people and the knowledge that if you let more in, you will antagonize those who are there. You hire muscle to open the gate just far enough to replenish the pool of those who leave. 'Who should I let in?' they ask you.

"Look around, ladies and gentleman. How would you decide? What markers would you use? Dockers? Khaki pants? Tweed jacket? Carefully curled hair? Knee-length skirt? Personal hygiene? How many rules would it take to prepare your staff?

"Or -- or -- perhaps you say: See those people with the black skin and that tightly curled hair? They don't get in. See those Hispanics and Native Americans? They don't get in either. 'What about those New York Italians? Do they get in?' Italians? Swarthy skin, but sure, yeah, let them in. Just none of the blacks."

He put a hand up in the air to forestall imaginary complaints. "My allegory misses much of the point -- the history of slavery, the denial of humanity, the cruelty in the name of civilization. And, indeed, the unspoken decision to exclude us was made hundreds of years ago, not today. What do the difficulties experienced by a modern African

American have in common with the plight of those in slavery a hundred and fifty years ago?" He smiled broadly and looked around behind him.

"We should be grateful, after all, should we not, that we are treated so evenhandedly today. Right? Grateful? Grateful? So evenhandedly?" He waited for a chorus that did not emerge. "Grateful to the gatekeepers. But even so, 'evenhandedness' in today's America does not mean that your hand is level with my hand. That would be a misunderstanding. It means that the hands stay where they are -- yours higher, mine lower; mine higher, yours lower. It does not mean that we will try to even the hands so that all may take part equally.

"Affirmative action? It's illegitimate, because we want to be evenhanded, after all. How could we hope to be the great, free country that we are if the great great grandchildren of slaves were suddenly given privilege over poor working white Americans? After all, we want to be evenhanded.

"Racism? There's no such thing, and if it exists, it's against the law. Laws ought to be enough for these African Americans. Right? Even if the gatekeepers are still there, still doing their best to keep us out, because, after all, it's illegal." He looked around as if contradicted on all sides. "Oh, you don't believe it? Racism?

"Why," he said, now assuming a studied academic air, "then, does the

African American community continue to suffer from an unbroken cycle of poverty, lack of opportunity, frustration, and self-destruction? Why do drugs flow in ever greater quantities into this country, and with such ease into the poor communities that are predominantly black? Why are blacks put away for drug offences at four times the rate of whites, even while the overall drug usage rate is the same? Chance? Evenhandedness?

"Why are blacks uniformly underrepresented on, if not downright absent from, elected bodies in this country -- when they make up fully 12% of the population? Chance? Is this the way the cookie crumbles in a democracy? Perhaps. Or perhaps it's the tyranny of the majority -- an undifferentiated mass of uncoordinated individuals, united only in their desire to see the gates close on their tail sides rather than in front of them. This danger, esteemed members of the public, is exactly why this country was not given direct democracy, but rather a representative democracy, made of men and women who are not bound to any higher terrestrial authority than their own conscience, a bulwark against the tyranny of us-them thinking. The only problem is that these same men and women are driven not by their conscience, but by the tyranny of the voter. We were not served well when we were given a representative government that enshrined notions of democracy above

equality. What we should have gotten was the principled democracy that Thomas Jefferson promised us in the Declaration of Independence: a universalist government that serves human rights first. Today, the decayed notion of human rights serves primarily as a tactical weapon in the dodgy games of politicians and interest groups fighting for the moral high ground.

"And black America still waits for the hand to pull us up to an equal footing, and to stop, once and for all, pushing us down again and again."

A minute of silence ensued, as Denabu looked around the room, a faint smile on his face, absorbing the shocked and sympathetic looks as if applause. This was no high school student given a loose script. You might have supposed that the real reverend had revealed himself here, if you were not immediately drawn to the now hunched figure of the minister coming up to the performer from the side, shaking his head slightly, like a veteran seeing the future in a rookie. He lipped "wow," then with his hand invited Denabu to step back into line.

"Well," Minister Brown said quietly, "well." He looked at the audience, which was still dividing its attention between him and the intellectual, and moved his eyes among all the attendees. Another few moments of silence, then he went on: "There is a lot of anger in that

young man. And we can feel with him, feel his frustration, understand his dissatisfaction with this great country and the suffering of black America. There's truth in his words, yes, there is a truth in his words. But Denabu, we need to remember the central words that Jesus uttered in the face of his radical critics: 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.' We cannot put our stock in a government of men, as if there were a magic solution for the ails that we feel. We should not kowtow to Caesar, no, but we should not imagine that when he is gone we will have created the promised land. No. The promises we have lead somewhere else: they move beyond America, into the past, through Africa and back out. We look to the stars at night, ladies and gentlemen, and we are forced to see it, to feel it. God will not let us be silent; we must lift our voices to him. Each cry a prayer, it is our cries that he waits to hear: our joy, our anguish, our grief, our outrage -- and our love. God, the Christian God we have adopted and who has adopted us, has defeated indifference -- and for that we must be eternally -- eternally! -- grateful. Everything else is the drama that we live out, as best we can, one minute at time, one evening at a time. Thank you for your attention, my friends, and a good evening to you."

No. 33 -- There is a difference, somewhere in the chemistry of the brain, between an onanistic ejaculation and one with a partner. It may

be the chemical play between the two post-coital bodies, or the mammalian relaxation provided by touch and warmth and snuggling two bodies together. Gary has experienced the broken version innumerable times -- an orchestrated ejaculation, followed by a deep enervation and then the sudden illumination of a trivial or panicked thought, and finally a fog that brings on either sleep or a listless interest in television. Even with a prostitute it has been different. You hear the woman pant, see her smile knowingly, look sympathetically at your hungry expression; you watch her imitate excitement, ape satisfaction -- and despite the dissimulation, it burns at your senses until you explode in a union of reality and play. Sometimes she will let you hold on to her for a few minutes while your nerves return. Then you pay, and she goes about her business as routinely as a doctor after a prostate exam. Sometimes she'll take a hygienic shower, and sometimes she just heads back out to the streets. If it's hot outside, you picture that she will let her own sweat to soak off your scent and touch; if it's cold, you can imagine the cold on her lips, her limbs and crotch, turning your warmth to just another layer of dirt on cold, dead skin. But he would savor the time it would take for the remains of such moments to evaporate.

Something had gotten into Gary's brain, and he recognized it and

savored it, and longed for it. Alice's image was in front of his mind, even as he stared at Scotty's rough-hewn images, the glittering ray that powered him, and the wormhole that held open space-time for a foreign intelligence. In his mind, he could almost see a union with her at the other end of that tunnel.

