

The fainting couch was as traditional as anything seen in a common psychiatry office. It was studded in soft brown leather. The legroom was ample and the rear half sloped at a perfect protractor's thirty degree slope with a built-in head cushion. It faced a wall-sized tinted window three stories above a serene, lush Indianapolis public park. On a wall across the room, there were three wooden framed replica paintings. Salvador Dali's *Geopoliticus Child Watching the Birth of the New Man* was a surrealist display of a tussling man fervently toiling to punch his way out of a malleable oblong globe. A haphazard opaque blanket hovered just above as a scrawny, long-haired nude stood off to the right with a leaf modestly covering his genitals. He limply pointed in the direction of the struggle as a terrified child clung to his legs. Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night* was a popular post-impressionistic piece depicting a quaint nineteenth century European town at rest underneath a tremendous nocturnal sky featuring enormous spinning amber swirls perhaps inspired by an aurora borealis. Pablo Picasso's cubist *Woman's Head* was abstract with sharp, defining black thick lines. The asymmetrical charcoaled tan face was triangular on the left and rectangular on the right. A novice could easily mistake it for a kindergartner's best effort.

Binaural sound of breaking ocean waves were dimly audible from concealed speakers as seagulls gawked occasionally. The smell of cigar smoke residue was significant. "I feel like I'm making great progress, sir." Matthew Stuffs took a whiff of his surroundings. He guessed that his doctor smoked genuine Cuban tobacco. "I think I'll make a breakthrough someday. First things first, I've gotta work on the fundamentals."

Doctor Gordon Astor sat behind Matt on a comfortable upright chair and took notes with a number two pencil on a white pad. "I am very glad to have you back. This is our fourth session and I feel as if I have known you for four years instead of four weeks. Continue on. I want to talk about the Cotard delusion. And we can finish up on the paranoia and your belief that ghosts are haunting you around. The Obsessive-compulsive disorder is intimately woven into these acute perceptions. You have a ghostly tormentor. Hervis Manchild is his name. You are fortunate, though, I must say. My colleagues employed by the state disregard so many imperative details and hasten to prescribe sedatives and blatantly counteractive psychotropics. I will fix your mind, though. I do not believe you have a brain problem."

"Fortunate?" Matt asked. He was getting used to speaking toward the open window. In the beginning, he fidgeted while laying down. It was uncomfortable not to speak face to face. He wondered what kind of facial gestures Doctor Astor was making. He wondered what he jotted down. "It's a bitter sweet situation to be in. My roller coaster ride has been hectic. I lost good friends over the years. I am haunted by Vivian Streets, the daughter of the man financing my therapy. Horace is a wonderful man and two hundred and fifty per hour is small change to him. The state? Yes. They would lobotomize me if I had to rely on them. I know it's not legal anymore and all, but... Yeah. I got issues." He was tempted to ask his shrink for a cigar. *Maybe it's what he wants. He wants to be personal. He wants to hang out. He wants this to be fluid. We should spark up a fat one and chat facing each other. Maybe a shot of bourbon would kick this session into high gear.*

“Let’s start with the Cotard delusion. Shall we?” Gordon Astor thumped the eraser end of his pencil on his pad. “You are dead to the world and it’s a metaphor... but somehow, it rules your life. Before you divulge, we will ceremonially address a couple of questions. Where are you at and what is the date?”

“I am in an office--*a fine one, I might add*--roughly an hour and a half drive east of my home in Terre Haute. It is Friday, May twenty-third in the year 2014 at the beginning of Memorial Day weekend.” Matt licked the roof of his mouth and resisted asking for a cup of water. “My Cotard delusion? Yes. Thanks for the terminology, doc. Kevin O’Leary embodies this best. He’s a guy that has a big, sharp, pointy nose. His eyes squint like a mad person. He is balding. He is wealthy, though. They call him Mister Wonderful for some crazed mysterious reason. Maybe it’s ironic. I’m hooked on the show, I must admit. Likely when I drive back home tonight, I’ll slip into pajamas, pop in a bag of microwavable popcorn, and get ready for the *Shark Tank*. Lori Greiner! Wow! She’s a hot one! Smart. Financially successful. The whole package. If I could snap myself out of my humdrum, dire circumstance and travel around the world with her, I would.”

“Very well, Matt. I may remind you that we have an hour to discuss your issues and these assorted tangents and insubstantial segues my detract from the heart of the matter.” Doctor Gordon Astor scribbled a note, *Offer Matthew an addition fifteen minutes at end of the hour*. “Kevin O’Leary represents the patriarchal system of your fabricated reality. You said so last week. His nose. Though pointy, you think it is large like yours also resembles your father’s. *Toucan*. A former employer referred to you as *Toucan* when ordering you around.”

“You are dead to me,” Matthew said. He couldn’t tolerate being on his back any longer. He sat up and faced Doctor Astor. “You look like Frank Zappa but with graying hair. Candor. It’s important. I can’t do this laying down the whole time. You are dead to me,” he repeated. “Have you ever felt dead? I’m not talking like a zombie.” He felt ashamed and looked down at his feet. “I am a feather in the wind. This thing called life has ripped me out of my comfort zones over and over.” He stretched out on his back again. “You are dead to me,” Matt said a third time. “It’s what they all believe. It’s his catch phrase. You are dead to me, you see? O’Leary says it in jest but it’s a reflection of his aristocratic class. We are dead to them. My whole generation missed out on the big prize. I have the opposable thumb and I have the developed larynx. I got the massive frontal lobe and I walk upright. Why do I feel like four-legged animals are better off than we are nowadays? Why am I spending my Friday nights plopped on a couch in front of TV all by myself every time I leave this place?”

“The zombie metaphor.” Doctor Astor wrote down a few notes. “Expand on that.”

“There’s a rash of zombie shows out there. Walking Dead on AMC is quite good. Highschool of the Dead is fantastic if you’re into anime cartoons. I’ve watched *Shaun of the Dead* countless times on video. Probably my favorite DVD. I know it’s *not* a metaphor is the problem. I’ve connected the dots and I know that your generation sold my generation out.” Matt sat upjk again and swiveled toward the doctor. “I’m not talking about you specifically, and I’m not talking about Horace Streets. I’m talking about the

wankers in Congress. I'm talking about the corporate tycoons. I'm talking about deluded military veterans who conveniently call themselves the 'Greatest Generation' but instituted fascism here after supposedly defeating it abroad." He calmed down and then stretched out on his side. "I've listened to a lot of music with Horace since his daughter died a couple of years ago. *The Beatles*. He told me what you guys are all about. Tavistock. Sigmund Freud. Mass manipulation of thoughts of people. The Aquarian Conspiracy, the Red Octopus and the hidden powers deep in the abyss. Even though I know I'm listening to the social manipulation, I know there's a thread there. I can hear it in the song, *She Said She Said*. *And you're making me feel like I've never been born*. Deliberate. Sadistic. A pretense that we are masochists and want your abuse and neglect. And I can hear it when the Cranberries sing *Zombie* of all things. *They are fighting with their tanks and their bombs and their bombs and their guns in your head. They are crying in your head, in your head, in your head, zombie. Zombie. Zombie.*" Matt paused for a few seconds of thought. "Horace watches classic shows with me, you know? *The Twilight Zone* is one of his favorites. An episode called 'The Howling Man' sends chills up my spine every time I watch it. The Devil, you see, is an old man. He's a feeble guy behind a wood jail door. There's a small window and he makes conversation with a guard outside. The bars of the window are spread enough that he could reach outside and lift the plank that secures him inside. He must convince the guard, though, to let him out. *He must charm him*. The beguiling works and the old man's true form takes shape. He is youthful with horns and a tail."

"Once again, we are somewhat off topic. We have gone astray but you are painting a picture. I like this." Doctor Astor scooted his chair to Matt's side. "Would you feel better if you could see me?"

Matt didn't answer. "It's *Sympathy for the Devil*. I thought our generation was going to win. I felt bad when Viagra and Rogaine were being pushed like street corner drugs across our airwaves. It shows a lack of character, you know? Accept it. *Man up to it*. Kevin O'Leary got super rich because his nose... and his bald head. Compensation. We hear it all the time. Buy a gun, you're a man. Buy the ridiculous four-by-four and it compensates for your small package. *Genitals, I'm talking about*. I have the big nose but I haven't lost my hair yet. Is that why I'm not driven to psychopathic success? Do you have to be scarred for that?"

"You believe in the biblical rapture, though. That's where we ended up last week. What are you talking about?" Gordon Astor set his notepad on his desk.

"Two will be in the field. One will be taken and one left behind." Matt turned away and faced the wall. "It's no secret. *Left Behind* was a popular Christian novel by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Matthew chapter twenty-four, verse forty. It's taken very literal by many people. Horace Streets told me the beginning of the Great Tribulation was in 1993 during the Waco standoff." A few seconds passed. "Maybe it's better that you sit behind me."

Gordon moved his chair back into place. "Continue along."

"It's very magical the way Jesus was supposed to come across the sky and take away his believers

into Heaven. I'm not even a religious guy. I know coded language. I've been across strange stuff. *They raptured people*. The Republican Party decided to take those seven years from 1993 until 2000 to make lists. They used money, they used military, they strong-armed, they deceived, they cajoled, they co-opted, they sold out, they tricked and they did everything they could to separate themselves from the general populous. I didn't make the cut. I'm one of the maniacs pounding on the side of Noah's Ark. I'm a zombie. I am dead to them. This is not a Cotard delusion. It's a Cotard reality. I need you to confirm that my problems are as much out there in society as they are in my head."

"First of all, your points are valid. Unemployment is astronomical. We are in the worst economy since the Great Depression. The government fixes numbers all the time. The U3 unemployment rate is manageable but the U6 is atrocious. People have given up looking for work. Also, new variables are factored in so things don't look so bad on the surface. I am a psychiatrist and not an economist. I suggest you enroll in a class or check these facts online if you want more information. You are not left behind, though, which brings me to my second point. You seem to have a sponsor at this point. *Horace*. He's a good person and I have known him for many years. He enjoyed supporting Fletcher Browne because his daughter loved him. He wants to help you because it brings him solace. He knows he can't save the entire world and he only bites off what he can chew. You will bring him healthy closure pertaining to Vivian's tragic early death." Gordon checked the time on his Seiko kinetic watch. "We're making good time. We can move on to Hervis Manchild."

