To See With the Eyes of God

John Scott G

A Novel of Mystic Actuality
To See With the Eyes of God
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gnud edition 2020_04_11

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Part One

Caressed by the Wings of the Serpent

“Of all the magic in the universe, none is more powerful than the magic of the mind.”
— J. W. Sydney
— Chapter 1 —

The sinners were exultant, their hearts were void of love; choir voices were rejoicing, audience ears were blocked; minds began to wander, torsos remained immobile; knowledge sought acceptance, ignorance reigned supreme; the air held the promise of life, the atmosphere was in peril; radiance was God’s gift, apathy was embraced; true pathways were displayed to all, greed was the day’s moral compass; time stretched out to touch infinity, circumstance conspired to snuff out lives; expectations were suggested, disappointments were triumphant; the world was set before us, the pit was all one could see; this was a summer of possibility, this was an autumn of loss and rejection; this was the acme, this was the nadir; this was the ascension, this was the downfall—in short, our time was so like narratives of dystopian woe that the souls of the populace remained barred from the possibility of redemption.
— Chapter 2 —

His voice raw and ragged, the Pastor had worked himself into a lather. Shouting, pleading, bellowing, rebuking, shrieking, and admonishing, the man in the pulpit was soaked in sweat. He was also loud, garish, lurid, flamboyant, and infuriating.

“God is not entirely schizophrenic!” he yelled, blue veins throbbing on his forehead. “Earth’s condition is under control, it’s the infidels who are in trouble! Every one of the unworthy unfaithful liberals will find themselves in the endless limbo of a colossal Dream Status Flux! The situation with liberalism has become dire, dire! All the sinners will perish!”

Some in the audience were eating up the tripe and twaddle; others were not buying the Singspiel being spewed by the Pastor, nor were they comfortable with the religiosity at the core of it.
“Evil looms large for the eternity of those who profess their love for the horned one, the taker of souls, the satan-devil!” the Pastor shouted from the pulpit.

“This guy lays it on a bit thick,” said one cynical listener.

“Shhhhh!” came from a parishioner.

“Shhhhh yourself,” the man replied.

They were both using a whispershout tone of voice, trying to be unobtrusive and insistent at the same time.

“Be quiet! The Pastor is speaking!”

“Jesus,” the man muttered to himself.

“What a crock o’ crap.”

“SHHHH!”

“Fuck this.”

“What?! How dare you?!” a parishioner hissed.

“You’re crazy for listening to this nonsense,” the skeptic hissed back. The man stood up in the nave and began doing the sideways shuffle-walk out of the pews.

“Yes, please leave now!” hissed another of the parishioners.

The skeptic replied in a normal tone of voice, which meant the sound reached
everyone in the building: “Hey, sheeple doofus: No more fake faith. No more lies. No more rightwing nutjob douchebaggery from the pulpit.”

This modest demonstration of common sense encouraged another realist to stand. And then another, and another, until there were groups of thinkers getting to their feet, all doing the sideways shuffle-walk out of the pews, and all marching down the aisles into the narthex, then through the sets of double doors and into the relative freedom of the outside world.

They paused a moment to enjoy the cool breeze, without noticing or caring about the wind, whose zephyrs did as they pleased, delicately playing with yellowed leaves on the trees, tugging at them, detaching them, and sending them swirling across the impassive slabs of concrete surrounding the church.

The escapees introduced themselves to each other. They had exited the temple for a number of different reasons: Many were realists. Some were doubters. A few were cynics. Others had accepted and welcomed
God into their lives but loathed what religiosity had done to their faith and to faith itself.

After a brief round of conversational interplay, which added up to no particular significance, they broke into groups and departed in search of different fields of play...

One elderly couple went to a tavern to enjoy a libation.

Two middle-aged couples went to a Japanese restaurant to partake of sushi and sake.

Seven teenagers went to a park to experiment with ‘shrooms.
— Chapter 3 —

As the couple from the religiosity travesty entered the saloon called The Office, shards of light reflected off the glass bottles on the dusty shelves behind two young bartenders working their shifts. “Call home and say you’re at The Office!” proclaimed the hand-painted poster mounted on one yellowed wall that led the way into the public house.

