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“You have the greatest gig in the world!” Martin Hernandez blew on his hot, black coffee. “I mean... for a janitor!” He smiled. “I tried to get work there!”

“Janitor? I prefer *sanitary engineer!*” Hector Gonzalez looked up and down Broadway. “It’s freezing, though... and no one knows if the Superbowl’s gonna be delayed.” He looked into the deep gray sky. “This weather is *crazy.*”

“Here we are sitting in a Starbucks right next to Madison Square Garden.” Martin tried to drink but the scalding sting was too much to handle. “You’re going to be cleaning *toilets...* during the biggest game in the world.” He thought for a second. “You’ll probably come across some cheerleaders face to face.”

Hector shook the thought off. “Hey. Did you hear about that crazy man in tights? I think they called him the Spandex

“The guy’s name was Satoshi Nakamoto. This is my tenth and final visit to this fine barn, by the way. I want to talk to the newcomers in particular. Someday, you’ll be standing where I’m at... that is, unless you flake out and stop coming to this shelter of fine aromas.” A few attendees laughed. They sat on iron fold-out chairs and the air reeked of livestock dung. Dude Mask felt uncomfortable and silly. He wanted to take off his Guy Fawkes and tell the people his real name. He considered it then shook it off. “Satoshi is the guy who started Bitcoin, many of you know... but he’s not a real person. It’s an assumed name and a while back, Newsweek figured they had the whole thing figured out... but I think they were wrong. The guys I talked to believe it was a Japanese mathematician named Shinichi Mochizuki. Others say Satoshi is actually three guys: Charles Bry, Neal King, and Vladimir Oksman. The point I’m trying to make is one, that alternate thinking can be successful. There’s no stopping Bitcoin. Crypto-currencies are the wheel. It’s an invention that is too good to turn away from. The other point is that there needs to be a degree of selflessness in these great endeavors.” Dude Mask finally decided to take off his mask. He stood in front of a group of about thirty people and he felt naked. He held up his mask to the crowd. “These masks are optional for you. If you look around, you’ll notice that there’s a dozen people wearing something just like this. You’ve seen these on TV and you can buy them through eBay for about three bucks. They’re not expensive.” Dude Mask reached into his pocket, pulled out a card from his wallet, then held the card up. “Newbies get ten of these cards. When they’re gone, you can longer attend these meetings.” Dude Mask put his card into the shredder which rested on a wheel barrel off to his right. “You have been marginalized or you would not be here... unless you’re a mole for the corporations, of course.” Laughter from a few people warmed Dude’s heart. “We work on problems. More than that, we come to terms. Is this permanent? Have we lost our place in the world? Is there light at the end of the tunnel? Can we overcome the beast that has put us under?” He put his wallet back into his jeans then clapped his hands together. “Are there any questions for me?”

Sharon December was in her fifth meeting and sat off to the left of the front row. “Does anyone know how long this has been going on? What typically happens when you leave? Do people keep in touch?”

“I have no clue how long this has been going on,” Dude responded. “I’d guess almost three years since the original Occupy protests started.” He walked to Sharon and handed her his mask. “You might want this. At the very least, you can give it to someone.”

“You’re not gonna keep it?” Sharon examined the facial expression of Guy Fawkes. Subtle rosy cheeks, a thin mustache, and a vertical slice of black hair under the mouth. The eyebrows were slightly rounded and pointed inward. *Mischievous*, she thought. “Won’t there be protests and marches?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” Dude shrugged her off and spoke to the newcomers again. He pointed to a tarp which covered a large, lumpy contraption. “That is an old fashioned printing press.” Near the shredder to his right, there was an antique clunky Smith-Corona typewriter. “These are more than sentimental artifacts of a kinder era. They are fully functional. We all have smart phones and

we utilize them. Every now and then, we think we have something sensitive... like these meetings.” Dude noticed some of the newbies checking out their hot pink flyers. “We do our own screen printing here and the NSA won’t be intercepting our messages because we go low-tech with a good deal of our communications.”

Sharon felt a deep feeling in the pit of her stomach. “I don’t know that I belong here.” She looked at some of the people around here. “Do you recommend we stick it out? Should we leave if we get too confused.”

“The best I can tell you is that this is the aftermath of a plane wreck. This is not your regular Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. We are doing more than conquering personal demons. There are misers in control of the world we live in.” Dude started to sweat and wiped beads from his forehead. “No one wants to be in a airplane crash, though. What do you do if you’re the survivor of a 757 that ploughed into the sandy beach of a remote island? That’s what you need to figure out.”

“I think I’ll stay... but it seems hopeless. For the past five Tuesdays, I’ve showed up to these therapy meetings and I haven’t said anything so far. I’m halfway through but I feel as confused now as I did on day one.” She decided to put the Guy Fawkes mask on. “I think I can fit in. *Futile*. It seems so futile, though.”

A quarter mile away from the barn, police officer Lou Wiggum sat inside his squad car talking it up with rookie Maxwell Smart. “I really wanted the Cowboys to take Johnny Manziel with their first pick. I mean, he’s a local star! Pundits figured he could go number one overall and he fell all the way to sixteen. *Some lineman*. They wound up drafting some lineman!” He bit into a glazed donut.

The lights of the squad car were off and they were parked somewhat conspicuously behind a large bush. “What are they doing in there?” Maxwell asked. “Why are we staking ‘em out?”

“I mean, it’s not the best message to be sending to Tony Romo. Am I right? You can’t have some hotshot kid looking over your shoulder!” *He asked a question*, Wiggum thought. “Did you say something?”

“Yeah. Why are we here?” Maxwell observed cows grazing under moonlight and he began counting the number of vehicles parked along the dirt road beyond the farm’s entrance. “Drugs? I heard those Occupy guys are all on drugs. It’s some sort of front. They raped girls in the tents. *Occupy Unmasked*. Andrew Breitbart did the documentary.”

“Those guys get under the skin of the mayor. They’re out there marching in front of the businesses along Main Street so shoppers wind up going elsewhere. *Shit rolls down hill*. That’s the first thing you gotta realize if you want to make detective sooner than later.” Lou Wiggum sipped some black coffee. “A few of those business owners are on the city council. It’s all about money at the end of the day. Never tell that to perps on the streets, though.” Wiggum stared across the field at the barn. “Drugs? Nah. They’re smarter than that. *Most of them are*. We’re going to wait for that meeting to break up, and if somebody darts away like a bat out of hell, then we stop him. We insinuate that he’s been drinking or doing

drugs, yes. Chances are, we might let him go... but we have to put *fear* into them.”

“Fear? So that’s what this is about?” Maxwell Smart was a twenty-two year old cop one month on the job. *Five years ago I was tipping cows at places like this*, he reflected. “So the documentary is wrong? Or does that just go on in the big cities?”

Sharon was in was in the barn returning to her seat. She had just spent a couple of minutes speaking in front of the small crowd about her confusion. Up next to talk was a young married couple. They took off their masks and the man began, “After Bain Capital shut down the mill, I was out of work for a year.”

His pretty wife explained, “Mitt Romney and Bain Capital bought the textile mill where Raymond had worked for eighteen years then shut it down.” She looked around and saw some somber faces and a few heads nodding in empathy.

The man was dressed in a greasy striped mechanics uniform. He looked down at his oval name patch which simply read “Raymond”. His testimonial continued, “It was really hard on my family. Finally, I got a job at a piano factory at half my old salary... then Bain bought *that* company and I got laid off again.” He paused and absorbed the group’s collective angst. “Next, I got work as a trucker but then Bain came along and bought the trucking company and then I lost *that* job too!” He noticed that Sharon was in the front row starting to snicker. She put her palm to her mouth to hold back laughter. Raymond continued, “I then got hired part-time at an Orange Julius until Bain obtained *that* franchise and shut it down. Now, not the whole company, you understand? Just that *one* store. And that’s when I said to myself, ‘What the hell is going on here?’”

Sharon stood up, “I need to excuse myself for the restroom.” She took off to the back and through the doors. There was an outhouse twenty yards away.

Raymond went on after she was gone, “Finally, I got a job at a shoeshine stand under an assumed name working just for tips... but Bain somehow found out, bought the business, and moved it to China. That’s when I knew... it’s not a coincidence.” He could hear Sharon bellowing just outside the exit and realized she was simply being polite by letting herself out. He saw her come back in and sit.

The pretty wife summed up, “Each time Raymond McCoy got a new job, Mitt Romney and Bain Capital would buy the company, apparently for the sole purpose of laying him off.”

There were a few seconds of uncertain silence. Raymond said, “We have someone amongst us who watches Saturday Night Live.” Sharon lifted her hand and bowed her head embarrassed. “My real name is Raymond Johnson--*not Raymond McCoy*--but we thought this skit hit home about how many of us have lived. It’s seemed like a thunder cloud has been following us around. I’ll show up to the market and it seems like it’s only raining on *me*. We use comedy to lift our spirits.”

His wife said, “This is our seventh week here. It’s been worth it. I used to lay home on my couch for hours on end feeling helpless. Sometimes, I think me and Ray are the only ones that feel like victims of this horrid *happening*. Our political leaders are bought off. Our business leaders don’t care. Our police

treat us like criminals before we do anything wrong.”

Snoopy Snooper had just pulled up near the barn and parked his 1978 Chevy El Camino at the end of a line of cars. He had just closed his door when he noticed Sharon going through hysterics outside. He was too far away say anything. When he watched her go back inside, he took a flashlight and flicked it on and off three times in the direction of the police car down the road.

“That’s our guy,” Lou Wiggum told Maxwell Smart. “He’ll blend in, gain intelligence, and maybe stir up some problems. He has a mask just like the rest. They won’t know any difference.”

Snoopy Snooper found a seat in the back just as Raymond and his wife wrapped up their business.

From the outside, the place didn't look like much. It was a simple trailer hidden behind an array of tall bushes and trees. Inside, Eddie wondered what the fuck was going on. He was trying to write a story. It didn't come easy. He had written a few novels but found himself in the middle of writer's block. "What the fuck is going on here?" he exclaimed into thin air. No one was around. There would be no answer.

He had *her* around, though.

Her name was...

"What the fuck?!" Eddie demanded as he struggled for control between himself and the author of this story. "What is this? Is this a psyche issue?"

A gal crept into Eddie's mind but he would shoe her away. "Slut!" he said aloud.

Ghosts were sent to spy on Eddie from the federal government through CIA programs. The CIA had contacts with the Screen Actors Guild and other agencies. They used to use *dude spies* but they would get nowhere with Eddie because they were fag and abrasive. Chick spies, on the other hand, could pull out information. What was life all about? Eddie had the answer. What the fuck was really going on with Nine Eleven? Eddie had a better idea than the common person. What will happen in the future? Eddie had an idea... and he also had a plan.

The government in Washington was full of corrupt losers. Eddie's *plan* was contrary to their collective agenda. They wanted to control the masses--not just their physical behaviors but also their *thoughts*. Eddie threatened their desires. They preached freedom and practiced oppression. They talked about education but tried to keep everyone ignorant.

The chick ghost spy was ready to talk. Up until this point, she was ready to sell Eddie down the river for a nickel. She realized that the author of this story was recording her every move and thought... and she froze because she was being exposed as less than honorable.

"Hey crazy spy lady! What's your deal?" Eddie wondered.

No answer.

"What kind of bullshit is this?" Eddie only waited a couple of seconds before adding, "This crap has been going on for fifteen years! What's the frickin' deal?!"

No answer.

The ghost spies *loved* to come around and talk when there was no writing going on. When Eddie was unwinding on a couch, they would pounce on him with *all kinds of thoughts*... and when he was tired on his bed ready for sleep they would poke at his brain with spiritual poker things.

"Well, you foiled my *other* story," Eddie said. "But you got the wheels on me writing! Yes! Now you know! Me and the author of this story are one!"

The was laughter from the ghost lady.

"If those fags from the government try to stop me now, they're in for a surprise! You can't end human desire! You can't stomp free speech! You losers!" Eddie wanted to wipe sweat from his forehead but he was in the middle of typing stuff on his laptop computer. Finally, he said to himself, *After this*

sentence, I'm gonna wipe my forehead. Sure enough, Eddie grabbed a shirt that had been resting on his synthesizer and wiped his forehead.

It was hot outside, of course.

The lady ghost decided she didn't want to stick around any longer. "Hey lady!" Eddie yelled. "Don't you know what *brain storming* is? I'm doing it!"

The lady ghost came back and wanted Eddie to write her actual name down. In real life, she was the anchor of one of the local news programs in the greater Los Angeles area. Eddie heard some spiritual mumbling because there were others around... but some of the others were total dogshit people and Eddie didn't want to acknowledge or dignify them. Through some of the mumbling, he could decipher that she would get paid *money* if Eddie would write her actual name down. *Some kind of bonus.*

There were other things going on and the author was going to write about them but the ghosts had a trick. *They would steal Eddie's thoughts.* Eddie defended himself sometimes by writing in pen on his hand... or carrying around a notebook and writing crap in there... or taking out his smart phone and jotting things on the provided mini yellow pad. They would steal his dreams, too. He would wake up knowing something good was going on upon waking... but they would jam his brain signals. When this phenomenon had started many years before, it would severely anger and frustrate Eddie. Over the years, he learned to deal with it. He thought about the starving kids in Africa--the ones with exposed ribs under thin skin and flies landing on them. They wouldn't swat them or shoe them away. *Learned helplessness,* Eddie thought. *That's what those kids have... and that's what I have to some degree or another.* He considered the moment. *Apathy,* he thought. *It's like apathy... but I'm not a hundred percent there yet.*

When the spirits were mean, they would coerce Eddie into performing a number of different things. It might be practicing a song on piano or guitar to upload onto the internet. It might be making some food. It might be writing something creatively. His pain was their pleasure. If Eddie was tired, it was a bonus for them.

Every now and then, they would feel sympathy... or the dynamic of the particular spirits would subtly change. In these cases, they would let Eddie do what came natural to him. This might mean taking a name or using the restroom.

I'm in that moment, Eddie thought. *They want me to get up from this keyboard and stop typing. They think I should have a Cup O' Noodles.* After a few seconds of delirious laughter, Eddie decided that his current story was going nowhere. He thought about the bullcrap in the central government. He still felt numb that DC had become a whole lot of fascist loser-ass wankers. *Yes, I'll get my Cup O' Noodles,* Eddie thought. *BUT NOT BECAUSE YOU SAID SO, ASSHOLES!!! You were reading my mind that that's what I wanted to do from the beginning, you cock suckers.* The ghost chick wasn't the one poking and prodding Eddie at the moment of frustration. It was some geezer dude dipshit.