"Hervis?" Matt laughed. "All the other things don't make me feel crazy. There's a horrible economy. I can deal with that. There are greedy corporate leaders who have bought flimsy politicians. I can deal with that. I can understand it. I can rationalize it. I can't tell you that I wouldn't be the same if I was their positions. It makes sense. They have power. *They want to stay in power*. Easy to understand. No second-grader would be baffled by their moves." He rubbed his eyes. "Vivian and Fletcher died in the autumn of 2013. That Christmas, I spent alone. I could feel them in the house, though. The flames of my candles would dance around when I thought Viv was talking to me. 'Are you here?' I would ask and the flame would nod in agreement. I would ask another question and it would shake side to side, 'no'. There was an opening of floodgates of sorts. Fletcher didn't talk as much. After the New Year, Hervis came around. I got scared. I heard this is quite common, by the way. People always believe their loved-ones are there with them after upsetting deaths. I didn't take down my lights that year. It was early January and my tree was turning brown in the living room corner. I had a manger on my fireplace and I had bobbleheads flanking it on either side. On the left I had Hermey, the dentist elf from Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer claymation special. On the right, there was the Bumble the Abominable Snowman. I wasn't doing drugs and my intake of eggnog was minimal." *I'm crazy for talking about this*, Matt thought. *He's going to put me on sedatives and humor me*. "The dentist starting talking to me but he said his name was Hervis, not Hermey. I could hear it clear in my head."

"To be clear, his mouth did not move. You heard these voices in your head and attributed them to

the figurine on your mantle?” Gordon Astor reached for his pad from the desk. He flipped through a few pages. “I believe last week you said that you were institutionalized after your boss spiked your drink with LSD? Are you familiar with flashbacks?”

“Listen, doc. I’ve thought about that a million times. Fletcher Browne went through this in Washington, DC with his father. *He had mild telekinetic powers.* This government ran an MK Ultra program where they’ve made everybody bend to their will. They don’t want us to trust in our supernatural powers. They want us to talk the talk about Jesus but they don’t want anyone to be serious about believing in ghosts and angels. It’s supposed to be like Santa Claus. We give it lip service but no more.” Matt closed his eyes. “I can see his face right now and if I quiet my mind, I can hear him talking to me.” Matt opened his eyes. “Hervis. He gave me the OCD. He followed me around the house. I would close the microwave door after putting in a burrito. I had to recognize Hervis or else he would sexually violate me. In other words, if I went about pressing the proper numbers and heating my food, he would torture me. Sometimes it would be by showing grotesque images of Fletcher’s and Vivian’s death. I had seen the photos. Horace got a hold of them. I would have to open and close the microwave door until he was gone.”

“And this went on with other things, correct?” Gordon Astor had a few diagnoses written down. He crossed off “paranoid delusion” and circled “obsessive-compulsive”.

“I drink water and I am violated, not just by Hervis. He has a team. I have to close my screen door over and over until he’s gone. He wants the neighbors to see me doing it. Then? They’ll call the cops and tell them I’m crazy. He wants me in an asylum.”

“How did you reach Horace? Why are you living alone?”

“I worked with Fletcher. I bonded with Horace in Sacramento after Fletch and Viv were buried. We stayed in touch. Why am I living alone? I’m crazy. I always have been. I’m a *functional* crazy, though. I’ve always thought of myself that way. My parents let me have the house. They’re not rich but I was too old to be living with them. The house isn’t all that big. They moved into a condo across town and we still see each other often enough.” *I feel relieved for some reason.* Matt looked across the room for a clock. He didn’t want to pull his phone to check for time because it seemed rude. *I have no clue how long I’ve been talking.*

“You think I’m supposed to take you to the next level. You said it half joking last time around, but I now believe you think I am a sort of doorway.” Gordon thought about his words. “The Illuminati and the great conspiracy to keep down the public. You think you’re supposed to be one of them. Am I right?”

“Listen, Gordon. I need to talk to you like a man once in a while, not as a patient to a doctor. I have respect for authority and I esteem your expertise in the field of psychology and psychiatry. There is no paper trail in my world. The people I’ve dealt with are at the tops of their games. CIA agents. Some mafia. Radical professors from parochial schools. *Esoteric people.* It makes perfect sense in so many ways. Only an egoist would need to see his name splayed across every television channel. I know people

who are incredible puppeteers and they know how to press the correct buttons. The Illuminati, though? Dumb.” Matt finally pulled out his iPhone but not to check the time. “This is the internet and there was a time when the Illuminati actually was a secret organization but now it’s a household name, at least for my generation. I know who set the charges in the World Trade Center. Fletch Browne and Viv Streets died looking for these kinds of answers. *Rogues*. For lack of a better word, that’s what we came to know them as. I found something out, though. After they died, I could see the intricacies of the true establishment. The public is ranting about the One Percent but they don’t realize that there’s a One Percent within the One Percent. I tried to do the numbers with Horace and he sent me to you. One percent of three hundred million is three million... but that’s too many. It really is. One percent of three million is thirty thousand, and that’s just the United States. That’s more like it though and even that number is high. There are two thousand billionaires in the world. This is really where it’s at. And? It turns out they have serious divisions. The *Rogues* represent a good chunk of the two thousand billionaires but not all of them.”

“I need you to say it.” Gordon Astor scooted his chair back to see the face of Matthew Stubbs. “Tell me you know the name of the organization which Horace spoke of.”

Matt couldn’t look Gordon in the eye and looked down to his chin when he said, “We are the Heuristic Myriad of Lachrymose Contrarians.” The session ended about twenty minutes later. Matt almost expected for large men to come into the room, grab him by the arms and toss him into a secluded padded cell. Instead, Gordon Astor congratulated him on his noteworthy progress and said he looked forward to seeing him again. Matthew Stubbs felt fatigued as he drove westbound on County Road 15 in his decrepit 2002 Honda Ridgeline. He liked to tell people that only the paint and some bubblegum held the thing together. He turned on the radio and his frustrations flared up. “Indy’s only classic rock” was Q95 and Dream On started playing. *I heard somewhere that Don’t Speak from No Doubt was a rip off of this song*. In a matter of seconds, Matt could lucidly see Steven Tyler’s face. He was singing from inside Matt’s old AM/FM radio with it’s broken cassette player. It wasn’t pleasant.

Matt changed the station and put his foot down on the accelerator.

The next stop was oldies at 101.9 WKLU and Elton John was singing Crocodile Rock. Once again, Matt had an immediate absurd reaction. It felt like Captain Fantastic was there with him mocking. *This guy is such a sellout*, Matt thought. *Performing at Rush Limbaugh’s wedding! Really? I’m sure all your gay friends hold you in high regard for that one!*

Matt changed the station again and rubbed his temples.

He took a shot at easy listening at B105.7 WYXB. *We all need the clowns to make us smile*. It was Journey’s Faithfully. *Through space and time... always another show*. Matt felt the vile emotion again, *I think I’m gonna puke*. Again, he started believing that the singer was there with him, Steve Perry. *This is Tavistock mind control. It his HAARP. It is something I don’t understand*. He tried to withstand insane images in his head. There were thoughts of war, thoughts of government agents at the Pentagon, and memories of Fletcher and Viv. *I have been gaslighted. Doctor Astor knows it. There has got to be a*

*solution.* Matt tried to will uncomfortable mental images away but was unable to. He finally took a crack at AM talk radio. News of the day was that there was a killing rampage in Santa Barbara, California. Some youngster snapped and went on a stabbing and shooting spree. *This is comfortable,* Matt mused. *I am not the only crazy person. There is someone else out there who found life's edge. Only difference is that I haven't gone over it yet.* Matt got home and went about his routine. Popcorn and Shark Tank. "Contrarians," he said aloud into an empty room. He had no clue what he stumbled into.

The drive to the Compound couldn't have come during worse weather. Australia was having its worse dust storm in decades. Ordinarily, Walsh River could be clearly seen to the east of Collins Weir Road but not in the late evening of September 23, 2009. The thirty-seven foot long Hawkins Motor Coach was a sturdy recreational vehicle but blasts of wind shook it off course continually. Ginger Hyde was afraid it would tip over. "Are we going to make it, dad?" Visibility was horrible. "I can't even see fifteen feet in front of us!" Her stomach turned.

"It's not that far. Probably a half mile." Robert Hyde squeezed the steering wheel. They trudged along as furious gusts blew debris in front of them. A minute later, they reached the end of the road.

"Where is it?" Ginger asked. Her eyes searched.

"The place is easy to miss even on a sunny day. It's meant to be that way." Robert drove off road for about fifty feet to high brush. It was like the opening of a huge maze. A concealed dirt road doglegged to the right flanked by a thick assortment of teak, nightshade and eucalyptus trees. It then doglegged to the left as the path curved toward the river where a rusty trestle bridge provided crossing. On the other side, there were patches of sugar cane waving wildly in front of tall black iron gate. "This is it, honey." Robert let out a sigh of relief. "I'll be right back." It was a mild struggle to open the motorhome's door and the sprint to the gate was met with acute shots of dirt grains to the face. Robert fumbled for the right key to the padlock. *I hope this is not typical Australian weather,* he thought. He swung the left gate out as far as it would go and fastened it to a tree with his belt. The right side almost escaped his grip and clung to swaying hedges. Robert jogged back to his vehicle and drove in. "It's not a whole lot to see right now. If this storm wasn't going on, you'd see the tractors and lumber. Every place has their own environmentalists now and this area is heavy with mollusk fossils. Some guys are camped out in trailers and they'll be excavating as much as they can before we start the construction."

"How big is it? How much do you have?" Ginger was afraid to get out but she had an impulse to walk around. "Are we sleeping in here tonight or do we have our own trailer set up?"

"We'll be sleeping in this thing tonight." Robert gestured with his finger across the land in front of them. "Two hundred and twenty five acres. You saw the sugar can back there. Up ahead there's banana trees. There will be land set aside for cattle grazing and we're building chicken coops. The land is divided into five sections. One for me and you, one for Kubu, one for Donovan, and one for Preston. Forty acres each. The rest of it is for commons. We have some really neat ideas there."

"Kubu Lacey? How did you work that out? Isn't he hotheaded and always going off about rich

white people? How could you get along with him?” It was getting dark outside. Ginger felt an uncomfortable tingle in her belly.

“Kubu is one of Donovan’s best friends. They own a record label together. He’s really not as angry as you might believe. It’s an image. He comes from a ghetto and hangs out with rap artists all day. He talks a mean talk but at the end of the day, we have the same enemies as each other. He’ll be fine here. Besides, he has a place in the Hollywood Hills and I doubt he spends a lot of time here.” Robert pulled up to a bulldozer and parked. “Donovan was actually tight with Kubu’s dad, Herbie. They went to high school together. Herbie was one of the marines killed in the 1983 Beirut attacks six years before you were born.”

“Why Australia, dad? And if Australia, why not Sydney? I mean if you guys got the whim to move this far, why not driving distance from the Opera House?” Ginger got up and headed back to the dining table. Robert followed her. And since we’re way out here in Queensland, why not the wonderful beach at Cairns?”