A half mile from Alice's condo Scotty waited. He did as asked: he stayed away from Alice and Andrew, and avoided any attention-gathering activity on the Internet. In exchange, he and Gary were in near constant contact: chat, email, instant message, voice over IP, just about every communication tool available. It did not take long before Scotty had the Gary and Alice story out, and was digging into its implications. Black and white? Single mother? Bachelor? Prostitutes? Church? God? Fiancé? Love? Longing? Regret? Anger? Rejection? Hope? Irrationality? Sublimation? Self-betterment? Desperation? Help? It was therapeutic for Gary, in a self-indulgent way, since Scotty never contradicted; but still, the probing questions often led Gary into a self-reflective noodle from which he would shake himself, swear off contact, and wander away. Never long.

One evening, Gary came by -- he often did come by because he enjoyed talking out loud and in person to Scotty -- and said, "Can't stay long.

Can you believe it, I've got a dinner with a headhunter."

What is a headhunter?

"A headhunter is someone who gets paid for finding someone to fill a job, or for finding you a job. This guy called up out of the blue today, and prattled on about how the economy was changing, and opportunity, and God knows what else. I told him to shove it, but then he popped out this dinner invitation, and he asked about a good place for martinis -- well, what the hey, it's on his company's dime."

Have you gotten calls from headhunters before?

"I used to, on occasion, back in the dot com heyday. But nobody's been getting them lately."

Is the economy improving? Have you gotten calls from other headhunters?

"What? I don't know. Look, it's just a dinner with some traveling stiff who'd rather eat with someone than alone. What the hell are you thinking?"

Take care.

"Suddenly you're the one to be careful?"

An odd twist then: This is not chance.

The bar and restaurant had the quiet atmosphere of a single traveler's place, although there were several families and groups scattered about. Something about the décor, the service, the muffled elevator music, all

made it seem a sleepy place where the sleepless gather. Maybe there are special hotel restaurant ceiling spackles that inspire desperate, lonely drinking. Gary knew the kind of place well, although as a rule he did not travel for business. There were his occasional visits to his mother and his grandmother, and an occasional trip that had some sexual or self-serving motivation but where he usually ended up in a harmless stupor in a place like this.

He sat at the bar and ordered a whiskey sour. ESPN documented a nameless sport from TVs at both sides of the bar. An attractive waitress wandered the tables with a disconcerting stutter step, as if one leg was a bit shorter than the other, putting out the evening menu. The bartender had that distracted look that came from rote work, moving bottles, assessing quantities, and looking out at the waitress.

"What'll it be?" with the smooth sweep of a practiced hand placing a napkin.

Gary waited for a half hour, downing two whiskeys more out of nervous energy than any desire. The clientele was picking up, the noise almost rising to the level of a place with energy, but somehow not getting there. Gary was mad at himself for finding the opportunity to get stood up by a shit traveling salesman, who had obviously found himself a better offer. He fought the urge to stomp out, but was mentally already

out the door when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

It surprised him so much he forgot to bat it away. "What?" he said.

"Bob Walton," said the other gentleman, the other hand extended.

"Gary?"

"Yeah," he said, not sure that he just heard the same name he was expecting. "Are you the headhunter?"

The other man smiled and nodded in sympathy for the dunderhead question, and his whole manner had a certain crisp charm to it. Gary stared for a moment at the dandy, who even gave him a moment to take it all in. "Shall we?" Bob said, pointing toward the restaurant.

"Sure," said Gary, a slur on the S escaping and giving him a brief scare that he was already out of control and hence likely to make a fool of himself. But he swung himself nimbly enough out of the chair, and gestured "after you."

The hostess was waiting for them, a young lithesome woman with a chanteuse's long red dress, complemented by her short gelled hair but somehow out of place with the nose ring. "Enjoy your dinner," she said bestowing the menus, with a pouty voice that completed the ensemble. Bob let himself stare at her returning to her station, a gesture that Gary recognized as an equalizer: we're all just stray males here, nothing to fight over. Bob pulled up the menu and gave it a quick once

over -- the smile disappearing as he concentrated -- and then he looked up and slowly brought the smile back.

"So Gary, do you enjoy your work?"

"Sure." Gary was still looking, wondering how far down the list of steak cuts he could go.

"That's good," said Bob. "Very good. These days managers are looking for employees who'll provide a stable workforce. What do you do in your spare time?"

"What?" Gary asked, looking at his counterpart with a quizzical expression.

"Your spare time, Gary. Employers are interested in seeing well-rounded employees, people with interests outside work. What are your interests?"

"I don't know," said Gary. The quizzing wasn't what he had expected. Bob didn't answer, let him wrestle with the ridiculous statement himself.

"I mentor," he said.

"You mentor? Really? That's great, Gary. What organization are you with?"

"Not an organization, through my church."

"Through your church, that's fascinating, Gary. I bet there are a lot

of kids there who could benefit from your mentoring."

"That's true," he said. But he did specify: "Actually, I spend most of my time with one boy, the son of a good friend, a single mother."

"You don't say. That's interesting, Gary. Don't lose that thought. I want to get back to that, but let's get this dinner going."

Bob didn't scrimp on his own dinner, so Gary went to the bottom of the steak list. Bob inquired about Gary's preferences in wine, but Gary just shrugged, so Bob was forced to engage the server -- a young man who looked as confused as he looked attentive -- for recommendations and consideration. They settled on a Merlot, with the promise that there was a hefty Sauvignon if the Merlot disappointed.

Gary meanwhile wondered how much of his whiskey sour he left on the bar.

Bob seemed uncomfortable as they waited for the wine and hors d'oeuvres, as if this interregnum wasn't supposed to be happening. Gary jumped in.

"What company do you work for?"

"Actually," Bob said, suddenly more serious, "I'm under contract with the government. -- But I am hunting heads for them, rest assured, Gary. You would be surprised by how much technology work goes on inside the government that you never hear the slightest thing about."

"I'll bet. The government, eh. Would I have to get some kind of background check?"

"Hmmm," said Bob as he watched the hostess stroll again to her station.

"Yes, probably, if you were to do the work I've been thinking about. That's not a problem, is it, Gary?"

Gary looked through the window to a dark parking lot. "No, I suppose not."

"Ah," said Bob, anticipating the arrival of the wine and antipasti. But it was a couple minutes yet before the server made it to them, as he had a table before them to serve. Bob kept his eye on the service, with a couple of self-conscious glances at Gary -- but whom he didn't otherwise acknowledge. After sampling the wine and taking his assortment of light foods, Bob seemed to relax.

"Okay, Gary, eat up and enjoy." They toasted with glasses, and ate in silence for a few minutes. Cheers.

"Look, Bob," said Gary finally, "I can't work for the government."

"No?" said Bob with a light mock surprise. "Why do you say that, Gary? Don't knock it before you try it. Regular hours, good benefits, the satisfaction of doing an important job."

"I don't believe -- in government."

