

PARTIAL ECLIPSE

by John Scott G



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johnscottg.com

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gnud

GOLOSIO NONTRADITIONAL
UNIVERSAL DISSEMINATION

“Life is a groove, man!”

—*Aristotle*

(Quotation unverified.)

Suicide Video

Fade In



“I, Leslie Justice Walker, being of sound mind and sufficient memory, hereby bequeath my worldly knowledge and artistic creations to those who are gathered to celebrate my self-administered exit from this planet.”

Leslie stood in one of the shafts of light streaming through the large windows arrayed across the upper story of his artist’s loft. Nearly every surface in the airy room was painted white, and the place gleamed in the sunshine.

He checked the display screen of his mobile device and compared it to the larger image on his desktop computer. Brushing back his longish hair, he grimaced at his appearance. He still maintained a lanky frame from his days on the college track team, but the thin and

angsty biped on the screen did not impress him. He did note that the outfit his girlfriend picked out for him—well-worn jeans and faded blue denim shirt—looked good in the video, but he was dissatisfied with the overall appearance of the shot. He tapped his phone to pause the recording.

He decided the visual presentation would be better if he moved his few pieces of furniture away from the center of the room. First, he pushed back the two chairs that he had recently liberated from a late-night party at the university where he was a lecturer on twentieth century art. Next, he scooted back a steamer trunk that had been appropriated from an abandoned building on the wrong side of the tracks just before he and some friends staged an evening of emo bands. Finally, he moved his worktable that held his computer, hookah, Nikon, and Shakti, his short-haired tabby, who was perched atop the computer, soaking up the warmth.

“You’re no help at all,” he told the cat. He picked up the Nikon and turned the camera toward Shakti. “Hey, fuzzy beast,” he told the dozing feline, “look sharp for your close-up.”

Shakti seemed to be squinting. “That’s my contrarian cat,” Leslie observed with a smile, “always ignoring my instructions.” Shakti stirred, stretched, and found a new position to enjoy the computer’s heat. After taking several shots, Leslie ran his hand from the cat’s noggin to the base of its tail. “You like this, don’t you, beastie?” he asked the cat quietly. Shakti began purring. Leslie smiled again and admired the rumbling feline for a moment. “You are a distraction,” Leslie told the cat. “You’re very cute, but you’re a distraction.”

Leslie put down the Nikon and reactivated the video in his mobile. He angled the camera on himself. The image shook slightly as he talked while pacing through his loft.

“We find ourselves in a tortured time,” Leslie said evenly but with an undercurrent of resolve. “Same as it ever was, I guess, but lately society has embraced big technology with little regard for morality. Mathematical process has replaced human rationality. Micro-electronics has mated with macro-stupidity.” He paused the recording and played back the last sentence. Nodding, he began recording again.

“In today’s world, the efficiency of the circuitry is more important than the efficacy of the citizenry.” His voice took on more urgency, causing the cat to open its eyes in annoyance. Unfazed, Leslie continued: “Boolean logic is futzing around with fuzzy logic, and both are losing. The speed of signal processing is increasing even as the signals themselves are clogging our systems. Advanced electronic data processing is utilized for everything whether it’s needed or not. Technology keeps moving forward whether the result is desirable or detrimental.” Leslie paused for breath, then added, “We are being forced to live inside a reality so perverted that it is actually surrealism.”

Leslie stopped the recording, walked to the loft’s kitchen area, and got a water bottle from the fridge. He took a sip and re-checked the lighting. Satisfied, he continued.

“Some people will call this video a rant,” he admitted. “That’s probably true, but you have to agree that there are huge problems in the world that we seem unable or unwilling to address. For example, everywhere you turn, you can see the unrestricted acceptance of computer

algorithms that are deciding things for us. We are caught in a widening whirlpool of technology that exists for its own sake.”

Leslie stopped at the north end of the loft. He took a breath and continued. “Facing up to this sobering fact makes it appropriate, if a bit ironic, to forego the suicide note in favor of this, the suicide video.”

He nodded into the camera and explained, “I want to assure all of you that my action is sincere and that I am taking it with no small amount of preparation.”

His phone buzzed with an incoming call.

“Wonderful timing,” Leslie said. He tapped the device and was abrupt with the caller: “Apologies to whoever you are, but I’m kinda-sorta busy right now.”

He ended the call and returned to his recording with a confession. “Okay, I’ll admit that my preparation did not include muting my phone, but I’ll take care of that immediately.” He hit the mute button with a flourish. “We now return to our regularly scheduled death documentary, already in progress.”

Leslie gave a rueful shake of his head at his mistake, took a deep breath, and returned to his

presentation. “I want to emphasize that I am concluding my own existence in an attempt to affirm everyone else’s existence. Yes, I recognize that this is patently pretentious, but no other choice is left to me. After witnessing everything that is being done to exterminate human life on our planet, I have joined a chorus of concerned scientists in trying to make cautionary statements to help bring about a course correction. You probably know how well that went,” he said derisively. “It is unfortunate, but earthlings appear oblivious to anyone’s warnings.”

His pacing once again brought him near the worktable, and he paused to gently stroke Shakti under the chin and the cat made more happy droning sounds deep inside. “Well, mrrrrumph to you, too, fuzzy beast,” Leslie told the feline.

Leslie turned back to the mobile device and resumed his termination talk. “It’s not as if the lack of human decency among humans hasn’t been pointed out to people. Artists of all kinds—authors, painters, poets, photographers, filmmakers, and stand-up comics—have created valuable arguments about the failings of

humankind. But humanity won't listen." He paused to take a couple of breaths.

"As for my suicide, maybe this small action will help more people accept self-conclusion as a viable alternative to earth life. Perhaps my stepping off can encourage others to do the same thing. I am hoping to incite a series of suicides, especially from those people who are not needed here on Earth. Among those who add nothing to society, I include spammers, telemarketers, advertising executives, corporate board members, producers of reality television, rightwing nut-job politicians, and, of course, performance artists."

Leslie paused a moment as clouds passed in front of the sun, momentarily lowering the light in the loft. Les glanced up at the row of windows. To the sky, he said, "Could use a little help," and waited patiently. The clouds moved on and the room brightened again.

"Thank you," Leslie said to the sky.

He restarted the recording. "The time has come for what is known as 'a reveal'," he said while walking to the kitchen. "Let me show you something that I know you're going to find interesting."

He opened the largest cupboard door and pulled out a red backpack.

“In here,” he said while carefully moving the backpack to his worktable, “is a custom-crafted, single-purpose, one-time-use, electro-mechanical device. It’s a ‘fiendish thingy,’ actually. It’s made of nitroglycol, ammonium nitrate, saltpeter, wood meal, lead azide, trinitrotoluene, and a heat-sensitive filament.” Leslie paused a second before adding, “In other words, it’s a bomb.”

Leslie gingerly lifted the thingy out of the bag. Shakti was intrigued. “As you can see, cat, this contraption is activated by a delightfully old-fashioned spark-inducing plunger.”

Moving with caution, Leslie placed the apparatus on his worktable. He gently caressed the handle of the plunger. “Terrific, don’t you agree?” he asked the camera with a genial smile. “I’m quite proud of the design. Some of you will notice that it’s built to resemble many of the explosive devices that Wile E. Coyote used in the Roadrunner cartoons.”

Shakti came over to examine the device.

Leslie performed a mock introduction. “Shakti the cat, meet thingy the bomb.”

The feline rubbed his head on the bomb's plunger handle. Leslie watched in fascination. "That's the part you push when you want the bomb to go 'boom'," Leslie told the cat.

Once more, the sun went behind the clouds. Leslie picked up Shakti, who eagerly draped himself across the back of his owner's neck. The front end of the cat hung over his left shoulder; the cat's haunches hung over his right. The tail whapped Leslie on the cheek. Leslie glanced sideways at Shakti and said, "Thank you, but I wouldn't even think of wearing a stole before nine in the evening."

There was no reply from the beast.

Leslie made himself a cup of coffee, moving carefully to prevent any cat hair from getting in his cup. He noticed the sun emerging from the clouds but became lost in thought.

Shakti climbed from Leslie's shoulders to the kitchen counter. The cat ignored Leslie, then licked one of its paws. After a moment, Shakti leaped from the kitchen counter back onto the worktable and began happily rubbing his body against the bomb's plunger.

Full Coverage

All Video, All the Time



“There is a loathing that I feel,” Leslie muttered to himself. “Hatred? Loathing?” Nodding, he restarted the recording and said, “There is a loathing that I feel when I regard humanity, and I believe many of you share this same revulsion. For me, it manifests itself as a tightness in the pit of the stomach. The muscle contractions shoot upward through the body and cause a synapse lapse that results in anger.”

Leslie turned and noticed Shakti’s interest in the bomb. He gently moved the cat to one side and took the device to the kitchen counter while continuing to deliver his monologue.

“This rage grows out of a sensation of helplessness that makes you want to smash something just to prove you’re here on earth.

It's as if you are driven to violence in order to avoid having yourself crumble into a thousand jagged pieces. This happens because... it's because..." Words failed him for a second.

When he resumed speaking, it was at a rapid rate. "It's because a large collection of humanity is wasting away. Hundreds of thousands of imaginations lying fallow, never stimulated. Millions of hearts broken, or never opened. Tens of millions of empty souls. Altogether, there are hundreds of millions of unfulfilled people, each day encased in another layer of suffocating unconcern and neglect."

Shakti watched Leslie as he paced around the room. The feline's eyes widened whenever Leslie's voice rose in volume. Each time his voice returned to a normal level, Shakti's face reverted to the quizzical feline expression that makes it seem like cats are judging humanity.

Both Leslie and Shakti were startled when the door buzzer sounded.

"Ooh, who could that be, boys and girls?" Leslie did a fair impression of Mr. Rogers as he went to the door, where a bored Fed-Ex employee handed him a package and turned to go. "Thanks!" Leslie called to him.

“No prob,” came the perfunctory reply as the van driver scooted down the hallway.

Leslie took the parcel to the worktable. “Hey fuzzy critter,” he called to Shakti. “You want the box once I take out the human stuff?”

The cat was curious but silent.

“Okay feline, this genuine cardboard container will soon be all yours.” Leslie opened the box and removed three small video cameras and mini tripods. “You know what these are going to do for us?” he asked the cat. “They’re going to give us multiple angles for the suicide video. Isn’t that cool?”

Shakti remained noncommittal.

After making sure no packing material remained in the carton, Leslie flung it across the loft’s hardwood floor all the way into the bedroom. Shakti proceeded to stalk and investigate this new toy.

Leslie smiled at the cat before setting up the cameras around the loft and testing them.

“Okay,” Leslie called out to Shakti. “We’ll capture video on everything in the loft, twenty-four/seven.” Leslie nodded to himself, set the phone on the counter, and began making lunch. “So,” Leslie said into the camera while

chopping lettuce, “allow me to make a personal request to viewers of my suicide video: if you see this on a public broadcasting channel, please don’t leave a note saying you’re killing yourself as part of a pledge drive. Those things are annoying enough as it is.”

Cat Conversation

Edging Toward the Edge



After lunch, Leslie walked to the bedroom and picked up the cardboard carton with the cat inside. Shakti peeked up over the edge to watch as they returned to the loft's main room. Leslie placed the box with its furry cargo on his worktable.

He activated the cameras and began addressing his words to Shakti. "Okay fur-person, listen up. I want you to understand a few things. First, you are in no way responsible for my end-of-life decision. Second, you are a magnificent cat, and I will try to have Sandy take you in before I make my exit. Okay, okay," he admitted, "I know you have territory issues with her dog, but in time you two will work things out."

Shakti looked skeptical.

“Another thing: I don’t see my exit as sad. I see it as a celebration. However, I recognize that there are many people who will find it a cause for mourning.” Leslie cocked his head slightly and continued. “Well, maybe not many people, but some. A few. A handful. Okay, one or two.”

Leslie brought his face down toward Shakti. Close. Closer. Finally, they shared a nose boop.

“You are a wonderful furry friend, Shakti cat,” he whispered to the animal. “I wonder if you’ll miss me. I hope so, but I trust it won’t prevent you from enjoying your naps.”

The cat lost interest in this game and exited the carton in a graceful arc. Shakti performed another smooth leap from table to floor. The cat made a couple of perfunctory grooming moves, blinked, stretched, and then slowly ambled away to locate and luxuriate in a sun puddle.

Leslie watched the cat and smiled. “Yeah, go dream of snacks and cuddles, you self-absorbed fickle feline.”

He turned to face one of the cameras. “Let me ask you guys something. Why are we all

hanging around?” Leslie asked his unseen audience. “You have to agree that the world conspires against us in a thousand big and little ways every day. Our entire existence is a confinement, a limbo in which there are walls and corners, rarely any windows or doorways, and with a perpetual treadmill for a floor.”

Leslie began pacing again. “Doesn’t it ever enter your consciousness that it might be better to cease consciousness? It’s apparent that human beings cannot seem to figure out how to arrange life to be worthwhile for most human beings. The forces of evil are hard at work, attacking us every moment of every day.”

Leslie checked the large screen display of the video streams from his mobile device and the three mounted cameras. He noticed a small orange blip in the upper right corner of the screen. He placed his cursor on it and clicked. A small info box appeared.