“It’s only a couple of hours drive to the coast... at least on a regular day.” Robert smirked. “This place is beautiful. Atherton is less than thirty miles away and has everything you’ll ever need. Kuranda State Forest is gorgeous. Lake Tinaroo is placid. There are hot springs to the south and even a volcanic mountain. America got crazy. I couldn’t stand it.” He became solemn. “You know who we are, right? You know our family history, don’t you?” Ginger fidgeted. Robert remembered *A Few Good Men*, *You can’t handle the truth*. He was having that moment with his daughter. *She doesn’t want to know. She doesn’t want to remember. We’ve had this conversation before. She doesn’t want to believe.* “We are the Contrarians, Ginger. Your grandfather, Jacob Hyde, was at the Jekyll Island meeting back in 1910. He was a loan officer living in New York City. He bonded well with Irwin Cobb, Donovan’s great grandfather. Fantastic lawyer. He also aligned himself with Benedict Callypso who made a fortune mining silver in Nevada. These three guys were jaded by happenings there at Jekyll. The event was astoundingly psychotic to begin with. Under the auspice of a duck hunting trip, prominent bankers, congressmen, attorneys, tacticians and other movers and shakers got together in one of the more dubious meetings ever held on planet earth. There was incredible secrecy about who was invited to attend but it has come to be known that Paul Warburg, Frank Vanderlip and Benjamin Strong were a few of the participants. These guys were blindfolded and taken there by mysterious rail cars. No joke! The United States had a couple of central banks that he failed in years past and they had just experienced the Panic of 1907 which was a run at the banks. JP Morgan locked many bankers in a library over night to solve the problem but it was only a temporary fix. The real solution came at Jekyll Island where they set off to create the Federal Reserve... which ironically is a private body. They control our money. They control interest rates. Your grandfather, Jacob dissented from the plan together with Irwin Cobb and Benedict Callyspo. There was something slimy about it, I remember hearing in stories. They wanted to try a third United States central bank but were shunned and scoffed at.”

“That doesn’t answer the question, dad. Why Australia? Are you running from these people?” Ginger got up and rummaged through a suitcase. “I’m changing into my jammies.” She stepped into the restroom and came out a minute later. “Why Australia?” she asked again.

“None of us thought it could happen. The collapse of the United States, I mean. There are two things synonymous with America. Freedom and capitalism. In 1971, Richard Nixon took us off the gold standard. That gave value and substance to our currency. In 1981, when Ronald Reagan was sworn in, the United States had a national debt of roughly one trillion dollars. Seemed manageable. Then in 2001, a rogue faction of our government planted explosives inside the World Trade Center and took down the Twin Towers. They set up a few Arabs as patsies and started a global war.” Robert yawned. “It’s not just our nation that owed trillions of dollars. Every Tom, Dick and Harry owes tens of thousands of dollars to credit card companies and lenders. The premise of capitalism is that you have capital to spend. Capitalism is dead. Nobody has assets anymore. Everything is owned by a few insane banks. And freedom? That went out the door after nine eleven. If capitalism is gone and so is freedom, that means America is gone.” Robert rubbed his eyes. “I played golf with Steve Lutterbach. Do you remember I told you about this?”

“The one who worked for Dore Wrecking Company?” Ginger got up. “I’m going to start a pot of coffee.”

“Dore Wrecking Company set the charges in the World Trade Center. Me and Steve are talking one day and he brings up Hill and Knowlton, the guys that did the PR job for the first war in Iraq. My ad firm was modest and he asked if I’d be interested in doing my own propaganda for the thing he had going on. He spills the beans about his role in the event.” Robert kicked off his shoes. “I tell him our family history. We are Contrarian s. We are wealthy but we are not megalomaniacs. We have no interest in such a fascist scheme.”

“I’m proud of you, dad. It sounds like you got run out.” Ginger loved the smell of brewing coffee. She figured they would stay up talking for a while and looked forward to a caffeine boost.

“I was hoping it was just a bad presidency. I’m talking about with Bush. The system is set up so that we don’t have to handle a lifelong tyrannical king... but they figured out ways to stay in power by pulling strings behind the scenes. Clinton started housing celebrities in the White House during the nineties and that was the beginning of an unholy alliance. Washington, DC provided Hollywood with physical security and Hollywood shifted from left to right and started spewing out totalitarian propaganda.” Robert excused himself for a short restroom break and changed into sweat pants. When he returned, he said, “It’s like witnessing a stabbing in a musty New York alley. You’re on your way to the theatre or something and you’re sucked into a violent drama. The thug notices that you witnessed his attack so now *you* have got to die out of paranoia that you’ll narc him out. In many ways, the hordes in America are protected by their own ignorance. They don’t *know* that nine eleven was an inside job. They don’t understand the Fed. They don’t know what debt slavery is. I had to leave because it was way too uncomfortable.”

Sleep was restless for Ginger. The dining table converted into a bed when the post was removed

and cushions were put on top. The wind howled and she wondered about life. At the age of twenty, her life was just beginning. Before her dad retired for the night, he explained that he wanted her to take over the family business, an advertising agency. Her mother was going through a midlife crisis of sorts and didn't want to make the trip to Australia from Chicago. Ginger woke up groggy and cotton-mouthed. The dust storm was still strong. She checked her father's sleeper and he was already gone. Ginger splashed water on her face, took a quick shower then dressed for horrid weather. When she stepped outside the motorhome, she saw her father far away in a red windbreaker. Tractors were moving about but work seemed futile. Visibility was still weak. When her father noticed her, he waved her over.

Robert yelled over the wind, "We've got to secure some things here and there! We don't want to lose equipment! Go over there!" He pointed to a tractor trailer. "There is breakfast in that place! You can meet some of the crew! They're really good people! I'll be there in a few minutes!" He waved toward a bulldozer driver and signaled left with both arms like he was a worker on a busy airplane tarmac.

Ginger hurried to the trailer. The smell of bacon came immediately. There was a gray-haired man frying eggs on a butane-powered skillet. A few guys sat around eating omelettes along thin table facing a dirty plywood wall. "Hello! My name is Ginger! I am Robert's daughter! Good to be here!"

The cook seemed startled. "Oh! Wow! I've heard a lot about you! Robert is a lucky man! My name is Graham. I do horticulture. I'll be bringing chickens and livestock to this place!"

A rugged young blond guy stood up. If not for his thick Australian accent, Ginger might have mistaken him for an American marine. "My name is Lander, ma'am." He patted a guy still busy stuffing sausage links into his face. "This is my good friend, Cole. We're ecologists." He walked to the trailer's entrance and pointed toward Walsh River. "Our boss has no time for breakfast! He's out there collecting snail fossils. They're quite amazing, actually!"

Ginger shook Lander's hand with her dainty hand. "Chester? Chester Besson? Is that your boss? My dad told me a lot about you guys. It's a lot more than gathering shells and bones out here!" Ginger watched the haze of dust kicking about. "You know everything about the ring of fire! You know everything about the Pacific islands from Malaysia to Kiribati!"

"Ma'am. I'm a novice. My boss knows a lot and I just learn." Lander sat down and gulped down some orange juice.

Cole stood up. "Pardon my manners." He extended his hand for a shake. "I've gotta get out there before I get yelled at. Wolfed down this grub as fast as I could. Cole Frazen at your service, by the way." He shook Ginger's hand then ran outside.

Graham handed Ginger a plate with eggs, bacon and potatoes. He said, "We're not going to get a whole lot done until that weather calms down. In some ways, that's good. We can get to know each other." Ginger was too restless to stick around. After she ate, she hightailed it out of the developing land where her dad was barking orders to various construction workers. She asked Lander Duncan to join her. He was hesitant because he was supposed to help Cole and Chester but this was more important. The big boss man

around was her father. That was the priority. Besides, she was his age and she was pretty. They walked out across the rusty trestle bridge and headed north on Collins Weir Road. “You’re really lucky, you know?” Lander told her.

“This place is so unimpressive to me. I don’t know why my father wants to be here. We have a great place in Chicago not far from the Willis Tower. I mean, he explained that he can’t handle the city life anymore.” Gusts of wind knocked her sideways. “This is the middle of nowhere! I mean no offense. You’re probably local, right?”

“I live in Atherton. You get used to it. You even learn to like it, believe it or not. I understand you guys are building replica landmarks. Scaled down Epcot Center, Eiffel Tower and Sky Tree. The White House! That’s amazing! Practially full size from what I understand... except without the east and west wings. And the Heijo Palace. That oughta be something when it’s finished.” Lander shielded his eyes from dust. “Up ahead is Crooked Creek. We’ll stop there.”

“One of my dad’s good buddies is a movie producer. He’s finishing up a movie in Baja California. He loves to do stuff like this. Building replica stuff, you know? He gets everyone in character and we walk around like it’s another century... even if we’re not actors in the movie. I think it’s great.” Ginger stopped walking and studied Lander’s face. “I have a serious question. My dad has seemed a bit more fidgety lately more than ever. He thinks something’s down. He’s an ad exec and he’s usually cool, calm and collected. *Clean cut.*” Ginger started walking again and felt embarrassed. “He’s talking about bug out locations. We almost went to Panama instead of this place. Too many drug dealers and problems with corrupt cops. And? There’s something he has about...”

“The caldera? The hot springs? That’s a real enough thing. They’ve been acting strange lately. It’s no more dangerous here than North America, though. Yellowstone? I’m not sure if the public understands that it’s a supervolcano. It’s not a matter of if it blows. It’s a matter of when.” That was the end of the conversation until they reached the creek. “Listen, Ginger. I have mixed feelings about a lot that goes on out here. I mean, I try to be ecological. I have a clear conscious when I think I’m saving the planet. Your dad is mixed up with many people that have tainted motives. I would almost call some of them sociopaths. I mean, as long as there is a net gain in their lives, they don’t mind that they ravage a pristine place like this.”

“I can’t tell you that I know everything that my father does. Once in a while, he’ll drop a bombshell on me... but I don’t know what to believe. He knows people in Black Water and one of his good friends runs RMI. Have you heard of them? A clandestine subsidiary of Northrop Grumman. He says everything is breaking apart at the seems in America. Wars are being privatized. Prisons are subcontracted. We’re building a replica White House because Preston Bancroft is going to feature it in a new film... but there is something psychological there. My dad wanted to be president--I’m pretty sure of it--and so did Preston, Kubu Lacey, Donovan Cobb and the rest of the eccentric tycoons he hangs out with. It wasn’t in the cards so this is the best they could do. That’s not the end of it, though. My dad said there will be

underground bunker--*these guys love to include bunkers, trust me*--but instead of being a safe house from nuclear warfare, it'll be a dungeon. *A subcontracted private prison.* I don't know what to believe because he's joking all the time. And he tells me that they're going after Tony Blair and George Bush for war crimes. He has friends that are organizing a tribunal, maybe in Malaysia."