Well, I do feel better for having written these things. I can safely say my writer's block is out the window as of now. He waited a few moments. *I will get my Cup O' Noodles... and I'm going to destroy the*

intrusive ghost fag wankers when it's over!!! He considered his situation. Nah. That's not going to happen because God is a loser and he's siding with their faggot asses!!

“I woke up in this sleeping bag on this hard, cold marble floor... next to this wheel.” Dick Tracy rubbed his chin. “How did you get here?”

What the heck is going on here? Erin Martin wondered. Eighty in white on top. Fifteen in green below followed by one hundred in red. Five in green then white numbers. Ninety, twenty-five, seventy. “It’s the *Price Is Right* wheel. Can’t you tell?” She felt a sense of vertigo. “My name is Erin, by the way.” She extended her right hand for a shake but the man in front of her turned away.

“I was at a cocktail party. That’s the last thing I remember.” He looked around for signs of being on a Hollywood set but there were none... besides the large wheel next to him. “Where could we possibly be?”

“I woke up next to you half hour ago or so. I took a look around.” The red pointer on the wheel was frozen at five. Erin yanked the wheel down a few notches. “It’s real enough. The other rooms? They’re like this... but different shows. They’re replicas. Family Feud, Jeopardy, Tick Tack Dough. I want to find a kitchen... or a restroom. It’s like a maze. No windows anywhere and no signs of exits.”

“I was about to sign a contract for a timeshare. *Amazing deal*. We were going to take a trip around the world. A package deal, right? Amazing package... then I woke up here.” There was a song playing from an unidentified speaker somewhere, “Please, Mister Postman” by the Carpenters. The music dimmed. Dick Tracy felt scared and infuriated.

A voice spoke from the speaker, “You will need to spin the wheel. If it lands on fifty or higher, you will have breakfast sent to you through a chute located near the corner of the room. Anything below fifty? You’ll have to spin again for a chance at lunch.” *So many days you passed me by... See the tears standing in my eyes... You didn’t stop to make me feel better... By leavin’ me a card or a letter...* The oldie played for a few seconds then shut off again. The voice added, “Make sure the wheel spins around at least one complete time, by the way... or you will not eat.”

“Do we do it?” Erin asked. “I say we sit here and protest. What’s he gonna do?”

“I don’t have my phone on me, lady, or I would’ve called nine one one already. I say we listen to the guy. He’s waiting for us to become belligerent. There’s bound to be a phase two of this thing.” Dick Tracy grabbed the side of the wheel and heaved it down swiftly. It span around a few times and slowed down. “I’m hungry,” he said. Fifty, ninety-five, fifty-five. *Slower*. Seventy-five. “*No, no, no.*” The pointer flirted with forty but didn’t get there. “Thank the stars! We get to eat!”

“*Congratulations!*” The voice interrupted the music again. “Food is on the way.”

“A lot of us have come here for different reasons. Some of us were part of the Occupy movement. Some of you have had luck with Bitcoin. Maybe your uncle was Eddie Vedder. *I don't know*. We are drawn to what is *alternative*... or we have been pushed out of the mainstream entirely. We are marginalized. Some of you are on the border of being completely apathetic and I can see it in your faces. You are tired. You are beginning to believe that they have *won*. Who has won? The Killer Pinnochios! The rampant liars that have hijacked our government! The ones who preach one thing and do the opposite! They say freedom then slam down the iron fist on us. They are the ones who try to enslave each and every person in this room. They tap our phone calls and they peer at us like lunatic voyeurs. They are psychotic, rotten perverts with the most expensive toys planet Earth has ever known. They are detached and thick skinned. I am sick of it. We are all sick of it.” XXX XXXX took off his Guy Fawkes mask. He held it in his hand and thought about *V For Vendetta*. He looked upwards and was grateful there was a roof overhead. Rain poured outside. A circle of about twenty-five people waited patiently for him to either sit down on his wooden crate or else to continue with his speaking. Almost half of the distraught attendees were wearing the same Guy Fawkes masks that had become associated with Occupy Wall Street and was also the adopted brand of Anonymous videos throughout the internet. “John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated fifty years ago today. Let us remember what he said.” He pulled out a sheet of paper and read the transcript of a 1961 JFK speech.

The very word “secrecy” is repugnant in a free and open society... and we are, as a people, inherently and historically opposed to secret societies, to secret oaths, and secret proceedings. We decided long ago that the dangers of excessive and unwarranted concealment of pertinent facts far outweighed the dangers which are cited to justify it. Even today, there is little value in opposing the threat of a closed society by imitating its arbitrary restrictions. Even today, there is little value in ensuring the survival of our nation if our traditions do not survive with it. And there is very grave danger that an announced need for increased security will be seized upon those anxious to expand its meaning to the very limits of official censorship and concealment. That I do not intend to permit to the extent that is in my control... and no official in my administration, whether his rank is high or low, civilian or military, should interpret my words here tonight as an excuse to censor the news, to stifle dissent, to cover up our mistakes or to withhold from the press and the public the facts they deserve to know.

XXX XXXX sat down after reciting the historic speech.

“What happened to the jobs? That’s what I really want to know,” Eddie asked

“They went to China. What do you want me to tell you?” Samantha answered

“What am I supposed to do? Sit here and let my life waste away?” Eddie asked.

“No. Fight your fight,” Samantha said.

“Fight my fight? It’s not effective. They wrecked us. I want revenge,” Eddie said.

“You’re not going to get revenge. They have no hearts. They have more power than you want to believe,” Samantha said.

“Thanks for the talk, anyway,” Eddie said. “I guess all I can do right now is play video games. I’ll get my revenge in the afterlife if I’m lucky... or when I’m really old and hardly have any use.”

“Behind me, you might be able to see four baseball cards pinned up in the upper left portion of the pegboard. Can you make out who the players are?” Eddie watched four bewildered faces try to figure it out.

“They are Royals or Dodgers,” one guy said. He was sitting on a metal folding chair with three people seated to his right.

“Good. What’s your name?” It was precisely one in the afternoon and the meeting began right on time. Eddie looked past the four seated guests at a young teen riding by on a skateboard. The garage door was open and he was expecting a few others to possibly show up.

“Albert,” the guy said. “It’s the blue uniforms and helmets. That’s why I know.”

“Good. Yes. It’s the 1981 Dodger infield. They won a World Series. They stayed in tact. Free agency has since been agreed upon and guys don’t stay together like they used to. Next to the four Topps baseball cards, there is a logo. Do you see it? Lips and tongue?” Eddie took a cue stick and pointed at the image. There was no pool table in sight but there was a row of sticks clamped inside a rack off to the side.

A gal sitting next to Albert raised her hand and timidly said, “The Rolling Stones. My dad *loves* the Rolling Stones. That’s their logo. I’ve seen it on T-Shirts.”

“Yes,” Eddie said. “They’ve been playing together for more than fifty years. What is your name? What school are you coming from?”

“My name is Betty. I’m in my sophomore year at Cal Poly Pomona.” She adjusted her thick, square-ish, black plastic-rimmed glasses. Her hair was brunette, thick, wavy and flowed in front of her chest. She fidgeted in her chair.

“Albert?” Eddie called. “You are a sophomore too, correct? At what school?”

“MIT,” Albert said. “I walked away last week.”

“We have two other people here.” Eddie’s attention turned to the remaining visitors. “If I am right, you are also sophomores and have left prominent engineering programs.”

A surfer-looking guy immediately to Betty’s right volunteered, “I was going to Cal Tech until a couple of days ago. My name is Don.”

The girl to his right had thick red hair, “Stanford. Not necessarily known to focus on engineering in particular... but I’ve had my share of physics labs.” She sat and waited for further instruction. A few seconds passed. “Oh! My name! Sherry.”

“Good.” Eddie turned his attention back to the pegboard. “Next to the Rolling Stones logo, you’ll notice a white P inside a blue square. That’s the PayPal icon for our smart phones. We all know who Peter Thiel is, am I right?”

Albert answered, “In your Craigslist solicitation, you mentioned him and that’s why we’re all here. He’s the CEO who encouraged students to drop out of college. He set up a two million dollar fund for bright kids to put their brains to work in the real world.”

Next to the the PayPal symbol, there was a black and white photo of an again, balding, grinning

man. “I have five dollars in my pocket for...”

“Timothy Leary!” the redhead shouted. “Tune in! Turn on! Drop out!” Sherry watched Eddie pull a crumpled bill from his front pocket and come over to hand it to her.

“There is a mosaic here.” There were various other logos, cards and photos pinned to the pegboard behind Eddie. He took his pool cue and gestured around the set in a circular motion. “Longevity. Focus. Philosophy. Youth. Intelligence.”

“How long do you want to remain together? Fifty years like the Stones? A decade like the Dodger infield?” Don waited for an answer but nothing came. “Is your plan rigid? What are we looking at?”

“Our first question concerns our capabilities. Evan Spiegel just turned down three billion dollars to sell Snapchat to Facebook. What does that tell you? Number one, the guy had the *capability* to create something of significant worth. Beyond that? We can debate the wisdom of passing up the offer. All of us here, though, have the capability to do something special.” The tip of Eddie’s cue extended too far and blue chalk marked the tip of John Lennon’s nose. “This man is recognized as being a great artist but was he too much of an idealist? It depends on who you are. From a business standpoint, the Beatles created Apple Records but they couldn’t make it profitable. They promised young artists that they would be a different kind of company and they would genuinely listen to every submission. They failed, though. As artists, their success was undeniable. As businessmen? They fell short.”

“I have a scientific mind,” Don said. “I need parameters. Six months? Is that the minimum? Are we going to be together five years.”

“I want to start with fundamentals.” Eddie’s stick was directed at a colorful picture of a hummingbird searching for nectar. “We build a birdhouse from balsa wood and we start within five minutes. We are people of action. Tomorrow we build a doghouse for my chihuahua.” Eddie set the cue aside and walked away from the pegboard. When he reached the edge of the garage, he spoke from behind the four others. Albert was the only one to turn around. “I invited nine of you guys and I’m happy that four showed up. My father operates a toy company. We were never in the league of Hasbro, Parker Brothers or Milton Bradley. We’ve been around for ninety years, though. All of our gadgets and games were exclusively made in America until the late nineties.” Eddie poked his head out of the garage and looked up and down the street. He figured that no one else was coming. He walked back to the pegboard and started pointing with his cue again. There was a red circle with a black H and a yellow rocket-looking A in front of it. “We’re in the ballpark of Avalon Hill. Not the biggest kid on the block but nothing to be ashamed of.” Eddie noticed that Betty was still squirming. He figured that she was questioning why she came. “The money is out there for us. I know that it’s not all about the money for most of us. I had a long talk with my dad at the beginning of this school year. We are at the point where we have to close all operations in the United States if we are to stay in business. China.” Eddie zeroed in on one of the larger images pinned to the pegboard. It was situated in the dead middle. “Everything we will produce will be

made in China next year... or some third world country.” Eddie looked straight at Betty. She stopped twisting. “That is, of course, unless we can figure out a way to stay in business here. I talked my dad into cashing in my college fund. I don’t have the technical background that you do. I was going to Wharton. It’s a great source of pride in my family that we’ve stayed manufacturing in America for as long as we have. I talked to my dad about Peter Thiel and we did a cost benefit analysis of the situation. End of the day, we agreed to give this thing a shot.” Eddie moved toward Don and addressed him, “To answer your question about how long? We have about eighty thousand dollars to work with. We’ve got to make a Snapchat-like app or some fantastic widget. There is great PR at remaining in the USA. We can augment costs of producing toys here if we hit a homerun.” A sense of shame came over Eddie and he looked down at his shoes. “The good business decision--*the most profitable one*--is to run everything overseas.” He looked up. “I don’t want to do that.”

“I have a few ideas we could work on today,” Sherry said. “I’m fine with the birdhouse, but I came prepared with a portfolio of things to work on.”

“I’m with the birdhouse thing!” Don said. “Let’s get this thing started as soon as possible. Less talk, more action. I understand what this is all about.”

“Unless anyone has anything else, we’re to meet in the backyard in two minutes. There is fruit punch in the Igloo cooler and cookies the mini-fridge. The restroom is through the door behind me, first door on the right.” Eddie waited for questions or statements but got none. He went through the side door and made his way to a table of tools and wooden supplies.

Darkness. Pitch black.

“Honey? Are you there?” Fletcher Browne reached down to his lower leg and he could feel silky, long hair. “Vivian?” *An explosion*, he thought. *Was there an explosion? The last thing I can remember is inspecting a landmine. We were rummaging through a giant warehouse.* “Honey?”

Vivian Streets felt a hand raking across her scalp. She didn’t say a word. She tried to look at her own hand in front of her face but she couldn’t see anything. Terror. She was scared and incredibly confused. A pinpoint of light. She spoke. “Fletcher?” She looked up at the light and it became brighter. “Fletcher, darling?” From a pinpoint to the size of a bright mirror ball perhaps thirty yards away. She grasped at the hand. “Are we alive?”

Fletcher watched the light grow larger and larger. He stood up and pulled Vivian with him. He tried to look at her. He wanted to see her face... but he saw nothing. There was only the shine of the distant light. Oddly, it did not illuminate the surroundings. “Alive?” Fletcher heard the descriptions before. He knew what he was seeing. “We were in a warehouse examining explosives.” He pulled Vivian close to him. “We blew up... or...” He thought about it. Slowly, some of the details came to mind. “I was gasping for air. It must have been...”

“Chemicals, Fletcher! You were writhing on the floor!” Vivian watched the light expand to the size of a large doorway.

“We’re dead, Vivian. I think we’re supposed to cross over.” Fletcher started toward the glowing portal. “Let’s go.”

“Fletcher?” Viv remained in place and yanked Fletcher back. “Shouldn’t we talk about this?” The light in front of her pulsed a little. “This is our eternity!” There were bright spokes in all directions projecting from the portal. “We have unfinished business on Earth. What if we can’t come back?”

Fletcher Browne paused to consider it. “We have to cross over. We’re going to wind up haunting our planet! We’ll be ghosts walking around draped in chains!” He tried to see Viv’s face but there was still nothing. “Let’s leave it behind. Our world was a wreck.”

Vivian felt better. She didn’t say a word. She began to walk to the astounding light in front of her and she pulled Fletcher along. She stepped through the glaring doorway. There were clouds beneath her feet. She looked back and could see Fletcher. He wore a white robe. She looked down at her own body. She remembered the warehouse. She was wearing hiking shorts. Now? She wore a white robe similar just like her lover. The Sun beamed in the far distance and rainbows arched across a blue sky. “Fletcher? I see someone coming.”