REMOTE VIEWING ACTIVE

Leslie smiled and waved at the cameras.

In her nearby loft, Sandy van der Nova watched Leslie’s four cameras on her own

computer screen. She smiled and waved back despite knowing Leslie couldn't see her. "Hi, doom man," she said pleasantly despite knowing he couldn't hear her. She reached down to pet her dog Geoffrey, an eager short-haired eight-pound bundle of energy. "There's my Leslie," she told her dog. "He's my art project. I love him almost as much as I love you." Geoffrey emitted a pleasant whimper of appreciation when Sandy scratched him behind the ears.

Sandy went to the kitchen, poured herself a cup of tea, and walked back to her computer. She passed by her "humble-brag" wall with stylish photos of herself wearing haute couture in outlandish poses from expensive photo sessions for the world's fashion and beauty publications. Next to each perfectly posed and lovingly lit shot was a small outtake from the same session with Sandy's eyes half-closed or her face twisted into a grimace. Sipping her tea, she watched Leslie on her computer display.

In his loft, Leslie began speaking again with renewed energy. "Here's a totally made-up and yet very realistic sample of the vicissitudes of modern life. Consider one weekday morning

in a major city. The alarm sounds and you turn on the news...

“A shocking discovery,” Leslie intoned in the voice of a news anchor. “The decomposed remains of fifteen nude bodies were uncovered this morning in Lakeview Avenue Park. Police Sergeant Reginald Dripnort said that the male and female bodies were of various ages and ethnic backgrounds. Identification efforts are being hampered because the heads and hands had been severed and roughly stitched onto the wrong torsos before burial in the shallow graves. More, after this word from Taco Bell.”

Shakti sneezed and Leslie told him, “Yeah, the idea of anything involving Taco Bell bothers me, too.”

He patted the cat and continued recording. “Maybe the morbid nature of many news stories reflects our own perverse interests, but the mindset of many reporters is a big factor. Have you ever watched them at the scene of a news story?”

Leslie began calling out questions in the manner of a media scrum.

“Sergeant, how decomposed are the bodies? Sergeant, were the women sexual

molested? Sergeant, were the men sexually molested? How, exactly, were they molested? Can you diagram the molestation for us?”

Leslie shrugged at the camera. “The shutterbugs aren’t any better.” He assumed the role of a news photographer urgently badgering the officer. “Sergeant, pose next to one of the bodies... Put your arm around one of them... Get close, Sergeant. No, closer... Great, now give us a big smile. No, that’s a grimace. Smile! And kiss the corpse, Sergeant. Wait, Sergeant, where are you going? Come back, Sergeant!”

Leslie paused the recording, went to the kitchen, and got the bottle of water from the fridge.

In her loft, Sandy applauded Leslie’s performance. “Nice job,” she said. “Just needs a little trimming.” She slid her chair forward and began making notes for possible editing points in her lover’s video. Geoffrey watched her with the soulful expression dogs employ to get treats from their owners.

Leslie sipped his water for a moment, re-capped the bottle, and began talking with quiet authority, slowly increasing the emotional intensity.

“Consider the journey you’re on at the moment. You’re zooming through space at more than 100,000 kilometers per hour. Your vehicle’s life-support system is weakening as poisonous gas enters the oxygen supply. Shortages of food and water are affecting the tourist class sections of the ship. Groups of passengers have taken arms against each other in bloody battles. The threat of terrorism is a constant factor. There are sects, tribes, groups, gangs, and factions ready, willing, and able to do monstrous harm to members of other sects, tribes, groups, gangs, and factions. A sizeable amount of time, energy, and money is being devoted to the development of weaponry of all kinds for use by the aforementioned cabals. You stop to consider this unwholesome state of affairs, and while you pause, your frail and tiny spaceship called Earth rushes onward in its orbit.”

Leslie paused for another sip of water. Idly, he tossed the water bottle cap in the air and caught it. He did this a few times, then sipped some more while pacing around the loft. He stopped in front of the cat. As usual, the sight of the furry companion made him smile.

“So,” he said quietly to the cat, “I think you get my point. You see why I feel that stepping off the edge of this planet is such a good idea, if only as a warning statement. If I can symbolize and crystalize the fear and anger of millions of people, then perhaps the warning will be heeded.” Shakti ignored him. He looked directly into one of the cameras. “You have to understand that humanity has botched things here. We have brought chaos and destruction to our place in the universe. Who is going to atone for this? Who?”

Leslie walked to the counter, set the water bottle aside, and picked up the bomb. He raised the device to eye level, admiring it in the sunlight streaming down from the windows.

“I am disgusted with the mess humanity has made here on earth. I hate the ground water contamination, the ozone layer depletion, the toxic dumping, the dictatorships, the child abuse, the organized crime, the insider trading, the corporate chicanery, the plutocrats, the misogynists, the homophobes, the xenophobes, the conspiracy idiots, the religiosity freaks, and the one group that combines all these ills: conservatives.” He scowled at the thought.

“They have made the choice of living or dying a frivolous one. And that is why it has come to this...”

Leslie cradled the bomb in one arm and placed one hand on the plunger. Slowly, reverently, inexorably, Leslie extended the plunger to its apex. There was a solid-sounding metallic click. He paused a second, his hand on the activation lever of the bomb. His muscles tensed just prior to slamming the plunger downward, and—

The loft’s door buzzer sounded.

Family Affair

Collateral Damage



Leslie placed the bomb behind one of the chairs, turned off the computer display, and went to answer the door. Shakti sat up, stretched, and waited to assess this new interruption.

Opening the door, Leslie found his sister Rachel standing next to a man holding a parcel covered in tan wrapping paper. Leslie smiled and welcomed his sister with a hug while nodding pleasantly at the man.

“Hey, Rachel,” Leslie said. “Come on in. Who’s your friend?”

“Thank you, Les. I’d like you to meet the man who has just become my fiancée.”

“You could have texted this,” Leslie said.

Peter offered his hand to Leslie and said, “Peter H. Zbrenski.”

Leslie shook hands and responded, “Leslie J. Walker.”

“Pleased to meet you, Les.”

“Zbrenski,” Leslie repeated. “Is that an ‘s’ Sbrensk or a ‘z’ Zbrensk?”

Peter smiled and said, “I am from a long line of zee-brensksk.”

Shakti had enough of the human noises. The cat skulked away from the crowd and exited through the bedroom door.

“You’re still a cannabis aficionado, I see,” Rachel said as she gently ran her hand along one of the hookah’s hoses.

“You bet,” Leslie replied.

“Or perhaps you’ve moved on to opiates?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, sis, just the Tetrahydrocannabinol.”

“Maybe,” Peter said, “you can help settle something about hookahs and bongs.”

“Happy to try,” Leslie replied.

“Someone told me that the colder the air you’re inhaling, the better the high.”

“Not true,” Leslie replied.

“How do you know?” Peter asked.

“If it were true,” Leslie said, “all bongos would be ice-making machines.”

Rachel surveyed the rest of the main room of the loft. “I see that you’re keeping the place very barren.”

“Thanks,” Leslie replied.

“I like minimalism,” Peter noted.

“That could cause trouble,” Leslie said.

“Why?”

“Rachel is not a fan of it, so you two may be in for some arguments about home décor.”

“True enough,” Peter said, still smiling.

“Les?” Rachel interrupted. “Whatever happened to all your plants?”

“They came down with something.”

“What?”

“Death.”

“Uh-oh,” Peter said.

“What?” Leslie asked him.

“We got you a fern,” he replied, slightly lifting his parcel.

“I am very sorry to hear that,” Leslie said.

“Peter dear, please unwrap the plant for Les. He’s likely to let it die in the wrapper. I think it deserves to die in the light of day.”

“Alright,” Peter said. As he removed the paper from the plant, he glanced around the loft and remarked, “Nice cameras.”

“Thanks.”

“What are you recording?”

“An instructional video,” Leslie replied.

“Oh, come on, Les,” Rachel said. There was an undertone of disdain in her voice.

“What’s going on?” Peter inquired.

“My brother has a peculiar notion about making a farewell message to the world.”

“You mean, like a will?”

“No,” Rachel explained, “Les is taking the phrase ‘farewell message’ very literally.”

“Oh?” Peter said. After a second, he said, “Oh,” on a more somber note.

“Oh oh,” Leslie said quietly.

“Les, you’ve got mother in a terrible state,” Rachel said.

“How can you tell?”

“Don’t be flippant.”

“Did she give you another printout from one of her favorite online advice ladies?”

“Yes, she did.” With pursed lips, Rachel removed a folded paper from her bag and handed it to Leslie.

Leslie read aloud: “I thought this would be helpful for anyone thinking of suicide. I was down in the dumps once but pulled myself back from the edge. I thank God every day that I didn’t kill myself. I never would have met my incredible wife, or gotten the job I wanted, and I would have missed out on so much. Instead of suicide, do what I did, because now I am... Alive and Kicking in Kenosha.”

Leslie turned to Peter and explained, “That’s a hick town in Wisconsin that hopes to become Milwaukee when it grows up.”

“Must you mock everything?” Rachel asked with quiet annoyance.

“Yes, I must,” Leslie replied amiably.

“You’re impossible,” Rachel said.

“You bet,” Leslie agreed. “Hey sis, I’ve got something you can take back to mom.”

Leslie grabbed a paper from his worktable and handed it to his sister. Surreptitiously, he activated the video recording but kept the computer screen dark.

Rachel glanced at the paper and said, “This is from one of those rightwing nutjob websites.”

“Yup. You can skip all their blather. Just read the headline.”

Rachel read: ““Antifa is training apes to take over the medical profession.””

“It’s in print, Rache,” Leslie said, “so you know you can believe it.”

“Be serious, Les.”

“I’m quite serious about some things,” Leslie said evenly. “You wouldn’t be reacting this way if you weren’t taking me seriously.”

Rachel stared at Leslie, exasperated.

Leslie smiled at Rachel, lovingly.

“Uh, mind if I sit down?” Peter asked, pointing to the chairs.

“Not at all,” Leslie replied. “My dump is your dump.”

Peter set aside the fern and plopped himself down on the chair in front of the bomb. Leslie noticed the chair slid back a few inches, almost bumping the fiendish thingy.

“Listen, Les,” Rachel said seriously, “this whole situation has gotten out of hand.”

“Okay,” Leslie replied.

“It’s gone from a family joke to an embarrassment.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Leslie said pleasantly, “but I disagree. There. We’ve had our little talk. Are we done now?”

“You know what?” she asked.

“What?”

“You make me angry, Les.”

“Good to know,” Leslie replied.

Rachel made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a groan and shook her head in frustration.

“Look, sis,” Leslie told her, “I’m glad that you care about me. I really am. It makes me feel all warm and gooey inside. But this project is something I feel is necessary.”

“It’s ludicrous,” she told him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “And here’s something even more ludicrous. It turns out that I need a favor...”

“Uh-oh, I feel an outrage approaching,” Rachel said.

“Sis, I need your help.”

“No,” Rachel responded.

“Just hear me out.”

“It’s a definite no.”

“Please listen.”

“Okay, but it’s fifty-fifty that I’ll go along with whatever it is.”

“Yeah, I get that,” Leslie said. “It’s just that I need you to oversee the books.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s going to be a lot of accounting on this project.”

“Accounting?”

“Right,” Leslie said. “Sandy can handle the artwork, packaging, and the electronic distribution, but I need someone like you to handle the business end of things.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked.

“Sales of the suicide video itself, of course, but also the documentation, tee-shirts, caps, lunch boxes, memes...”

“You’re crazy.”

“Don’t rush to judgment on something like that until all the facts are in.” He did his best to imitate John Cusack saying the same thing in *Grosse Pointe Blank*.

There was a pause while brother and sister stared at each other, wondering about the gulf between them.

“I guess the fern was a poor choice,” Peter said, breaking the silence, “A deadly nightshade might have been better.”

“Good one,” Leslie said, grinning.

“Whose side are you on?” Rachel asked Peter.

Peter raised his hands in mock surrender.
“Just an impartial observer, darling.”

“Nobody’s impartial,” Leslie said.

“Perhaps not,” Peter said agreeably. “Just out of curiosity, how do you intend to, you know, end things?”

“I was toying with the idea of using a bomb,” Leslie replied.

“That’s enough,” Rachel stated firmly.
“I’m not going to listen to this bullshit.”

“Take it easy, sis.”

“You think you’re so smart, pretending to get ready to kill yourself. You get the whole family completely discombobulated... You kill off your plants, toss out most of your furniture... make flippant jokes.... You’re trying to turn our entire family into collateral damage. This isn’t the first time you’ve freaked out on us. You went whole hog into alternative music, remember? And then into alternative literature. And then it was videography. And... and... And now I’ve had enough!”

“Discombobulated?” Leslie asked quietly.

“Shut up.”

“Whole hog?”

“I’m not talking to you.”

“Really? You’re not? Because it sure seems as if—”

“And that’s not all,” Rachel said, still agitated.

“Oh good, there’s more.”

“What about the fact that you never seem to hold onto a job? How many have you been through now, six?”

“At least.”

“So now there’s this big play for the attention of the world. Well, the world doesn’t care, okay?! Plus, this is a crime.”

“A crime?”

“Taking one’s own life is against the law. And it’s against your religion.”

“I don’t have any religion. I’m catholic.”