"Everybody believes in government, Gary. Otherwise it's chaos, anarchy."

But you mean you want a smaller government? Laissez faire?"

"Sure, you gotta have a government. But it's not me. I'm not the government type."

"What's the government type, Gary? You're a church-going man who does volunteer work. That's exactly the kind of ethic that we need in government. People for whom service to others is second nature. That's the heart and soul of public service. My hat's off to you, Gary."

"Right," said Gary dourly. He began to understand, and after a few moments said: "What is this, Bob? Are you really trying to recruit me? Or what?"

"Okay," he said after a moment's pause and with a widening smile.

"You're right. I'm not being fair. I know a lot more about you than you know about me. I am very familiar with the ____ Church and with your activities there. Even your affection for a certain single mother who attends that church --"

Gary's mind switched from the irked and suspicious mindset that Bob had engendered to a flaring alarm and near panic. His thought: I'm sitting across the table from one of the men in black -- albeit dressed in a forest green tweed jacket, over a carefully pressed dress shirt with a generous brown tie. He looked as intently as he could at the eyes facing him.

The dapper gentleman had been talking, but Gary couldn't tell you what he had said -- probably providing Gary with more evidence of his foreknowledge. Gary meanwhile was overwhelmed by the realization of exposure for Alice and Andrew, let alone for Mary and Bluthe, and felt his jaw trembling.

"So," said the man, putting another fork full in his mouth, "there's really not much about this case that I don't know. And I'd like to put it to rest. You'd be willing to help me, right?"

"Sure," Gary replied, "sure, yeah, I would."

"That's great," Bob replied. "There are a few details we've got to discuss, but let's not let the details spoil our dinner. Your file is here."

Gary didn't contradict, although, as he ate, the rare meat evinced a disturbing animation beneath his knife and fork, which finally spoiled his appetite altogether.

No. 34 -- Gary's interlocutor took his time eating, but used the time to give Gary some background. He kept the wine flowing into Gary's glass and chose not to comment on his lack of appetite.

"That's right. I work in the FCC," he said, vigorously buttering a slice of French bread, "but you can take that with the usual grain of salt that a conspiracy theorist such as yourself inevitably applies."

He took a large bite, and looked around casually to locate the hostess.

"You see, the government is a community, with hard lines of delineation and soft ones. My job makes me reliant on the soft ones -- not unlike Alice's Reginald in his community, if my sources are accurate. So I have a home in the FCC, but my pay comes from a pot of money that gets fed from here and there, and, well, it pays the bills. But like most government employees, I'm not in this for the money. Oh, sure, fair recompense is important, but really what you want is -- job satisfaction. Am I right, Gary?"

"I wouldn't really know."

Bob chuckled. "I kinda thought so. Your resume is astounding in its singlemindedness. I bet your supervisor wonders if he'll have to kill you to get rid of you. Or are you the workgroup hot potato? No comment?"

Well, no matter. It's not your job experience we're after." He took a bite, savored, then looked at Gary as if hoping he would give his memory a little boost. "Oh yes -- job satisfaction. Gary, my job, in the main, is to find anomalies like yours and to assure that they do not negatively affect the fabric of our society. What does that mean? Well, let's be specific, shall we?" He stopped.

"Sure," said Gary slowly.

"Okay, four months ago, you get a call from Alice -- at work I believe

-- and you come to see the strange goings-on. If I know you, you have a hard time believing there's anything out of the ordinary, but then you see it and you know that this is not some average everyday malfunction. You come back two nights hence, and sure enough, there it is -- glowing in mid air, big as life. Ever the chivalrous gentleman in matters concerning Alice, you offer to take this intruder away, and in short order you manage to decode its instructions sufficiently to make good on your promise. You've got it captured in a TV-like cage or a spiral -- "

" -- spiral -- "

"Good, thank you, a spiral somewhere where it won't easily be found. Now, mind you, I could unleash a furious investigation to find it, the like of which you couldn't imagine, but -- and maybe you've figured this out for yourself -- that becomes awkward. The more people involved, the more questions. Or at least when I involve the more public members of the government community. There are more shadowy groups and associations that let themselves be used for this purpose and from which there is never a question or indiscretion, just one refrain: 'what's the next job?'"

Gary thought better of referring to the Blue Ball Society before he opened his mouth, but Bob seemed to pick up the hesitation.

"It was four months ago, Gary, when I sat in a trailer not far from here and posed the question to a young man." He stopped again.

Okay, I'll bite, thought Gary. "What question?"

"The question, Gary, was this." He put down his silverware and straighten the plates and glasses. "Soldier, I said, this man has a device that he believes communicates with an alien intelligence. Given that this alien intelligence could be malevolent, what does this constitute?"

"Foolhardiness?"

"Okay," said Bob indulgently. "That I'll grant you. But the young man -- not long ago lost during a training exercise in Alaska -- answered as his training would make him. Treason."

"Treason?"

"Yes, Gary, treason. Do you know that treason is the oldest capital crime under federal jurisdiction?"

Gary noticed how his saliva turned metallic, just like in the tired images of thriller novels. He wanted to capture that feeling of dread for later.

"I didn't know that."

"But as I said, there are hard lines and soft ones in the government.

This fact pertains to how penalties are applied as well. I asked the

young man to pass judgment. And he did."

"What was his decision?"

"You're sitting here, aren't you?"

Another banal involuntary action, a gulp and a cough.

"But more importantly, Gary," he said, reaching for something in his jacket, "they're still here as well."

He tossed onto the table the thermal image of Alice, Andrew, Reggie and Gary. There were no identifying features but Gary recognized the moment.

Gary looked at him, unsure if the anger welling up in him would suffice to get him to the point where the man across from him was cold and dead. Then he looked down at his hands in his lap. He knew there was probably someone in the room with them, at another table or the young server himself, who was trained and waiting to turn Gary's rage into impotence and dying capitulation.

"Well, I do believe in double jeopardy, Gary, so let's just forget about that offense and that moment of risk. You've been absolved."

"I appreciate it," he said.

"You're welcome. Dessert?" When Gary shook his head, Bob buried his eyes for a moment in the dessert menu. He signaled to the server -- who appeared with suspicious alacrity -- and said, "A Café Americano for

me. I bet you could use an after-dinner drink, Gary?"

"A whiskey sour," he said, with the realization that there was another act coming, and with resignation.

"Now, to the point," Bob said, slipping the picture back into his jacket. "It's time to end this farce. You have the anomaly, and you will give it to me."

"Yeah, sure."

"You will never say another word about this incident, and you'll make sure that all your co-conspirators do the same."

"Absolutely."

"Finally," said Bob, "you will assist in a sting operation to capture a treasonous member of the United States government, someone who has been seduced by an alien power and who has abused the sacred trust of the American people."