It wasn’t Jesus. It wasn’t Saint Peter. It wasn’t the devil. “Viv? I think that’s George Washington.” Fletcher expected to hear the sounds of harps. He expected to see a golden gate. He stood dumbfounded and convinced himself that he was in the middle of a dream.

“You have unfinished work,” George said. Thin cloud vapor hovered around but slowly disappeared. “America is doomed. Your work has been good. Vivian Streets? I have followed you and

Fletcher Browne for some time.”

Vivian scraped her fingernails across Fletcher’s forearm. “Can you feel this?”

“We were flying from Kilimanjaro. You poured us a few drinks. It was high altitude. The air was thin. I don’t know honey! I’m almost sure we are asleep on that airplane! Finnegan is right next to us. He’s watching us snore.” Fletcher rubbed his forearm. “I couldn’t feel your nails. We are sleeping.”

“George? Why are you here to greet us? I’m no expert on the Bible... but I’m almost sure we’re supposed to talk to Saint Peter at this point.”

“Saint Peter? Yes. He had this post at one time or another. He still does. We’re like toll booth collectors in some ways. He operates a different turnpike. And? I’m not here to collect money from you. I need *information*. Do you want to return to Earth? There is unfinished business there... and you did not die of natural causes.” George Washington wasn’t dressed in a white robe. He wore a traditional blue colonial military uniform.

“Vivian? I’m positive we’re dreaming. You might as well humor him. Let’s see where this goes.” Fletcher spoke without regard to George’s presence. Vivian seemed sad. Fletcher asked General Washington, “What can you do to wake us up? I’m sure we’re napping on our way to Paris. I asked Vivian to marry me while hiking. We see ourselves as patriots. That’s why you’re here. I’m sure Carl Jung could interpret all the symbols--*the Sun, the clouds and the rainbows*--but unless he appears from thin air, I won’t have the luxury of understanding what I’m in the middle of.” Fletcher looked into the blue sky and was almost sure that flying angels would round out the experience. “George? Could you wake us up?”

“You were on a quest. Were you not?” George Washington began to pace while he spoke. “*Thermite*. You were intrigued by the happenings of nine eleven.” George paused to face Viv and Fletch then began to pace and speak again. “Truthers! That’s what you became. *Truthers*. And you came across an idea that Rogues within the American government performed the greatest false flag mission in world history.” Pause, face, then pace. “I have seen my share of blood during our Revolution. I remember the tyranny from Great Britain. Whose side do you think I am on?” George Washington paused and faced Vivian and Fletcher again. This time, he waited for a response.

“We’re just kids. We don’t know what we’re doing.” Fletcher squeeze Viv’s hand.

“Do you think I believe Dick Cheney is a patriot? Do you think I am proud of Rumsfeld?” George paced. “You remind me of the people I cared about when I was in Lexington. Ordinary people built America. Ordinary people fought tyrants! Ordinary people shed blood for freedom.” George stopped pacing. This time, he didn’t look at Viv and Fletch with a piercing gaze. He looked down at his own feet. “You can move along,” he said. “Jesus is waiting for you... if that’s who you’re here to see. Want Buddha? I’m sure he’s out there.” He paced again. One hand held another behind his back. “You can go back and finish what you started. You won’t have a physical body. You can speak to people while they dream. You can whisper into people’s ears. Some are more prone to listen to angels than others. You can fix your world.”

“Why are you here?” Fletcher walked a few paces forward. “Shouldn’t you be down there fixing the world yourself?”

“You’ll learn the way it works. It’s not as simple as you might think. There’s a divine force out here.” George looked up into the rainbows. “There’s an element of free will that seems to matter.” George walked toward Fletcher and was an arm’s length away. “There are higher places out here... but you’ve got to want it. You really should fix the things you’re able to.”

“Or we won’t be at peace with ourselves? Is that it?” Vivian remained behind Fletch. “We’ve got to make it right before it’s too late?”

George Washington walked past Fletch and spoke to Vivian. “There’s a man named Dimitri Khalezov that disappeared from the public eye. No one believes the government account of nine eleven. Where was the wreckage at the Pentagon and Shanksville? Whenever a plane crashes, investigators must piece together the remains. Where were the remains?”

You’ve been up here longer than me, Viv thought. You should know the answer. Vivian waited. She dared not question America’s first president.

George began the pacing. “You two are honorable people. Thermite was a piece of the puzzle.” He stopped in front of Fletch. “Eye witnesses heard explosions. Professional film crews and many amateurs captured this on tape. *Firefighters explained it in detail.* Controlled demolition. The falling of the Towers was compared over and over to a controlled demolition. Stephen Jones tested for nano-thermite in debris kicked into surrounding apartments. Steel became like lava and burned for weeks. Concrete was turned to dust.” Pacing again. “Dimitri Khalezov was an expert at understanding nuclear detonations. Specifically, he understood underground blasts. A zero-box device placed fifty meters under each tower could do the job. We’re talking about one kiloton evaporating seventy tons of pure granite. A spherical cavity a hundred meters in diameter created in an instant with crushed and damaged rock all around.” Facing Fletch and Viv, “A chasm... large enough for skyscrapers to fall in to.”

Fletch asked, “Why us? I still don’t understand. Why not you?”

“Barry Jennings was one of the survivors from World Trade Center Seven. He was led out by rescuers and he was told not to look down. Why? They were stepping over dead bodies. This building was not hit by a jet. *The dead bodies were there because of an explosion.* He testified of this to reporters and on August 19, 2008, one week before the government’s explanation of that building’s collapse, he was found dead.” George examined Viv’s face and could see that she was tiring of attempting the hero role. “On Earth, loved ones pray the we rest in peace. Can you rest?”

“I can’t,” Viv said. “I’m sick of exerting myself and feeling like I’m going nowhere... but I can’t rest if I believe we lost.”

“I want to go back,” Fletch added. “But I think my mind has snapped. Nine eleven was too much like a living nightmare. Up until this moment, I’m sure I was being piloted around by secret androids. Now? There are clouds beneath my feet and I’m talking to the guy from the one dollar bill.”

“Do as you wish.” General George Washington turned away from Viv and Fletch. “My time speaking is done.” He walked into a white haze and vanished. As soon as he was out of sight, six illuminated portals opened up along an invisible hallway, three to the left and three to the right.

“Do you think we should peek down one?” Fletcher asked Viv.

“I don’t think standing around is the answer. Let’s go.” Vivian walked to the first one on the left. “I’m going in,” she said.

It was Friday, October fourth. Matt Stubbs held his left wrist with his right hand and he stared into a rectangle hole. He guessed it was precisely six feet deep. He wasn’t comfortable in his black slacks, black overcoat, white collared shirt, black tie and black shoes. He was a casual kind of guy and it just didn’t feel right. Through his sunglasses, he studied the canopy which provided shade for about thirty white fold-up chairs. The service had ended in the chapel minutes before. He looked down the hill across rows of tombstones and wondered about the people buried in the ground. He wasn’t sure he should’ve come. He watched mourners make their ways up the hill. He stood next to Horace Streets. Walter Browne and Herman Eichelberger. “I walked around Sierra College yesterday after I flew in,” Matt said. “I understand that was Viv’s fallback plan.”

“Yeah.” Horace didn’t feel much like talking. “My daughter was a wild one.” He went through the motions. “You didn’t see her mother during the service, did you?” he asked.

“They found them lifeless.” Herman’s mind was scrambled. He looked around Rocklin Cemetery. “Android. Some people think the android malfunctioned. Finnegan. He was with the two of them.”

“We’re right in the middle of their high school in Sacramento and Folsom Lake. They used to *love* that lake. They spent a lot of weekends there.” Horace wasn’t sure how to feel. Was he supposed to celebrate that his daughter lived life to the fullest? Was he supposed be sad or angry that her life was cut short?

“I kind of saw it coming,” Walter said. “They stayed out of trouble... but there was a dark cloud that started following them around. Eddie and Nancy? I heard they’re in hiding. They think the androids are *bad*. They dropped Tom McKay out of an airplane. It was too fruity the way I heard it went down.” Walter Browne brushed some dust off of his pants. He wondered about the color black. Why the gloom? “I thought my kid was gonna be a sportscaster. That’s what he wanted to be when he was ten. He met Vivian and his entire life changed.”

“Did you hear that?” Vivian stood next to Matt. “I think they like us. We can rest in peace.” A mild breeze chilled the face of Horace Streets. Vivian rustled his hair. “We can control some things in their world. I’m starting to get a hang of it.”

“I don’t want to stick around,” Fletcher said. “It’s kind of creepy. *This is our funeral.*”

“Let’s stay long enough to watch our coffins to get lowered. I like that our bodies will rest next to each other.” Vivian scooted in between her father and Fletch’s. “If you time it right, you can give ‘em

chills! Fletch? Try it! When the wind blows, touch your dad's back."

"Viv? I'm not in the mood. I don't know what we're here for." Fletcher Browne watched friends and family start to seat themselves under the canopy. "I say we take off right now." He wasn't at ease in ghost form. He admired Vivian for her enthusiasm. "I saw you play with a balloon in front of a little kid back there. How do you do it?"

"I think you're right. We should go." Vivian Streets floated past her father and on to the canvas canopy. She made it ripple a few times and she wanted to see the reaction of the people below. The wind wasn't blowing at this point. "Can you feel me?" she asked her father below.

"Vivian? I've already tried. *We're dead to them*. They can't see us." Fletch glided up to where Vivian was. "I tried and I tried and I tried. I was able to make him feel uncomfortable last night while he was asleep. He can't hear me right now."

"A girl back there heard me. When they were making their way into the chapel, I talked to one of them. I mean, she turned around. I spoke to her and she responded." Vivian darted to a tree and frightened a few birds. They fluttered away. "We can send them messages."

"It's gonna take time to learn how to do these things. I'm not even sure it's possible to do more than what we're doing." Fletcher missed being in the flesh. He remembered holding Viv at night. Phantom mode was different. It had it's perks... like flying around... but he missed being alive as an organic human. "I know what we can do. We can go down to a psychic shop. We can screw around we a reader. We'll know then if it's possible. For all I know, they're all fake. It's just a ruse. *But...*"

"But if someone *trained* to talk to the spirits can hear us then maybe we can move on." Vivian descended to her father and kissed him on the cheek. His face twitched but he didn't think it was anything more than a random muscle spasm. "I think we're supposed to say our goodbyes right now, Fletch."

"Never turn back, Vivian. I can feel it too. This is it." Fletcher spoke into his father's ear. "That was clever how I thought you were gonna crush me with rocks in the Caribbean." Fletcher laughed. "If you can hear me, wipe your forehead. *Five... four... three... two... one.*" Fletch gazed over at Viv's transparent body. "Nothing. He can't hear me."

"Did you *touch* his forehead? You have to be more interactive." Vivian poke her finger at her dad's belly button. "See how he rubbed his stomach?"

"Vivian? I haven't adjusted well." Fletcher scratched her dad's forehead with his ghost fingernail. "Five, four, three, two..."

Walter Browne wiped his forehead.

"*Vivain?*" Fletcher was excited. "I think I'm getting the hang of this."

Viv and Fletch took off together. They were lovers in Sacramento during the late nineties. They were familiar with the area although it had changed a bit. Closed shop here. New house there. They looked for anything that had to do with New Age mysticism. They hovered over the streets and once in a while, they observed more than just pedestrians and drivers. They came across other ghosts. They made

their way to Freeport Boulevard close to where they lived in California's state capital. In between Sacramento City College and Saint Josephs Cemetery, there was a quaint place called *Sunlight Vision*. Vivian commented, "I was almost sure we'd be buried at Saint Josephs. I mean, its right around the corner from where we lived in high school."

"They like Rocklin, I guess." Fletcher read text hand-painted in small white letters underneath a graphic of a foreboding electrical dark purple sphere with rainbow lightning illuminating out of it. The disclaimer read "for entertainment purposes only". In the upper corners of the store display window were small unicorns seeming to gallop toward one another. They flanked a large pink neon eyeball with a small yellow crescent moon just above. "Let's go in." Fletcher felt nervous and wondered about it for a moment. *I don't have biological nerves anymore. Why would I feel any anxiety?*

Vivian floated her way through the window while Fletcher made his way through the door. In the middle of dim room, there was a square table draped with a maroon tablecloth. There were brown beads draping walls in all directions. There were small rainbow abstract pictures here and there. There was a lady sitting behind the table. Her nose was large, her hijab was dark red, her eyes were brown, and her shawl was opaque. "I've been waiting for you," the lady said. "They call me Madam Wonk Wonk." There were two candles in front of her and a deck of perfectly stacked tarot cards in between them. The flames flickered. "We don't have much time. I have an appointment. You can watch me in action if you'd like. I will pretend you are not here when it happens." She paused. "I *am* an entertainer, after all."

"Madam? I'd like to know why we're here." Fletcher wasn't all too shocked that he could be perceived. "In perfect fairness, you ought to know that we plan to seek second and third opinions. We're going down to a church after this. We want to hear what priest, minister or rabbi might say about our predicament."

"And you came to me first because I have no pride? You think I would be easier to talk to?" Madam Wonk Wonk splayed the tarot cards in front of her. "Point to a card. I will turn it over for you."

"Can you see us?" Vivian asked. "We are transparent to one another. Can you merely feel our presence? Do you know who we are?"

Fletcher Browne pointed at a card a third of the way from the left. "This one," he said.

Madam Wonk Wonk overturned it. "The knight of swords." She contemplated it. "*Hmmmm*." She answered Vivian's question. "I can see you in my mind. It doesn't mean that in another circumstance I couldn't see you with my regular eyes. You are Viv. You were killed in a chemical accident."

"What does the card mean?" Fletcher began to wonder about the wisdom about heading to a psychic before anyone else. "What is our fate? Why are we here?!"

"Calm down, Fletch." Madam Wonk Wonk fanned herself with her right hand. "The knight of swords is conquering, cunning and arrogant. You are here for revenge. You would like to see the demise of your enemies." She sensed that Fletcher did not accept the interpretation. "You must understand that this is an incomplete reading. There is more to it than this simple explanation."

“Who do I kill? Who do I haunt? Can you tell me?” Fletch was flustered but his curiosity grew. “I want out of any ridiculous quest.” Fletcher pointed to card near the middle. “What’s this one say?”