“Stop it! Just... stop it!”

Rachel spun away from Leslie and passed near where Peter was seated. He held out a hand to her. She paused a second, took a breath, and then smiled. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down to sit on his lap. The back of the chair brushed against the plunger on the fiendish thingy.

Leslie regarded his sister with a smile. After a moment, he spoke quietly. “Rache, I

know you feel strongly about my plans, but I think this is the best course of action for me.”

She sent him a withering look and said, “You are the most exasperating sibling in the history of the world.”

“Really? Cool!”

“This can all be traced back to your damn short story,” Rachel stated.

“Pretty much,” Leslie admitted.

“Wait,” Peter interjected. “What story?”

“It’s nothing,” Leslie told him.

“It’s a lot of protracted whining that Les put down on paper back in middle school.”

“Observing,” Leslie explained. “Not whining, observing.”

“What was it about?” Peter asked.

“You explain it to him, Rachel,” Leslie told her.

“It was all about how the planet is doomed, humans have done the deeds leading to the doom, and therefore ‘stepping off’ should be our act of atonement.”

“You were writing about that in the eighth grade?” Peter asked.

“Seventh,” Leslie replied.

“What was the title?” Peter inquired.

“Flores para los Muertos.”

“Flowers for Death?”

“Flowers for the Dead.”

“His story won some sort of intramural writing contest, but Les wouldn’t let them print it in the school paper.”

“Really?” Peter asked. “Why not?”

“I wanted it published posthumously.”

“Ah, of course.”

“Ludicrous...” Rachel muttered.

“You cried when you read it, Rache.”

“Oh, it’s beautiful, Les.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s lovely and insightful and full of wonder, but it’s also ridiculously, indulgently, and irredeemably sad.”

“So is life,” Leslie replied quietly.

“Look, Les,” Rachel said sincerely, “I know you care deeply about all this, and that you think you’re creating some sort of ‘distant early warning system’ for humanity, but you don’t have to threaten to take your own life to call attention to the world’s difficulties.”

“More than mere difficulties, Rache.”

“Please stop being so literal,” Rachel told him.

“Rachel,” Leslie said, “we’re talking about real calamities affecting the planet.”

“Like climate change?” Peter asked.

“That, plus the fact that the radioactive level in this room is measurably higher than it was when we were born.”

“Hold on a second,” Peter said. “You’re going to have to explain that.”

“Will you tell him, sis, or shall I?” Leslie asked.

“Whatever,” Rachel muttered. She rolled off Peter’s lap and stood up. The back of the chair nudged the plunger on the gizmo.

While Rachel went to stare up at the sky through the loft’s elevated windows, Leslie turned to Peter and made ready to relate one of his sad stories about humanity’s follies.

Watching the computer screen while sitting in her loft, Sandy made notes about adding charts and graphs to Leslie’s video in order to display the earth’s rising radiation levels.

In his studio, Leslie was speaking quietly but in earnest. “When the early reactors at the Hanford nuclear plant had produced so much waste material that it became inconvenient to

keep storing it, the radioactive leftovers were sealed in lead containers, incased in concrete, and buried under fifty feet of earth in the desert outside the Tri-Cities area.”

“Tri-Cities?”

“My god,” Leslie said in mock alarm. “You have somehow missed knowing about the urban splendor of Kennewick, Pasco, and Richland in the state of Washington.”

“I was really close to knowing all about it but then I had other things to do.”

“Soon,” Leslie said, “everyone will know the Tri-Cities. They will be famous for their glowing humans and two-headed pets.”

“Les, that’s not funny,” Rachel said.

Ignoring her, Leslie continued. “Not only is the buried waste material still radioactive, but it has contaminated the lead, the concrete, and the earth around it. The ground itself is now pulsating with radioactive energy.”

“Sounds like a nineteen fifties sci-fi movie,” Peter noted.

“Yes, exactly,” Leslie agreed. “The whole area is guarded 24/7, encircled by miles of barbed wire fencing. Every year, every month, every week, every day, every hour, every

second, the contamination spreads a little further, bringing all of us a few inches closer to snuffing out our lives. And this is from one location in one state.” Leslie paused dramatically, then changed the subject. “So, when’s the wedding?”

“What?” Peter asked, still thinking about the radioactivity.

“It’s set for next month, darling,” Rachel reminded him.

“Right, right.”

“Les,” Rachel said, “I saw some bottled water in your fridge. May I have some?”

“You bet.”

“Thanks. Also, Les, I wonder if we could negotiate a truce during which you would stop being so morbid.”

“Morbid,” Leslie repeated.

“You’re so hung up on the terrible things about humanity that you refuse to see the beauty around us. There are good things on this earth. Loveliness and mysteries that are absolutely beautiful.”

“Name three,” Leslie said.

Rachel glared at him but replied. “Alright, Les, I’ll play. Every sunrise is absolutely

incredible, despite our taking them for granted,” Rachel said evenly. She paused and sipped some water. “Then there are oceans lapping at our shores,” she said. She paused and sipped some water. She spotted Shakti and got another thought. “There’s the way a cat can leap ten times its own height onto a ledge less than its own width,” she said. She nodded to herself and sipped some water. “For that matter,” she continued, “there’s the force that drives me to be kind to you and you to me. And mom to both of us. Besides, Les, you have to accept that bad things will sometimes happen.”

“I don’t accept that,” Leslie said quietly.

“I believe,” Rachel said, “that even bad things are part of some bigger purpose.”

“Are they?”

“They have to be.”

“Do you feel secure in that belief?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. “Yes, I do.”

“Well,” Leslie noted, “you are fortunate.”

Rachel turned to look at her fiancée and Peter stared back. They both wondered if they shared that same view of existence.

Leslie watched as Peter and his sister regarded one another. He smiled ruefully and

told them, “I’ve given you guys a great topic for the next time you’re snuggling.” He got blank stares in reply. “No, no,” Leslie said to them with fake sincerity, “no need to thank me right away. Happy to do it.”

The three of them exchanged glances in a mildly gruesome silence.

Shakti leapt up onto the worktable, stepping on the spacebar of Leslie’s computer. The screen lit up, displaying the live video from each of the cameras in the main room of his loft.

Leslie spotted the images on the large tabletop computer display and knew he had to block his sister’s view of the screen if he wanted to keep recording the video.

Death Debate

School Daze



Leslie quickly moved to pick up Shakti and turned off the computer screen before Rachel and Peter could note their presence in the video recording. Still holding the cat, he turned to his sister. “So,” Leslie asked Rachel quietly, “are earthquakes part of the big purpose?”

“How dare you make fun of me?” she asked.

“You make it so easy,” Leslie replied.

“Darling,” Peter said sincerely, “I’d also like to know your feelings on this.”

“Everything has to have a reason,” Rachel responded. They all shared another painful pause. “Look,” Rachel said at last, “I freely acknowledge that earthquakes, floods, and disease bring pain and suffering to good and evil

people alike, but it's all part of something we humans are just not able to comprehend.”

“I don't understand,” Leslie told her facetiously.

“Up yours,” Rachel told him with a smile and a wrinkle of her nose.

Leslie did the smile-with-wrinkled-nose thing back at his sister. He lowered Shakti to the computer and the cat appeared to flow from his arms to the warm machine in one smooth movement. After a loving caress of the feline, he turned to Rachel.

“By your reasoning, sister dear, people who were run over by drunk drivers would have died for a purpose, and I don't agree. There's a purpose to gunshot deaths? There's a purpose to heart disease?”

“Wait, you can't—” she started to reply.

“Is there a purpose to cancer?” he asked.

“Don't!” she said.

“Was there a purpose to dad having his body ravaged from the inside out? Where did you get such depressing optimism?”

Rachel was undaunted by her brother's verbal attack. “I am optimistic about life because mom and dad were optimistic about it.

It's how we were brought up, Les, although you always fought it."

"I'm still fighting it."

"Yes, and that pisses me off," she stated, "which goes against my optimism—damn you for that, by the way—but I believe that being positive is the best way to go through life." She paused a second, then added, "We both need to acknowledge that the world contains good and bad people, good and bad events."

"Too many bad people, too many bad events, and too many bad outcomes," Leslie stated.

"Les, do you remember dad's last words?"

"Yes," Leslie said softly. He and Rachel stared at each other a moment.

"What did your dad say?" Peter asked.

Rachel turned to Peter. "He said, 'The battle continues... you have to keep fighting.'" Rachel nodded as she said the ominous words.

"Even in death," Leslie stated.

Again, they fell silent for a moment.

Peter shook his head at the gravity of the man's final statement. "That," Peter said, "is... is... I don't know how to describe it."

"Weird?" Leslie asked.

“Well, I—” Peter began.

“Horrible?” Leslie asked.

“If you—” Peter tried again.

“Annoying?” Leslie asked.

“Look, the—” Peter began.

“Depressing?” Leslie asked.

“Les!” Rachel interjected. “At least let Peter finish.”

“Sorry. Go ahead.”

“That’s okay,” Peter said. “You covered all the bases, I think. Weird, horrible, annoying, and depressing. Check, check, check, and check.”

“I think what dad said was beautiful,” Rachel stated.

“You have been leading a strange life to be able to hold that view,” Leslie told her. “You probably got some of that from school.”

“We went to the same schools, Les.”

“That’s right. And you never complained about the idiotic behavior, the asinine antics, the gossip, the stupidity, the lies—”

“You can’t blame the schools for the problems of their students,” Rachel said firmly.

“I was talking about the teachers,” Leslie said.

“You hated school, too?” Peter asked.

“I hate bad schools,” Leslie replied.

“You and I went to good schools, Les,” Rachel stated.

“A school that makes active kids sit still for hours is a bad school,” Leslie replied. “It’s only good for teachers who want it quiet.”

“Come on, Les,” Rachel said. “That’s—”

“For anyone who wants kids to grow up uncreative and unimaginative, most schools are great,” Leslie continued.

“He’s not wrong,” Peter said.

“It doesn’t pay to encourage him,” Rachel responded.

“Elementary school,” Leslie stated, “is the most critical time in a child’s educational development, yet this is the location for the least-paid instructors. It’s also where ‘Order’ is the order of the day. Order and conformity.”

“I warned you,” Rachel muttered to Peter.

“Next up on the edge-uh-muh-kay-shun hierarchy comes ‘Muddle School,’ followed by ‘Let’s Get Really High School.’ It’s here that you find courses have been gutted and watered down by decades of attack by conservatard politicians. Because of right-wing perfidy,

schools now have courses like ‘Math & Society,’ or what my father would have called ‘Remedial Mathematics’ and my grandfather would have called ‘Slow Learner Arithmetic.’ There’s also something that is still called ‘American History,’ but the right-wingnuts have managed to literally whitewash history from our schools’ history classes.”

“He’s still not wrong,” Peter said.

Rachel was nettled but couldn’t find any objection to Leslie’s points.

“The deterioration of education has invaded colleges and universities,” Leslie noted. “Have you read what passes as a thesis paper for some of the so-called advanced degrees? It’s funny, but in a sad way: ‘The Final Four and the Apocalypse: The N.C.A.A. Tournament as Viewed in a Post-Spiritual Context.’ Or how about this one: ‘Nourishment and Provender in the Modern Time/Space Continuum: Fast Food Restaurants and Twenty-First Century Society.’ If you’ve looked at thesis titles lately, you know I’m barely exaggerating.”

“Um,” Peter said.

“Yes?” Leslie said.

“I’ve got one for you,” Peter told him.

“Oh please,” Rachel said irritably.

“Oh, please!” Leslie said enthusiastically.

“Okay,” Peter said, “try this: ‘American Estate Valuation: Origin, Societal Implications, and Future Imperitives of the Garage Sale.’ How’s that?”

Rachel sighed as Leslie said, “Excellent!”

In her loft, Sandy applauded what she viewed on her computer screen. She turned to Geoffrey and said, “It looks like our Leslie has a potential convert in this Peter character.” Sandy rubbed her dog’s head tenderly. “We’ll go over to Leslie’s place in a little while and I’m pretty sure that everyone will do this to your cute noggin.” Geoffrey was pleased by the head rub while remaining unmoved by the images on the screen.

In his loft, Leslie continued conversing with Rachel and Peter, adding to their unknowing participation in the video. “Most people leave school with a smattering of mostly useless information. They also have about as much feeling for culture as a doorknob. Face it, people are not taught to love learning, or to seek facts, or to revere reason, or to embrace

creativity. They are taught to think that they are thinking. They emerge from classes docile, willing to be led, and deathly afraid of being criticized. You know what school kids say: ‘God, let me fit in!’ is their mantra. ‘Pull-eaze let me be normal!’ they say.”

“True enough,” Peter said.

“And it’s very sad because the typical ‘normal’ person is a dismal and dehydrated remnant of what a human being could be.” Leslie paused a second and abruptly changed the subject. “So, where did you two meet?”

“What?” Peter said, caught off guard by the sudden change of topic. “Oh, it was at a gallery.”

“That’s cool,” Leslie said.

“I was having a show.”

“Even better,” Leslie said.

“I’m not in traditional art,” Peter explained. “I’m a conceptual artist.”

“Oh wait a minute,” Leslie said in recognition. “I knew your name was familiar. You’re the guy who exhibited the empty room at the Contemporary.”