"A sting operation?" Gary said, imagining a wire and the voice of a wise guy...

"Yes, but don't worry. All you have to do is be your regular selfish and self-absorbed self. No acting, no putting yourself at risk."

Gary was waiting.

"Here it is in a nutshell. We'll have another conversation about this after you've had time to think about things a bit. There's nothing

worse, I find, than sending someone out to do your work whose mind is still on their own petty worries. They can be uniformly relied upon to muck everything up. So -- briefly. The anomalies were first predicted by a respected physicist, who has been on retainer with the government to help us locate them. He now seems to be -- " He paused while the coffee was placed. "-- to be interested in making his own contact with the so-called alien intelligence. To this end, we believe he will be contacting you shortly, probably through this woman." He produced a photo of a petite, attractive but hard-eyed woman in fatigues and with the distinctive green beret on her shoulder. "Your job will be to arrange for him to be found with the anomaly."

"And then?"

"And then? And then I would try to be as far as I possibly could from the sting. Be on vacation. Mexico, Virgin Islands, Bahamas -- any place you don't need to worry about a visa. I suspect you won't have time to get one."

"Then that's it?"

With a sip and a connoisseur's smack, he replied: "That's it. As long as you stay to your side of the bargain."

Gary felt the relief of imagining himself emerging, tanned, from the plane to a rebirth in his home town.

"There are only two little matters. First, you can't breathe a word to the alleged intelligence. Not a word. Second, I need you to have someone there, a local contact. In a case such as this, my associates will insist on it, for the sake of cleanliness."

"Someone there?"

"Yes the person the anomaly belongs to. Say that Reginald fellow. Maybe you could take Alice and her boy on a vacation, and give Reginald a chance to collect on the reward he's been pestering me for."

"Reginald came to you?"

"Oh yes, ready to sell his dear mother to collect a finder's fee. He was ready to throw you to the lions, that's for sure." A sharp chuckle.

"I wouldn't turn my back on that fellow."

"If he came to you, why are you talking to me? Why aren't you giving him this deal?"

"Well, first, he doesn't have the anomaly, does he. Second, he can't be relied upon, not in a matter as delicate as this. And third, I don't think he's quite smart enough to be as afraid as you are. -- Let's just enjoy the end of this meal, shall we? Afterwards, I think I'll have to go up to my room and take a nap."

Day 35 -- Gary sat in his cubicle, aware of being surrounded by a twelve by twelve array of such cubicles, one third of which was filled

by contract workers, one third was empty, and one third were people who resented the hell out of Gary still being there while person X -- friend, spouse, lover, less grating colleague -- was out on the street. You may know how it is. One group gets decimated while another gets protection, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes through alliances, sometimes because an accountant somewhere was told: "I don't care how -- just make the numbers balance." But the severance package wasn't bad -- yet -- and Gary sometimes wondered how it would feel to have a fistful of paychecks in the pocket and nowhere to be, no deadlines, no reason not to jet off somewhere. But with the economy shaky, these were likely to be one-way layoffs -- and even so, they weren't taking volunteers.

He was watching Expedia and the rest, but hadn't decided yet where to go. He hadn't taken any steps, in fact, but he had in his hands a digital recorder with someone's voice he didn't recognize -- probably, from the sound of it, someone paid to read the text who could barely read. He listened to it three times before he was sure he understood what he was being asked to do. He had in front of him the web page with a certain Robert C. Walton's contact information. The recorder told him that he was never -- under absolutely no circumstances, without violating the terms of their agreement -- to contact Mr. Walton. He had

a question, though, one that he had had abundant opportunity but no courage to ask, one he thought Walton owed him. What was Scotty? Bob had used "alleged" and the like -- did he think this wasn't an alien intelligence? What did he think it was? Why was he so afraid of it? Gary took an early lunch and walked out and away from the parking lot. He had the prepaid phone with him, and dialed Bluthe's office phone. He tried to mask his voice.

"Hello professor Bluthe, this is your colleague Rex I. Piece. Please give me a call back at this number at your earliest convenience -- "

He put the phone in his pocket and walked down the street, though he'd never done this before in all his years at that company. He walked with his hands stuffed into his pants pockets, another thing he never did, but somehow today it seemed right, a way to signal his introspection, his independence, something like that. It felt right.

But he nearly jumped out of his skin when the phone rang in his pocket.

He took a deep breath before putting it to his ear. "Yeah?"

"This is professor Bluthe. Did I understand your name is professor Piece?" Not a hint of irony. He had been fooled -- or wasn't willing to take the chance.

"This is Bouleregard."

"What?!" Bluthe shouted. "I don't know any." He hung up.

A short time later, Bluthe called back from another phone. "Damn, man, you've got to stop this. What shit are you in now?"

Gary bah'ed. "I think it must be elephant shit, it's that deep. Bluthe, they came to see me."

A silence. "I don't know any they, and I know I don't want to."

"That's fine, you won't have to. We have an arrangement."

"You and Faust."

"Who?"

"You can't have an arrangement with any devil. If you think you've outsmarted him, that's when you know you're in too fucking deep."

"Well, there's a price -- I think it's high enough. But I guess we'll see. You just have to be silent, not another word. To anyone. Ever.

Lose the website, your whole damn archive. Mary has to be silent, too.

You can't even talk to each other about it, in case they're watching you. And we -- you and I had better not talk to each other any more."

"Well, then, Fuckhead, it's been a sick voyage, but you made it with me so I'll just say: Bon Voyage."

After the minister's concluding words, the audience defocused and began to meld into little groups. Alice tried to herd a group or two into the hallway where there were refreshments, but no one seemed to want to

make that first step. She also noticed that they were not discussing the presentation: the kids, the health of a former minister at that church, an impending wedding, vacations. No one rushed to shake the minister's hand, or to get to know his five local actors, who had in any case managed to disappear completely. Alice approached Minister Brown.

"Thank you so much," she said.

"God's work is its own reward, but thank you, child." He looked at her expectantly, and she did remember before it got too awkward. "Here's a small token of our appreciation and a donation for you to continue the work." He smiled as he took the envelope.

There was something about the moment that made some who heard it feel uncomfortable. The minister just nodded as he looked in the envelope.

"God's work goes on." You didn't know how far he saw his own fortunes hitched to God's wagon, but it would be hard to doubt that this was an honest sentiment.

Alice looked around to see if she could point out Mr. Valerio, the businessman who had stepped forward to fill the void that had yawned before Alice. "How much do we need to host the minister?" he had asked and written the check right there. Alice had thanked him, with no assumption that there was a personal motivation. She saw him with Mr.

Hennessy and April Wilson, then moving over to touch Mrs. Kildare's shoulder ever so slightly and greet her with a friendly word. Alice told the minister about the generous gift -- though not its face-saving emergence -- and pointed out Valerio, who just kept sliding between groups, smiling and somehow stealing their attention for a few words, and then moving on.