Tiny bells rang behind Viv and Fletch as the door opened. A nerdy, balding middle-aged man in a cheap beige suit walked through the door. “We’ve got to go, Fletch.” Vivian watched a large almost-phony smile come to Madam Wonk Wonk’s face. “I can’t hear her. Her mouth is moving... but something is keeping me from knowing what she’s saying.”

Fletcher wanted to leave but it was like he had no choice. There was something out there that was pulling him away. His vision of the psychic shop grew darker and darker. Something was sucking him away. He was traveling out of the shop but he could tell that it was more than a geographic move. He could tell that he was heading into another dimension.

Vivian was the first to notice. “Fletcher? We’re back at the beginning.” She looked at the clouds under her feet. “It’s him. He’s coming again.” Through some mist, George Washington appeared. “What is it?” She was almost scared. It reminded her of being a teenager again. Sometimes, an unwritten rule was broken and she’d find herself in trouble for something she didn’t understand.

Fletcher was flustered about being pulled away. He tried to focus. He tried to blink himself back to Sacramento. He wanted to know how Madam Wonk Wonk’s interaction was going play out. “What happened?” he asked. He was almost angry. It wasn’t George Washington he was mad at. There was something at work in the Universe that was pulling the strings. He hated feeling powerless.

“You are doing well,” George said. He paced just like before. “You were able to witness your own funeral and you were able to see that some people have the ability to detect you.” He stopped pacing. “The knight of swords was a key but it could throw you off. You are not on Earth for revenge. I summoned you here because you were about to delve far away from your mission. The man who walked into Madam Wonk Wonk’s shop was a political bureaucrat. In the time since you passed away, the Affordable Care Act was implemented. It has been marred with heinous computerized glitches. *A mess.* A total mess. The man was there to seek advice. He’s an aid of a state senator.”

“Okay.” Fletcher was still somewhat bothered by how things operated. “What about Region 3? FEMA? There was incredible concern that World War III was eminent. People we were close to speculated that martial law was on the horizon and Americans would be round up into concentration camps. What happened? The dollar was on the verge of collapse.”

“There was widespread trepidation not long before nine eleven this year as you might recall. *The Million Muslim March...* and all the bikers that planned to show up. Russian troops were called in during the summer in case our own peace officers and soldiers would not suppress a considerable insurrection. The day came and went. Instead of millions marching, it was a few hundred. There were bikers, yes, but there was no threat to national security. All ado about nothing.” George paced again. “Then people figured it would happen on October first. You were hiking around the mountain tops of Kilimanjaro on September sixteenth when a civilian contractor gunned down a dozen people in a Washington, DC naval

yard. Four days later across the Atlantic, you both ingested enough sarin to end your natural biological lives. There were apprehensions about America defaulting on its bills. On October first, Obamacare became law and Congress was deadlocked about a budget. The closest thing to World War III or martial law that happened was yesterday when an irate lady was chased from the White House to Capitol Hill and she was shot dead by authorities. It turned out her young daughter was in the car with her. Bullets missed the youngster, though. Today, a man set himself on fire in the National Mall as a form of protest.” George faced Fletch and Viv. “This past nine eleven, there was hype, fear and some hysteria.”

“It blew over, though!” Fletcher was now happy. He thought for a couple of seconds. “Of course it blew over. We would’ve known if martial law was implemented. We were at our own funerals. Yeah, we would’ve known.”

“What are we to do? I’m confused.” Vivian thought about conversations with friends from high school. “My Catholic girlfriends used to say that Purgatory followed death. Is that where we’re at? Because I heard from other people that once you die, you meet Jesus. *There is nothing in between Earth and Heaven.*”

“I can’t tell you how it works. I’ve been dead for more than two hundred years. I’m still trying to figure it out.” General Washington marched about. “I’ll send you on your way. There is nothing important at this moment I can tell you except that... you’re like babes again learning to crawl. You will be frustrated by some of your learning experiences. You will be annoyed at your lack of control. Someday, with patience and diligence, you will be in my position and you will summon spirits to assist with your endeavors. Or? You will move on to whatever’s next.” He began to walk away. “I’m not ready for the next stage. I have more work to do.” He vanished into cloudy haze. Lighted dimension doors appeared when he was gone.

Father Eugenio Foscolo kneeled in the second row of an empty Saint Elizabeth’s church. He prayed, “I confess to almighty God and to you my brothers and sisters that I have greatly sinned in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do, through my fault...” Vivian sat next to his right and Fletch sat next to her. The priest continued, “Through my fault, through my most grievous fault. Therefore, I ask blessed Mary ever Virgin, all the angels and saints, to pray for me... to the Lord our God.” He did the sign of the cross, made his way to the isle, genuflected, then went out through a side door.

Saint Elizabeth’s was a few blocks around the corner from Madam Wonk Wonk’s psychic shop. “He passed right through me,” Vivian noted. “Do you think he knew we were here?”

“This is the first place we went after prom. I remember talking to Father Percy Sheridan. He was the first of about five clergymen we talked to that month. Do you remember?” Candles were lit near a statue of the Virgin Mary. Jesus hung limp on a cross. Fletcher feared that the *real* Jesus would appear and judge him together with Vivian. He shook the thought. “Do I think the new priest knew we were here?”

“We should follow him. We should try to talk to him.” Vivian studied the statue of Mary. “I don’t

know what else to do.”

“Let’s leave.” Fletcher was uneasy. There was something about the crucifix. “I can feel him. I didn’t think too much about religion when we were dating as teenagers... but I can feel him now.” Fletcher admired the craftsmanship of the wooden beams above.

“Let’s go.” Vivian hovered away and left through walls between stained glass windows. When she was together with Fletch near the street, she suggested, “There’s a Chinese restaurant on Nineteenth with a huge Buddha. *Little Beijing* is the name of it. Maybe we can get something there.”

“Take out?” Fletch was joking. He followed his girlfriend across town.

Viv and Fletch didn’t make it to their planned destination. They saw the strange beige-suited man walking up the street. They decided to follow him. “I don’t *know!*” the man yelled into thin air. “I can’t get ‘em to leave, mom. They’re always here.” No one was around him. Viv and Fletch followed him to a cozy house on Larkin Way. There was a large smiling framed black and white photo of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Fletcher went over to the dining table where a stack of bills were scattered around. “Neil Scopes” and “Resident” were the only names on the mail. The man kept talking aloud. Fletch went through the rooms of the house while Viv stayed with the man on his living room couch. Fletcher came back and told Viv that the house was empty. The guy ranted about society, the government and JFK conspiracies. Fletcher noticed computer printouts of different web sites on the coffee table in front of the man. “I have a month to make my case against the Warren Commission!” The man rubbed his temples then loosened his bland black neck tie. “Fifty years ago... they got away with *murder!*” He massaged his scalp. “Where are you JFK?” Fletch looked around and found himself in the man’s bedroom. There were many science fiction books and a few legit science magazines. There were computer printouts about comet ISON. “Is someone there?!” the man demanded. Fletch returned to the living room.

“He might be one of ‘em. I think he can faintly detect that we’re here,” Vivian said. “He lives alone. I’m pretty sure.”

“Let’s stick with this dude for a while. We can learn things. We can test our powers. We can figure out how to operate on our planet again.” Fletcher looked around for something he might be able to move. A curtain. The leaves of a potted plant. The string of a ceiling fan. He couldn’t find anything. There was foil on all the windows. “Try talking to him, Viv. I think his name is Neil. He was yelling to his mother on the streets. Do you think she’s here with us? Can ghosts be invisible to other ghosts?”

“Billions of people have died over the past hundreds of years. You would think there would be more of us still here.” Vivian Steets decided to try to talk to Neil Scopes. “Neil? I am your mother. How was your day?”

“Mom? *Mom!*!” Neil looked around his living room. “That’s not you! I can tell who my mother is!”

“Whoops!” Vivian asked Fletcher, “What should I do?”

“Who’s your friend, lady? I can hear you.” Neil patted at the cushions on his couch but Viv was

already up and away with Fletcher in the dining room.

Fletcher whispered to Viv, “He can hear us. We need to learn our parameters. We need to know how far we can go. We need to learn the signs. Who knows we’re here? Who doesn’t? Who are the fakers? Who are the real deals? Who knows we’re here but blocks us out.”

“We can get a lot done. I heard about these people. It has to do with isolation. Theory is that you go crazy if you’re left alone long enough. I don’t think that’s the case. *Not anymore*. I mean, when I was a kid, I was sure these people were bonkers.” Vivian went into the kitchen and Fletch followed. “I don’t want to be here. I want Heaven. I thought we’d be in Heaven and there would be no more problems. Why do we have to keep living here?”

“Apparently, there’s a mission for us. *Unfinished business*. We’re supposed to stop something bad from happening. Or we’re supposed to bring peace to a loved one. I don’t know.”

“We can stick around for a couple of hours. We can do some tests. We can come up with a hypothesis or two and find out what our limits are.” Vivian could hear Neil coming their way. “He couldn’t have heard us from the other room. Is he just getting a bite to eat or can he feel our presence?”

“Mother?” Neil asked. “I’m going to make your favorite batch of cookies! I talked to your psychic friend! Madam Wonk Wonk? She said she misses you, mother!”

“Here’s our first chance! Vivian? Whatever his recipe his, convince him to put something a little different than usual! We’ll know we have the power of suggestion!”

Neil opened his fridge and put some ingredients across the counter.

“There’s *M&M’s* on one of the shelves. I bet they’re not part of the usual batch.” Vivian turned her attention toward Neil. “Neil? I bet candy would be good in your cookie dough! Why not try it for a change?”

“Mother? Is that you?” Neil Scopes froze for a while. All he got was silence. He kept about making cookies from scratch.

Viv and Fletch made their way back to *Sunlight Vision* and decided to sit with Madam Wonk Wonk. “Tell me about him,” Vivian requested.

Madam Wonk Wonk took a deep breath and shut her eyes. No one was around except the ghosts of Fletcher Browne and Vivian Streets. “Neil Scopes lost his mother when he was fifteen. He never knew his father. He developed a *gift* for communicating with dead people... but it’s nowhere near what I can do. John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald haunt him, he says. He’s set on finding the so-called real truth of the JFK assassination before November twenty-second--*that would be fifty years to the day*. He managed to get a job in government but he’s severely distressed that he hasn’t succeeded more in life. He thought he was supposed to be a senator... but he’s only an aid to one.” She took another deep breath. “He has managed to keep it a secret--*the spiritual contact*--but he’s been getting worse lately.” She opened her eyes. “I’m afraid he’s going to do something radical.”

Viv asked, “And the science fiction interest? We looked around his room. There were books and

other imagery.”

“Yes. He thinks that comet ISON is going to crash into Earth. He believes NASA and the United States government are covering up this mega doom scenario. ISON, he says, is really Planet X. Have you heard of Nibiru?” Madam Wonk Wonk got up from her seat and walked to the store’s window. She pulled a small beaded string shutting off the neon sign. She flipped the a cardboard sign from open to close. She sat down again.

“Nibiru? We’ve heard of Nibiru. It’s fake though.” Fletcher watched the psychic lady shake her head in slight frustration. “Tell me it’s fake. Are we here to save the planet from Planet X?”

“No. Let me tell you a story, though.” Madam Wonk Wonk spoke for a half hour about zany details of an alternate cosmic schematic. It had much to do with traditional mainstream science. Apophis, for example was real asteroid heading in Earth’s direction. In the year 2029, it’s predicted to narrowly miss slamming into Earth which could cause mass extinctions. Madam Wonk Wonk posed the question about the nature of the asteroid belt. “Where did all those rocks come from?” Neither Viv nor Fletch really knew so they let her continue. Some astronomer named Olbers in 1802 claimed that there used to be a planet between Mars and Jupiter. “Phaeton was the original fifth planet out there. Tiamat is another name for it in other circles. It’s gone, though.” She described the nature of Nibiru, also known as Planet X. It’s orbit was elliptical much like a comet. It would come in close to the Sun then swing out far beyond Pluto and Charon. It was a brown dwarf, four times the size of Jupiter, and it had many moons.

“Brown dwarf?” Fletcher was intrigued.

“Yes. A dwarf by *star* standards... or a very large gaseous planet,” the psychic clarified. “One of it’s moons destroyed Tiamat.” She explained that the ancient Sumerians were thriving at the time of the momentous impact.

“It sounds like a neat story,” Viv commented. “But really? Why would only the lunatic fringe believe such a tale?”

“Your boyfriend believes nine eleven was in inside job! Don’t you think *you guys* looked like screwballs to the average person? Besides... Science is showing that there is a lot more out there than anyone’s imagined. Have you heard of Sedna?”

“Sedna? Yes. That’s the planet past Pluto.” Fletcher was surprised he could remember such a detail.

“Since the turn of the millennium, they have also discovered Eris, Haumea, Makemake, Quaoar, Ixion, Orcus, Huya, Varuna... and I think they’re just hitting the tip of the iceberg.” Madam Wonk Wonk cracked her knuckles. “Is comet ISON really Planet X? I don’t know. I don’t believe it is. I’m not one to dismiss a story simply because it hasn’t been reported on the six o’ clock news. Otherwise? I wouldn’t be in the business I’m in.”

“Thank you for your time.” Vivian was genuinely grateful. She felt like she was making progress as a ghost. “One last question. Is it possible for me and Fletcher to travel out there? I’ve heard of astral

projection. Is it possible to do that?"

"Honey... You need to master the simple things before you get ahead of yourself. Go back to Neil's place and see if you can get him to draw something only you and your boyfriend would know about. That could be a start." Madam Wonk Wonk got up from her seat and headed to a back room. "I'll talk to you later."

Viv and Fletch left. They didn't feel like seeing Neil Scopes any time soon. They had other things they felt the need to tend to. They headed to Pasadena and sought out scientists from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. "No luck, Neil. Can you hear me?" It was a dry run. Vivian was trying to make contact with Neil Scopes. "The government is shut down, Neil? Can you hear me? Rant about your mother if you know I'm here."

"The government is shut down," Neil Scopes confirmed. He walked to his front screen door and stepped out. He looked up and down the street. "There are cameras in my smoke alarm. I heard they do that. They're listening to me, lady. That's why I can't talk to you."

"Neil! Listen! This is vital! The NSA is collecting millions of gigabytes per second on everyone! They don't have time to scan through it all! If comet ISON is really Nibiru, it doesn't really matter! If Earth is in its final weeks, it does not matter what the feds think of you!" Viv was happy that she was getting through.