“*C’est moi.*”

“That was great,” Leslie said.

“Thanks.”

“Inspiring, in fact,” Leslie added.

“Well, I’m glad you thought—”

“It was a deep and disquieting statement about the zeitgeist. By stepping into the gallery, the unwary visitor becomes part of the art.”

“Exactly,” Peter agreed.

“You know what?” Leslie asked Peter conspiratorially.

“What?”

“I can relate to your goals,” Leslie said, guiltily pleased that his suicide video currently featured two unsuspecting participants.

Esq.

Budding Ronin



Sandy took Geoffrey for a walk through the arts district and then to the street where the market stalls were offering arrays of veggies, fruits, and vegan delicacies.

Every time Geoffrey stopped to sniff something, Sandy checked her mobile device to monitor the proceedings in Leslie's loft.

"Hey, Geoffrey," she said at one point, "I can see that Leslie's cat is in a napping mode, so you can enter the loft without fear of being pounced on." Geoffrey didn't react because he was too busy checking all the fascinating scents of every four-footed creature that had passed that way since sunrise.

After buying Geoff a treat, Sandy went into a health food store and purchased a small

supply of Vitamin C capsules. Next, she took Geoff into the park, and they did some people-and-pet-watching. They had to switch positions on a park bench when Geoffrey's tail began thumping against one of the bench legs.

After blissfully contemplating the sky for a moment, she turned and addressed her dog. "Geoffrey darling, you'll have to excuse me again while I check in on our special event soap opera, already in progress." She consulted her mobile. "Ooh, you'll like this, Geoff," she said. "Leslie's sister is revealing too much about her fiancée. Wow, that is so like her. C'mon, Geoff, we'll walk back home and pay a visit to my Man of Extinction." She and Geoffrey got up and headed toward the park entrance. "Okay, pooch," Sandy told Geoffrey. "Since we're going in the madman's place, I need you to be good when Shakti wakes up. So, do you understand?" Geoff made no promises.

In Leslie's loft, Peter was showing some of the critical reactions to his art work. "Here's the *Times* reviewer looking terribly perplexed," Peter said, happily showing Leslie a photo on his phone.

"Nice," Leslie said.

“Yes,” Rachel agreed, “it is quite nice. Peter has a small following and he has sold some documentation of his installations, but we both recognize it’s not likely to be a life’s vocation.”

“Interesting,” Leslie said. Turning to Peter, he asked, “Both of you recognize that?”

“Well...” Peter let the thought trail away.

“Yes, we do,” Rachel continued. “That’s why Peter is about to get his law degree and is already studying for the bar exam.”

“Uh-huh,” Leslie said.

“I can’t wait until he has an ‘Esq.’ after his name,” Rachel admitted.

Leslie looked at Peter without making a comment. The silence was palpable.

“What?” Peter asked.

Leslie smiled in response.

“What?!” Peter asked again.

“Nothing,” Leslie said.

“Say what you’re going to say, Leslie,” Rachel told him.

“I’m just wondering,” Leslie replied.

“Wondering what?”

“If Mr. Peter H. Zbrenski, Esq., will be a good Ronin or a bad Ronin.”

“Wait, you can’t assume that he will—”
Rachel began.

“A tuna or a shark,” Leslie went on.

“That’s not—”

“A litigator or a shyster,” Leslie said.

“That’s insulting, Les,” Rachel told him.

“Really?” Leslie turned to regard Peter.

“Did you find that insulting, Peter?”

“A bit.”

“But a bit truthful as well?”

“Yeah,” Peter admitted.

“Damn it, Les,” Rachel said. “You can ruin anything.”

“Some things need ruining.”

“I hate you sometimes,” Rachel muttered at him.

“Sue me,” Leslie replied with a grin.

Peter took Rachel by the hand, guided her to a chair, and sat down with her in his lap. “Do you and your brother always fight like this?” he asked.

“Only when we’re together,” Rachel said.

Leslie noted that the chair once again nudged the bomb on the floor behind it.

Fiendish Thingy

The MacGuffin



“You know, Peter,” Leslie said, “it’s good that you consistently use your middle initial. By insisting on being ‘Peter *H.* Zbrenski,’ it prevents us from confusing you with all those other Peter Zbrenskis.”

“Up yours,” Peter said good naturedly.

“Okay,” Leslie replied with a smile.

“You know what?” Peter asked.

“What?” Leslie replied.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You do so at your peril,” Leslie said.

“I mean the killing yourself thing.”

“Really? Why is that?”

“Why?! You’re living the dream, man,” Peter told him. “You’ve got money for all this video gear, plenty of time on your hands, and a

loft so desolate that you can clean it with a can of compressed air.”

“All that may be true,” Leslie admitted. “And yet, I have come to loathe this chrome-plated hollow hype called life.”

“Jesus, Leslie,” Rachel told him. “You sound like you’re writing bad poetry.”

“It’s a question of evil,” Leslie said, ignoring her jibe. “There are far too many things in this world that are totally and irredeemably vile.”

“Sure, but—”

“Vile,” Leslie repeated. “Vile, putrid, heinous, and preventable. But, since my talking and writing about them doesn’t seem to reach a wide audience, I intend to kill myself. Maybe that will get a blip of attention.”

“Fine, whatever,” Rachel snapped at him. “At least find something more believable than a bomb.”

“They’re kind of tricky to make, aren’t they?” Peter asked.

“Not really,” Leslie said. “You can get the plans online. Hell, there’s so much info there, I could make a nuclear device if I could get the plutonium.”

“Come on, Les,” Rachel said with a trace of condescension. “You’re not the bomb-making type.”

“Aren’t I? Let me show you something.”

“Skip it, Les. I wouldn’t know a bomb if I fell over one.”

“Funny you should put it that way.” Leslie stepped around behind them, picked up his fiendish thingy, and brandished it with quiet pride. “*Voila.*”

“What the hell?” Peter said.

“Jesus, Les,” Rachel said, struggling to her feet.

“Wanna play catch?” Leslie asked. He mimed tossing the device at them.

“Hey, be careful with that thing,” Peter warned, also getting to his feet.

“Damn you, Leslie,” Rachel spat out. “That’s dangerous. How dare you?”

“It added a curious tension to the two of you cavorting on that chair.”

“You make me so mad I could spit.”

“Not very ladylike, sis.”

“That’s not funny, man,” Peter said.

“Sorry,” Leslie replied. “Sometimes I’m funnier than other times.”

Leslie checked a couple of wires on the bomb.

“What are you doing?” Rachel and Peter said at the same time.

“Nothing,” Leslie replied. He placed the bomb atop the computer, grabbed his mobile, and pointed the camera at Peter.

“Wait a minute,” Peter protested. “Now what are you—”

“And, in three... two... one...” Leslie began using a pushy announcer voice. “Joining us today is legendary conceptual artist Peter H. Zbrenski. Peter, your exhibits have been puzzling gallery visitors, many of whom say they just can’t see your work. Tell us, with all your experience, what are your thoughts on the mysteries of life?”

“Um...”

“Well put!” Leslie said with a fake smile. “Many of us feel exactly the same way.”

“Look,” Peter said, “this is not my thing.”

“We could all leave the room,” Leslie told Peter. “That would be more your thing.”

“Hey, screw you.”

“Tell me something, Mr. Peter H. Zbrenski,” Leslie said, still using his announcer

voice. “Are you actually angry right now, or are you performing?”

“I stand by my previous statement.”

“Very good! Why did you pick this genre of artistic expression?”

“Look, I don’t—”

Leslie dropped the announcer voice for a second. “No, really. I’d like to know.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Peter said warily. “Performance art plays with peoples’ perceptions of time while questioning their occupation of physical space. Performance art enables the artist to confront a viewer’s expectations of reality. We’re creating a contradiction between artistic and objective reality.”

“And what, exactly, do you do in your performances?” Leslie inquired.

“Probably my most famous piece was holding an auction for parts of my body.”

“Oh right,” Leslie said, back to his normal voice. “I read some articles about that. ‘The Man Who Sold His Penis.’ Excellent click-bait headline. So, how much did you get for your manhood?”

“Nobody met the minimum bid.”

“Which was?”

“A million dollars.”

“How odd,” Leslie commented. “I’d have thought people would pool their resources to see a performance artist castrated.”

“Well, I don’t—”

“Especially one who was going to become a lawyer.”

“Can we change the subject?” Rachel said. “What the hell are you doing with that thing?” She disdainfully pointed at the bomb.

“Explosive devices have two purposes,” Leslie replied. “They can go ‘boom,’ or they can be used as a threat to coerce behavior.”

“I repeat, what are you—”

“Okay,” Leslie said firmly. “Here we go.” He picked up the bomb, cradled it in one arm. With his other hand, he pulled out the plunger. It made an ominous ratcheting sound.

“Hey, hey, hey, hold on,” Peter said.

“Leslie, stop this,” Rachel ordered.

“It’s a question of values,” Leslie said with steely intensity. “Too few people assess where they place their priorities in life. When more people can sing the advertising jingles of the

top-selling franchise food emporiums than can recite the alphabet, something is terribly wrong. When generations of Americans cannot name our three branches of government, something is terribly wrong. When the most advanced people on the planet keep on trying to destroy the planet, something is terribly wrong.”

“Les, don’t,” Rachel said with alarm.

“When one political party embraces racism, fascism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, theocracy, plutocracy, greed, ignorance, and treason, something is terribly wrong!” Leslie said.

“Calm down, man,” Peter said.

“Among the general population, stupid is the new average, and among conservatives, troglodyte is the new normal.”

“Please, Leslie,” Rachel implored.

Leslie’s hand tensed on the bomb’s plunger handle.

“Wait!” shouted Peter.

“No!” shouted Rachel.

Leslie slammed down the plunger.

Rachel and Peter grabbed each other.

The room was ominously silent.

The Femme Fatale

It's Complicated



Leslie, Rachel, and Peter stood frozen in place, muscles tense and eyes wide. The sound of a key unlocking the front door caused them to turn their heads in unison.

Sandy entered with Geoffrey, who was straining against his leash as he tried to rush over to greet Leslie.

“Good or bad time?” Sandy asked.

“Absolutely a good time,” Leslie said, putting down the bomb. “You know Geoff is always welcome.”

“What the hell!?” Peter exclaimed.

“That thing is a fake?” Rachel demanded.

“Afraid so,” Leslie admitted.

“Damn you!” Rachel spat out.

“Christ!” Peter muttered venomously.

“Are you saying you’re disappointed?”
Leslie asked.

“Not cool, man,” Peter muttered.

“You, you—!” Rachel sputtered.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Sandy said. “Calm down, everybody. Les is always making those things lately. It’s no big deal.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Rachel said bitterly.

“I guess it is,” Sandy admitted pleasantly.
“Les, are you ready for a dog mugging?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.” Sandy released Geoff from the leash and the happy animal scampered across the floor and leaped into Leslie’s arms.

“Oof,” Leslie said as he coped with the overly friendly critter that seemed to be made out of quivering steel springs.

“That’ll keep them both occupied,” Sandy said. She waved hello to Rachel and introduced herself to Peter. “I’m Sandy, mistress of the furry bundle of energy over there.”

“Uh, hi, I’m Peter.”

“Nice to meet you, Peter,” Sandy said.

“Peter is my fiancée,” Rachel told Sandy.

“Congrats,” Sandy said to both of them.

“Need a little help here,” Leslie said in mock protest as he wrestled with a double armload of dog. “Wild beast attack.”

Sandy walked over to Leslie to retrieve her pet. She set Geoff on the floor, stood up, and kissed Leslie on the lips. The kiss lasted a bit longer than Rachel or Peter expected.

“Mmmm,” Leslie said as Sandy pulled away.

“That’s all for now,” Sandy told him. “I have to tend to the other man in my life.” She looked down at Geoffrey and asked, “Pooch parched?”

Geoffrey sat on his haunches and waved at her with one paw.

“Thought so,” Sandy said. She moved to the kitchen, got a bowl from under the sink, filled it with water and placed it on the floor. Geoffrey looked up at her.

“Okay,” she said.

Geoffrey began lapping some water with more noise than seemed necessary.

Sandy opened a couple of cabinets, moved around some of Leslie’s canned goods, and said, “Damn. No dog food. I’ll be right back.” Sandy breezed toward the front door. “You kids play

nice while I'm gone. Les, don't let Geoff fight with Shakti."

"If I could control cats, I could rule the world," he called after her. Leslie turned to his still annoyed guests and waited expectantly.

"What the hell is going on here?" Peter demanded.

"Alright, let me explain," Leslie said amicably. "Sandy is a successful fashion model and an excellent photographer. Her studio is in another loft in this building."

"I mean with the bomb."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that! Is all this a big psych-out?"

"No, I'm going to step off, just not with a bomb. It might destroy the computer files."

"You don't have the right to scare me like that," Rachel told him with quiet intensity.

"I apologize," Leslie told her. "But I thought you realized the bomb wasn't real."

"For heaven's sake, Leslie, how would I be aware of that?"

"You keep saying that you know me so well, sis."

Rachel regarded him for a moment before saying, "Damn you."

“Okay,” Leslie replied.

Sandy re-entered the loft and set about feeding Geoff. “Don’t mind me,” she told the others. “Carry on with your adulating.”

Rachel followed Sandy to the kitchen and petted Geoffrey. “What a handsome dog.”