The couple looked around and selected a booth just to the left of the huge oak bar. “That woodwork is magnificent,” the woman noted. Hand-carved and ornate, the grandiose structure was the centerpiece and prized possession of The Office.

“This bar is a work of art!” the owner would proclaim to anyone who would listen. “The history of America can be found inside the wood of this bar,” he would boast, pounding one palm down on it for added emphasis. “This is an all-American hunk of
wood. Allow me to explain,” the owner would say, not really asking permission.

“First, a towering oak tree was chopped down by Paul Bunyan himself. That’s right! Then, the wood was cut, stripped, and cured by shamanic Indian tribesmen from the Great Northwest. Next, the wood was meticulously carved by none other than Jack the Ripper. Finally, there’s the paint job. Magnificent! Gleaming! Look down and you can see yourself reflected in the finish. And just who did the painting? Was it Pablo Picasso? Was it Jackson Pollack? Almost... No, it was Andy Warhol! This was back before he did the soup cans and the Marilyns and the Jackie O’s. And before he died.”

Over the years, regulars in The Office would enjoy watching new patrons react upon receiving this information.

“Oh yeah?”
“You’re kidding.”
“No way!”
“Is that right?”
“I didn’t know that!”
“Sure, if you say so.”
“Who’d a-thunk it?”
Once in a while someone might point out that Paul Bunyan was mythical or that Jack the Ripper was British. And mythical.

“Hey,” the bar owner would state loudly, “do I come into your office and make contrarian and smartmouth comments about your business?”

“Well, no, I just meant that the facts indicate that—”

“Oh, I think we all know what you meant,” the owner would respond.

“No, no, no,” the nettled patron would protest, “it’s just that the—”

Before the befuddled customer could get any further, the barkeep would loudly announce to the crowd, “Take note, thirsty ones: we stop serving if there are any troublemakers in here.”

With a malevolent glare that morphed into a wicked grin, the owner quashed all argument. He never once felt regret at shutting down discussion of his bar’s proud counterfeit history. He knew his cause was righteous: he was performing a public service by ensuring that serious drinking could continue unabated.
Positioned against the walls on opposite ends of the bar were two high-definition television screens displaying sporting events with the sound turned off. Music from a digital jukebox was loud enough for dancing but not so pervasive as to deter conversation.

The walls had originally been Arctic White but had faded to café au lait. The ceilings were a deep black with small white dots in an irregular pattern. It was an attempt to suggest a night sky; it was a failed attempt.

Half of a mirrored ball hung from the ceiling of the dank hallway leading to the two highly lacquered doors bearing brightly colored placards reading “Jacks” and “Jills.”

Each time one of the restroom doors opened, the overhead light fixtures in each chamber emitted beams that would strike the segmented surface of the mirrored demi-sphere, causing rays of light to hop, skip, and jump amidst the gloom of the saloon. “There’s your damn night sky,” the owner would say sarcastically. If gently pressed, he would tell you the whole story of the paint job, how long it took, what it cost, and some of the personal habits of the painting crew.
One bar patron used a debit card to pay the required fee to enter a preferred genre of music into the sound system.

Which is why the current half-hour of tunes came under the category of “One Hit Wonders.”

Which is why the interior of the cocktail lounge was now gently pulsating to the pop-schmaltz-psychedelia of *Green Tambourine* by The Lemon Pipers.

“Hey,” the man said to his wife, “they’re playing our song.”

She punched him on the arm.
Every square inch of the wall space inside Restaurant Yojimbo (“Sushi to guard the health of your body”) was adorned with huge graphics in a style reminiscent of the late Patrick Nagel. All of the paintings were in forced perspective—occupying three-quarters of the image was a carefully-rendered depiction of gorgeous freshly cut fish being offered to the viewer; hovering in the background of the graphic was the face of a samurai sushi chef with his knife flashing reflected light.

The two couples who had exited the religious service now entered the restaurant and were promptly seated.