"I've heard a *lot* of stuff since I've been out here. I don't know what to make out of it. I keep my nose clean. I dig where they tell me to dig. I don't do a whole lot else." For a short period, the wind stopped blowing. Lander took off his shoes, rolled up his pants, and walked into the creek. "Come on"

Ginger joined him. She stayed in Australia for the weekend and was able to enjoy a couple of ordinary days of weather. She wasn't meant to stay long. She caught a flight back home to Chicago and rejoined her mother. Before leaving, she had a conversation with her father about taking over the ad agency. He said he was planning on selling it if she didn't want to take a crack at running it. She was only twenty years old and it seemed daunting. She had been involved unofficially for years helping on many campaigns. She felt up to it. The nature of marketing changed since the advent of the internet and she even believed that her lack of traditional experience could actually be a benefit.

"Novus Ordo Seclorum."

The man speaking was seated comfortably on a lush burgundy high-back chair. The table in front of him was humble and probably of the fold-up variety which was meant for impromptu outdoor parties and other gatherings. There was a round window behind him decorated as a sailor's wheel. To the right, there was a large framed photograph of the night sky. It was an intriguing photo of huge tornado illuminated by a nearby substantial bolt of lightning which stretched from the clouds to the ground. There was text at the bottom. *To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you're not allowed to criticize.* A quote from Voltaire. There wasn't traditional carpet. No, it was a type of artificial grass, and not the smooth kind you'd find at miniature golf courses. It was the hard, scratchy dark green stuff. And to the left there was a huge mounted flat screen monitor. The fold-up table had three objects on it: A blue and white captain's hat, a yellowish scarf, and an Apple Mac Book.

"Reach into your wallet and pull out a one dollar bill." The man speaking wore a loose opaque safari shirt and was relaxed. He combed through his well-groomed dark beard with a few fingers. "The proof has been there all along." He plopped his workman's boots on the table.

Thaddeus Streets was nervous and fidgeted. *I Werewolves are jealous of his beard.* Tad was reminded of a Dos Equis commercial as he reached into his wallet then seventies disco, *Billy left his home with a dollar in his pocket and a head full of dreams... He said somehow, some way, it's gotta get better than this.* Music sounded inside his head. It was "Young Turks" from Rod Stewart. It was somewhat antiquated to him but he grew up listening to classic tunes with his aunt. There was a wide range of oldies he otherwise wouldn't have been exposed to. He thought of his aunt and he missed her. His attention was turned back to the man across from him. *When he drives a car off the lot, it increases in value. His passport requires no photograph.*

“Flip it around to the back side and you’ll see it on the left side underneath the pyramid.” The bearded guy watched Tad turn the bill around. “See it? Do you know what it means?”

“No. I never really thought about it.” Tad Streets started inspecting some of the other imagery. Off to the right there was an eagle arrows in one claw and possibly an olive branch in the other. “What does it mean?”

“New World Order. Latin, of course.” He had a remote control and pointed it at the mounted monitor. The screen turned on and there was a split-screen picture of a five dollar bill. “You take this money, fold it length-wise, twice upwards, then you have something that resembles a baseball home plate... but if you look at the image it creates, it looks like the Twin Towers from the World Trade Center. Brash stuff, if you asked me.” The bearded man took his feet off the table and reached into his own wallet and pulled out a five, ten, twenty, fifty and hundred. He demonstrated with the five. “See? Try it with the ten.” He pushed the money across the table and continued with his powerpoint presentation. “With the same fold, you’ll see the building is struck. As the denomination rises, the towers start to fall until they’re only rubble at a hundred.”

Tad folded the ten then the twenty and was at a loss for words. He folded the fifty then the hundred. He examined the images.

“Brash, huh? They did the whole thing. But you know that already or else you wouldn’t be here.” The bearded man got out of his and walked behind Tad. There was a spiral staircase. “Come on. You’re ready to see the meat and potatoes. You’re aunt Vivian did not die in vain.” He pulled Tad up from his chair. “You only have a small piece of the puzzle, though. I want to fill you in. That’s why we gotta go upstairs.” The mysterious bearded guy made his way upwards and Tad followed him.

The floor was checkered in black and white linoleum tiles. The room was dim and there were windows in the middle of all four walls, each with the curtains drawn shut. There were large grayscale graphic photos with brass frames, engraved placards and subtle horizontal lamps beneath each. There was also an array of color maps and enlarged political cartoons and caricatures. Near the corners, there were white marble pedestals with different objects on them. Globes, helmets, small statues. The room had the ambient feel of a marriage between a retro diner and a quaint hipster museum. “I still haven’t caught your name,” Tad said after a few seconds of scanning. In the middle, there was identical burgundy armchair as the floor below but there was no table. Instead, there was a black mini-fridge in front of it.

“That’ll come soon enough.” The gruffy guy made his way to the far corner and Tad followed. He stood in front of an image. “What do you see here?”

“It’s the most hideous crap I’ve ever seen! What the fuck is this?” Tad moved closer to the large framed photo then backed off. “There are heads on opposite ends. There are multiple arms coming off this thing. It looks Hindu, like one of those gods that has six arms. That’s what it looks like. It reminds me of Cat Dog, a cartoon on Nick I watched when I was a kid. That’s what it looks like. I wondered how the thing shitted, by the way.” Thaddeus Streets tried to hold back genuine laughter but was unable to. He

chuckled, covered his mouth with his hand and pretended it was a cough. “Listen, I know I’m not supposed to laugh at this stuff.” He was embarrassed. “Is this real?”

The adventurous-looking guy became angry and had to hold back his own emotions. “Listen! Have you ever heard of white phosphorus?! Do you know what depleted uranium is?! Do you have any fuckin’ idea at all how your precious aunt died?! !” He wiped sweat from his forehead, collected himself, then moved along to the next grayscale photo. “Do you know what this one is, Thaddeus?”

“Hiroshima. That’s my best guess. I studied history in high school. I didn’t take college too seriously—I’ll admit that—but I know devastation when I see it. There is an elderly oriental man holding a dead loved one... and the back drop is a flattened city.” Tad rubbed his chin. “It could be Nagasaki.”

“Good answer!” The man’s rage was flushed away and he was proud. He walked to the next image. “Can you tell me if there is a difference here?”

“My best guess is that it’s the other Japanese city. If I guess right on Hiroshima, it’s Nagasaki. If I was wrong about Hiroshima, the first time then this has gotta be it.” Thaddeus studied the photo and noticed that the children cried in agony but they were not Japanese.

“This is Palestine this past summer. Israel flattened the Gaza strip and killed more than two thousand people, many of them innocent women and children.” He turned from the image and made his way to the center of the room and seated himself on his burgundy thrown. He gestured for Tad to sit on the mini-fridge. When Tad was seated, he extended his right hand and introduced himself. “My name is Donovan Cobb. I am a billionaire.”

Tad shook his hand. “You know something about my aunt. What is it?”

“First, we drink. I’ve done some research on you and I know you’re fond of your aunt Vivian’s favorite liquor, Bartles and James Berry wine cooler. As for myself? I like Caberet Sauvignon. Both are in the fridge underneath you. Let us partake.”

Tad spread his legs apart, opened the door and pulled out a couple of bottles. They drank for a few minutes without saying anything. Finally Tad noted, “On the opposite corner from where we started I see my aunt Vivian and my uncle Fletch. Give me the story.”

“You don’t want to discuss the autopsy photo of JFK? There’s stitching above his eyeball. He was shot multiple times, countless witnesses including Dallas cops heard shots from the grassy knoll... and somehow, some way they sewed up his head on Air Force One to make it appear like a single shooter got the job done.” Donovan Cobb wiped some dripping wine from his lower lip. “Why couldn’t law enforcement get it straight about what kind of rifle Oswald fired with? Was it an Italian Mannlicher Carcano or was it a German seven sixty-five Mauser?” Donovan Cobb realized the wine hit him quick and he reached a mild buzz. “You can call me Don, Tad.” He got up and walked to the corner where pictures of JFK, Vivian Streets and Fletcher Browne were displayed. Tad grabbed another bottle for himself then hurried to catch up. Donovan asked, “See that mangled up bitch next to your aunt and uncle?”

“Yes. They did a job on her.” Tad moved closer until his nose was a few inches from the image.

“A bulldozer. Ploughed the shit out of her.”

Donovan Cobb turned to Thaddeus Streets. “That’s Rachel Corrie. She was ploughed to death in 2003 less than a week before the US invaded Iraq in 2003.” He walked to the picture of Vivian Streets’ head resting on Fletcher Browne’s thigh. “Your aunt died at the hands of the same people. Rachel was trying to form a human shield in front of an Israeli demolitionist crew forging its way into occupied territory. They stopped caring, at some point. I’m talking about all of them. They don’t care about us. We’re like houseflies to them. Reckless abandon. Their plan is to grow, dominate and subjugate.”

“I miss my aunt. That’s why I came here.” Tad teared up. “You said you could help me. I believe you can.” His face flushed red.

“Listen, Tad. You’re one of my favorite people on planet Earth and I’ve only known you for less than a couple of hours. You saved my ass! I want to know how you knew the things you knew. I brought you to the platform for a reason.”

“Was this place an offshore oil rig before you converted it into museum?” Tad studied Donovan’s shrewd face and realized he didn’t want to yet discuss the logistics of where they were. He explained, “I got a text message from my aunt Vivian a little more than a year ago. She was finally gonna marry uncle Fletch after dating him for more than ten years since hooking up in high school. Grandpa Streets wired me the money to meet them in Europe... and he gave extra cash so I could bring my buddies, Ramon and Brent. Whole ‘nother story though. I was getting ready to board my plane from the States when I got another text, this time from my grandpa. Vivian and Fletcher are dead. Prepare for a funeral, not a wedding. That was the gist of it.” Tad thought he had given enough information but he re-examined Donovan’s face and could tell he wanted more. “After the funeral, I started getting these vibes. That’s the best I can tell you. I knew my aunt was there at night. I knew she wanted to talk to me.”

“The flickering candles in your room. The notes she left behind for you.” Donovan Cobb pointed to the mini-fridge Tad was sitting. Without any words, Tad reached below and pulled out another bottle of wine and handed it over. Donovan repeated the same thing he had told Tad on the helicopter ride over the their remote island location. “I don’t delve too much into internet conspiracy sites. I like them for entertainment. I’m practical, though. I don’t need numbskulls telling me what’s going on in the world. In the autumn of last year, I started following stories about the comet ISON. It was supposed to come and crash into our planet and end life altogether. Many said it was really the mysterious brown dwarf, Nibiru. Entertainment, like I said. But then you came along.” Donovan scratched the back of his head like he was trying to figure out a complicated riddle. “You spoke in such detail about who we are. The Illuminati and the fringe groups. The Georgia Guidestones. That was big. The Cremation of Care. The Anunnaki. Three twenty-two.” He rolled his emptied bottle across the floor and popped the cork off his new one. He swigged. He contemplated. He looked like he was baffled. “I logged onto Maniac Saloon. Herman Eichelberger. I knew that name. You said the shit had hit the fan. *Robots were going to be sent to replace certain celebrities, the liberal ones in particular.*” Donovan shook his head, still in disbelief. “The thread

was deleted in a matter of minutes because someone said something wrong—*something too sensitive*—but I was already tipped off... and I'm grateful to you."