“Yes, he is, but please don’t flatter him too much. It might go to his head and then he’ll also start making a suicide video.”

“So, you’re against this scheme, too?” Rachel asked.

“No, I’m with Les on this, but that doesn’t mean I can’t joke about it.”

Peter wandered into the kitchen area.

“He’s a mix, right?” Peter inquired, reaching down to pet Geoffrey.

“Correct,” Sandy told him. “He’s part Chihuahua and part Dachshund.”

“Does that make him a Chihuahund or a Dachshua?” Peter asked mischievously.

“Both, probably,” Sandy replied evenly, “but he’s just Geoffrey to us. However, with that kind of disrespectful attitude, from now on I’m going to have to insist that you address him as Sir Geoffrey Dog, His Majesty the Magnificent.”

“I’ll try to remember all that,” Peter said with a smile.

“Please do,” Sandy replied with a pert nod of her head.

Peter and Sandy exchanged a look for a moment. Rachel noted the two of them regarding each other and said, “This mutual admiration society meeting will now come to order.”

“Hey, babe,” Peter protested, “we’re just joking around about the Sir Geoffrey Dog.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” Sandy whispered.

“Is that what you’re doing?” Rachel asked at exactly the same time.

“Yeah,” Peter said confidently. Then, less confidently, he added, “Aren’t we?”

“Annnnnnd now we’re ready for our next scene,” Leslie said as he held up his mobile camera.

“Hold on a minute,” Rachel said.

“Why?” Leslie asked.

“Don’t drag us into your horror show,” Rachel stated.

“Come on, sis, think of the reviews we might get with this project,” Leslie enthused.

“From the *New York Times*: ‘Dozens die under influence of bizarre video!’ From the *Wall Street Journal*: ‘Sales of suicide video cheer retailers!’ From *USA Today*: ‘Most in USA still alive!’ This will be exciting—we’ll be part of the national news cycle for at least twenty minutes.”

“And that’s about all that will happen,” Rachel said dismissively.

“Not if you guys keep the story going,” Leslie said earnestly.

“Stop trying to drag us into this, Les.”

“Keep the story alive, so to speak.”

“Knock it off, Leslie.”

“You’re just angry because you were so willing to believe the bomb thingy was real.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s been true throughout history,” Leslie stated.

“Wait, what?”

“It’s because violent acts are what everyone understands,” Leslie stated. “All through the ages, all over the globe, we have put the most amazing efforts into designing and manufacturing more effective implements of destruction.”

“Oh boy,” Rachel muttered darkly. “Here we go.”

“Oh boy,” Sandy said pleasantly. “Here we go!”

“Shaping rocks into barbs and sticks into arrows,” Leslie continued. “Fashioning slings to hurl stones further and with more force; inventing the catapult to improve the throw weight and striking distance of the sling; employing gunpowder and hollow tubes to create the cannon...”

“Leslie,” Rachel said with annoyance.

“I don’t think he’s talking to us,” Peter said.

“I’m talking to everybody,” Leslie stated with a grim grin. “Next came motorizing the cannon to create the tank, then conquering the skies to drop metal packages of horror from the airplane, and finally, mastering physics and aerodynamics to deliver explosive devices from land, sea, air, or outer space. Let’s face it, violence makes sense, and violence through technology makes the most sense of all.”

“Damn it, Leslie,” Rachel snapped at him. “I didn’t invent arrows, bullets, spears, swords, rifles, knives, cannons, tanks, or missiles! Yes,

I know those things exist. Yes, I know people use weapons on each other all over the world. But I, personally, do not rely on them in my normal, daily routine! And I will not take responsibility for one single solitary skirmish, police action, border dispute, or war.”

“I think we all have a responsibility to hold people responsible for their perfidy.”

“Leslie,” Rachel said in exasperation. “You are nothing if not obstinate.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s time to go,” Rachel said.

“Wait, sis,” Leslie interjected. “Let me try something, okay?”

“No, Les, I think it’d be better if we—”

“Just let me make one more attempt to reach you about why I’m doing this,” Leslie insisted. “No jokes. No fooling around. You listen for a minute and then you can comment and leave, or just leave without a word. That’s fair, right?”

“I don’t know...”

“That’s pretty close to a ‘yes’, I think,” Leslie said with a smile.

“Jesus,” Rachel sighed. “Alright.”

Veterinary Healthcare

Woof



Leslie, Sandy, Rachel, and Peter faced each other. While Leslie and Sandy were smiling in anticipation, Rachel and Peter were apprehensively frowning.

“Okay,” Leslie began, “let’s agree on a topic for our bonus round. How do we feel about politics?”

“Politics is fucked up,” Peter said.

“That’s the point,” Leslie responded.

“Until we can introduce sanity into our politics,” Sandy pointed out, “progress is going to be at a standstill.”

“True,” Leslie added, “and sometimes, we’re going backwards. One of our two major political parties fails to acknowledge that we live in a democratic-socialist nation. This means

that when the Party of Stupid attacks socialism, they're attacking the U.S. from the inside.”

“Everything they do is attacking the U.S. from the inside,” Sandy noted.

“Good point,” Peter remarked.

“Please,” Rachel interjected, “no more on politics.”

“Okay,” Leslie replied amicably. “Here’s something else: we are being overrun by a generation that is self-anesthetizing on the mindlessness of social media driven by the hopeless surrender to algorithmic madness.”

“Is that what’s bothering you, Bunkie?” Rachel inquired with a snarky smile.

“It’s one of the things,” Leslie said pleasantly. “If that doesn’t interest you, let’s turn to the concept of human veterinary health care.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Rachel exploded.

“Hey! You said you’d listen.”

“You said you’d be serious.”

“I am serious. Just hear me out.”

“Fine,” Rachel said, the one syllable stretched out with a powerful sigh.

“And now...” Leslie made a show of activating the video recording, which had been

capturing everything all along, but this allowed his guests to be aware of their participation.

“Les, please don’t do that,” Rachel said.

“It’s showtime!” Leslie and Sandy said together, both doing the Bob Fosse jazz-hands motion.

“I don’t want to be in your suicidal wet dream,” Rachel said.

“Yeah,” Peter said, “I’m not sure I want to be in the video, either.”

“Geoffrey and I want to be in the video,” Sandy volunteered.

Leslie smiled at Sandy and said, “That’s because you’re adventurous.” Leslie turned to Rachel and Peter, and told them, “As for you, you’re too late—you’re already in it.”

“We’re leaving,” Rachel said.

“No problem,” Leslie told her. “You’ll be able to watch it after the funeral.”

“Come on, Peter,” Rachel commanded.

“Come on, Peter,” Leslie and Sandy said together, mimicking her.

Rachel’s eyes flared. She swallowed, took a breath, and then said in her most imperious manner, “*Wer wagt mich zu höhnen?*” (‘Who dares to mock me?’) from *Tristan und Isolde*.

“We’re both mocking you,” Leslie told her.

Rachel stared at her brother. “You’re impossible,” she said quietly.

“Whenever possible,” he replied.

“Stay a little while longer,” Sandy said. “You might be able to influence him. I’ve talked him out of doing it dozens of times.”

Rachel couldn’t help eyeing Sandy from head to toe before saying, “You have more ways of influencing him than we have.”

Sandy did the smile-with-wrinkled-nose thing at her.

“Did you pick that up from Les?” Rachel asked.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s really bad for the face.”

“It is?”

“Stretches the skin, you know?”

The two women stared at each other, a gulf of emotion gaping wide between them, yet both knew they were somehow bound to each other because of their love for Leslie.

“Okay,” Peter said, trying to gently break the tension. “I think we’re out of here.”

“Yes, indeed,” Rachel said, turning to gather her things.

“I’ve got other topics,” Leslie told them eagerly.

“No, that’s okay, Les.”

“There’s the scam of organized religion.”

“Heard it all before.”

“There’s the horrible results of corporate monoliths removing competition.”

“Know all about it.”

“How about this: Of the billions of people on this planet, many of them are undernourished and inadequately sheltered, and most of them are out of reach of educational opportunities.”

“Some other time, Les. We’re going.”

“Wait,” Leslie said with a grin. “We’ve got lots more choices: gun control, voting rights, reproductive rights, fossil fuel pollutants, tax inequities, political graft...”

“Les, my darling sibling,” Rachel said, “we know about these things, and we are doing what we can to combat them. But we don’t want to participate in your suicide video.” She stepped close to him and kissed his cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he replied.

“Come on, Peter.” She turned to the door.

“Just a second,” Peter told her.

“Fine, I’ll be down by the car,” she said, “peeling away the winos and junkies.” She swept out of the loft. There was a moment of strained silence.

“I don’t think the winos and junkies stand a chance,” Sandy noted.

Peter laughed and admitted, “She’s no softy, that’s for sure.” He offered his hand to Leslie. “It was nice meeting all three of you guys.” He shook hands with Leslie, Sandy, and Geoffrey.

“Nice meeting you,” Sandy said.

“It was a pleasure,” Leslie told him.

“You know,” Peter said to Leslie, “you’re doing something interesting here. And you know what it really is?”

“What?”

“Performance art!” Peter smiled broadly and left the loft.

Sandy glanced at Leslie.

“Oh my god,” Leslie said as he hung his head in shame.

“Well,” Sandy noted, “he’s not wrong.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“You know the answer to that, darling,” she said sweetly. “I’m on Geoffrey’s side.”

Leslie laughed. He stared at Sandy and his smile became blissful. They slowly approached each other and went through a ritual they had adopted without realizing it. They stood a few inches away from each other and kissed without any other part of their bodies touching. Then they stepped forward to hug while kissing. After a moment, Geoffrey shuffled over to them and rubbed against their legs until they bent down and included him in the hug.

“You’re a good dog, Sir Geoffrey,” Leslie said.

“A great dog,” Sandy corrected him.

“No, a great dog would make friends with a good cat.”

“When you get a good cat, maybe that will happen.”

“You’re very brave,” Leslie told her.

“Brave?”

“To openly denigrate Shakti the Mystical Spayed Goddess in that haughty manner. The feline beast might retaliate.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she said.

They kissed again.

Geoffrey regarded them quizzically until the kiss was over and he received more loving pats and a bit of scratching behind his ears.

“Hey,” Sandy said. “What’s this about veterinary health care? That’s new to me.”

“It’s a frightening one,” Leslie said. “Mind if I act it out for the video?”

“Not at all. Pontificate for the cameras. See if I care.”

“Well,” he said, and paused a second so she could join him in reciting the same line.

“No one really cares,” they said together.

They grinned at each other, then Sandy decamped to the kitchen with Geoff by her side, and Leslie readied himself to continue the recording.

“Alright,” Leslie said into one of the cameras. “The subject is veterinary health care. Sooner or later, everyone is faced with a choice about providing medical attention to a pet. The vet is always somber and professional as the options are explained to you.”

Leslie played the part of the veterinarian as well as the pet owners.

“We can perform a lung transplant for your dog, Salivajowls, unless you want him to die.”

“Oh! What would that cost?”

“It’s a lot,” Leslie said imperiously.

Leslie turned, as if speaking to another owner.

“I’m sorry to tell you that your parrot, Orville Overbite, will need a double leg prosthesis unless you don’t mind him falling off his perch all the time.”

“Oh! What would that cost?”

“It’s a lot.”

Leslie turned to address still another pet owner.

“Your cat, Fluffybuns, is going to need open heart surgery or she’ll never wake up.”

“Oh! What would that cost?”

“For you, a lot.”

Leslie turned to a different camera and addressed the viewer, “You probably noticed a pattern here. The animal is the patient, but the medical decisions are made by the one who pays the bills. In America, human beings are at the mercy of insurance companies. These for-profit monoliths make the medical decisions. As long as conservatives prevent Medicare-for-All, this is how things will be. Well, this plus a lot of people depleting their savings.”

Shakti appeared at the bedroom door and paused to survey the scene. He noted the presence of Geoffrey in the main part of the loft, turned, and retreated back into the bedroom.

“This situation,” Leslie went on, “creeps up on families as parents and grandparents age to the point where they cannot fully take care of themselves, completing the vicious circle that begins with each of us as a helpless, messy infant and concludes with each of us as a helpless, messy elder. Families are left with a few disagreeable choices... There’s home care, assuming you can afford it. There’s taking in your parents, or going to live with them, but that’s not practical for many people. And there’s assisted living, in what is often called a nursing home.”

Leslie paused the recording to go get a sip of water. Sandy was again making notes about editing the video. She smiled at him but kept writing. Geoffrey watched both humans expectantly, hoping to be rewarded with strokes on his noggin.

Leslie took a deep breath, exhaled, and re-activated the recording. “Fortunately, many of these places are quite comfortable.” Leslie

played the role of a nursing home sales rep. “Yes, Mr. and Mrs. Throgmorton, your dear grandmother will be very happy here at Slo-Mo Village. We have a round-the-clock nursing staff, medically approved meal prep, full security services, private rooms, and a multitude of social, cultural, and physical education programs. For example, this month’s guest lecturers include a third cousin of slain *Playboy* model Dorothy Stratten, and a former neighbor of a former member of the former rock group, Strawberry Alarm Clock.”

Leslie turned slightly and responded as Mr. Throgmorton. “Oooh, that sounds good. How much does that cost?”