"Yes. It's all part of the conspiracy. The scientists in Pasadena. They're out of work because they *know* ISON is heading our way. They know we don't have a lot of time left. It's a diversion." Neil walked to his bedroom and brought back a few magazines. "It's in here... and it's on the web."

Fletcher tried to care but he believed it was yet another event with way too much hype and hardly any substance behind it. "People believed solar flares were going to wipe out Earth a year ago. The Mayan prophesy, remember? Can you hear me?"

"Freddy? No. *Fletcher*? Yes. I can hear you. It's not clear because government agents jam my brainwaves with HAARP. Remember the naval yard shooter complained ELF's? Yes. They do that to me. Except when I go to work, I can think clear. I don't know why. I think they turn them off." Neil patted around. "I can't see you guys. Madam Wonk Wonk was a friend of my mother's. She said I might have vision someday."

"I'm with Fletcher, Neil. I think it's overblown hype. I can't see ISON hitting Earth." Vivian wanted to hold Fletch but those kinds of affectionate activities became strange since passing over.

"You have to go check. There's a way. What do you think Hale Bop was about to that suicidal cult? The spirits *travel* with these objects. You've got to try." Neil Scopes flipped through pages of one of his magazines. "There's articles that tell you how to do it."

"Neil? I thank you for your help. I think we're gonna pass, though. We were out trying to figure out the mysteries of the sarin gas attacks in Syria. That's how we died." Fletcher approached Vivian for the first time to attempt a kiss.

“I almost felt it,” she said. “Not the same without an actual tongue... but I appreciate the gesture.”

“Neil? Good luck in your work. Take it from me. Don’t let this stuff get to you. If I could go back and do it again, I would ease up. Life is short. Smell the roses.” Fletcher tried to hold Viv’s phantom hand. “Let’s go,” he said. They headed south across town to Bodhi Temple near a past rival, Calvine High School. They spied on a rabbi reading the Torah alone. Fletch spoke to him, “The Democrats were the first major party to select a Jewish candidate for vice-president in 2000. Did the Mossad get revenge on America on September 11, 2001 for not voting for Gore and Lieberman?” Nothing. No response.

“Don’t ask him something *political*,” Viv suggested. She approached the rabbi’s ear. “Hey! What’s with the yamaka? I could never figure that out.” No luck. She waited a few seconds. Zilch.

“Vivian? I feel lost. Beside the kookie psychic and her marginalized client, we’re not having a lot to show for our efforts.” Fletcher had an idea. “I know where to go.” They had graduated from Rosemont High in the nineties and they head in that direction. South of the school was Cordova Golf Course. They went to the eighteenth green. “This is the second place we made out. Remember?” Fletch and Viv tried to have ghost sex. There were a few putters around but they didn’t mind. It wasn’t the same as a traditional organic session but it seemed worth the try.

“I feel lost like you,” Viv told Fletch when it was done. “Something’s missing. I don’t think this is supposed to be our fate. Why are we not driven by the same motives we had when we were alive? Why are we not finding the answers we’ve always been looking for?” She looked across the golf course. “Do we just stick around our hometown for centuries and relive our past experiences?”

“There’s got to be more. I know what you’re saying. Somehow, the social pressure is gone. I was trying to be a photographer. We were trying to make it on our own merits. We don’t have to do that anymore. We can stick around our favorite places and not care about the regular human world.” Fletcher knew something was wrong, though. “We’ll figure it out. It’ll come to us. In the mean time, I have other issues here. I want to stick around for a few days. It can’t hurt.”

“We’ll do that. Promise me, though, that by the new year we get out of here. I’m getting antsy as it is.” Vivian drifted away toward her old high school and Fletch followed her. They scooted around the campus for a while then decided on the next natural place to visit. “Your old house isn’t far from here. We ought to check on your mom.” They took off north to Mirandy Drive.

“It’s bringing back memories,” Fletch noted when they got to his driveway. They slipped through the garage door. “My dad’s retro console video games are still here. Remember *Space Duel*? This is the story of our lives! Tandem fighters shooting at cubes... and we’re still hooked at the hip!”

“Space Invaders and Asteroids are still here!” Vivian looked around the oily cement for a coin. “I bet I can lift a quarter into one of the slots right now! I feel that confident.”

“Let’s go inside.” Fletcher made his way to his bedroom and Viv was right behind. “It’s just like I left it my senior year.” There was a torn poster of Soundgarden on a wall and a stack of VHS tapes on his dresser. Near the door, there was a framed picture of what looked like a blotch of simple patterned colors,

purple and aqua. It was a 3D Stereogram illusion. “Remember this? How long did we have to stare into this thing before we could see dinosaurs?”

“They looked like styrofoam figures once I could see ‘em,” Vivian recalled.

“I bet the people here are like we were back then. Some people can look into this thing and see images. It takes training or natural talent. Too many people, it’s a merely a splash of hues and shades.” Fletch heard a voice in the other room. “It’s my mom. Let’s check on her.” They headed to the living room. “She’s ordering a pizza on our rotary phone. I bet she still doesn’t have a cell phone.”

“She didn’t even want you guys to get AOL! Remember?” Vivian plopped herself on the couch. “Let’s forget about trying to talk to her. If she knows we’re here, she’ll say something. Maybe it’s better if we let it come to us.” Vivian looked across the room at the TV which also hadn’t changed in about twenty years. *She’ll never own a flat screen in her life*, she thought.

“You know what? I’m the one freaked out now. I bet we come across people that can hear us but have jitters. They’ll pretend we’re not around. If my mom starts talking to me? I think I’ll be the one to jet out of this place.” Fletch watched his mother hang up the phone. “I say we leave before it gets awkward.”

Vivian’s place was around the corner on Brakeman Court. They dilly dallied there for a few minutes then headed to *Great America* in Santa Clara. “I love the *smells* here,” Vivian said. “Popcorn. Cotton candy.” The couple strolled along. Vivian noticed a scraggly man sitting alone on a bench. “Is he waiting for a child on a ride?”

“He might be a ride jock on a break. I’ve seen my share at the State Fair.” Fletcher considered the situation. “You know? The Bush/ Cheney era might be known as the golden age for modern perverts. We had the Sandusky thing and that Castro guy in Cleveland.”

“But you’re thinking of the NSA and sleazy chaps looking like *this* guy staring at everyone from behind their remote monitors, aren’t you?” Vivian noticed a churro stand. “I wish we could get something to eat. There’s *got* to be a way.”

“Hop in the guy, Viv!” Fletch zoomed to the filthy man on the bench. “He’s dozing off. This is the perfect time to try it!”

“*Ooooooh!*” Vivian pondered it. “I’ll do it!” Vivian snuck up to guy, turned around, then sat on the exact place.

The man jerked into consciousness.

“You touched him!” Fletch watched the guy get up and walk toward a carousel ride. “Stay with him, Viv! See if you can steer him... or influence his body motions.”

Vivian jogged to catch up then tried to synchronize her walking speed when she was inside. “I can hear his thoughts, Fletch. I think I’m listening to what he’s thinking.”

“What is it? What’s in his mind?” Fletcher rushed to her side.

“He’s looking for his daughter... but he doesn’t see her on the ride.” She stood still with the guy.

“‘Where is she? I couldn’t have been asleep that long!’ That’s verbatim what’s in his brain.”

“Darling? Look! A lady’s buying a churro! Run over and see if you can taste it!” Fletcher pointed in the direction of the mobile vendor.

Viv tried it. “Yes. I can taste it” *It feels good but it’s still not quite as good as the real thing. I want to be alive again.* She went over to the bench where the scruffy dude had been nodding off on. Fletch sat next to her. “We can go see a minister next, if you want. The rabbi and the priest didn’t really go anywhere.”

“Do you remember what Father Sheridan told us about our city? He equated it to Job from the Old Testament. God bargained with the devil and Job was the subject of many tests. He lost his crops, his family and his health.” Fletcher noticed that the raggity man finally found his daughter. She was probably six years old and had gone to the restroom by herself, probably after getting off a ride. “I’ve thought about it over and over and I always wondered who played the role of God in today’s world and who was the devil. Back home, we lived next to many government bureaucrats. We could’ve gotten jobs with the state just like that poor soul, Neil Scopes. Or? We could’ve slaved for a private company... maybe like Wal Mart or McDonald’s. I can’t shake the feeling that we were doomed, though. I sit here looking around at these people trying to have fun and make meaning out of their lives. They don’t look happy to me. They’re smiling, they’re yelling, and they’re slurping on sodas and sweets. Can’t you tell they have dread in their eyes? Sooner or later, they’ve gotta leave and head back to the rat race. They’re all caught in the bargain just like we were. God’s out there still bargaining with the devil over us.”

“You think so?” Vivian asked. “I can’t see God in some of these situations. I thought he was supposed to be all-loving. If most of us have the choice between collecting checks from the government or a private corporation, I almost think the bargain is between two different devils. Why are so many people miserable?” She wanted to change the subject. Instead, she sang Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, “*Well then can I walk beside you? I have come to lose the smog... and I feel like something turning... and maybe it’s the time of year, yes, and maybe it’s the time of man... and I don’t know who I am but life is for learning... we are stardust...*” Fletch joined her, “*We are golden... we are billion year old carbon... and we got to get ourselves back to the garden...*”

The couple mingled with patrons in the lines of roller coasters and other rides. They didn’t get on the rides, though. “I feel no obligation to go back out there, Vivian. I could stay in this amusement park for years. Are these desperate people on short vacations from grinding social machines? Maybe. I’m starting to think of Heaven in a different way. Maybe its not up above in Heaven taking advice from our country’s first president. Maybe it’s here. Maybe we belong *here*, Viv.”

Vivian wanted to be held and tried to place her phantom head on Fletch’s phantom shoulder. She watched parents going to into shops with their children. She watched teenagers running. “We’re lucky, I believe. Maybe Hell is here, too. Maybe it’s having to go through this afterlife with no one at all. Loneliness... but forever.”

“I’m glad we came here... and I can rationalize staying.” Fletcher had the urge to go candy wagon. He wanted a caramel apple. “We’ll be tormented by our limitations if we don’t move along. Let’s go to Alcatraz. I want to meet other *ghosts*. What better place than a closed down prison?”

“Do you remember our first tour guide in Tanzania? We were talking about the three volcanic peaks and then we started talking about human evolution and the prevailing thought about our ancestors moving from the trees to the savannah? What did she say? Humans evolved at the beaches! She talked about Elaine Morgan and the aquatic ape theory. Primates in Borneo are like none other in the world. They’re used to wading through shallow marsh. Humans became upright, lost their fur, gained fatty blubber, developed controlled breathing, and grew larger brains... by living around the water--*not the grasslands*--for so long.” Santa Clara wasn’t too far from the Pacific Ocean. Viv prodded, “Let’s go to the beach. Let’s find whales. Let’s find some of these things out.”

“You’re not talking about the Animal Planet documentary we watched on our plane before the flight out, are you? The one that went a step further and claimed mermaids evolved from those same aquatic apes? The one that claimed they’re still out there migrating with all kinds of marine life? We sat on the runway for an hour watching that strange thing.” Fletcher thought about alternative plans. They could walk through the walls of the Pentagon. They could find out the actual truths of nine eleven and the sarin gas tragedy in Syria. It didn’t sound too fun. *We’ve got to do something we enjoy before we do anything else*, Fletcher thought. It was decided. “Yes! Let’s go swim with some dolphins!”

They headed up the coast and mingled with killer whales south of Vancouver. They headed across the Bering Strait. The necessity of breathing oxygen was no longer important so they took dives to the deep ocean floor. They were fascinated by the unusual life under the sea but they did *not* come across any mermaids. They found themselves off the coast of Japan and witnessed conflicts between whalers and the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. Ultimately, they settled in Borneo and integrated with proboscis monkeys on tree branches. More interesting, they waddled with aquatic apes waddling in the wetlands. Vivian strutted with a few through the shallow water and told Fletch, “Most primates carry their young on their backs. These guys? They’re so used to being upright that their kids hang from the front. See?” She was glad that she wasn’t soaked.

“I’m positive this is how our ancestors learned how to walk.” Fletch observed remnants of webbing between his ghost thumb and ghost forefinger. “A million years being in this kind of environment would do it.”

“Do you know what today is? November sixth.” Vivian was learning new tricks as the days passed. She was able to change her clothes. She felt being a cartoon character because it was done at will instead of heading to a closet or drawer. She wore a safari hat. “Fifty years ago, Laura Welch killed Michael Dutton Douglas in that Texas car crash.” She made her way to land with the apes. “You know what? I’m not even mad.”

“Yeah?” Fletcher thought about it. He observed the rough fauna they were traveling through.

Don't have to worry about broken ankles or anything. That's one perk of it all. He turned his attention back to Vivian. "I'm a little surprised at myself. I'm nowhere near 'vengence from the grave' with my attitude. I wonder if something's wrong with me."

"I can feel that there's something we're supposed to know. There's something we're supposed to discover. I don't know what it is, but once we become enlightened, we'll know what the next step is." Viv admired the primates taking care of one another. "This is nice... but I don't believe it's our final destination."

"Maybe it's time to move out." Fletcher noticed that certain animals detected them moreso than others. There were sparrows in Sacramento that seemed keen on their presence. As he stood, there were a few exotic birds that seemed to flutter when he got near.

“Where are we?” The room was dark but he could faintly make out the silhouette of his girlfriend.

“We don’t have a choice anymore,” she said. She rubbed his leg. They sat together on a bed. Outside the window, there were storm clouds moving along. There was a rickety tree with no leaves. Behind some of the clouds, there was moonlight from a hidden full moon.

“Did it work?” he asked. “Did our experiment work?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. *I can’t keep this up*, she thought. “It’s not an experiment anymore.” She tried to study his face for an expression but there were too many shadows. His face was in one of them. “They’re going to think we’re dumb.”

“I really want to care what they think.” He took her hand into his. “I’m lost. I’m confused. I’m trying to make heads and tails out of this whole thing.”

“Give it time. We’ll know what happened.” She put her head on his chest. “I want to get some sleep.”

At noon the next day they were at a coffee shop. They drank their coffee black and sat outside. It had rained early in the morning and their chairs were still a bit wet. “Do you think we can stay together?” she asked.

“I’m afraid this isn’t going anywhere. I can *feel* them again.” He gestured behind his girlfriend to a couple of men in thick raincoats. “Them,” he said again.

“They’ll never know what you’re doing.” All of a sudden, she became sad. “I know it’s them. *It’s the executives.*”

Burbank wasn’t too much to brag about. Guy Hess had been riding his mountain bike around the neighborhood earlier when it was raining. “There’s something *dead* in this town.” The men behind his girlfriend weren’t too discreet about their gazes. It looked like they wanted to approach Guy and his girlfriend but they continued inside the shop instead. “I can’t put my finger on it, but something’s going down.”