"And now, I'm tired, I will go to my hotel. Don't worry about me, Alice, my assistant is outside and he will drive us. You've been more than kind. I hope that we have made an impression, but all that is best left with God's foresight. I don't pretend to know the whys or wherefores of what we do, I just do God's bidding." He saw her look at him with a question. "Believe me, we are all doing God's bidding, especially when we look around and find that what we have done is better than we thought, but still impossibly little. It is the impossibly little that gives us the ability to imagine God." He gave her a smile that seemed to say that this was the seed of the answer to a question she could not even ask yet -- a seed that could as easily be blown away.

She watched the minister go, heard the chatter and felt a general relief that the event was over, a success, if also a strange event that would emerge in private conversations over the next days and weeks. An

evening with impact.

"I really enjoyed the minister, Alice," a voice said.

She turned to find a balding, plain, middle-aged man -- someone she had seen around at bake sales and evening events -- but she didn't know his name and probably found his presence in their church strange, without a connection otherwise to the community of volunteers. She smiled in thanks.

"We need more events like this," he said, with a little too much force, as if he was telling himself not to let this opportunity go by.

"Thank you for saying so," Alice said. She may have been tempted to glance around the room, find Mr. Valerio in his progress around the room or see another acquaintance, but in fact she did not. She waited for Gary to go on.

"I feel -- challenged," he said, unsure of the strength of that statement but pleased with how it sounded.

"The minister came highly recommended," said Alice, "and I think he did not disappoint us."

"Definitely not." Gary shook his head thoughtfully. "Definitely not."

He looked around, perhaps embarrassed by his lack of wit, but then said with his eyes diverted back to her, "I bet you're glad it's over, though."

That personal reference took her by surprise -- she looked at him for a split second, and then she laughed, a full little laugh that told of letting her guard down.

They looked at each other, both surprised by the reaction.

Gary managed to break the silence first. "In celebration of a job well done, would it be all right if I took you out to dinner sometime?"

"Oh," she said, "oh thank you. -- But I have very hard time arranging for more babysitting for Andrew. You understand."

"Sure," Gary replied without delay. Then: "I absolutely want to take you and Andrew out for dinner."

Alice had expected her statement to end this and found herself looking at him, confused again. There was something incongruous, she felt, but at the same time there he was, looking for all the world like a nervous teenager asking a girl out for the first time. She smiled in encouragement. "All right, then, thank you -- " she paused.

"Gary," he said, "Gary Corinth." He put his hand out, by force of habit, and they shook hands, both aware of the ironic reversal this conversation had taken. They parted ways almost immediately thereafter, lest the awkwardness spoil the feeling that the encounter had been a human and successful moment, a culmination of the evening's message.

No. 36 -- Gary had not expected the contact to arrive via snail mail,

but there was a certain daring-do to the approach that gave him a rush of adrenaline. "Amy's Escort Service" sent a bill (clearly so labeled) to him. He had never yet used an escort service, and was quite sure that this was not an alias for one of the online services he did use. He tore open the envelope with a curse, imagining how he'd have to argue with a succession of cynical voices about why this charge was bogus... Then he found a strange insert -- it looked like a folded piece of rice paper. He had to cut it open, so he put the bill down. On a printed page -- with purported customer testimonials -- were the slowly emerging outlines of a handwritten message in something like reappearing ink:

Mr. Corinth, We have a proposition for you. We know of your involvement with a certain projection. We are willing to recompense your time, but more importantly, we know you want to know more about this phenomenon, and we can help you. Your place in history will be assured. You will not be able to contact us, but when you are introduced to an escort from Amy's, please go with her, if you are willing to participate. Now, if you would be so kind, please eat this letter to eliminate it as evidence. You'll find it no worse than a rice cake.

With kind regards,

Professor __

He ate it as soon as he finished it. The bill indicated a positive balance at Amy's Escort Service, good for one evening with the escort of his choice. The girls could be perused at the appended confidential URL. The management does not condone contact between customer and escort, but after the terms of the contract are fulfilled, the management does not concern itself with what occurs between consenting adults.

Gary sat in front of Scotty, watching a television program projected wanly through Scotty's apparatus. Occasionally a question would appear about this or that phrase or about the telegraphed murderer or whatever else. Gary felt guilty for having been absent for two days and not responding to Scotty's instant messages or calls. Scotty was reticent, but it was only a matter of time, Gary knew, until the questions began. It began with: Did you get a new job?

"No, no job. I did get a nice dinner."

Pleasant conversation?

"No, I would say that it was more like torture."

That is a strong phrase.

"The fellow was not very pleasant."

What jobs did he offer to you?

"He wasn't in a position to offer jobs, but he was recruiting for the government."

The government? Why is the government interested in you?

"They aren't, really. He was just killing time with me, frankly."

That is another strong phrase.

"No, you're over-interpreting. People kill time -- all the time. It's just a phrase for burning time before something happens."

And you, Gary? Are you killing time?

The day came more quickly than he anticipated. Next day at work, he went to the bathroom to burn the last five minutes before 5 o'clock, and when he got back he was floored to find a petite woman with a visitor's badge, sporting a bobbed haircut and a red cocktail dress, peering intently into his computer screen, clicking madly -- searching his email apparently. When she turned to him, he recognized the face.

"Hello?" Gary said, sparing her his usual "What the f---".

She was surprised but unrepentant. "Gary Corinth? I'm from Amy's Escorts, and I'm here for our evening together. Shall we go?" She stood up and held her little handbag in front of her with both hands -- an endearing gesture but Gary wondered if she was keeping a handgun at the ready.

"Ah sure," he said. He took a moment to shut down the computer and to try to see what she had been doing. She had closed all windows.

The surrounding cubicle environment was agog -- people either amazed at the woman, or disbelieving he'd managed to make the call to an escort service at all. Those few moments Gary enjoyed, but he found himself riding the elevator down with his immediate boss, not relishing a confrontation. The fellow was a grease-haired twenty-something, who spent the ride down three floors trying to figure out if he should slap Gary on the shoulder or give him a stern glance. He walked out of the elevator first, pretending he hadn't noticed anything untoward.

The Amy girl stopped when they stood at the circle in front of the building. "Which way?"

"Which way where?" Gary asked.

"To your car, silly," she said with a saccharine voice that made Gary's shoulders lurch in a suppressed guffaw. She smiled with a strain.

Gary pointed out into the lot, and she took off. She seemed to scanning the lines of cars for someone trying to determine if they were together. Gary had to call to her to stop when she reached the row. She recognized his car when she did, but she did a wide circle around it, pretending to be interested in car styles or occupying her mind while Gary caught up.