“Twelve thousand, five hundred dollars,” Leslie replied as the administrator.

“I see,” began Mr. Throgmorton.

“Per month,” Leslie added.

“Ouch,” said Leslie as Throgmorton. “Is there anything less expensive?”

“Certainly,” Leslie replied. “The Hotel Bubonic next to the abandoned chemical plant.”

Leslie and Sandy both paused to watch as Shakti tentatively emerged from the bedroom and once again viewed the situation.

“Stay, Geoff,” Sandy instructed her now excited dog. Geoffrey was eagerly wagging his tail while peering at the cat, but the obedient dog remained by her side.

“I think he wants to play,” Leslie noted.

“Yup,” Sandy agreed, “but his idea of play may get his nose scratched again.”

Shakti quickly padded to the kitchen, leaped onto the counter, and stared imperiously down at Geoffrey.

“Okay then,” Leslie said. “We seem to have achieved détente between the furry species.” He returned to the video production. “More and more of us will be facing painful choices regarding family health care because medical science is keeping us alive longer, despite the fact that there are fewer reasons to spend the extra time on earth.”

Leslie sighed, paused the recording, turned to Sandy, and asked, “How about dinner?”

“I have to walk Geoff first.”

“I’ll feed Shakti and then come with you.”

“Cool,” she said. “Also, look at the time.”

“Ahh,” he said with a grin. “Is it...?”

“Yup,” Sandy said. “It’s bong o’clock.”

The Unknown

What if...?



Leslie and Sandy got high, over-fed the cat, and took Geoff on a walk, during which Les tried to get pictures of the dog bathed in the flickering glow from storefronts, signage, and streetlamps.

“Is it okay to talk about the video while you harass my dog?” she asked.

“Sure,” he replied, “although I am treating your dog like any other super model.”

“You know I have reservations about this project,” she said.

“You think I don’t?” he said, twisting his torso for a better angle on the dog.

“It doesn’t always seem that way, Les.”

“Believe me, I often doubt I’m going to be able to pull this off.”

“Les, I completely agree that everything you rail against is evil, but...” She didn’t complete her thought.

“But what?” he asked.

“To change the world for the better, shouldn’t you tell people to stick around and battle the things we know are wrong?”

“That’s exactly what I hope people take from this,” Leslie responded. “Yeah, I know there’s a call for more suicides in the piece, but what I really want is to have a sense of loss turn into anger against those people and institutions that are causing that loss.”

“You might mention that in the show.”

He was silent a moment and he stopped his photography session with Geoff. “We should probably talk about this more often,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “Do I get a reward?”

“Sure. Would you accept a kiss?”

“I would.”

He kissed her on her forehead. Then her cheek. Then her lips. Then her lips again.

“Umm,” she said. “More later?”

“Agreed,” he said.

They walked in silence for a few moments. Then, as if dredged up from somewhere hidden, Sandy asked, “Are you frightened by the prospect of dying?”

“Oh man,” he muttered. “Yes,” he conceded, “but only because it means facing the unknown.”

“The unknown is always disquieting,” she admitted.

“After we die,” he said, “I think we go on to some other form of existence. Our energy, or essence, or soul, or whatever, continues in another realm, on another plane.”

“That’s a nice thought,” she said quietly.

“We don’t know, and that’s what is scary.”

“Is it as scary as Uni?” she asked as they approached their favorite sushi bar.

“Nothing’s as scary as Uni,” he said as he held the restaurant door for her and Geoffrey.

They sat across from each other in a booth with Geoff next to Sandy. She ordered Uni, he ordered salmon sashimi, and they continued to discuss the video.

“Time for another round of def-con,” Sandy said, referring to their game of ‘definitions and confessions.’

“Okay,” Leslie replied. “Shoot.”

“Ultimate consumer product.”

“Ooh, good one. Alright. It would be the suicide video, of course...”

“Of course.”

“...but it would be highly technological.”

“Details, please.”

“Certainly,” he said. “After you activate the video, a voice would inform you that this was a participatory event in which you would be exploring death.”

“Using a professional announcer?” Sandy inquired.

“Absolutely. There would be a real voice-of-god actor on the soundtrack.”

“Goodie,” Sandy said.

“Mr. Leatherlungs would explain that viewers of the video were being monitored by drones surrounding the building.” Leslie did a poor imitation of a deep-voiced announcer: “Do not adjust the controls. Sit still. You must continue watching the suicide video at all times. Heat-sensing, infra-red, and motion-detection devices are being utilized to ensure that you remain in the room with the video playing. If you stop the video or leave the room, a chemical

explosion will destroy everything within fifty feet of the screen. Enjoy. That is an order.”

“Kind of Germanic, that last part,” Sandy observed.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he said. “I’ll reword it.”

“Good boy.”

“Do I get a kiss?”

“Not while we’re eating,” she replied.

“Damn.”

“I have dog treats in my purse. You can have one of those.”

“That’s okay. I’ll wait for the human treats.”

“Okay,” she said. “Now it’s my turn. Give me a topic.”

“Our modern age,” he said.

“Alright,” she responded. “Our modern age.” She took a deep breath. “Okay, we’re all trapped in an uncreative, unresponsive, inhuman existence, but it’s one that we have collectively created. Which means we can do something about it if we all get mad enough or motivated in some way. The potential for change is there. It’s inside all of us. Hiding. Fearful. But hopeful. The potential, the

promise, is just waiting for some fuel and a spark.”

“Nicely put,” Leslie told her.

She nodded her thanks and was silent for a moment. Then: “Your words can be the spark, Leslie,” she said quietly. “Perhaps you don’t have to throw yourself on the fire.”

“I think I do, Sandy,” he said, matching her tone.

“Hmmm,” she replied.

“That’s it? Just hmmm?”

“Well,” Sandy said solemnly, “that, and please pour more sake.”

“No problem, wino woman.”

“I’m not certain I appreciate that kind of insult from maryjane man,” she replied with a pert smile.

“I’ll take my chances,” he said.

There was another pause before Sandy spoke again. “Les...”

“Um-hmm?”

“What if you’re wrong? What if there’s nothing else out there. You know, after we die.”

“Then this is an entirely fucked up universe,” Leslie said quietly.

“That’s a possibility, right?” she asked.

He thought about it a second. He sighed. “That is, indeed, a possibility,” he admitted. “But doesn’t that make it even more of a moral imperative for us to behave well? Doesn’t that make it more important to actually live up to those great philosophical tenets that are in every religion?”

“You’re referring to all that stuff that the religious people spout but ignore in their own lives?” she asked. “I’m sorry if that came out snarky, but, well, isn’t that the truth?”

“Yes,” he said. “You snarked a little, but you were truthing at the same time.”

“Meanwhile, maybe you could stick around a while longer?” she asked.

“I guess I want to know about the next step, or the next level of existence, Sandy. And I think we have to die to find out for sure.”

“But we don’t have to die before our time,” she said.

He smiled and stared into her eyes. “What if it’s close to my time?” he asked.

They ate in silence. Every once in a while, Geoffrey poked his head up to watch them quizzically.

“So,” Sandy said.

“So?” he replied.

“This is not one of those moods, is it?” she asked.

“What moods?”

“The dreaded ‘weight of the world, living heartache, woe unto everyone, downer of the year’ moods,” she explained.

“It’s not as bad as that, is it?” he inquired.

“It’s pretty intense, Les.”

“Oh?”

“I mean, you have to admit that you do sometimes carry things to an extreme. Making a suicide video while you’re in good health, and the whole time thinking the world will be altered by your actions? Most of us seem to get by with a temporary overindulgence of weed or alcohol and listening to a few tracks of Willie Nelson.”

“So,” he mused, “you think it’s wrong?”

“No, I enjoy Willie Nelson.”

He smiled and said, “Fuck you.”

“That sounds good,” she said. “I was wondering when you’d bring that up. So to speak.”

“You’re a minx tonight.”

“Not just tonight.”

“We don’t need to order dessert here since you have something planned for later.”

“After our talk.”

“We are talking.”

She caught his eye and spoke quietly but with intensity. “You know how we talk when we’re alone late at night?”

“Um-hmm,” he said.

“Real talk,” she emphasized.

“Real talk?”

“Like when we just lay there discussing how the world works and doesn’t work. Like that, okay?”

“Yes.”

“We talk about the need for compassion,” she said slowly. “We talk about the nourishment from hope. We talk about the quest for knowledge.”

“We do lots of things really well when we’re alone late at night,” he said.

“I’m being serious now,” she admonished him.

“Right, sorry,” he said. “Go ahead.”

“We discuss humanity’s refusal to learn from past experience, the emphasis on petty disputes, the evil of the conservative cabal, the

grifting of the religiosity tribes..." She paused a second. He was going to reply but she began again in the same earnest tone. "Too many people keep a cunning eye on the possibility of a shortcut to wealth or pleasure. Too many people grab what they can without payment of emotion or concern for the pain they might be inflicting on others."

"Yes," he said. "Exactly."

"Okay then," she said. "You're overdoing your presentation of it, Leslie. There's just no way people will sit still for all that."

Leslie nodded as she spoke. "You make great points." He paused. "As usual, damn you."

"I mean," she continued, "most people won't take the time to listen for very long unless you find a way to grab them. Entertain them. Distract them from their everyday concerns. Let me put it like this, Les," she emphasized, "it's a very long way from the brain's synapses to the heart's desire."

"Ooh, that's good," he said.

"Thank you."

"Can I quote you?" he asked.

"Feel free," she replied.

"You should be on the recording with me."

“You want me to die with you?”

“No!” he said. “I want you to live. To experience life. To perfect your art. To photograph the world in a way that changes how other people view things.”

“Ahh, my Leslie,” she said evenly. “He always said such nice things while he was still alive.”

“I’m going to ignore that,” he told her.

“I sincerely wish you wouldn’t,” she said quietly.

They stared at each other for a while. Eventually, Geoff put both front paws on Sandy’s arm and looked imploringly at her.

“We should go,” she said.

Juggling Act

Unique View of the Universe



Leslie and Sandy went to her loft, put Geoff to bed, and took another dose of THC. He got out her futons as she dialed up some Arvo Pärt to play through the speakers and subwoofer in the largest space in her studio.

“Lights low or medium?” he asked her.

“Flames,” she replied, and they each lit several candles scattered around the perimeter of the loft’s main room.

Once they were lying on the double layer of padding, they talked quietly, accompanied by the ethereal choirs of the Estonian composer whose work they used for contemplation and conversation.

“Let’s consider the visual presentation of your project,” Sandy said.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “I’d appreciate whatever ideas you’ve got.”

“Okay, so what should be on the screen when you mention some of the violence in the world? Right now, it seems like it’s just this one guy talking into the cameras.”

“You’re suggesting there’s too much of me in the video?” he asked facetiously. “How could that possibly be the case?”

“Yeah, it’s a puzzle.”

“Alright,” he said, “so, apparently, the video needs cutaways.”

“Good thinking,” she said.

“Examples?” he asked.

“You could show a grieving family when you talk about war.”

“Um-hmm,” he said.

“You could show a graveyard when you talk about schools.”

“Ooh, I like that,” he told her.

“Thank you. And you could show a flaccid penis whenever you mention politicians.”

“Wait, what?”

“I just threw that one in there to make you like the other ones even more.”

“Good thinking,” he said.

They were silent a while but eventually they began quietly and earnestly discussing the disturbing penis image. They joked and punned about it, and Sandy apologized for the line and inquired innocently, “Is there any way I could make it up to you?”

Leslie and Sandy were both very excited to discover a way they could collaborate on a scientific demonstration of the opposite of flaccid.

The next morning, after making breakfast for themselves and their furry roommates, they moved to Leslie’s loft and began getting ready for recording. “The dog gets that corner of the kitchen,” Sandy said, “and the cat gets the bedroom.”

“As long as they both can get to their water dishes without a battle,” Leslie said.

“Right,” she agreed.

“Hello,” Leslie said into one of the cameras. “I’d like to introduce you to the executor of my estate, Sandra van der Nova.”

“Hello,” Sandy told one camera with a smile. She expertly moved into the frame and took over the video presentation. “Right now, we’re going to consider a pan-universal

viewpoint. If you can, please take just one minute to imagine yourself inside the celestial heavens... Regard the array of visual wonders in every direction... Look at all the stars generating their own light and heat. Closer to home, you can see the planets of our solar system floating on black velvet... But that's not correct, is it? They aren't 'on' anything. They're flying through the metagalactic void, dependent on each other's gravitational power. They perform in majestic arcs and graceful parabolas. They appear to be moving at a snail's pace even though they're traveling at very high speeds."

Just as Leslie did earlier, Sandy began to pace through the loft as she spoke.

"Sometimes," she said into the hand-held camera, "I picture a large multi-armed creature performing juggling acts with the orbs in the galaxies." She tossed the mobile phone into the air and caught it with ease.

Leslie was watching one of the large desktop screens when the image flipped around. "Whoa!" he said.

"Just like that," Sandy noted, "but with a whole night sky full of spinning objects."

"Nice move," Leslie noted.

“Thanks,” Sandy replied. “But after that comes the creepy part. I imagine this juggler as an old vaudevillian, well into his act, sweat starting to glisten on his skin as he sends the little glowing spheres whizzing up and out, letting gravity influence pitch and yaw in a truly miraculous performance... and then I am caught up short as I wonder... what happens if... this cosmic juggler... sneezes.”