"I was part of it. That's all. I wasn't a *big* part of it but my aunt stumbled onto something that ruffled the wrong feathers." Tad looked around at the framed photos. There was a black and white image of a US soldier pointing a gun at the temple of a pleading, whimpering Vietnamese citizen. There was Slender Man. Nine eleven, ground zero. Navy sailors running for dear life at Pearl Harbor. Alien autopsy. It was currently the winter solstice of 2014 but Tad had no worries about horrid east coast weather. He was now in an island paradise near the equator in the middle of the Pacific. The previous day, big news was made in Brooklyn when two police officers were shot dead, execution style. The nation had been in uproar since unarmed black citizens were killed by cops. One was Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and the other was Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York. People took to the streets. In Ferguson, the government declared a media no-fly zone and businesses boarded up their windows in anticipation of riots. Peaceful international observers come in and were met with brutal police resistance. The country waited with psychotic anticipation see if Darren Wilson would be put on trial for the murder of Michael Brown and if Daniel Pantaleo would be tried for the murder of Eric Garner. Tad's eyes were fixed on a three foot by five photo of Garner being taken down in a choke hold which had been outlawed since 1994.

Thaddeus Streets retraced the steps in his mind which led him to Kiribati.

Darkness. Pitch black. More than a year before Tad sat with Donovan drinking. No light. It was late September of 2013. Mystery. "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. Now, a pinpoint of light. She spoke. "Fletcher?" She looked up at the light and it became brighter and thin rays shot in a conical fashion from its center. "Fletcher, darling?" From a tiny dot to the size of a bright mirror ball perhaps thirty yards away. She grasped at the hand. "Are we alive?"

Fletcher watched the white rays 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 at all. There was only the glimmer of the distant light. Oddly, it did not illuminate his surroundings. "Alive?" Fletcher heard the descriptions before. He was coming to consciousness and realized 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. Very slowly, some of the details came to mind. "I was gasping and heaving. It must have been..."

"Chemicals, Fletcher! You were writhing on the floor like a disco snake!" Vivian watched the bright hole expand to the size of a large doorway.

"We're dead, Vivian. I think we're supposed to cross over." Fletcher moseyed toward the

glowing portal. “Let’s go.”

“Fletcher?” Viv remained in place and yanked Fletch back. “Shouldn’t we talk about this?” The light in front of her pulsed and throbbed. “This is our eternity!” There were dynamic spokes spewing in all directions protruding from the illuminated gate. “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 and cursing our planet! We’ll be ghosts walking around draped in thick, rusty chains!” He tried to see Viv’s face but there was still nothing. “Let’s leave it behind. Our world was worthless. It was a wreck.”

Vivian began to feel better. She didn’t say a word. She began to ease her way to the astounding brightness in front of her. She pulled Fletcher along and stepped through the radiant rectangle. 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 to her lover. The Sun beamed in the far distance and rainbows arched across a clear, 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 tried to convince himself he was in the middle of a dream.

“You have unfinished work,” George said. Foggy white cloud vapor hovered but slowly dissipated. “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.” Vivian continued to scratch Fletch’s arm.

“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 of George’s presence. Vivian seemed distraught. 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 azure 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 were called. *Truthers*. And you came across an idea that Rogues within the American government performed the greatest false flag mission in the history of the world." Pause, face, then pace. "I have seen my share of blood during our Revolution. I remember the tyranny of 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 really 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 an offhand 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 pretty sure he's out there, too." 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 hear angels than others. You can fix your world."

"Why are you here?" Fletcher walked a few steps 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 in this dimension... but you've got to want it. You really should fix the things you're able to. Bite off what you can chew."

"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?" *I can help my father still*, she thought. *I can make peace with my mom. I can give important clues to Tad. We all know he needs them.*

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 his pacing again. "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 molten lava and burned for many 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 vaporizing rock all around.” Facing Fletch and Viv, “A chasm... large enough for skyscrapers to fall into.”

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 the hero role. “On Earth, loved ones pray that we rest in peace. Can you rest right now?”

“I can’t,” Viv responded. “I’m sick of exerting myself and feeling like I’m going nowhere. But I can’t rest if I believe we lost. That’s bullshit!”

“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 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 in 2013. 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 not far from 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 to 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 outlandish 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 get lowered down. 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 did you do it?”

“I think you’re right. We should go.” Vivian Streets floated past her father to the top of 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 Vivian. “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, though.”

“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 being. "I know what we can do. We can go down to a psychic shop. We can screw around with 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." In the distance, she saw her nephew Tad arriving late with his pals, Brent and Ramon.

"Never turn back, Vivian. Let it all go. I can feel it. 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 chuckled. "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 his dad's forehead with his ghost fingernail. "Five, four, three, two..."

Walter Browne wiped his forehead.

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

Viv and Fletch flew past Tad and his buddies. They took off together into the city. They had been lovers in Sacramento during the late nineties. They were familiar with the area although it had changed insignificantly. 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 had lived in California's state capital. In between Sacramento City College and Saint Josephs Cemetery, there was a quaint place called *Sunlight Vision*. Vivian remarked, "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 hand-painted text in small white letters underneath a foreboding graphic of an electrical dark purple sphere with rainbow lightning sprawling 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. "Let's go in." Fletcher felt nervous and wondered about it for a moment. *I don't have biological nerves anymore. Why do I feel any anxiety?*

Vivian drifted her way through the window while Fletcher strutted through the door. In the middle of dimly lit room was a square table draped with maroon tablecloth. There were brown beads draped along walls in all directions. There were small multi-colored 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 brownish marble, 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 translucent 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.”

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. *Sarin*. That’s what did you in.”

“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 to get out of any ridiculous quest.” Fletcher pointed to a tarot 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 warping 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 the feeling of being powerless against it.

"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 Three? 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 rounded 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 and have difficult 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 you with chosen 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 a cloudy haze. Glowing 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 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 right now?”

“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.” It stood gracefully atop a crushed serpent.

“Let’s leave.” Fletcher felt 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 the wall 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

quaint house on Larkin Way. There was a large smiling framed sepia portrait 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 along ranting. Fletch went through the rooms while Viv stayed with the man on his living room couch. Fletcher came back and told Viv that the house was empty. The guy grumbled loudly 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 the comet ISON. “Is someone there?” the man demanded. Fletch returned to the living room.

“He might be one of ‘em. I think he can subtly 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. His hopeful demeanor mutated quickly to animosity. “That’s not you! You are a fraud! I can tell who my mother is!”

“Whoops!” Vivian was embarrassed and 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 Fletch 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 phonies? 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 totally bonkers.” Vivian went into the kitchen and Fletch followed. “I don’t want to be here. I want to be blissful in Heaven. I thought we’d be in Heaven and there would be no more problems at all. 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. Maybe your nephew. Maybe your

mom or dad. 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 boundaries 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 oatmeal 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 is, 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 pled.

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 bizarre and possibly violent."

Viv pondered, "And the science fiction interest? We looked around his room. There were books and other imagery. Jupiter and that sort of thing."

"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 downward shutting off the neon sign. She flipped the a cardboard sign around 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 Wilhelm Olbers claimed in 1802 that there used to be a planet between Mars and Jupiter. "Phaeton was the original fifth planet out there," she explained. "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 mystic clarified. "One of it's moons destroyed Tiamat." She explained that the ancient Sumerians were thriving at the time of the distinctive impact.

"It sounds like a neat story," Viv commented. "But really? Why would 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? Astronomy and astrology overlap."

"Sedna? Yes. That's the planet past Pluto." Fletcher was surprised he could remember such an obscure 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 this business."

"Thank you for your time." Vivian was genuinely satisfied. She felt like she was making progress as a phantom. "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. Crawl before you walk or run. 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 away. "I'll talk to you later."

Viv and Fletch left. They didn't feel like seeing Neil Scopes. There were bigger fish to fry so they headed to Pasadena in Southern Cal to seek out rocket scientists from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. After some investigation, they blinked back to Sacramento. "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 the government does stuff like that... especially to people like me. They’re listening right now, lady. That’s why I can’t talk to you.” He began to sweat profusely.

“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 all 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 special agents jam my brainwaves with HAARP. Remember the naval yard shooter complained ELF’s? Yes. They do that to me, too. Except when I go to work, I can think clearly. 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. *Third eye vision.*”

“I’m concur with Fletcher, Neil. I think it’s overblown hype. I can’t see ISON hitting Earth.” Vivian still wanted to hold Fletch but those kinds of affectionate activities became prohibited since passing over.

“You have to go check. There’s a way. What do you think Hale Bopp was about the cult led by Marshall Applewhite? The spirits *travel* with these objects. You’ve got to try.” Neil Scopes thumbed madly through pages of one of his magazines. “There’s articles that tell you exactly 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, though... but I appreciate the gesture.” She smiled.

“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 ghostly hand. “Let’s go,” he suggested. They headed south across town to Bodhi Temple near a past rival, Calvin 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 anything *political*.” Viv 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 burnt out 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 darted 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’m in an insane funk like you,” Viv told Fletch when it was done. “Something’s missing here. Absolute vertigo. I don’t think this is supposed to be our fate. Why are we not driven by the same motives we had just days ago when we were alive? Why are we not finding the many answers we’ve always been looking for? The easy things are seeming impossible!” 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. “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.” Vivian flew 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 said when they got to his driveway. They crept 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 up at the hip!”

“Space Invaders and Asteroids are still here!” Vivian looked around the oily cement floor 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 a blotch of gradient patterned colors from 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 the dinosaurs?”

“They looked styrofoam. That’s what I can remember.” Vivian looked into the picture.

“I bet the live people still here on Earth are like we were way back then. Some people can peer into this thing and effortlessly see the images. For others, it takes some training or a type of knack. To a lot of people, though, it’s only a splash of colorful hues and shades.” Fletch heard a voice in the other

room. "It's my mom. Let's check on her." They dashed 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 burst 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 two thousands might be known as the golden age for modern perverts. We had the Sandusky thing and that Castro guy in Cleveland. Computers and hidden cameras everywhere."

"But you're thinking of NSA sleazy wankers looking like *this* guy staring at the entire populous from behind remote monitors, aren't you?" Vivian giggled then noticed a churro stand. "I wish we could eat something! There's got to be a way."

"Hop inside the guy, Viv!" Fletch scuttled to the filthy man on the bench. "He's dozing off. This is the perfect time for me to try!"