“Why don’t you quit writing about things they’re uncomfortable with?” Maxine Gill blew on her coffee and was hesitant to drink. “You can do fluff. *They love fluff in this town.*”

“It’s not who I am. I’ve always wanted to write something serious. I have the world at my hands now.” Guy pulled out his smart phone. “The internet... in the palm of my hands.”

Maxine shifted in her chair and averted eye contact. “I wish we could find a way to destroy them.”

Guy didn’t say anything. The two men in raincoats walked back out of the shop. “They want to know what I know. I’ll never know why.”

Maxine and Guy eventually finished their coffees and pastries then got into Maxine’s new red convertible Mercedes. Dark clouds still loomed above them but they took a chance driving with the top down. Rain would ruin the leather if they let it pour on them. It was loud with the wind blowing around them as they made their way onto the freeway. “I’m not going to help you if you don’t help yourself,”

Maxine said.

“I have no choices.” Guy rode along in the passenger’s seat. He put on his sunglasses even though it was still gloomy around them. *What the hell is going on in life?* he wondered.

“Take me to the place you were talking about last night,” Maxine said. She looked over at Guy. He was dozing off. He didn’t sleep well the night before. “Where are we?” The room was dark but he could faintly make out the silhouette of his girlfriend.

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“Essentially, son, there was a man by the name of Jesus Christ whom humanity basically centered its life around. There were Christians, and there were Muslims whom placed him high in the pantheon of spiritual order. He was, to put it plainly, a madman by the time he lost his life at the age of thirty-three... but the guy hadn’t done anything wrong, and people protested! Some thought he performed miracles. Jesus stood up to oppressors and was deified for it. He was remembered well by his followers. Granted, the way he died was horrible. *Very, very horrible!*”

“So for one thousand years--*that would be approximately two thousand Earth revolutions in conversion, I understand*--people celebrated a martyr! People revered those whom clashed with weighty opponents! Before Jesus on Earth, there was a man named David whom fought a brute called Goliath! He slung a rock at the large beast and knocked him cold! Jesus and David heroes on Earth and celebrated!”

“Yes! You probably know that on Earth, you could read about these people in something called ‘the Bible’! And they also likely explained that these stories were documented on a thicker version of the paper you wipe your butt with! These electronic reading devices did not always exist! They were actually invented *on* the planet Earth, believe it or not! They compiled these fantastic stories, and the best of them shaped the behaviors of people far and wide for centuries on end!”

“You think Jesus was magician though? You think he pulled pranks to gain attention?” XX01 put down his electronic library--an instrument that didn’t evolve much from Earth’s touch pad devices a couple of decades before The Great Terraforming Project began. The Fender Stratocaster made its way to the Red Planet unchanged, and so did Converse sneakers and Levi jeans. Certain things were taboo to tamper with. Roots were important. Incredible advances in bioengineering and space travel didn’t necessarily prompt better designs of buttons, zippers, safety pins, and a few fundamental achievements of human invention. “You believe that it was an illusion when Jesus walked on water or compelled paralyzed lepers to rise, walk, and see?”

“Jesus lived before science was prominent or important, son! The light bulb had yet to be invented! There were no *cameras*! Humanity relied on the word of his followers for a *long, long* time!” XX01’s father sipped from an ice cold Budweiser. The Red Planet brought the best of Earth’s innovations, and a great deal of its aesthetics as well. Budweiser, Jack Daniels, and Jose Cuervo were a few of the alcoholic delights. “So if you learned of Moses, well? Am I supposed to explain how an entire sea parts?” XX02 wiped his mouth. “There was an era before the light bulb when magical thinking was the rule--*not the exception*--and it didn’t take but a couple of centuries for the land of America to reconfigure its calendar! It had once been centered around the Pirate Twins of Europe. Later, Jesus Christ was the focal point. When *Enlightenment* reached America, an agreement was made to adjust to technology. Anything that happened before the light bulb was called humanity’s ‘*Primal Era*’! Everything after light bulbs began to be used was known as...”

“*The SPACE AGE!*”

“Yes!” XX02 said. “Except that it wasn’t an overnight thing... *but it felt like it!* It actually took a

few generations for Russians to put *Sputnik* into the air, and before long Americans were walking on the Earth's lone *moon!*"

"It's funny that they only had one moon, DAD!" XX01 laughed.

XX02 ruffled XX01's hair. He went on, "The Earth's final calendar could've centered around many things: Their first airplane flight; the first successful explosion of an atom bomb; the first flight into their near outer space! They chose the invention

“One four five progression? What’s that even mean?” ABCDE looked down at a laptop situated on a desk.

“It’s the foundation of rock ‘n’ roll! It’s the essence of the blues. And this program can write a billion songs per day. It uses patterns of top forty classics from over the decades. The *abacab* style. That is A-B-A-C-A-B where A is the verse, B is the course and C is the solo or bridge. And most of it’s four-four time, roughly a hundred and twelve beats per minute.”

“It deviates just like a experimental musician?” ABCDE scratched his head and was intigued.

“Yes. Of course! There are heavy synthesized guitar roots but, like Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin, ya’ might hear a flute every now and then. Ya’ might hear a song open up without any percussion for a minute or two. And the rhymes are above elementary school pairings. Every now and then, you’ll get the ‘fire’ rhymed with ‘desire’--it’s been done over and over in pop culture--but you’re more likely to hear something organic. ‘*When he came across this young man sawing on a fiddle and playing it hot... And the devil jumped on a hickory stump and said boy let me tell you what.*’ Charlie Daniels rhymes ‘hot’ with ‘what’. That’s human and it works.”

“A billion songs per day? And you have focus groups listen to these not knowing it’s a computer doing the music *and* the singing?”

The Moon looked pinkish more than anything else. Frasier stared at it and wanted to nod off. He inhaled a strong whiff and tried to think. It smelled musty and he wondered if there were old rags somewhere in the sleeper behind him. He peeked over at Hank and thought to kick up a conversation. Hank's eyes were trained on the road, though, and he was slouched over the wheel like he wanted to sleep on it. Frasier reflected on the past few hours. When there was sunlight outside, a slinky stream ran alongside the highway. Radio reception wasn't great and there seemed to be a tendency to have country stations playing the same few modern hits. "River Bank" by Brad Paisley was one of them. *We got an inner tube, we got a trailer hitch. We're near the river and far from rich. But we got each other and gas in the tank. We're laughing all the way to the river bank.* The song played in his head and he wondered if Hank was the slightest bit adventurous. He wondered if he ever said "fuck it" and went off route. Frasier Cuervo wanted to pull off to the side of the road and have a tall can with his feet plunged in the water. They had picked up a few tons of apples in Yakima and they were due in Reno sixteen hours later. It was his inner child tugging at him, though. *I miss the river.* Frasier stared out into the sky and watched the pink Moon looming. He wondered if it would turn full red like he heard it would then he started thinking about the river again. It hit home, in some ways, when he listened to the Paisley song. He remembered being on the Mississippi River and floating around on a fat rubber tube. He recalled playing with his cousins and watching his old uncles and friends getting wasted and talking a lot of junk. "Do you think it's going to happen?" Frasier finally asked. "The end of the world?"

Hank Saunders was in a trance. The words didn't penetrate. He downshifted as they made their way up a six percent uphill grade. His beard was graying, thick and mangled. He ran his fingers through it and rubbed his palm many times on his chin. "This is a strong world, kid. It's gonna be here for a long time." He rubbed his forehead with a filthy red bandana and downshifted again. He was unphased by the eclipsing Moon. He had a delirious urge to stop the truck and scream at Frasier to get the hell out. He chuckled for a few seconds and didn't say why. He lightened up. "The Bible? You're talking about Revelation six twelve? *And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and, lo, there was a great earthquake! That one? Are you talking about that? And the Sun became black as sackcloth of hair... and the Moon became of blood.*" Hank pulled downward on his lumberjack-type beard and grinned. He looked high into the sky and then turned his gaze back to the monotonous windy road. "I've had maybe five hours sleep in the last forty-eight hours." His voice became dry and raspy.

I knew this would happen. Frasier felt some anger when Hank started to laugh. He believed that it was the question he asked. Truth was that Hank couldn't go on for another driving hour. Severe fatigue set in and life was a joke at that point. *What were my choices, though?* Frasier's mind became a tiny whirlwind spinning into a category F5 tornado. In any five minute period he'd find himself excited about becoming a professional truck driver but then he'd find himself in hidden despair and deeply regretting the

decision to get his class A license and take a crack at making a living on the road. “Hey, man. I don’t mean to get all religious or anything. I’m just trying to make small talk. We have hours and days in front of us.”

Hank Saunders didn’t respond. He turned on the radio but there were no stations with good reception. From Eighty-four they’d hit Ninety-five. He knew the area well. “Listen, kid. Up ahead a few miles, there’s a place called Deadman Pass. *Part of the Oregon Trail*. Nice rest stop.” He felt feverish even though brisk air was circulated inside. “Are you up for driving? We’re gonna stop, take a leak, then I’m gonna roll back in that bed behind us.” His eyes had mostly been locked on white broken lines. He put the hammer down on his 2011 Freightliner Cascadia then turned toward Frasier to study his face. “You ain’t no pussy, are you?” Hank was becoming scattered in the mind and he fought dozing sensations. “*Trucking is a life, boy! It’s not a job!*” He feared the kid would break into tears and babble that he couldn’t handle it but he saw only shock.

Frasier took a breath in. “I was made for this shit, man! When other kids wanted to be football players or astronauts, I wanted to be drive trucks!” He wanted to be offended by the accusation but he figured that Hank’s behavior was the rule, not the exception. He wasn’t working in a corporate high rise somewhere in Los Angeles. He was not required to wear a suit and tie to work and speak in politically correct manners when he was around others. Quite the opposite. He was surrounded by dirty people sleeping in dirty trucks and hotels speaking dirty language. “I can drive this bitch!” Within the hour, they got to Deadman Pass and Frasier Cuervo drove a semi-truck for the first time in his life without his trainer awake to correct anything he might mess up. Hank’s loud snoring sounded like a bull horn and the Eighty-four became mesmerizing except for the Moon emerged from the shadow of the Earth. Frasier was glad to be alive.

The afternoon was balmy in Chicago. Across the country in Nevada, Frasier Cuervo was carefully backing a full eighteen-wheeler loaded with Washington state apples into a warehouse dock. Oblivious to Frasier’s existence, Ginger Hyde shuffled papers behind a mahogany desk forty stories high not far from Lake Michigan. She set the papers down and anxiously walked across her empty office to a wall mirror. She looked at herself from the front. *I look like a dainty Kate Upton... but with sophisticated secretary glasses*. She turned to the side and checked herself out. *You look professional. You can do this*. She pulled a paper cup at a water cooler near the mirror and swallowed enough to get brain freeze. She went back to her desk and watched the phone for a few seconds. It was a 1990 beige BellSouth Supremacy 4300 and it had arrived via UPS three days before. Her white Gianfranco Ferre long sleeve blouse was tucked into her dark gray Tahari skirt and she felt uncomfortable looking this formal. She looked down at her Sam Edelman boots and admired the silver, shiny buckles.

Her phone rang.

Ginger Hyde scurried to her desk and was close enough to pick up the receiver on the first ring but she waited.

The phone rang a second time.

I'm not a desperate person and I don't need to behave like one.

The phone rang a third time.

It felt like a month went by but it was only microseconds. Ginger pressed the speaker button.

“Yes? Sabrina? Has our guest arrived?”

“She just walked in. She’s ready to see you.”

“Tell her to give me a minute. I’m in the middle of something.” Ginger Hyde straightened papers on her desk and pulled out paperwork from a filing cabinet. “Can you do that, Sabrina?”

“Yes. I’ll send her to see you in sixty seconds.”

Rachel Harford eventually made her way into Ginger Hyde’s office. She walked with a bounce and dressed in a plain black T-shirt, men’s blue Levi’s and simple black rubber boots. Unlike Ginger’s eighties-ish blonde feathered flowing locks, Rachel’s hair was naturally dark and straight. She got to the desk where Ginger sat and said, “Hello! Glad to be here. So you’re the great Ginger Hyde, huh?” She waited to be asked to be seated but there was nothing. After a few moments, she took the liberty upon herself. “Wow! This is one of those Aeron chairs, isn’t it?! All the tech guys had these right around the dotcom crash fifteen years ago or so! Wowza!” She leaned back a little and then adjusted her seat.

Ginger Hyde sat dumbfounded. “I’m sorry. Forgive my manners.” She removed her Alain Mikli glasses and rubbed her eyes. She put them back on then got up to shake Rachel’s hand. “Pleased to meet you.” She was expecting something different. She knew of Rachel through the internet and was familiar with her work and she knew of her casual side. They had talked on the phone about a business partnership. Ginger was expecting Rachel to show up more formal, though. *This might be a mistake.* She scrutinized Rachel from toe to head. *I think she’s heading to a Morrissey concert when she leaves.* She giggled then scolded herself for judging. *Never question a genius.* There was no portfolio, iPad or briefcase and she was questioning the situation again. Rachel’s lips were bright red and there was no other sign of makeup besides dark eyeliner. It took a few seconds but Ginger could see it. *She’s sexy, actually. She has confidence in herself. She’s glowing. She knows she can get the job done.* Then the train went a little too far. *I would date her. I would kiss her... I mean, if I was into girls and all.* “You are one of the more respected political activists that Philadelphia has. Our ad agency is beginning to hemorrhage money, you are aware. I refuse to be Motorola or Blockbuster Video. It’s adapt or die. That’s the nature of the beast. CBS decided to sell off its billboard division. The mode of business I’ve been in is just not what it used to be. We, here at Verson Advertising and Marketing, have managed to thrive in the greater Midwest since around the nineteen fifties. Along comes this internet thing and all of a sudden, everything old rules no longer apply.”

“You’re now getting into comics and interactive cartoons. That’s a big swing. I respect you and I believe I can help.” Rachel pulled out her phone and started to navigate through her programs. After tapping the screen here and there she said, “I sent my portfolio in electronic form. I also sent a detailed outline of where I propose this company ought to go... and there is a list of my contacts.” She examined the

room and didn't notice any computers. "We can incorporate ideas from Bitstrips, JibJab, Xtranormal, GoAnimate and a few others. Furthermore, contrary to popular misnomers, people like to hold tangible products in their hands. We can't go a hundred percent cyber. We need to partner with CustomInk to sell custom made t-shirts of the images we put out. It wouldn't hurt to partner with a custom bobblehead company, either."