She paused and flipped the mobile device again. And caught it.

“Can I try that?” Leslie asked.

“No, darling,” Sandy told him. “You can barely hold onto one dog with two arms.”

“What if I juggle your dog?”

“Then you would be murdered before you were able to kill yourself.”

They paused and stared at each other with half-smiles playing on their lips.

“You know,” he said, “I once saw a guy juggle a bowling ball, a feather, and some tofu.”

“Many are the forms of entertainment,” she replied.

“Wait, do you consider what I’m doing to be just entertainment?”

“I wish it was,” she said.

“Sandy,” he said quietly, “it’s more than that.”

“Look,” she pointed out, “I think that your primary message is great, but I think the suicide part of it is misguided.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And shortsighted.”

“How so?”

“You should stick around to keep up the good fight. We can gather fans and followers who preach the removal of the human detritus that has infested the planet.”

Leslie didn’t respond at first, but eventually said, “Okay, I’m listening.”

“If you kill yourself, you risk turning this into a freak show. It may be a *cause célèbre* for a little while, but the true message may get lost for most of the rest of us.”

“But if I was just acting out the suicide,” he said slowly, “that would be hypocritical.”

“It would be a good performance.”

“It would be deceptive,” he said.

“It would be prudent.”

“It would be chickenshit.”

“It would be the act of someone who wanted to continue the battle for decency in the

world.” She watched his face as he weighed her words. “It would also be something else,” she said.

“What?”

“It would be something that makes me happy.”

They stood there in silence. The sunlight poured through the windows. Shakti padded quietly into the room, leapt to the countertop, lapped some water, and quietly returned to the bedroom. Geoffrey twitched his paws in his sleep as he dreamed of chasing squirrels.

“Well,” Leslie said, “the critters are content, but we have reached an impasse.”

“May I continue my side of the argument?”

“Sure.”

“I think you should stick around to talk about your points, refine them, write and speak about them, and answer the critics.”

“Hmmm,” he said.

“Take this show on the road, maybe.”

“Hmmm.”

“Set it to music, maybe.”

“Nope,” he replied. “You went too far.” Leslie went into his announcer voice: “America, get ready for *Suicide: The Musical!*”

“Well,” Sandy said with a shrug, “I’ve seen worse.”

He thought about it for a moment and then admitted, “Yeah, I guess I have, too.”

“Okay, then,” she said. “So, I bought you a present.” She got a small gift box from her purse and held it out to him. “It’s something I can give you that also gives something to me.”

“I’m not putting on a garter belt again.”

“No, silly,” she said. “Open it.”

He pulled one end of the bow, removed the ribbon, and opened the box. “Vitamins?” he asked.

“After last night, I think we can both agree you don’t need vitamins,” she said. “No, those are placebos.”

“What’s in them?”

“Nothing, now. I bought Vitamin C capsules and emptied them.”

“I could put morphine inside them.”

“You could,” she admitted. She stood very still and held his gaze. She could feel her heart beating as she waited for his response. “I hope you take the empty capsules,” she said softly. “Geoffrey does, too,” she added.

“Not Shakti?” he asked.

“He’s a cat,” she said with a shrug. “They have their own agendas, and they rarely care about humans until they need something.”

“Yeah,” Leslie admitted, “but they can purr.”

“So?” Sandy asked.

“So, if dogs could purr, they’d absolutely rule the world of pets.”

Sandy nodded in agreement. She glanced at the darkening sky beyond the row of windows.

Delaying Tactics

All Five Senses



The lights in Leslie's loft weren't strong enough to produce a good image for recording at night, so they brought in some of Sandy's lamps.

"That's only a little better," Leslie noted. "I think we need to stay near a light source if we record after dark."

"You're not going to be moving at the end," Sandy said tersely.

"True enough," Leslie agreed. "Plus, the dark and grainy images kind of fit the mood of death, don't you think?"

Sandy nodded but remained silent.

"Are you okay with editing the video after I'm gone?" he asked.

"Positive."

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, Leslie.” She forced herself to address the technical aspects of the project. “I’ve been making notes ever since you started this project, and I’ve got a lot of footage and photos to insert in the video.”

“Want to talk about them?”

“I want to talk about everything,” Sandy said.

“You’re amazing,” he told her. “You’re wonderful, you’re intelligent, you’re talented, you’re a great kisser, and you have a cute dog.”

“But...?” she asked.

He stared at her for a while and then muttered an answer. It sounded like he said, “I hffta theckbt tss.”

“What?” she asked.

“I have to think about this,” he repeated at a normal volume.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “While you do that, I’m going to load some imagery into your computer.” She moved to his desktop and signed into her file transfer protocol.

“What kind of imagery?” he asked.

“Shhhh, you’re thinking, remember?”

“Come on, Sandy. Give me a hint at least.”

“It’s all good stuff, I assure you. So, you just keep doin’ yer thinkin’.”

“Damn it, this is my project.”

Sandy sighed but was secretly pleased with the way the conversation was going. “It’s all great stuff,” she assured him. “Clouds and blooming flowers in speeded-up motion, people and animals in slow motion.”

“May I please see some of it?” he asked.

“Sure.” She selected the fast-moving cloud folder and let one file play in silence.

“Beautiful,” he noted.

“Lovely,” she agreed. “I think it would be nice to use this when you talk about love.” She turned to him and inquired, “You are planning on talking about love, aren’t you?”

“Well,” he said, “it didn’t seem to fit in with the rest of the piece.”

“Nothing happens without love, Leslie.”

“I disagree,” he stated.

“Nothing good happens.”

“Oh, well, that’s different.”

“It certainly is,” she said. “Speaking of which, do you want to postpone the denouement in order to make love to me?”

“You’re a temptress,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling.

“You think you’re going to keep me alive by fucking me to death?”

“That’s my plan,” she replied.

“Not bad,” he admitted.

“It’ll work fine,” she stated, “right up until I get my period.”

They both hesitated a second and then burst out laughing.

“Well,” he said, “that broke the tension.”

“Yeah,” she said. “So, how do you want to make love to me? Consider the possibilities.” She watched patiently as Leslie considered the possibilities. “Screw now, die later,” she urged him.

“Okay,” he said softly.

“Well alright!” she replied. “Let’s go.” She reached for his hand while taking a couple of steps toward the door.

“Why do you always want to make love at your place?” he asked.

“Because,” she replied, “it looks like an asylum waiting room in here.”

“It does?” he said, a bit too pleased.

“Not that I’ve seen a lot of them, but if I had to design a stage set, this might do.”

“I should put that into the project.”

“Stage set design?”

“No, the mental health of the world.”

“Don’t preach at the audience, Les,” she told him. “Let them go to church for that.”

“No one with an I.Q. above sixty goes to church anymore.”

“Some do, but I admit that religion has really let civilization down.”

“That’s for sure.”

“But if the church talked about the same things you’re concerned with, even you might be there.”

“I doubt it, but I take your point.”

“Come on, master of demise,” she said. “Come take me.”

They exited his loft, walked down the hall, and entered hers. They made love to Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem*.

Separation

Anxiety



The next week proceeded as Sandy had predicted. During daylight hours, she and Leslie worked on editing the video. They cut out many flubs and pauses. They removed extraneous shots of Shakti and Geoffrey. They used many colorful sequences in place of, next to, or superimposed over Leslie as he spoke.

After nightfall, Sandy made certain that their lovemaking was memorable enough to cause Les to postpone his departure. They were both aware that this nightly bliss could not continue forever.

What separated them was not ovulation but adoration—Sandy was booked to model in another major photo shoot.

“What’s this one for?” Leslie asked her.

“Cruise line,” she replied.

“Which one?”

“Does it matter?”

The agency sent a car to pick up Sandy and take her to the airport. Leslie rode with her. They went through their parting scene without many words. She told him she expected him to take care of Geoff until she returned. Her tone was matter of fact, but her eyes were pleading. He promised they would see each other again.

“Deal?” she asked.

“Deal,” he replied.

She stared at him a moment, then nodded.

“Alright then.”

With a quick kiss, she was gone.

He waited inside the terminal until the plane roared down the runway and lifted off into the sky.

After returning to his loft, he petted the worried dog and the unconcerned cat. That evening, he talked quietly to the animals about the decision he had to make. Shakti yawned and curled up on the computer to nap, but Geoffrey was very attentive and seemed quite empathetic.

“Extra skritches on the noggin for you,” Leslie told the dog.

Geoff accepted the attention.

The next few days saw Leslie alternating between adding to the video and staring off into space as he tried working out the answer to the quandary he now faced.

He forced himself to go over the list of topics that were addressed in what he called his “digital doomsday diatribe.” He ticked off some of the major items to an attentive Geoffrey and a dozing Shakti. “Okay, fur persons, here’s a list of topics: The climate crisis. The rise of racism. The worship of greed. The spread of fascism. The perversion of the news media by right-wing cabals. The undermining of education by conservatives. The distortion of values by the GOP. The intolerance and violence of religiosity cults.”

He flipped through the notes he and Sandy had made about additional points to be considered, such as the book banning bozos, and the Voluntary Human Extinction folks. “Maybe we should put those in,” he said to Shakti and Geoff. “What say the feline and canine members of our organization?” Both animals were non-committal, but the dog at least pretended to be paying attention. “You’re

a good dog, Geoffrey,” he said softly. He turned to Shakti and said, “You could be a bit more like Geoff, you damn contrary cat.” He gently stroked Shakti. Geoff watched for a moment, then nosed him in order to get some petting of his own.

Leslie smiled at the animals. “I want both of you to know that I consider you better than any humans on the planet except for Sandy and my well-meaning but annoying sister.” He made sure the pets’ water dishes were full just before getting into bed. Shakti and Geoffrey both climbed under the blankets on opposite sides of Leslie.

“Listen up, beasts,” he announced. “If we’re going to share the bed, I don’t want any fighting over territory.” He petted each of them a couple of times. “Goodnight, fuzzy critters.” All three bedmates wriggled their bodies into comfy positions. All three of them sighed. All three of them slept soundly, especially Leslie because he had resolved his dilemma and now knew what he was going to do.

Slow Fade

The Exodus Shuffle



Next morning, Leslie awoke with a smile. He fed the animals, made breakfast, and took Geoffrey for a walk. When he returned to the building, he put the dog into Sandy's loft and made sure that he had dry food and a bowl of water.

“Everything is going to be fine, Sir Geoffrey,” he assured the worried dog.

He entered his own loft, pet Shakti a moment, and then got ready for recording.

Leslie opened a folder on his computer and placed a huge video file on his desktop. He set it to play on his largest screen. The video began with slow-motion sequences of beautiful locations from around the globe. As the video continued, each shot was slightly shorter than

the previous one, creating the feeling of acceleration.

Satisfied that everything was ready for recording, Leslie stepped to the kitchen for a quick sip of water. He put down the glass, took several deep breaths, and turned back to the video equipment.

“Okay,” Leslie said firmly, and started recording. “Let’s do this thing.” He took a vial from his shirt pocket and faced the main camera.

“The method of my exit,” he said, shaking the pill container. “Mundane, I know, compared to a bomb, noose, gun, or guillotine, but it has the advantage of being relatively painless, which may not matter to you, but it has a certain appeal for me.”

He opened the vial and lifted it to his nose, as if savoring the aroma from a bottle of wine. “A delicate and subtle bouquet,” he remarked, “gently redolent of the mists of time.” He put the vial to his lips, tilted his head back to put a capsule in his mouth and swallowed. He smiled.

“Won’t be long, now,” he said. He looked into the main camera and his smile faded. “I am hereby accusing you of aiding and abetting

death. No, I'm not referring to me, but the oncoming demise of humanity."

Leslie maneuvered himself into one corner of the frame, making certain that the montage of imagery occupied most of the screen above and behind him.

"You," he said, nodding at the camera. "You just sit there, complacent, self-satisfied, thinking only of your own amusement. You may have allowed yourself to become aware of some of the horrors of this world, yet you do little or nothing about them. You might as well be dead for all the good you do."

He put the vial to his lips, shook it gently from side to side, sending another capsule into his mouth. After swallowing it, he glanced at the montage. It was just beginning to add examples of heartbreaking poverty to the presentation of breathtaking tourist sites.

"It's the same all over the world," Leslie continued. "People of every description are alike in ways that are more important than skin color or the shape of our eyes. Let's take a look at this for a moment."

Leslie angled the camera so he appeared only in the bottom left portion of the screen.

“We are self-propelled, bipedal creatures with built-in chemical and electrical factories. We have on-board self-lubricating hydraulic and pneumatic pumps. Our internal guidance systems employ sophisticated lenses and sound diaphragms. We’re powered by an internal combustion engine with handy fuel intake and exhaust ports.”

He took a sip of water and tilted the vial for another swallow.

“We move around with a reference library and an information retrieval mechanism in our uppermost portion, along with a miniaturized supercomputer capable of developing logical analyses leading to rational thought. Our mid-section offers pleasure and reproduction. Our lower limbs provide locomotion, while our auxiliary appendages are complete with claws and opposable thumbs. What a piece of work.”

Clouds blocked some of the sunlight for a moment and he paused patiently, breathing heavily. When the shafts of sun returned, he resumed speaking.