She did not approach the car until Gary got in. Then she hopped in and said, "Get going."

"Where to?" he said.

She switched back to the saccharine voice. "Wherever you want, honey."

"Dinner?" he said, not knowing the parameters.

"Maybe we can have dinner later. What do you say we get comfortable somewhere?"

He was about to say something, but she put her finger to her lips. She reached into her purse and flashed a book of matches at him with the name of a nearby adult motel. The matches went back in the purse and she took up surveillance again. Gary drove a longer route than necessary, thinking that might help if they were being followed, but of course Amy Girl didn't know the difference.

They pulled into the lot, and Amy Girl smiled and said, "Oh look." She pulled a set of keys from her purse. "What do you know," she said with a giggle. They both hopped out of the car and walked to the room. It was a small, single-story motel set into an irregular lot at the intersection of two major but askew streets.

The door had closed behind them before Amy Girl turned around. The face had become hard -- in the way that women's faces often do before a difficult transaction. "You got our message," she said curtly.

"Yes I did."

She moved toward Gary, staring from one eye to the other. "Have you told anyone?"

He smiled in a moment of relief. "I haven't told anyone."

"Has anyone contacted you about us?"

Gary had a brief moment to weigh his decision about the next step. He knew that he was at that moment of transition, where the one future becomes real and another impossible, without knowing what the future he was selecting would be. But this future was, in a sense, already mapped out for him, in a path of least resistance that he could not overcome and could not want to.

"Yes, in a sense." -- "Oh shit -" She turned away and cursed some more under her breath, took a massive breath and stretched her limbs, down to her finger joints.

When she was motionless -- but still averted -- Gary decided to go on.

"Robert C. Walton invited me to dinner, and we talked about the anomaly, as he called it. He says he wants it. He also said I should tell him if I was contacted by the professor."

She turned around completely. "Did he mention me?"

"Yes," he said.

She did not react this time. "Did he get the projection?"

"No," said Gary.

"Why not?" She approached him, in a for Gary strange mixture of menace and allure.

"He wanted to see if you show up."

"Why?"

"He wants to catch you with it."

"What are you supposed to do when you see us?"

"I have a way to contact him."

"Okay," she said. "It's safest to assume he already knows I'm down here. You should contact him. Later."

"All right," said Gary, somewhat meekly, but with the voice he had honed through dozens of interactions with superiors who had, finally, decided to give him what he wanted because it suited their needs, too.

"Tell him that you were contacted by me and that we arranged to meet tomorrow night. I'll fly back to ___ tonight."

"But -- " began Gary slowly, trying to get the point of this from her.

"But we'll see it tonight. Professor ___ is already here.

Only Walton won't know that."

"What if he knows it -- he'll know I'm lying."

"He won't know a thing about what you know. For one thing, this room is completely jammed -- even if you were wired head-to-toe this

conversation is private. Tomorrow night is what you tell him. We'll make it worth your while."

"How can it be worth my while if he has me killed?"

"When you don't have the projection any longer there's nothing he'll do to you. Trust me."

"That's not the impression I got from him. In fact, I had the distinct impression that he would have no compunction about adding me to a very long list of deceased individuals, including a private in Alaska..."

She didn't respond, looked him over closely. "He's bluffing."

"It's not worth my while to find that out. I'll tell him that you're here and that we're planning on tomorrow morning. He won't contact me any more, he said. Let him figure out what to do about tonight; I won't go anywhere near the thing. But I'll contact you later tonight to let you know how to find me 'tomorrow.' What happens then isn't my problem."

"Oh no? If you think you can set us up -- "

"I'm the one who's set up here, lady. I just dialed in a fucking signal on a home radio, and now I'm holding a live grenade. If I throw it, I get shot. If I drop it, I get blown up. If I hand it to you, we both get shot, then we get blown up. But I figure if I drop and run as fast as I can the other way, maybe only my backside will get blown off."

"Well, thank you for that image." She said, and plopped onto the bed. A pack of Camels and the motel matches came out. She lit up and set to considering the new reality.

No. 37 -- Sit here, she said, pointing to the end of the bed. He sat down, and she kneeled at his feet, peering up at his crotch -- a scene right out of a porno flick. He looked down at her with a distrustful expression. In case they're still in the dark and have decided to thermal scan us, she said, puffing on her cigarette. When she finished it, she licked her thumb and pushed it on the stub of the cigarette.

Then she threw it in the corner. All right, lie down on the bed. She lay down next to him for a while. Now, she said, leaning on a shoulder and looking him in the eye, I'm going to sit on your pelvis. No funny business, if you know what's good for you.

During those awkward few minutes, Gary had an itch to keep conversing.

"So why does the professor want to see this thing so badly? Hasn't he seen others before?"

Amy Girl stared at him for a moment, weighing whether to answer at all, but finally relented with a shrug. "He's never actually gotten close to one. There are those -- whose job it is to keep him away from them."

"Why?" Gary asked.

"I don't know. Somebody's probably afraid that he'll buck and want to

yap about it to get his Nobel Prize."

"Does he know what it is -- who's on the other end?"

She rocked back and forth a bit -- a sudden burst of realism -- and Gary had to catch his breath. She said nonchalantly: "Well, he has a good idea. He hasn't told me a lot. But what he needs is an opportunity to interact with the projection, test some of his hypotheses about how the intelligence on the other end should respond. That would help solve the mystery."

"Walton seems to think the thing isn't real."

"And that's why he kills people. Right. He'll deny there's anything there until his dying day. Lying takes no toll on the fellow, nor does illogic."

"He did say he was just worried about the social order. Things like that."

"Well, sure," she said, in a different tone. "To a degree, it doesn't matter what's real, just what people say is real. What's really dangerous here is the repetition. You can squelch anything that is a one-time phenomenon and whose appearance is predictable. But if it keeps popping up, spontaneously, the chances keep increasing that in one or more communities it'll come into a maturity where the community spreads the message coherently."

Gary whispered to himself, "The Blue Ball Society."

"What?" she said, putting her arms up and clasping the sides of her head, and twisted her upper body side to side.

"So what if it does? We don't know anything about the intelligence on the other side, and I doubt we ever will."

"It's the other side of the equation that matters," she said. "If you base the social order on there being a closed system, with its own internal logic, then the greatest danger is a sign that the closed system is just one among many, perhaps not even the best. The opportunity to think beyond the limits of the given. Gödel's Theorem. That's what he's afraid of." With that, she looked at her watch and collapsed on him. He could feel her warmth and imagined he could feel her breast resting on his chest. When his eyes managed to focus on her face, directly next to his, she was smirking, but without the saccharine. "Okay," she said with relief, "I'm going to take a shower."