Ginger's trepidation faded and she felt embarrassed for second-guessing the meeting. She plodded to her window nearly halfway up the one-hundred-story John Hancock Center. "See that building right there? Oprah Winfrey has a flat that cost a few million bucks. Must be nice." Rachel joined Ginger and they peered outside together. "I live down the street at the North Pier Apartments. Not as fancy, but it gets the job done. We'll be doing a good deal of our business there. You can stay with me and if this works out, we'll figure something more permanent out."

"Sounds good!" Rachel rubbed Ginger on the shoulder. "Should we get a bite to eat?"

The gals headed to Teavana while Frasier Cuervo and Hank Saunders headed hit the road far away in Reno. "That wasn't so hard." Frasier was happy with himself. "I'm dead beat and can use a thousand hours of sleep... but I can get used to the driving part."

"You're twenty-five thousand mile training period will go by quicker than you know." They headed east on Interstate Eighty. "Here in Nevada, most the trucks are allowed to go faster than most states, something like seventy-five miles per hour. Out in California, you can't do anything faster than fifty-five. This truck is governed, though. That means we go sixty-two while other rigs pass us like we're standing still. It's a company thing. They think they're going to be saving money on fuel... and they figure it's safer but it's not! We're impeding traffic, you see?" Hank was driving again and it felt like it didn't matter what he said. The kid next to him--*his trainee*--had so much crap going through his noggin that it appeared useless to tell him any more. He didn't care, though, and started to spit out some more details, "First thing they told me when I started driving for WC Galahad is don't sign a lease with them! They own their own leasing company, you see? *Sunset is the name of it*. Some guys, though, swear by it but they're few and far in between. You lease for a few years, pay 'em another nine thousand, then you have the option to buy... and if you can stand working here that long, you're making ten thousand a month but ya' gotta be a trainer and have tikes like you drive for really cheap to get experience."

"Ten thousand's not bad. A month?" Frasier's eyes were heavy but he was interested. "I heard my training period is longer if I don't lease after thirty days. Is that true?"

A Pilot gas station was approaching and Hank wanted to exit to take a whiz but held it. "Yeah. This company *feeds* off people like you. Annual turn over is ninety-seven percent. You hit a pole? They're going to say you're unsafe and kick ya' out of the truck. You'll still owe 'em a few grand for your tuition. They get paid three thousand bucks by the government for each of you's that graduates. *Stimulus stuff*. They get paid by the government just to have you show up... if you were unemployed. Some people call it a scam but it works for a few people. Worst case scenario is that you won't be fully trained and you'll owe

boat loads of money. You're best case scenario is that you'll keep on trucking and spend the vast majority of your next few years chained to the road. *You'll never see your family.*"

"I've heard horror stories about dudes that have the proper paperwork about their loads then they get to weight stations and find out something's screwed up then they have to call the dispatcher but they don't care or pay for it and it somehow comes out of your pocket. There are guys that work here that do everything by the book and they're starving and staying in roach-infested motels. If you slip or screw up, you'll actually be *paying* Galahad to be on the road. Is that true?" Frasier watched a JB Hunt truck zoom past them at seventy-five. He looked at their speedometer and saw they were doing sixty. "What does WC stand for? West Coast? I've been wondering."

"West Coast? Nah. *Warren Chadwick*. He founded the company back in the twenties. Warren Chadwick Galahad started delivering potatoes and other produce from Idaho to New Mexico. Had a 1919 Studebaker Big Six and his grandparents were some of the earliest settlers around Salt Lake. He had that pioneering spirit so he bought more cars and trucks and the WC Galahad company grew and grew and grew. They survived the Motor Carriers Act of 1980--deregulation which knocked out many of the big players--and today they're making their way into China and South America." There had been a mix up at the warehouse where they had dropped off the apples. "This is called *deadheading*, by the way. When you're cruising along in a bobtail without freight? *Deadheading.*"

"We're picking up bananas in Lovelock, right? Heard you talking to the DM. Someone's rig broke down?" Frasier was trying to remember other parts of the conversation. "*Lot lizard*. You said something about a lot lizard."

"First of all, we're running a reefer. *That's not a drug term*. It's a refrigerated truck. The cat in Lovelock had his engine blow so his load is heating up. It'll go bad if we no one picks it up today. Lot lizard? Yeah. I saw a skanky woman back at *Love's*. You'll learn more than you'll ever want to know about lot lizards if you stick around for just a few months." Hank spelled it out, "*Prostitutes*. They'll take every last dime if you let 'em. *Give ya' gonorrhea, too!* Wreck your marriage!"

"Okay. Stay away from lot lizards... unless they look like Chrissy Teigen, right?" Frasier smiled.

The blood Moon phenomenon had passed--*it happened on the tax deadline day*--and Simon Vickers sat in his psychiatrist's office in Tallahassee, Florida. "And then one day, it stopped," he told her. Simon looked around the room. There wasn't anything special about. A small plastic fern was situated in the corner. On the wall, there was a framed photo of a dense forest with large white print which read "Think Positive" across it. The chair was plastic and black and could've come out of a high school classroom. "I used to talk to 'em all the time and I thought it was neat. I thought they were gonna drop me the answer, you know? *Walk by faith, not by sight*. I went to church when I was young and..."

"You're not hearing the voices anymore, though, right? I have to make a recommendation to Social Security whether or not you'll continue along with SSI benefits. During the worst of your episodes, you were harassing strangers about conspiracies and doom." Amber Vernon didn't like her job a whole lot.

It paid well but it was always a crap shoot. There was never a hundred percent way of knowing if a patient still had a screw loose. For that matter, there was no full fledged way of knowing if a patient was completely faking having a screw loose in order to receive government benefits. “You want to work, correct? And you believe that you’re mental illness has regressed enough that you have your thoughts under control, yes?”

Simon felt bitter all of a sudden. *Mental illness. They all call this a mental illness.* He looked across the desk and noticed doctor Amber fiddling with a sharpened pencil. *Left handed, he thought. And she’s wearing a fat diamond ring. I wonder if she does this to her husband. I wonder if all these guys are required to make you feel dumb.* “I was wondering, actually, if there’s a way to expunge this thing from my record. I mean, I was arrested by a guy named Bobby Carillo in Kings County, California. *You can look this up.* The guy was arrested for being part of an impound ring! He was trying to steal my car!”

“First of all, it doesn’t work like that. You did not get diagnosed for paranoid grandiose psychosis for getting arrested for disorderly conduct. *You tossed a cup of iced tea onto an officer’s face.* Your diagnosis came for what you did while in custody.” Amber set her pencil down. “Second of all, I am not a judge ruling over a criminal matter. I do not expunge charges from your record. That’s not how it works. Once an authoritative figure deems you to be deranged, you must live with it. There’s no wiping the slate clean. *You can’t work as a peace officer and a slew of other things.* You must cope with this reality.”

“It’s not fair,” Simon said. “I wasn’t even speeding. *I swear I wasn’t.* He walked up to my window, I had my license and insurance information ready, and he called me ‘pretty boy’. I heard about these guys on the news. *Fake cops.* You’re supposed to drive away and call two one one when you reach a safe public place like a busy gas station. I was on the One Ninety-eight in the middle of nowhere and, yeah, I threw my drink in his face and meant to speed off... until he drew his gun and yelled for me get out and hit the floor. It all happened so fast. And when I got to jail, all the cops inside started messing with me. It was an out-of-body experience. I was yelling at them demanding badge numbers and the whole thing. I told ‘em I was reporting them to internal affairs and the media. Before I knew it, I was in solitary confinement. That’s when the voices started.”

“Tell me about Eurabia, Simon.” Doctor Amber Vernon picked up a yellow pad and her number two pencil and scribbled some notes. “Do you still believe there is a conspiracy between European royalty and Islamic states to turn the EU into a caliphate? And you think the same thing is going on in America with Mexico or even the government of Spain?” Amber teetered. This was the key. Conspiracy theorists existed everywhere but not all of them wielded arms and prepared for violent overthrows. Simon Vickers went down a quick downward spiral. A routine stop turned catastrophic and the chain reaction that followed left him tarred charged not just with a felony but also with a stigma of being demented. Amber had to figure out if Simon still harbored resentment that he would retaliate.

“Conspiracy? No. The numbers speak for themselves. The Census Bureau has projected that whites will represent less than fifty percent of the United States population by 2043. When I was arrested

in April of 2011, I was a normal guy. My court case dragged on for months and by the time my lawyer plea bargained my charge down to a misdemeanor in July, the Oslo thing was going on. Anders Behring Breivik stormed that camp in Norway the day before my sentencing. He was dressed as a cop when he shot seventy-seven kids on the island of Utoeya. He said that Muslim immigrants had a religion of violence and wars and they were a threat Norwegian society and values.” The bail bond set for Simon Vickers was set an unusually high amount, a half million dollars, so he sat in the county lockup for three months. Because of his confrontations with cops early on, he spent the first month secluded from the general population. “They call solitary confinement ‘the hole’ on the inside,” he explained. “Studies have been done and this and the results are clear and predictable. *It will change your brain.* Prolonged isolation changes the very chemistry inside your skull and you will wind up with auditory hallucinations. Also? Bullying does the same thing. I was terrified of the deputies on the inside so it’s no surprise I wound up perceiving notions that he was talking to me.” Simon Vickers met with Amber Vernon monthly for the past couple of years. They often went over the same issues from different angles. Usually, Simon didn’t peel the onion too much. He let the conversation remain brief and nonchalant. He wanted to be a normal person again. He didn’t believe hiding his skeletons would help. “Charles Manson thought the Beatles were talking to him. *Helter Skelter*, remember? Turned out it was about an upcoming race war. I got released from the hole after a few weeks and I’m at a table minding my own business horrible dinner sitting on one of those god-awful silver chairs when a Northsider walks up to me and says it already happened.”

“You’re jumping around a little bit.” Amber Vernon wrote, erased, wrote some more. “What already happened?”

“*The change.* The race war. Spain bought California back. Why do you think all of the illegal immigration legislation this past generation has backfired? The pope had something to do with it and it was irreversible.” Simon Vickers listened for a while. Amber Vernon was jotting something, but he was not listening for her. The door was closed behind him. *Are you there?* he wondered. *Are you there? Are you going to give me advice?*

Nothing.

“Yeah. I was crazy. I’ll admit that.” Simon was curious about the notes being taken. “It’s not fair, though. I was arrested by a corrupt officer. The things that happened afterward shouldn’t matter. It was like being possessed. On the day of my final court date, I was asked if I was sorry for yelling at deputies and all. I told the judge that they were coming. It’s all ending.” He felt ashamed and stupid. “*Your honor, I would like to express my regret and remorse for the inexcusable things I have done.*” He was sarcastic and role-playing. “That’s what they wanted to hear. I couldn’t control myself. I felt audacious, self-righteous and proud.” Simon thought about the weeks after his sentence. “They reduced my charge to a misdemeanor, I lost my job, and I wound up on freeway offramps asking for money... but the voices already set in. I was hearing the *Breivik* guy for some reason and I was writing ominous messages. ‘*Will work for food*’ was on one side of my cardboard sign and ‘*They’re coming for you*’ on the other. I would

only show the doom side to BMW's and Mercedes cars. I thought it was my purpose."

Amber Verson was ready to wrap up. "It sounds like you've made a lot of progress. *You're honest with yourself, and that's good.* Some people are deemed mentally disabled and can never recover. You did a good thing. You were able to check facts and restrain yourself over time."

"The comet ISON was a big turning point in my life. I'll admit that. The last time I had major voices in my head was this past holiday season. *The comet is gonna hit. You need to warn everyone. The fate of planet Earth is on your shoulders.* It was a big deal to me. I had stopped taking my meds, by the way. I researched the stuff you prescribed me and found out that all it does it wreck your liver. It never stopped the voices at all! All it made me do is sleep all day. Anyhow, I held it in. I was at a Christmas party with family and I wanted to tell them. *Hey, ISON is gonna slam into us in January so I thought it'd be neat if we say our last goodbyes right now.* I held it in and acted as normal as I knew I could." Simon saw Amber stop writing on her pad and set it down. "The scientific community said that ISON was destroyed while traveling around the Sun but my voices were telling me that they were lying. Astronomers and everyone in the government didn't want to cause a panic. ISON wasn't the litting pebble they pretended it to be. It was actually the size off Jupiter and on a collision course with our world." Simon smiled. "The impact never happened. February came and I realized I didn't have the gift of biblical prophets... or the *curse*, I should say. There's no special mission for me here... but I really thought there was. Jesus Christ was crucified as an innocent man. My religious journey started when I was pulled over in 2011 by a corrupt officer and I figured it was happening to me. I spent years trying to make heads and tails out of predicament but I finally rationalized what it was all about. Last year, Tabitha Gentry was stripped naked by jailers in Floyd County, Indiana. No basis. Just to humiliate her. Insult to injury, they pepper sprayed her. Bad cops exist all over the place and I was a victim. My isolation in a cell created my voices. *Nothing special or religious going on.* When ISON broke up, my thoughts became clear again. They were tainted for a while. There were things that felt totally foreign."

"I'm disappointed to hear that you gave up on your medication but psychiatry is not always the answer. You might think I wouldn't tell you this because it's my profession. People really have sodium imbalances and it really can be fixed with the proper medication. Dopamine and serotonin levels change after bankruptcies. Medication helps stabilize people. Psychological trauma happens, though, and it remains even with the best help in the world. *All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.* The mind can be like this, but not yours. You found a way to get past it. You speak with a soundness and you're back on track. It will be my recommendation that your SSI benefits cease and you rejoin the national economy."

Hark Saunders and Frasier Cuervo were eastbound on the Forty just outside of Cubero, New Mexico when Hank noticed an orange Schneider semi heading west. "Do you remember what I told you the very first hour you stepped in a truck with me? Don't bullshit a bullshitter! That's what I said. Lotta stuff you gotta know to drive a rig... but we're on the road so much, you're bound to hear your share of tall

tales.”

“*Right!*” Frasier was driving. In about twenty-four hours, they’d be in Chicago. Most of his apprehensions were gone. He was getting used to the trucking life. He was a tad homesick but less and less the days went on.