“I do not wish to continue associating with a species that has so diluted its potential that an act of ordinary integrity looks like courage. I am

sick of the thousand little examples of personal decomposition we force upon ourselves every day. I am tired of the living death we have fashioned for ourselves and our children. I recoil from the horror and the heartache. And I remove myself from all of it.”

His face began getting a faraway look just as the montage of imagery was speeding up. The content of the video was as violent as the rapidity of the juxtapositions. Riots. Storms. Explosions. Barbed wire. Corpses. Rabid dogs. Conservative politicians. Snakes. Wounds. Graveyards. Sculptures splintering. Artworks in flames. Rotting food. Dead flowers. Car crashes. Assassinations. Executions. Plague.

Intercut with the mayhem were images of people of every age and ethnicity, all looking angry, insane, tired, frightened, tormented, evil, and threatening.

“Can you feel it?” Leslie asked the camera. “There is a tangible hurting that the world visits upon humanity. There are only a few glimpses of hope. For a precious few brief seconds, the suffering becomes mitigated by love. But the joy is fleeting and then it’s back to the wanting and waiting and hurting and hating.”

Leslie closed his eyes because the horrific imagery had speeded up to the point where the onslaught was creating a stroboscopic effect in the room.

“This world could have been a true realization of the Garden of Eden, but we are destroying it. In too many regions, the sky is beclouded, the landscape is ravaged, and the people are ignorant.”

Tears formed in the corners of his eyes and slowly ran down his cheeks.

“Pandora’s Box has been rebuilt, restocked, and re-opened. We are turning Earth into a living hell. Soon, it will be a dying hell.”

Leslie writhed in his chair as the strobing imagery pulsed alarmingly. It suddenly stopped on an image of Earth floating in space. Slowly, and in silence, the Earth dissolved into a photo of one lonely red rose.

“I wonder...” He halted. “What if...? What if Earth wasn’t a hellscape, but a waystation? What if we’re right at the gates of heaven? What if all this suffering is taking place in an instant of god-time, and we’re about to be judged and reassigned? What if...? Maybe... Could it be...? Judgement...?”

Leslie's eyes fluttered and shut. His body lost all tension and he slumped, motionless...

The sunlight poured through the loft windows, oblivious to his condition.

Several moments passed until Shakti padded into the room. The cat leapt up on the worktable, brushed past the screen, and climbed atop the computer. Spinning around twice, Shakti settled onto the warm surface and began to purr.

Epilogue

Shame v. Satisfaction



“How about a couple with flared nostrils?” Sandy asked the photographer, a highly paid and eccentric man who was professionally known as Vaurien, which was “scoundrel” in French.

“Ehh,” came the reply from the long-haired and bearded man as he peered through the lens of an imposing custom-built digital capture image-and-video system that was mounted atop a massive tripod.

Around the set were many people besides Sandy and Vaurien: a lighting director, two camera assistants, a hair stylist, a make-up artist, a wardrobe manager, two grips, three account executives from a Madison Avenue advertising agency, and several major and

minor functionaries from the marketing department of the client, the maker of a new fragrance that was scheduled to be unleashed on the public prior to the next holiday season.

Everyone but Sandy was puzzled by the curt responses from the photographer. She took everything in stride. She called him by name or “Rascal.”

Sandy often made suggestions to the photographer, some quite helpful, but she was not afraid to present silly ideas on occasion.

“Here’s flared,” Sandy said, and struck an exaggerated pose with one of the mock-ups of the heavy sculpted glass container for the perfume atomizer.

“Hmmm,” Vaurien said. There was a soft metallic clicking from the camera.

“And here’s unflared.” More clicking.

Vaurien mumbled something to his lead assistant. She listened, nodded, and moved into the shot to confer with Sandy. Together, they angled the glass container to avoid reflecting light into the camera lens.

“Umm!” Vaurien said. Sandy held the pose as the assistant stepped out of the frame and the camera clicked.

Sandy watched as Vaurien conferred with two of the clients, both of whom were annoyed with the music that Sandy insisted be played at a high volume through the photo studio sound system.

At a nod from the photographer, his lead assistant tried explaining the situation to the complainers.

“This is from the *Six Suites for Solo Cello*,” she stated in a calm but firm tone. “It is universally recognized as magnificent music. In addition, this has been discussed with Ms. van der Nova, and some of us are convinced that Johann Sebastian Bach composed these pieces with someone like her in mind.”

“I’m convinced you’re all nuts,” said the Executive Director of North American Product Marketing.

“That’s entirely possible,” admitted the assistant amicably.

“I don’t care that it’s by Johann Sebastian fucking Bach,” said the Executive Manager of Global Consumer Media, “it’s driving me crazy. This music is a downer.”

The assistant glanced at Vaurien, received a nod, and turned back to address the whiners.

“Guess it’s time for another break,” the assistant told them. “Take ten, everybody!” she shouted.

Vaurien had already stepped away from the tripod. His eyes twinkled but his full beard and shaggy drooping hair hid his expression.

Sandy smiled, stood up, and moved to the dressing tables, secure in the knowledge that Vaurien would win the argument on her behalf.

Waiting impatiently at her dressing table were Geoffrey and a writer from an online magazine that dealt with the vagaries of pop culture, most often from a trendy and dark perspective. Geoffrey accepted a hug from Sandy and then calmed down. The writer was perpetually impatient.

“So, are you ready to continue with our interview?” the writer asked.

“You may ask away, my gothic darling man,” Sandy said. She sat down and sipped an iced coffee while the hair and make-up professionals performed touch-ups on her.

“In the past year, you have become one of the most sought-after models in the world.”

“Says you,” Sandy replied.

“No, it’s verifiable. You’re booked months in advance.”

“I have a very good agent,” Sandy said.

“And your fees are equal to anyone in the industry.”

“I have a very good manager,” Sandy said.

“It’s alright to admit to your success,” the writer noted.

“My protests may sound like false modesty to you,” Sandy said, “but there’s no way I could possibly negotiate with the jackals in the ad biz on my own.”

“Okay,” the writer said with a nervous laugh, “but what I’m leading up to the fact that you took time away from your very lucrative career to edit the so-called ‘death video,’ *Partial Eclipse*, and some people are wondering about your reasons for that.”

“Money doesn’t enter into it,” Sandy told him. “I think the message of the suicide video is important. Whether you condone ‘stepping off’ or not, the points Leslie Walker makes in the video are relevant and well worth considering.”

The interview continued during breaks in the photo session throughout the day. Sandy spoke about the editing process and her criteria for selecting sequences in the video. “I love the message of the video... it felt right to work on

the editing...” and so on. “I enjoy images that are gorgeous, shocking, and poetic,” she continued, “so that’s what I put into the video.”

“What are the sales figures for the suicide video?”

“The *Partial Eclipse* video is discussed more often than viewed,” Sandy stated. “The video is doing really well in terms of online controversy,” Sandy noted, “and the memes have been quite impressive, even if some of them are not in very good taste. It is true that we’re not exactly setting records in terms of sales. However, people who like the video tend to love it to death, so to speak,” she added.

“Leslie Walker, the man in the suicide video, was your boyfriend at the time the video was made, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. Leslie was my love, my lover, and my life for several years.”

“Do you miss him a great deal?”

“Being apart from him kills me,” she said without a trace of irony. She noticed the interviewer looking at her quizzically. “Does that sound flippant?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” the writer said, hoping she would continue.

“I don’t mean it to sound facetious,” she said. “We all carry around memories. We all carry other people in our hearts, no matter what plane of existence we’re currently occupying.”

“Yes, but how did it feel to be working on the video containing images of his death?”

“It felt like a part of me had died,” she said simply. She turned to look the writer straight in his eyes and asked, “Have you ever been in love?”

“Well, sure, but—”

“Imagine how you would feel if the love of your life was suddenly gone from your life.” There was a moment of silence. “You would experience the loss in many ways,” Sandy said simply. “It would touch every part of your existence.”

The interview continued over the course of a couple of days, with the questions and responses taking place between her various outlandish poses. There were also several tense moments, such as when the paint on some of the mock-ups of the fragrance had not yet dried. Queries from the journalist ranged from the mundane to the ridiculous, but Sandy handled them with good humor and plenty of patience.

Despite the pretensions of the ezine, only once in a while did the questions touch on serious aspects of the end-of-life movement.

“What is your opinion of the so-called death clubs?” the writer asked.

“It’s always nice to have fans,” Sandy replied evenly, “but not all of them express themselves well. When their views are rooted in a desire to improve the world rather than just an attempt to grow their fan club roster, then I try to support them. Otherwise, they’re not part of the solution, they’re part of the problem.”

“The problem being the ills of humanity?”

“The problem being the surrendering to temptation,” Sandy said.

The interviewer eventually stated that he had all the responses needed for his piece, which was a face-saving way of stating that the ezine was refusing to pay any more of his expenses. Sandy was not sad to see him depart.

At the end of her next fourteen-hour day, Sandy brought Geoffrey to her hotel suite, fed him, and took a long hot shower. After toweling off, she donned a robe and stepped into the bedroom. She stopped when she saw a lump under the coverlet of the king-size bed.

With a smile, she gently sat on the edge of the bed and carefully peeked underneath the covers. She was greeted by a “Mmmrrreow” from a curled-up cat.

“Hi, Shakti,” she said, lovingly petting the feline’s head.

Shakti stretched, yawned, and began to purr.

“Where’s your human?” Sandy asked.

“I’m right here,” came a voice from behind her.

Turning, she saw the shaggy-haired and bearded photographer leaning on the doorjamb to the adjoining suite.

“Hey, you,” Sandy said with a knowing smile. “Are you still Vaurien or are you back to being my Leslie?”

“Good question,” he said. “Which personality do you prefer?”

“Depends,” Sandy told him. “Leslie is the more caring lover, but Vaurien is an animal in the sack.”

“I could try to blend the two,” he said.

“Hmm,” she mused. After a moment, she slowly pulled back part of her robe, revealing her legs.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“You realize that under this robe there’s a totally nude girl, right?”

“Right,” Leslie told her.

“You’re not in the mood?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but I just keep going back and forth with the cop-out ending to the suicide video. Taking those empty capsules seems like, I don’t know... It seems like cowardice.”

“With all that we face in this world,” Sandy told him, “I think people who chose to continue living are the brave ones.”

“Look, I get what you’re saying, but this doesn’t seem like the proper ending,” he said. “It just doesn’t feel right. It feels like a fraud.”

“The video has a great ending,” Sandy said firmly. “And you are now starting your life over. With me. With the opportunity to promote the ideas and ideals you stated in the video. We can make sure more people know about everything you put in it.”

“Everything we put in it. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. “I am happy and proud to have helped. Right now,

however, my suggestion is that you cheer the fuck up.”

“I’ll work on that,” he said. “But listen, I’m bothered by something else. When do you think we should tell my sister about this?”

“Actually,” she began, and trailed off.

“What?”

“I already told her.”

“You did?”

“Your mom, too. Are you mad?”

“No, no, it’s just... I should have done it.”

“You couldn’t. You were busy going off the rails with your project. You just went a little crazy, that’s all. That’s what they think.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know you’re right, but it still eats at me.”

“Snap out of it,” she said, doing her best Cher imitation.

“I wish it was that easy.” He sighed. “I was leading people on. The whole thing ended up a fake. Or a fake-out, at the very least.”

They had been going over this same ground many times in recent weeks. While he was troubled by what he called trickery and deceit, Sandy was happy that they could work together on developing a new way to positively

influence people. No matter what Sandy said, Leslie was unconvinced.

“I feel guilty,” he said.

Silence reverberated around them. Sandy cocked her head slightly and spoke softly. “Well, darling, do you think there is anything I can do to distract you from some of those pesky guilty feelings?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Yes, you do.” She smiled. She waited until he was looking at her and then she let the smile become something more, something daring, something enticing.

“You’re doing that thing again,” he said.

“What thing?”

“You’re giving me your *femme fatale* persona.”

“Nope,” she said. “I need something slinky to go full *femme fatale* on you.”

“Hmmm,” he said with a smile.

“Okay,” she said, standing up and slowly unfastening her robe. “Here’s what I need you to do: pull the drapes, turn down the bed, sequester the animals in the other suite, light some candles, and put on some music.”

“I see where this is going,” he said.

“Also,” she said, turning to walk toward the closet, “you have to give me your vote. I have high heels, nylons, garter belt, peek-a-boo bra, and a new micro-mini skirt. You can pick any three for me to wear.”

He couldn't suppress a grin that alternated between his gentle lover persona and his take-charge alter ego. “You are amazing,” he said as Leslie. “What if I want all five?” he asked as Vaurien.

“That's going to cost you a couple of extra kisses,” she told him.

“You've got a deal,” he said.

“Goodie,” she told him.

“Are you going to distract me like this every night?” Leslie asked.

“That's my current plan,” she replied.

Earth in Space

Or Oncoming Bullet



Author Blurb

Previously, John Scott G was an oafish, repugnant, annoying, pouty, sarcastic, misanthropic, and ne'er-do-well crank who was overpaid for writing commercials.

Now, John Scott G is an oafish, repugnant, annoying, pouty, sarcastic, misanthropic, and ne'er-do-well crank who is underpaid for writing stories.



johnscottg.com