Over so soon. With Minister Brown, I feel like bowing out now, before the end, with the grace of those who have seen much and need not see much more. But there's a debt to be paid here, and I have no excuse for turning away now. Whether I survive long past the end of this narrative, I couldn't tell you -- and it's not your concern, after all.

Neither my story is, nor I myself am, necessary anymore, but if I die in this cause, then my death has been redeemed many times over. The story has indeed gone beyond the confines of a single community -- if it needs to go underground again, it will do so with a sufficient inculcation, with a broad enough infection, to replicate. That, together with the ongoing, occasional transfer across the Einstein-Newton barrier, guarantees there will be no end to this progression.

The only danger, it seems to me, is the successful colonization of the message by a closed system -- a religious cult, for instance. Of course, Christianity is the archetypal viral message as cult, as closed system -- the conquering of communities through infection and dissemination. Even such a successful message is subject to an infinite variation, an endless re-purposing and absorption. Spirituality, Bluthe has written, awaits us at the end of the world. Perhaps. That, or death, is where the spirit meets reality. But we live on in a world where the spirit meets only itself, replicated billions of times over, repeating, endlessly, a small set of intuitions and insights. Whether they are meaningless blips in the evolution of an intelligent universe, or light piercing the veil of this physical world, no one of us can decide on the basis of evidence, when we are each just at a random

place in the Brownian movement of the social cloud we inhabit.

After an hour, Gary and Amy Girl left the motel together. She had decided that it was too dangerous for them to separate. She would keep an eye on him as he delivered the message to Walton, and he would release the location of the projection to the Professor. When the professor had had his encounter, she would hand over a Cashier's Check in her possession. She suggested cashing it out of town.

Gary and Amy Girl drove to his house. They cracked some beers, turned up the music and pretended to be relaxing. They were both getting ready to contact the men whose interests they represented. Gary was to erase the message he'd received, and to go to a Web address. It would work once. He had 30 seconds to select a date and time for the rendezvous from a Java applet that could be decrypted only once -- no typing for a keystroke log, or a Web form to be captured locally. He had a phone from them with a GPS signal. He was to turn it on and leave it at the location. If circumstances warranted, he could leave a voicemail on the phone. Then his job was to get as far away from this town as he could. Of course, nothing works quite like it's supposed to. How many times had he been bitten, showing off a design or maybe a little application to his higher-ups, and the demo gremlins stepped in to mess it all up? He was all too familiar with the hubris of even the simplest mortal

plans. This one was straightforward enough to describe, but had disaster written all over. Of course, all the imaginable disasters would crash around his head, not Walton's, and he could see that face, generous and conniving at the same time, smiling at him as he recognized that the deal offered was never meant to be consummated. But to Gary the question was always first and foremost how to best cover his ass: You almost never avoid getting your face shoved in the dirt this way, but sometimes you manage to drag it back out, half crushed into a defiant smile.

"Okay," Amy Girl said, "tell me where it is."

"How are you going to contact him?"

"What's it to you?" she said. Then: "I hook this cell phone to this scrambler. No one can listen to the message because it's just random bits. I leave the message on a cell phone attached to a special machine in a secret location. That machine passes the message on to various locations on the Internet. One of them calls the Professor, and he decrypts."

"Interesting." He wrote down a street address. She dialed, spoke it into the phone slowly and quietly, then hung up. Then she burned the note.

"All right now you," she said. Gary deleted the message on the device,

then sat down in front of the computer. He punched in the IP address that he had memorized. The browser stuttered like it was being immediately redirected, then Java loaded and a simple calendar and digital clock emerged on the screen. Gary clicked the next day and then set the clock to 9am. After the requisite thirty seconds, his browser was redirected to Google.

Gary produced the phone. "I've got to get this to the shop tonight."

"Not before we're done."

"Well," Gary said with an odd but insuppressible tone of hope, "what do we do now?"

Amy Girl, unmoved, was shuffling some DVDs on his table. "Do you have anything besides porn in this pathetic collection?"

No. 38 -- When the door opened and the light flashed ever so briefly over Scotty's apparatus, the shutdown began. By the time the Professor sat down in front of the device it had submerged again in the metallic goo, the beam had fizzled. The green stain at the end of the spiral completely dissipated just a few minutes later. The anguish on the professor's face must have been something.

Against all protocol, Amy Girl received a direct call. "What is it?" she hissed. "Oh shit." She sat up on the couch and straightened her back. Then she turned to Gary: "He wants to know what happened to it.

It disappeared when he came in."

"Damn," said Gary, "it's been suspicious lately. I don't normally keep much in the way of secrets from it. It must have thought that he was Walton."

"How do we get it back?"

"I don't know," he said. "Try switching the battery off and on again."

A couple minutes passed. "Nothing," she said.

Gary looked at her while he reflected -- though his eyes wandered a bit too much. "Does the professor feel a prickly sensation? Like there's a lot of static?"

She relayed both ways. "Yes," she said in reply.

"It's probably watching him. I think they have the ability to observe where there's a residual connection. Of course, the professor would know better than I."

"So -- it's waiting for you to come?"

"I guess so," he said meekly.

"Well, fuck me," she said to no one in particular. "All right, then, Gary, let's go to the shop. And give me that damn GPS phone."

There was a lot going on at that very moment, not very far away from the shop. Bags were being packed, there were kisses goodbye. Andrew

deleted the temporary files on his computer with a utility that filled the emptied space with zeros multiple times, just in case there was a copy of the encrypted chat he had just had with Scotty. He could remember every word of it, with the strange acuity of youth: unmitigated memory, untroubled by the suspiciousness that would lead you to look behind the words to what was not said. But it was a shocking enough message that he knew this went well beyond his ability and desire to understand. Most of it was directed to his mother, anyway, with the express admonition that Reggie, if he was there, should not be allowed to see the conversation.

Scotty had a lot to fill Alice in on, in just a few short sentences.

Walton's return. Reggie's involvement. Gary made sure that Scotty would explain: someone needs to be there to meet with Walton. But he did not elaborate to Scotty what he suspected and knew to be the outcome of that presence. If Scotty embellished, so be it; if he stuck to the script, well, Alice was certainly well versed enough to draw her own conclusions. Or so Gary told himself. Then on to the tickets. Waiting in her name at the airport. Tickets you could cash in at any airport for another set of tickets or for cash. Or you could just leave them if you had reason to believe that the deal had gone south -- oh, say, if Gary found himself unable to meet her at the airport. But, and this was

the crux of the issue, Gary or Reggie had to be there to meet Walton, or she and Andrew were at risk. Gary or Reggie. Reggie's involvement, his greed, his indifference to the risks to her -- Gary went on at some length while Scotty listened.