“I told you I have a few caged chupacabras at a ranch in Lubbock, remember? You sat there and nodded.” Hank felt insecure riding shotgun. It went with being a trainer, though, and he was glad that Frasier caught on better than most students. “Up ahead in Albuquerque, we’re crossing the Twenty-five. If we take it south, we can see one of the stranger anomalies this country has. Ever hear of Spaceport America? You know that crazy guy from Virgin? *Branson*. That’s his name. He built an airport for *space craft!* True story.” Hank thought about the Schneider they had passed. “If we take the Twenty-five north, we can get to Dulce. You ever hear of Phil Schneider?”

“Any relation to AJ and Don Scheneider? From Schneider National? Biggest privately-owned trucking company in the country if I remember you right. Made it into China before us.” Frasier was starting to feel like a company guy and was almost sure that he would make it through his one-year contract without anything tragic happening first.

“Nah. Phil Schneider was a government agent of sorts. In Dulce, there’s an underground building seven stories deep! It houses a crap load of aliens, like from outer space. Back in 1979, the aliens...” Hank cut off. “Are you familiar with alien folklore? The Greys, Reptilians, Varginhas, Iguanoids and so forth?”

“Cephalapoids, Ewoks and Vulcans.” Frasier laughed. “That’s all I know.”

“Let’s not mix movie fiction with modern legend here.” Hank pressed on, “The Greys. It was them in Dulce that got sick of being locked up so they managed to get some laser guns and got in an epic shootout with special agents and Green Baret troops.” The road was a great place to be. Stories didn’t matter after a certain point. Fact and fiction seemed to blur. Hours went by and killing time often took the form of far-fetched fables. “So Phil Scheider was one of those guys in this fight and he winds up going on a speaking tour many years later, right?”

“So? What happened to him? Did he marry an alien or something? He has one of those rare half-human, half-alien kids running around?” Frasier laughed some more.

“Nothing like that. Murdered, so many people speculate. Probably tortured before it happened, made to look like suicide.” Hank noticed that Frasier stopped laughing. “Moral of the story is not to expose these secret projects. He talked about all kinds of things besides aliens. Black budgets, man-made viruses, the Oklahoma bombing. You name it.” On the way to Chicago, they would be passing through OKC. Hank wondered if they should take a quick pass by the federal building site. “If you ever become an IC and they ask you to haul a Gunderson freight car, don’t do it.”

“IC?” Frasier asked. “What’s that?”

“Independent contractor. You run your own truck.” All of a sudden, Hank didn’t feel like talking.

They drove for a few hours without saying a word.

Rachel Harford and Ginger Hyde took a liking to each other. They'd spend morning until night trying to figure out for Verson. They decided to drop "Advertising and Marketing" and replace it with "Enterprises". Also, they became lovers after their third day together. Rachel had been sleeping on Ginger's floor, they capped off every night by drinking wine, one thing led to another and it got romantic. "This is my beanstalk. I'm afraid of what my parents would think of me. They live in retirement in Greece right now. You know? With the *Grecians* and all."

Rachel was happy with where she was. She liked Chicago and loved the view from Ginger's apartment. "I'm really afraid of what's going to happen to this country." They sat on the floor together. Instead of sleeping on Ginger's bed, they had been sleeping in the living room. It was late at night. "I fight so hard and I don't know if I make any difference."

"You shouldn't care. This is my beanstalk. My dad left me the company and he hasn't been much of a nuisance. I thought he'd be over my shoulder telling me how to run things... but he left and let me make my own decisions." Ginger emptied the last of her Rulo Syrah into her glass. "The practical side of me says I should've stuck with the old business model until the ship sank. I always like the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, though. This is my chance to live a fantasy."

"I got a call from a cousin earlier today," Rachel said. "He's a trucker now. He's coming into town tomorrow and wants to get together. You interested in meeting him?"

"We can talk. Maybe he can help us with our transition. Does he know anything about comics?"

"I've been thinking about some of the things going on in the world. We have that Cliven Bundy standoff, the Crimea situation and now that bizarre case of the twelve-year-old girls in Wisconsin who stabbed a lady. *Slender Man*. They did it for a fictional guy from Creepypasta. Is the same thing gonna happen with us? We're planning to create an edgier version of Bitstrips--*something more for adults*--an interactive Jibjab-type deal with New Yorker or Newsweek kind of themes. And we're close to 3D animation. We have Sims-type of face creators people can see themselves in pre-determined daily scripts. They'll see themselves punch a congressman in the gut for passing the wrong piece of legislation... but are they going to become like those kids in Wisconsin and cease to be able to tell fiction from real life?"

"It's not only politics, though. They'll live the lives of rock stars and scientists. Do you know how our first Moon base will be built? 3D printing! Lunar dust is called 'regolith' and somehow it can be used as the material which will be the building blocks for future structures on that big rock in the sky! We can put people up there in our comics. It doesn't all have to be about sticking it to the man." Ginger felt trapped in life. In too many ways, she was only going through the motions. She lived too much of her life trying to please other people. For the first time, she was trying to make significant steps with her own thoughts but she thought she was failing. "I know a guy doing experiments with 3D printing. You'd be amazed at the stuff you can make. *Shoes, bikes, dolls*. We can go see him tomorrow! This guy flies octocopters and is helping to develop self-driving cars! Oh, you can tell your cousin that they are

developing self-driving *trucks* so he might have to find a new line of work.”

A dimension exists beyond comprehension which is suspected by only a few mortals on the planet Earth. Like two ants pondering what it might like to have color vision... or something different than they're accustomed to, scientists debate about what it would like to have *hawk-like* vision... or something better. They think about what it would be like to have *infrared* vision... night vision... or something else their machines and gadgets have conjured up. There are more than five senses, though... and even the *best* of scientists know that dogs could "smell fear." Birds have an intuition to travel, as do salmon. As a matter of fact, there are *hundreds* of senses... and there ways of knowing and perceiving the cosmos which have been lost, distorted, misunderstood, or piled under cakes of bureaucracy. Power establishments have scared, duped, and hypnotized masses through legislation, coercion, and administrating phony information in order that they remain in power. Their methods in modern North America until the turn of the second Christian millennium had been the television, public speech, and radio. To circumvent falling into their own traps, they have devised "alternative systems of knowing" through private satellite transmissions, psychic readers, and closed-circuit conference calls. Verification of "facts" are vital to them, and they have plans which are rapid and precise as to how they would process potential adversaries or uprisings. Sometimes, "one word slings" would be enough through national and worldly "news broadcasts"... although they would never *privately* refer to them more than "necessary propaganda." Sometimes, *police persuasion* would be the tactic through covert and discrete commands from selected political figures. Sometimes, "waiting it out" is the way they go—delaying during long hiatus stages while their challengers fold, give up, or change beliefs. The traditional power establishments have reigned for an expansive epoch, but the Sphynx is wearing down... the Temple of Artemis came and went... the Colossus of Rhodes will be but a faint collective memory some day... the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus has its due as a mere afterthought... as the world on the third dirt clod from the Sun phases into its inevitable fate as a dusty glop spread across the miniscule portion of the unrestrained boundraies of space known now as "The Milky Way."

I am here to tell you of the "Other Worlds" where minds can lift heavy boulders without the aid of metallic apparatuses. These places will become imminent destined locations fo discovery. As a matter of fact, you have visited them throughout many nightly fascinating voyages. I am here to tell you of places where worlds *are* flat, indeed... and surface areas which are magnified beyond what occupants of this fading planet Earth could *hope* for. Jupiter is but a tiny grain miniature in some of the places, and traditional scientists are scoffed at moreso than comedians along Hollywood's Sunset Strip. Gravity is a nonfactor, and speech exists without words or larynxes. Fright exists, not by presence of knives or guns... but by *thoughts*. Telepathy is a given, of course, and prompt transmutions modify personic structures into morphed creations which make werewolves, vampires, and chameleons seem laughable. I am here to tell you because the time is near. No, it is not next week. It is not next *year*. With all hope, it will not be within the next *hundred* years. You still have a thousand years or so on your planet if you have work to do or unfinished business. When your spirit leaves your carcass, you can do for loved-ones what I am presently doing for you. You can tell them were to go. You can tell them how to be. You can speak to

them in their own *voices* so that they think they are hearing “thoughts.” You have to prod them along with lovingkindness, and you can’t scare them unless an abrupt end to their personal worlds are on the horizon. You have to obey the laws of the Universe, and you can’t allow a picked recipient of affection to be bequeath benefaction at the expense of all others. Remember, you are one of many deities when you leave... and there are angels whom have come before you and they are resting amongst withdrawn dwelling abodes situated extremely beyond typical mortal comprehension. There are gods, and there are dragons. Seldom is there a fable conveyed on the planet Earth which prevails for eons without significant merit, or at least a grain of truth behind it. Divine entities have interacted on occasion and thwarted *many* traditionalists conceptions of what they thought nature *was*. Everything comes in balance, and cries are heard extraordinary parsecs in every prone direction. The soothsayers have baffled communities with twisted logic and *apparent* leaps of faith... and their credos to trivialize heartfelt wisdom having been deciphered through venerated quasi-ancient parchments reeks of self-preservation and supernatural longing. They ignore the facts that *many* religions have many *things* in common... and they deduce that we ought to be in a “secular humanist world”... because we can’t agree on what those things *are*... but most people have had at least *one* mystical experience in life, and they know that there is something greater than them “out there” than them as individuals.

I am here to tell you that I am a cowboy of the nineteenth century... according to *your* years in the Christian traditional sense. The one who is communicating this message is composing a written account of all that I have learned... *thus far*. I have died in a gun battle way out in an area which used to be known as “Arizona territory.” I have had time to go to universities... and I have had more share of women *since* my departing than before. At the age of thirty-one, I was on the cusp of my next birthday celebration when an out-of-towner spoke to me as if he knew my *life*. What I had was a map of California—it had been voted into the Union, back then... but *I* didn’t recognize it as a *STATE* just yet—and I was not willing to part with “gold secrets.” The stranger, at the end of his rope decided to challenge me to everything I had. Up until then, a dame by the name of *Betty* was all I had... and she shared her services with me and a couple of other rascals. The stranger wanted Betty for the *road*, and he wanted my horse along with my *map*. We tussled, it wasn’t but fifteen seconds from the onset of the dispute until the moment that fiery metal was sent into me from a double-action revolver. Rumor had it that the Samuel Colt family sent the guy personally, but I’ve never been able to corroborate it with anyone... *since spectres are known to fib narratives as well as humans*. I went to the colleges, though, right after passing... and that’s when I realized that I didn’t know a whole lot. My world was the Arizona land, *Betty* had been my lady... and Brianna had been the one I went with when I *first* got through the American prairie. The ladies whom would visit tikes from the Ivy League conglomerate would light fires at camp... and they would set candles about their rooms. Once in a while, a girl would *speculate* on great frontier of the West... and if she was drunk enough, I would have my *way* with her.

We can *do* that at times.

I learned, over time, that there are factions that *control* things. Just like the youngsters are surprised to have a flame flicker or a curtain sway... *I* had been surprised by the “greater beings”—the ones that cut off my train of thought, at times, and persuade me that “it’s not time yet”... to do this, that, or *the other* thing. So as I chatter to the link—the “go between”—of this deliverance, I am prodded to use *both* languages. I prattle with the *contemporary* tongue of your world... and I dabble in the one I fast forget when jolted by suspicions that you will not be *salvaged* for the next passing if you don’t do something *soon*.

The ambassador who I proclaim to is most compliant and hardly has anything derogatory in thought. My manifestation is one in such that I could *overrule* ideas unbecoming to my dictation... if need be, and under the proper circumstances. I have *told* this person that the “rules” are a lot like your modern football in America—not the *soccer* of other parts. You go to training camp. You’re given regulations, expectations, and histories. You’re told what would be done under this or that circumstance. If you run with blazing speed, you show up to practices on time, and you have a gleaming track record from college... *you should make the squad*. If you’re late, yet you have a death in the family... *you should be excused*. If a new coach comes in and wants to implement a new system... you can expect anything... including being cut for no evident reason. The rules have been given. Moses let us know that we ought not lie... or exaggerate stories. The Buddhists observed the same thing and articulated “Eight Nobel Truths.” Millennia later, Walter Disney observed it as well and produced “Pinocchio” into one of the standard hits of your generation. The Greeks had Aesop, and the primeval English inscribed *Beowulf*. All noticed that when you misinform too much, heartache is sure to follow. Now, there are certain circumstances when you *should* embellish. Your queen is on the other room, a marauder has stormed your palace and put a sword to your neck demanding the royalty’s whereabouts. You *say* that she’s in a faraway loft then scamper away with her when the thug is remote and removed. Valor, in that instance, superceded *honesty*. The greater truth, if there is one... is that your love should not *expire*.

The point is that there are *rules*. Jesus of Nazereth taught that to anger in your heart is to commit murder... and to lust in your mind is to commit adultery. He preached a method whereby if you loved your enemies, you would not be treated like heathen peoples. That was okay in historic Palestine as *everyone* was oppressed by Roman rule. If you didn’t stick up for and forgive your brother, you were *destined* to be executed sooner than you otherwise *would* have been. In a closed arrangement, it does not *work*. Christians, around the time of Saints Paul and Peter, were a budding group. They believed they *could* elude catastrophic personal outcomes by conducting themselves as upstanding civilians for prolonged chronicled phases. As the belief of humility and meekness infused and percolated its way into societies’ schemes of management, it became known that incest, rape, famine, disease, and disaster *still* arose... no matter how smart people got or how humble they were. War necessitated that sides had to be picked. “Turning the other cheek” often stipulated that you would not be loving your brother. Quite the opposite materialized. Allowing your brother to be persecuted in front of you was now *hating* your brother... in a lot of

conceptions. If you are loving an antagonist whom is killing, pillaging, and embezzling for the jollies of doing so and without conscious... you are *killing* your friends. Sides have to be taken... and common sense has to be considered with esteem.

You are to know that the rules exist. “Be fruitful and mulitply” mattered at a time... but we are near an end for *feasible* capacity on the planet Earth... if everyone is to live as a “modern human” according to pretentious standards derivative of certain circles’ expressed anticipations. We *can* live for another thousand years with surplus petroleum to boot if everyone lived as existing inhabitants of *India*. Or we can *expire* our resources within a century and be judged as incompetant and stupid.

In my day, kerosene went a *long way*... and paraffin oil was very much respected. As we move along, you need to know that a new shift in humanity is pending in the looming distance. If you are the informed one of this ostensibly disenchanted memorandum, you must send it along like a *chain letter from HECK*. Or you must suffer the consequences of believing that you have come too far... or you may attempt to encode ramblings of my theoretically lunatic mind.