"*Ooooooh!*" Vivian pondered it. "I'll do it!" Vivian snuck up to guy, turned around, then sat on his 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 father had been nodding off. 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 trials. He lost his crops, his family and his health.” Fletcher noticed that the raggedy man 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’ve 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 got to leave and head back to the ubiquitous rat race. They’re all caught in the grand bargain just like we were. God’s out there still negotiating with the devil over our teeny lives.”

“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 lame government or some 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 I’m a cog in 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 actually 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 meat-grinding social machines? Maybe. I’m starting to think of Heaven in a different way. Maybe its not up above in the clouds taking advice from our country’s first president, Mister Washington. Maybe it’s here, precious. Maybe we belong *here*.”

Vivian wanted to be held and tried to place her spectral head on Fletch’s spectral 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 a 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 shut down prison?”

“Do you remember our first tour guide in Tanzania? We were talking about 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. Alister Hardy, too. Primates in Borneo are like none other in the world. They’re used to waddling 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.*” 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.”

“It was a tame version of the Animal Planet documentary we watched at your dad’s, remember? 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? I vaguely remember watching it.” Fletcher contemplated 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. The decision was made. “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 deep dives to the muddy 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 waded through shallow water with aquatic apes frolicking in the wetlands. Vivian scampered with a few through marsh 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 thrilled to be there.

“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.” He remarked, “Their noses are *soooo* huge!”

“Do you know what today is, by the way? 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. *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 ‘vengeance 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, it’ll be clear to us what the next step is.” Viv admired the primates taking care of one another. They were picking bugs off one another’s backs and a host of other substantial activities. “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 more so than others. There had been sparrows in Sacramento that seemed keen on their presence. As he stood in a swamp in Borneo there were a few exotic birds that fluttered and squawked when he got near.

“Uncle Fletch and my aunt Vivian stayed there for a few days and decided to give up on the living world. I’m talking about the world where I came from back in America with horrible politics and crappy economy. It was like the original Superman when Clark Kent gave up his superpowers in order to marry Lois Lane. He couldn’t follow through with it for too long, though. There was always some evil or another waiting to attack the planet. My aunt Viv has always a JFK conspiracy buff and it was coming on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination. Her and Fletch went to Dallas and explored Dealey Plaza. There was all kinds of media leading up to November twenty-second of last year and there were all kinds of regular joes involving themselves in the action. We all know that president Kennedy was killed on Elm Street. Did you know that *Nightmare On Elm Street* with Freddy Krueger was centered on that day?” Thaddeus Streets looked at Donovan Cobb’s inebriated face and wondered if he was going to pass out. “Fletch and Viv spied on many people over there and they came across millions of neat stories. Two future Republican presidents were in Dallas when JFK was shot: George Herbert Walker Bush and Richard Nixon. Did you know that? Many Dallas cops heard shots from the grassy knoll and even chased a man into the adjacent train yard... but the Warren Commission decided to ignore their testimony.” Tad’s attention turned to the autopsy photo of Kennedy. “You see it right there!” He pointed. “There is stitching on his head. An autopsy was done in Maryland, not in Dallas. His head was sewn on Air Force One on the flight to the east coast! James Humes burned his frickin’ hand-written notes about the president’s dead body! They knew he was hit from a different direction than the sixth floor where Oswald was!”

“Yes. Highly irregular.” Donovan offered the remainder of his wine to Tad.

“This is when I realized that they’re all lying!” Tad took the offering and drank. “Not just in 1963 but in 1942, 2001 and today. Lying, it turns out, is the rule. It’s not the exception. Herman Eichelberger had seemed like such a nice man, at least compared to Cornelius Stuart. They were always jabbing at each other, and there was always some kind of war game taking place or being planned. That’s how they get their shit done, by the way. They have patsies all over the place who think they’re part of drills. Everybody around them in the lower ranks is only on a need-to-know basis. That’s how they pulled off Sandy Hook. Everybody thought it was a drill until it was too late.”

“But they failed in Sandy Hook,” Donovan commented. “They wanted to create an uproar with these supposed murdered children in order to outlaw all handguns.”

“Well, Cornelius Stuart worked for the CIA and was done in by an android—*one of those S2024*

*models.*” There was a photo on the wall of a growling chupacabra. “We all live in this world where we don’t know what to believe. You told me one of your billionaire buddies delves in trading exotic animals including that one.” Tad motioned toward the picture with the tip of his bottle. “I didn’t know who to turn to. I got on the Maniac Saloon and ranted away. Their forums are full of a bunch of rejects—we *have to admit that much*—but there’s enough people like you and me to make it worth it. The last days of Fletch and Viv’s life, they were hiking the mountain peaks of Kilimanjaro. But you know what I was doing? I was manning a base at Fort Indiantown Gap waiting for the wheels to come off this tumultuous social experiment called the United States of America. Folks were going to be rounded up and put in camps.”

Donovan Cobb got up and walked to the corner towards a few maps. Tad followed. Donovan grabbed a yard stick and began pointing to various spots. “This is Gilead, Tad... according to Handmaid’s Tale. Next to it, you see Amerika with the country of Heartland in the middle. This, of course, from a different piece of fiction. Look at some of these towns. Neptune and Sunnysdale are in California. Eerie and Pawnee are in Indiana. Twin Peaks, Washington. Cicely, Alaska. Castle Rock, Stars Hollow and Pine Valley are in New England.” Behind Tad, there was a globe the size of a medicine ball resting on a pedestal. Donovan spun it around a few times then stopped it abruptly. “Right here, you would think it’s New York City. It’s not. In the daytime, it’s Metropolis and at night it is Gotham.” His forefinger slithered away downward from North America. “San Lorenzo in the Caribbean, Sierra Gordo in South America, Mepos in the Mediterranean, Kangan in western Africa, Shangri-La in the Himalayas, Chernarus and Pokolistan in Asia. For the enthusiast of make-believe lands, this planetary model a great blessing. You told me you did work in Southern California’s Inland Empire?”

“Yes. Warehouse stuff. Putting in pipes and deadly furnaces.” Tad was drawn to the globe and read some of the other locations. Narnia, Honalee, Opperland, Bengalla, Guilder, Zubrowka, Slaka, Wadiya, Kumar, and Blefusca. He recognized a few of the names but many, many more he never heard of.

“I own countless maps, atlases and globes from ordinary to comic novelty to extremely obscure. I haven’t seen Inland Empire on one of them. Not to my best recollection.” Donovan tapped his yard stick on map.

“It’s understood. The Inland Empire consists of a few cities east of Los Angeles in San Bernardino and Riverside counties.” Tad focused on the tip of the stick. “I’m sure there must be a caricature one advertising certain businesses. Either way, just because it’s not on your map doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“Bingo! Let’s now turn Greenland, though.” There was silence. “Take a few seconds and tell me what is wrong with this picture.” A few seconds passed. “Is this a joke? A caricature? It’s not supposed to be! Something is glaringly wrong here, correct?”

“Greenland is the same size as the entire African continent.” Tad rubbed his chin. “That’s it, right?”

“Bingo. Greenland is less than a million square miles. Africa is nearly twelve million square

miles. You have been told a lie your entire life. This map—the *Mercator map*—is in public classrooms all across America. Also, England is the same size as Madagascar here but in real life it's half the area. People say this map is used because it demonstrates how longitude lines are adjusted from a sphere to a flat surface... but that's not the only problem with it. The equator two thirds down the page! It's Eurocentric! It gives a false sense that the north is larger than it really is." Donovan stepped a few feet over for the next illustration. "This is an interrupted world map. It looks like an abstract color drawing Pablo Picasso might've put together. It's a world map in overlapping crescents. Strange as it might seem, the land masses are way more accurate in proportion to one another." He stepped further along. "This is a Peters map. It's not perfect... but it's way more proportional than the Mercator one. South America looks oblong, at least until you get used to seeing it this way." He circled the curve of the next one with his finger. "See how horizontally oval and wide this one is? This is a barrel map. It shows the entire Earth's surface while given the illusion of looking at a standard globe." Donovan turned toward Tad and tapped his right shoulder with his yard stick, almost like knighting him. "The last map here is the big enchilada. It will tell you secrets you never wanted to hear about." From Tad's shoulder, the stick found its way quickly to India with a thud. "East of Madagascar, south of India and west of Australia is the lost continent of Kumari Kandam."

*Tad's jaw dropped.*

Donovan moved the tip over. "The place where you and I are standing? This three-story building on an offshore platform connected by a narrow, modest pier to a relatively dinky atoll? Well, this place was one of the higher elevated mountains on one of Earth's greater continents, *Lemuria*."

"Also known as the continent of Mu." Tad rubbed his eyes. "Stretching from the Marianas in the west to Easter Island in the east. North from Hawaii reaching south to Mangaia. We're dab in the middle of it!" The

"Yes, yes. Glad you can read, kid." Donovan winked. "Kiribati has a few island chains. To our west, there is the Gilbert group and to our east there lie the Line Islands. The humble abode we're conjoined to here is called Nikumaroro in the fabulous Phoenix Islands. Did you hear that Amelia Earhart is rumored to have crash landed here? There's an awesome, awesome lagoon I'll take you to in a matter of time. It's located near compelling, mysterious airplane wreckage. Stay sharp here right now, though, because this lecture is not done. Follow." He skipped the Americas and knocked on the Atlantic ocean with his knuckles. "Atlantis? It's here. It's real... and it's here. That's not what I want to talk about." He used his foot to pat on the United Kingdom. "Up here off the coast of Ireland, there's an island called Hy' Brasil. At least there's *supposed* to be." He walked to a pedestal and retrieved a few folded maps. "This cloth square came with an eighties computer game, Ultima. It helps you navigate the fictive fauna of Britannia." He handed the descriptive garment to Tad then unfolded a high-gloss city map. "This is Sunset Valley from EA Games. It's also an imaginary place." He held it long enough for Tad to examine with a look over. "My point is that we humans know when we're producing something that is *actual*... and

something that is made up. When we listened to Walter Cronkite reporting from Vietnam, we knew it was a bloody mess and soldiers were getting mowed down left and right. But when Orson Welles took to the radio airwaves back in 1938 and reported a Martian attack with the startling *War of the Worlds* like-like drama, there ensued mass hysteria. People took to the streets in a maniacal panick. Society was caught off guard... but eventually everyone realized it was a ruse. Christopher Columbus sailed across the Atlantic and believed he landed in India. It happens. Did you know that rumors are pervasive that Marco Polo came to America first? There are seventeen years unaccounted in his life and a map surfaced in San Francisco providing some evidence. Also, there was a prolific Chinese explorer, Zheng He, who journey around with a fleet of twenty-eight thousand crewman. His attributed map of the Americas is accurately detailed. What are we to believe?"

"California was believed to be an island. I remember that from high school history. Why did you put your palm around England?" Tad crept closer.