It took some forty-five minutes to drive to the shop. Amy Girl looked out the window; Gary played Bruce Springsteen, his Born to Run work, a repetitive paean to a young rebel on his motorbike and his last ditch offer to his love to jump on the bike and flee. The intended effect was there: both elation and a sense of the monumentality of those seconds and minutes. At the same time, he was tired and more than a little hungry, and his penis actually throbbed from unaccustomed excitement and inattention. His body, it seemed to him, ached a general feeling of indifference in the face of the experiential quantum mechanics, in which the mundane coexists with terror, that was swallowing him whole. They came into the shop slowly, but the professor called to them. Amy Girl stopped Gary from turning on the overhead light, then she was gone from beside him, and a few moments later he saw her silhouette at the edge of the cone of the professor's flashlight. The professor had embraced her, and she was whispering to him. But from his movements, the professor seemed only now to comprehend something, and stepped back from her. Gary surmised: she hadn't been frank about the danger he was

in. The professor leaned against the table with Scotty's bowl and spiral. Gary heard her repeat, "It'll be okay, it'll be okay."

A minute later, Gary joined them at the edge of the flashlight cone.

"I'll see if Scotty will come back." He leaned over the table and clicked the battery on and off, waited, then on and off. Then he waited and clicked it on. He turned to see Amy Girl looking pensively at him; he smiled his meek smile. "Like turning an engine over, I think. You've got to prime it."

She seemed unimpressed with his platitude, but had a flash of insight.

She took the phone from her purse and examined it.

He took the opportunity to look at his watch. There wasn't much time; he and Scotty had agreed on posing an hour deadline to Alice, an hour to resolve this, one way or the other. This, after Scotty had pried -- through silence -- the truth from him; this, after Scotty had shown the flaws in every scenario that Gary painted to him. All right, Gary had said, what do you suggest? Scotty was silent on that point, but Gary found himself constructing the current plan in the ensuing silence. At the center, presuming all the pieces fell as anticipated, was Alice's choice: her chance to decide who sacrificed for her and who was willing to sacrifice her.

The story they provided was that Alice was to send Reggie to get the

device before Gary put them all at risk; she had just gotten the address from the device itself. Then Reggie was to get rid of it. Right now. The key was right now. It would be gone within an hour.

Amy Girl was trying to turn the phone on and off, but nothing happened. Then she turned it over, and pulled the battery. The spark told her -- it had been on, the whole time.

There was a back way out the storefront. When Reggie came in the front door, there was a chance that Gary could get out that way; he had left just the doorknob lock on so he would barely have to break his stride. And Reggie had three minutes to get there.

"Oh my God," said a voice -- could have been Amy Girl's, but Gary realized slowly that it was the professor's. There, in the center of the spiral, a green cloud had formed and was expanding, in a way that Gary had never seen before. With a sudden yellow and black-tinged flash, a beam caught the surface of the goo in the bowl and started raising a lump.

Gary looked back to Amy Girl, who was not looking at the bowl at all. She was weighing this moment, perhaps weighing whether this last deception merited a bullet in the brain. Or probably she had already decided and just waited until he was watching her to turn to the professor and put her arm around his shoulder. The prof was impervious

to all this in his state of marveling. Gary filled in the message from Amy Girl: 'it's not worth trashing this moment to kill you, and most likely I'll be able to watch you squirm and die before I do -- or don't.' She must have thought she had immunity -- as Gary did -- but each for their own reasons. Gary brought the watch to his eyes.

The seconds pulsed slowly away, their progression marked by the slow growth and evolution of the lump that the beam was creating from the silvery liquid chaos. A square, an undeniable geometric shape, formed, then was refined by smaller echoes of the same shape of which each in turn took on noticeable function: here a small screen, there a lens, over there an antenna for audio reception. Weak flashes passed over the screen until finally a defined image formed: the professor himself, crudely drawn, with Amy Girl embracing him from behind. The tears in the professor's eyes were not visible, nor were those in Amy Girl's.

Gary had no tears, but his eyes were welling, as he sang Bruce Springsteen to himself, repeating the words and a few notes until they had slowed the thoughts in his mind.

The seconds were painful, even as he got to see Scotty one last time, hear that metallic sham of a voice, see the letters flash across the screen. He looked away to the darkness in the back of the shop, where a curtain hid a doorway and ten feet behind that a way out into the

alley. But he had to wait for Reggie, who was taking his damn time. The last few minutes finally just meshed together in the darkness. There were barely fifteen seconds left when he knew he could not hope any longer. He felt something akin to anger: Scotty had been silent during the planning, but he knew how to play silence quite well. Was there something about this plan that wasn't Gary's own? Thirteen. He knew the risks of what he had undertaken -- a hundred reasons why it could fail. Alice could -- oh my God! -- already be dead. Ten. Scotty would have told him if that were true. Everything was still on track. Eight. Reggie could have refused; he could be suspicious, beat it out of Alice. Six. Or she could lose her nerve; Gary knew he would forgive her. Five! Or maybe he wouldn't be able to, at the last moment. Four! Time was up -- his life was ebbing away. Three! Maybe -- Two! this was the inevitable -- One! outcome.

Gary was silent. Scotty saw the moment pass, and would shortly, out of deference, retreat into the nether from which he had come. But for the time being, he attended to the condemned.

Preamble (No. 39)

We misunderstand silence as the absence of sound, but absence is the exceptional case. You can take your point of reference out of house, building, street, town, region or country, moving with disembodied

speed past roaring wide-body jets, up to and beyond the reach of chirping communications satellites gleaming majestically in their isochronic orbits, away from this blue ball into the immense ocean of solar particles, meteors and clumps of dumb mass; and then imagine another logarithmic shift as your view leaves the sun's sphere of influence for darker and colder realms of galactic space, gooey at these speeds with a vast, loose foam of dark energy and darker matter, then faster, out of the galaxy and into the still not empty space that lies fallow between galaxies and among galaxy clusters, until you have moved so far away, so quickly, that the unfathomable reaches of these billions upon billions of burning spheres become nothing more than tiny buckets, from which an occasional smattering of photons jump like flashes from a cosmic sparkler. There, in that Kelvinian stillness, you might begin to understand absence.

But here, you lie crumpled on the floor in a hot, humid, motionless room, with air that seems to swirl above you like milk in coffee. You tell yourself that you are alone and you believe you lie in a silent room. Yet noise is echoed from afar and filters in all around you: the rumble of tires slapping pavement, the patter of accelerating engines, and the bass booms of competing car stereos. The air exhales from your lungs with a soft whoosh, moist and sticky, and comes right back in

with an empty rushing sound. The wicked muscle in your chest pops off like an engine that won't stop sputtering, followed by the rush of a chokingly thick liquid, a one-two foomp that fills your ears: the pounding that inspired Poe but seems a bittersweet torture to you. There is no doubt that, if the cacophony should end of its own, your ears themselves would begin to ring or whirr, driven to perceive something -- anything -- until sensation ends completely.