"Yes. I go on tangents once in a while. The island of Hy' Brasil was documented west Ireland in 1325 by Dalorto. It was clearly indicated on the 1375 Catalan atlas, it was denoted on the 1570 map of Europe, and it was still there on the 1595 Abraham Ortelius map and Gerardus Mercator version. John Nisbet wrote about the mysterious foggy place in 1674. Somehow, though, it disappeared. No one knows what happened to it. The place where we're at? Kiribati with it's thirty-three atolls and reefs? Well, two islets disappeared back in 1999, never to return. Abanuea and Tebua Tarawa are gone forever but there's a slight caveat. Hy' Brasil is supposed to be gone as well... but it comes back every seven years, or so they say. A *ghost* island. The highest point here in Kiribati is barely four yards above sea level. The president has bought tracts of land in Fiji on Vanua Levu. Australia has pledged help. Mainstream scientists report that Kiribati will be completely submerged by the end of the century due to the rising sea. Natives here continually are moving their homes further and further away from the coastal breaking waves. This is one of the clearest signs on planet Earth of severe climate change. Factor in the general increase in world temperature and visible melting of polar ice bergs and glaciers. Unless, of course..." Donovan paused. He blushed and wiped his brow.

"Unless what?" Tad was intrigued. There was nothing the bearded guy dressed in the safari outfit could say that would disappoint. Tad wanted to know where it was going. There was a line of logic. There was a preponderance of evidence. "What else could it be?"

"The lost continent of Mu! You see, it existed way before the combustion engine! Way before there was industry! Way before smoke stacks and choking dark smog and slimy soot!" Donovan pranced across the room and waved Tad over. "Come!" Near the staircase where they entered the room, there was an odd infographic. It illustrated the Earth with a cut-away which detailed the inner workings. It was likely not produced by some fancy schmancy university like Stanford. No, it wasn't from a highly-respected place of higher learning like Cal Tech or MIT. It possibly came from a crack pot folklore professor from a fly-by-night school or from a joker trying to get a rise. There was a bright flaming ball in

the dead middle and there were towns and countries directly under the upper-most crust. “This is Agartha!” Donovan was proud and believed without indulging in wine he wouldn’t have had the nerve to bring up the subject. “There is a land of people under us. *Dancing on the ceiling*. Gravity works opposite and they have their own Sun in our planet’s center.” He smirked. “If the sea isn’t rising... then the Earth’s crust is sinking. That’s what happened to Atlantis. That’s what happened to Kumari Kandam. That’s what happened to Mu.” Next to the cutaway infographic of Agartha, there was a movie poster advertising *Royal Wedding* starring Fred Astaire and Jane Powell. “Imagine living in an apartment and the guy living below you is singing upside down from you right below your floor!” Donovan pointed. “That’s what Astaire did in that movie! He was dancing all over the room along walls and frolicking with his feet tapping the ceiling! The people of Agartha are like that. Their moving about with their feet at our Earth’s thin crust.”

An urge told Thaddeus Streets to run. Find a way off the platform. Sprint down the pier. Jump on a motor boat and get far away. *This man is crazy*, Tad thought. He looked at sweat beads drip from Donovan’s face. Other images came into Tad’s mind. *I was manning a detention camp. The United States has contingencies to round up millions of citizens*. He looked at the puddles of wetness at the armpits of Donovan’s beige safari shirt. *Executive Order 10999. Agenda 21. Readiness Exercise 1984*. “You think you come across as nuts, don’t you. Not playing with a full deck, right?” Tad’s throat was getting dry and he was starting to sweat like the man he spoke to. “I like you.” He thought about his aunt Vivian. He thought about Fletcher. He thought about grandpa Horace. “You delve in the fringe. We’re not talking about ordinary fringe. You talk about Atlantis, which every red-blooded person has heard of... but you talk about Kumari Kandam and Mu as well. My aunt was like you. She had to know everything. It went beyond that, though. She had to see everything for herself. Curiosity killed the cat. It killed my aunt right before she was to get married.” Tad was almost at a loss for words. “I understand, though. I really understand. I was raised to believe that the United States of America was this great land—a *utopia*. I saw a dark side I never wanted to see. My mind still pushes out images.” He felt dizzy. “Ordinary people get thrown in loony bin if they begin thinking that extraterrestrials are out there scoping us. Years ago, FEMA produced a manual for firefighters. The infamous chapter thirteen instructed first responders how to deal with alien contact, and we’re not talking about migrant workers. We’re talking about Greys, Reptoids, Andromedans, Dropas and possibly Ewoks.” Tad felt stirring in his gut. He knew what was happening. He was having a sort of epiphany. In the next few moments, a decision would be made. It wouldn’t be one of life’s insignificant choices. Do I order the chicken grilled burrito or do I go for a couple of beer battered tacos? This was the proverbial “blue pill or red pill” moment. *If I let my cold feet get the best of me, I laugh at this place. I pretend this guy has gone off the deep end when I’ve been looking for this place all along*. “Donovan?” *I know what it is. It’s coming to me. Shaking these jitters isn’t as simple as saying I believe there just might be a nation of people hanging around like bats in a cave right under my feet. The Earth is hollow like a basketball and creatures live on both sides of the leather*. “Do you mind if I call you Don?” Tad asked. “We’re hitting it off well and I feel like I’ve known you for years.” *It’s not as simple as*

*believing, with this guy. He's going to require me to go out and about like aunt Vivian.*

“Don?” He considered it. “Maybe in private, it’s fine. I’ve come to find though that if people call me Don in public, sooner or later, they start calling me Donald. Bugs me.” He turned toward the stairwell and made his way down. Tad followed.

The pier outside of Donovan’s building anchored a 2013 Donzi 35 ZR Cuddy dubbed “Gamera” and it featured a perfect airbrushed image of the flying Japanese giant monster turtle on a charcoal gray backdrop. As speed boats went, the Donzi was ample enough. There was still plenty of daylight left as Donovan and Tad hopped in for a cruise around Nikumaroro. A few time zones to the east, it was dark. The Moon looked pinkish more than anything else. That’s what Fraser Cuervo recalled as he stared into the dark sky and fought nodding off. He inhaled a strong whiff and tried to think. It smelled rancidly musty and he knew there were caked rags somewhere in the sleeper behind him. He peeked over at Hank Saunders and thought to kick up a conversation. Hank’s eyes were bolted to the road, though, and he was slumped over the wheel like he wanted to lick it. Fraser reflected on the past few hours. When there was sunlight still outside, a slinky stream ran alongside the highway. Radio reception wasn’t strong and there was a tendency to have country music stations playing the same handful of modern hits on an endless wheel. “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. Fraser wanted to pull off to the side of the road and have a tall can of brew with his feet deeply plunged in icy water. They had picked up a few gaggles 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.* Fraser stared out into the sky and watched waning crescent Moon looming yearning to put out any light from its thin sliver. There had been an abnormal Blood Moon back in October except that it didn’t live up to the hype. It was supposed to be red but only turning dirty pink. His mind turned to the river again. It hit home when he listened to the Paisley song. He recalled being on the Mississippi River and floating around on a fat rubber tube and splashing with his cousins while watching his old uncles and friends getting drunk and talking a lot of junk. “Do you think it’s going to happen?” Fraser 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 whiskers were graying, thick and knotted. He ran his fingers through them and rubbed his palm on his chin over and over. “This is a strong world, kid. It’s gonna be here for a long, long time. Longer than you’ll ever know.” He rubbed his forehead with a filthy red bandana and downshifted again. He was unphased by the wimpy Moon. He had a delirious desire to stop the truck and scream at Fraser to get the hell out. He chuckled for a few seconds. 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? You thinking of that Blood Moon

again? *And the Sun became black as sackcloth of hair... and the Moon became of blood.*" Hank pulled downward on his lumberjack chin and grinned. He looked high into the stars and then gazed back to the monotonous windy road. "I've had maybe five hours sleep in the last forty-eight hours." His voice cackled and was hoarse.

*I knew this would happen.* Fraser felt some anger when Hank started to smirk. He believed it was the question he asked. Truth was that Hank couldn't go on for another driving hour. Severe fatigue set in. Life was a joke at that point. *What were my choices, though?* Fraser's mind was whirlwind spinning into a category F5 tornado. In any five minute period he would find himself excited about becoming a professional truck driver, then he'd find himself in hidden frightening despair and deeply regretting his decision to get a 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. You know? We have hours and days in front of us. We could talk about the chupacabra if you want? Or those aliens."

Hank Saunders didn't respond. He turned on the radio but there were no stations. From Eighty-four they would hit Ninety-five. He knew the area like the back of his hand. "Listen, kid. Up ahead in a few miles, there's a place called Deadman Pass. *Part of the Oregon Trail.* Nice rest stop." He felt sickly feverish even though brisk cool air was circulating 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 bolted on broken white lines. He put the lead down on his 2011 Freightliner Cascadia then turned toward Fraser to study him. "You ain't no pussy, are you?" Fraser looked scared. Hank was becoming scattered in the mind and he fought dozing sensations. His eyes were thick blankets. "*Trucking is a life, boy! It's not a job!*" He feared the tike would break into tears and start babbling but he saw only intense shock.

Fraser sucked in a lungful of stale air. "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 this behavior of Hank's 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 and speak in politically correct manners when he was around people. Quite the opposite. He was surrounded by dirty people sleeping in dirty trucks and mangy hotels speaking dirty language. "I can drive this fuckin' bitch!" Within the hour, they got to Deadman Pass and Fraser Cuervo drove a semi-truck for the first time in his life without supervision. His trainer conked out and his loud snoring sounded like a bull horn. The Eighty-four became somewhat mesmerizing. Fraser was glad to be alive.

The afternoon was balmy in Chicago. Across the country in Nevada, Fraser Cuervo was carefully backing a full eighteen-wheeler loaded with Washington state apples into a warehouse dock. In the Pacific, Donovan Cobb and Tad Streets were island bouncing. Oblivious to the existence of Fraser, Donovan or Tad, Ginger Hyde shuffled papers behind a mahogany desk in a fortieth floor office not far from Lake Michigan. She set a stack down and anxiously walked across the empty room to a wall mirror. She looked at herself from the front. *I look like a young Farrah Fawcett ... but with secretary glasses.* She turned to

the side and checked herself out. *You look professional. You can do this.* She pulled a paper cup from a water cooler near the mirror and chugged enough to get brain freeze. She went back to her desk and stared at the phone for a few seconds. It was a 1990 beige BellSouth Supremacy 4300 and it had arrived via UPS three days prior. Her white Gianfranco Ferre blouse was tucked orderly into her dark gray Tahari skirt. She felt uncomfortable in formal attire. She looked down at her Sam Edelman boots and admired the silver buckles. *Missus Claus wears these, I'm pretty sure.*

The phone rang.

Ginger Hyde scurried to her desk and was close enough to pick the receiver up on the first ring but... she waited. *Can't look desperate,* she thought.

It rang a second time.

*I am confident. I am focused. I am competent, capable and willing. I can take on the world.*

The phone rang a third time.

It felt like a eons 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 filed documents into a metal cabinet and pulled out some others. "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 heavy bounce and dressed in a plain black T-shirt, men's blue Levi's and simple black rubber boots. Unlike Ginger's eighties-esque blonde feathered flowing locks, Rachel's hair was naturally dark and completely 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! Wowza! Feels good!" She leaned back then tried some adjustments.

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. "I'm pleased to meet you." She was expecting something different. She knew of Rachel through the internet and was familiar with her work. She knew of her casual side but wasn't expecting to see it. They had talked on the phone about a business dealings. Ginger was expecting Rachel to show up more formal. *There is a time and a place.* Ginger felt queasy. *This might be a mistake.* She studied Rachel from toe to head. *I almost sure she's heading to a Morrissey concert after she leaves.* She giggled then scolded herself for judging. *Never question genius.* There was no portfolio, iPad or briefcase. She was questioning the situation again. Rachel chose dark maroon lipstick, white powder on her cheeks, and thick eyeliner. It took a few seconds but Ginger could finally see it. *She's sexy, actually. She has confidence in herself. She's glowing like a*

*lamp. She knows she can get the job done.* Then the train of thought 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 renowned grassroots political activists Philadelphia has. Our 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 this beast. CBS decided to sell off its billboard division. The mode of business is just not what it used to be. Here at Verson Advertising and Marketing, we have managed to get by in the greater Midwest since the nineteen fifties. Along comes the world wide web and all of a sudden none of the old rules apply anymore!”

“You’re getting into comics and interactive cartoons. I can help you with that. That’s a big swing. I have experience there.” 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, opposite of popular misnomers, people like to hold tangible products in their hands.” She pulled out a thumb drive from her pocket and hand it across. “We can’t go a hundred percent cyber. We need to partner with CustomInk. We’ll sell custom t-shirts of the images from our site. It wouldn’t hurt to partner with a custom bobblehead company.” Rachel looked at the thumb drive still in Ginger’s open palm. *She doesn’t know what it is.* Rachel explained, “I have JPEG, GIF, WMA, PDF and AVI files on that thing.”

Ginger’s trepidation faded and she felt embarrassed for second-guessing the meeting. She put the zip drive in a drawer then plodded to her window almost halfway up the one-hundred-story John Hancock Center. “See that building over there? Oprah Winfrey has a flat that cost a few million bucks. Must be nice, huh?” Rachel joined Ginger and they peeked outside together. “I live down the street at the North Pier Apartments. Not quite as fancy but it gets the job done. We’ll be doing a great deal of our business at that place. You can stay with me. We can figure something more permanent out later.”

“Sounds super!” Rachel rubbed Ginger on the shoulder. “Should we get a bite to eat?”

Donovan Cobb and Thaddeus Streets snorkeled around the Phoenix Islands. They returned to the pier where Donovan flaunted a personal museum of obscure images and globes. “Did you expect to see that flying tortoise?” Donovan asked. A half drunk bottle of red wine was in hand.

“Gamera?” Tad laughed.

“No! The guy flying under the water! The tortoise with the flippers. Donovan looked into the sky. The Sun had gone down less than a half hour before they docked. “UNESCO controls this place. I’ll tell you about it later.” He has happy. “I have so much to tell you. My cousin’s son. You’ll probably meet him tomorrow. Everything will start making sense.”

“You can tell me that there’s a porpoise overlord in the third story of your joint and it’ll make sense at this point.” Tad had a can a beer he was nursing. “I used to be surprised by the turns in my life.” He sighed and looked across the dark ocean. “Not anymore.”

“The third story is just my bedroom. Not a lot there.” Donovan reflected on his own life. “Do you understand decompression chambers, Tad?”

“Yes. Quite well after the conversation we had earlier. Nitrogen bubbles. They’ll get in the blood stream if you surface too fast from deep waters. You have to go into decompression chambers to normalize your metabolism.” Tad watched Donovan’s eyes watching incoming waves. They had fishing lines stashed in barrels behind them but they hadn’t cast out yet.

“Do you know what allegories are, Tad? Analogies? Euphemisms?” Donovan had an internal balance he rarely achieved. Not too sober but not stumbling-down drunk. Not too out-of-touch but not in-your-face. Not too aloof but not too anal. “Tad? Do you understand what I’m getting at here?”

“Analogy? That would be the boy that cried wolf, right?” Tad liked his speed boat ride around the islands. The bearded man that drove had pizzazz but sometimes he came out of left field.

“The decompression chamber analogy is this island. You were at a certain *pressure* in the United States of America. You were bombarded by bullshit media stories about bullshit media people leading to bullshit media tactics. But you would hardly know it unless you were able to leave. I will take you to Macau. Provided you don’t have a mental breakdown or an aneurysm, you will be able to see some of the finer places this planet has to offer. You realize I couldn’t take you straight to Seoul, Korea, right? You’re going to arrive there with biases and misnomers that the American media wants you to have. You’re going to wind up asking a waiter at a restaurant what kind of dog meat your dish is made out of. It would ruin our trip.” Donovan swished his bottle around then pressed it to his forehead.

“I’m not like that... but I realize what you mean. I have a lot to learn.” For the first time, Tad thought he was walking on eggshells. He realized that better things were ahead but Donovan was screening him for what those things would be.

“Do you know who the thief in the night is, Tad?” The night was dark and the Moon was nowhere to be seen. Donovan wanted to read Tad but was unable to. He was only a silhouette. “The rapture, Thaddeus? Do you know what the rapture is?”

“I’ve heard it talked about. Holy rollers. Bible thumpers. I’ve seen ‘em. That’s their kind of talk.” Tad stopped nursing his beer and drank. “Satan. Anti-Christ. I’ve heard it. I can’t say I remember everything, but I’ve had more than one Jehovah’s Witness come to my door trying to get me to convert. I saw a couple of Mormon guys on ten speeds talk to me at a bus stop once. They ought to consider sweat suits instead of business suits when they ride. It’d be much more comfortable.”

“Hell, Thaddeus!” Donovan smirked. “Trinity! Eucharist! Do you know that political parties are not mentioned in the Constitution? Capitalism? The primary system? Some of the western world’s cornerstone foundations are not explicitly written in its canonical pieces of literature! Would you be surprised to learn the Hell is not in the Bible? Neither is the Trinity! Neither is the Eucharist!”

“The Eucharist only matters if you’re Catholic! I dated a chick in college...” Tad decided not to divulge. “Why does this matter? Hell has gotta be in the Bible! It’s one of the central teachings! Let’s all

kill and cheat and steal otherwise, right?"

"Gehenna, Thaddeus! Jesus spoke of Gehenna! A place where fuckers burned their trash in the streets and lepers roamed around the byways like forlorn zombies! It was a suburb of Jerusalem! That's what Jesus spoke of but when translators got a hold of the original Gospel writings, they changed it to Hell! Gehenna was a physical place... just like skid row in Los Angeles. A place you didn't want to wind up! Fuckers think of something magical with the rapture! Chapter seventeen, verse thirty-six of Luke says that two wankers will be working in a field! One will be taken and one left behind!" Donovan poured some of his wine onto his hand then rubbed it through his hair. "Idiot ministers in the United States always pretend this is a physical happening! These guys go to seminary for years, but not to save souls! They learn how to stuff their pockets!" He laughed and attempted to continue with his point but was unable to. More heartfelt laughter came and his belly hurt. "I raptured your ass, Thaddeus!" Donovan smiled widely. "The rapture is physical happening... just like Gehenna was a real place in the times of Jesus and skid row is a real place in Los Angeles!"

"You saved my ass from a personal Hell?" Tad asked. "I haven't been here too long to feel it! Pardon my honesty! My aunt died a tragic death, my best friends sold me out, and the United States government is more than willing to jail me if I return for bolting from their stupid death camp program! I appreciate your intentions but it's not quite Heaven yet!" He felt bad for his outburst. "I know you're trying really hard but I've gotta right some wrongs." Tad thought about Ramon and Brent. They were his pals in college and they worked with him in Fort Indiantown Gap but something changed. After aunt Viv and uncle Fletch were gassed, everything fell apart. "I have to defeat some personal demons."

"Fair enough." Donovan exhaled. He was beat but still ready to take another boat ride. "It all comes with time, Tad."

Fraser Cuervo and Hank Saunders were on the road far away in Reno. "That wasn't so hard." Fraser was happy with himself. "I'm dead beat and can use a million 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 save money on fuel... and they figure it's safer this way 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 was about to burst. He didn't care, though, and started to spit out some more details, "First thing they told me when I started driving for WC Yorkshire 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 lads like you drive really cheap to get experience."

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

A Pilot gas station was approaching and Hank wanted to exit to take a whiz but passed it. "Yeah. This company *feeds* off people like you. Annual turnover rate is ninety-seven percent. You hit a pole? They're going to say you're unsafe and kick you 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 ya'll 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 barrels of money. You're best case scenario is that you'll keep on trucking and spend the majority of your next few years chained to the road. More than three hundred and fifty days a year. *You'll never see your family.*"

"I've heard horror stories about dudes that have the right paperwork for their loads and they get to weight stations only to find out something's screwed up. They have to call the dispatcher but they don't care or pay for it and it somehow comes out of the pocket. There are guys that work here and do everything by the book. Dotting every 'I' and crossing every 'T'. They're somehow starving and staying in roach-infested motels. Bed bugs chewing on their legs at night. If you slip up, you'll actually be *pay* Yorkshire to be on the road. Is that true?" Fraser 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 nineteen thirties in the middle of the Great Depression. Warren Chadwick Yorkshire started delivering potatoes and other produce from Idaho to New Mexico. Had a 1929 Studebaker Commander with a trailer hitched. His grandparents were some of the earliest settlers around the Great Salt Lake. He had that pioneering spirit so he bought more cars and more trucks. The WC Yorkshire company grew, grew and kept growing. They survived the Motor Carriers Act of 1980—deregulation which knocked out many of the big companies—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*. Gotta learn the terminology."

"We're picking up bananas in Lovelock, yeah? Heard you talking to the DM. Or eh... the *travel agent*, as you said. Someone's ride broke down?" Fraser was trying to remember other details from 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. Travel agent is our DM, yes. Glad you picked that up. The cat in Lovelock had his engine go to shit so his load is heating up. It'll go bad if we don't pick it up today. Needs the engine running to keep cool. Lot lizard?"

You got it. I saw a skanky cougar back at *Love's*. You'll learn more than you ever wanted to know about lot lizards. Give it a little time." Hank spelled it out for some reason, "*Prostitutes*. They'll take every last dime if you let 'em. *Give ya' gonorrhea, too!* Wreck your marriage! The whole nine yards."

"Okay. Stay away from lot lizards... unless they look like Ronda Rousey, right?" Fraser finally believed he was in good hands.

It was the day after Christmas in 2014.