“Sake for all, am I right?” one of the men asked his three companions.

“I could go for some hot sake,” one of the women replied.

“Oh no,” the man protested. “Chilled sake is the best. Only mediocre sake is heated.”
“Really?”
“Absolutely.”
“Well, I guess we can try some cold sake...” the woman said, reserving judgment. However, she was convinced after just one sip of the Dassai 23, a super-premium sake imported from the Yamaguchi Prefecture in the Chugoku region of Japan.

The two couples were pleased with the smooth rice wine and a succession of delicious servings of sushi and sashimi. Conversation flowed easily among the foursome.

“What do you think of the pictures?” one woman asked the group, nodding towards the wall-mounted graphics.

“Some of those knives look pretty evil, but the fish looks great.”
“Really like that retro look.”
“Are they retro?” the other woman asked. “I thought this was the latest thing.”

“It’s an eighties style that keeps on making a comeback. Patrick Nagel did illustrations for Playboy and an album cover for Duran Duran. Which one was it? Rio, I think. Anyway, the point is that Nagel did
commercial art and regular art. And these pictures are delicious Nagels.”

“Tasty Nagels.”

“Fishy Nagels.”

They might have continued the game except one of the men saw something disturbing.

“My God!”

“What?”

“Oh, no, I’m sorry. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Maybe it’s the wine, but...”

“But what?”

“I thought I saw one of the knives moving.”

They all swiveled their heads to examine the graphics, paying particular attention to the gleaming carving tools in the background of each image.

The artworks remained stolid, serene, and stationary.

After staring at the depictions of the knives for several seconds, the couples turned back to glance at each other. They shrugged.

“Well,” one woman noted, “nothing’s moving now.”
“I’m sorry, I’m really sorry,” the man said. “I could have sworn...” He let the thought trail away.

On the walls, inside the artworks, there was the briefest of movement. The knives had stirred before—the man was not mistaken. But while the blades were now immobile, the eyes of each of the painted samurai sushi chefs glittered in excitement and anticipation, and they glanced down at an intended victim, then another, and another, and another...
A symphony of green greeted the seven teenagers as they sauntered into John Muir Preservation Park. By far the largest amount of square footage in JMPP was the expanse of lawn, its verdant turf stretching out over the gently sloping acreage. Lining the park were groves of trees, all of them displaying leaves and needles of Kelly green, olive green, leek green, money green, emerald green, and Nile green. This is not to overlook the patches of shamrock, avocado, patina, and aquamarine. Even the winding footpaths were a pea green.

“This place looks awesome!” Ralph exclaimed.

“Hmn,” Cindy said.
“You don’t like it?”
“No, I do,” Cindy replied, “but this is kind of weird, don’t you think?”
“What do you mean?” Riff asked her.
“Everywhere else in the city, all the leaves are turning yellow, orange, and brown.
But right here, everything is green. Why is that?”

“They water a lot,” Angelo said.
“Good brand of fertilizer,” Ralph said.
“Your tax dollars at work,” Buddy said.
“Fuck you,” Cindy told them in an offhand way. “Come on,” she urged, “let’s move out of this open space and get this party started.”

“Nobody’s going to bother us here,” Jeff stated.

“No,” Samantha countered, “a soccer game is going to begin here in a little while.”

They all glanced around and saw that the soccer crowd was beginning to gather sixty yards away. Already, a man dressed as a game official was heading over to them.

“We’re going to want to be closer to those trees,” Samantha told them.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Riff said. “Let’s get out of their way.”

The teens waved at the soccer official and moved across the lawn toward the trees at the Southeast corner of the park.

Exiting the grounds from the Northwest corner, about two miles away, were four
crews who had just finished painting the foliage and grounds in thirty-seven different shades of green for tomorrow’s shooting of a cable channel remake of Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1960’s cult classic, *Blow-Up*, starring Bob Harris as the photographer originally played by David Hemmings, and Vicki Lester in both of the roles originally played by Vanessa Redgrave and Sarah Miles.

The group of teens made their way to the nearest grove of freshly painted trees. “Okay everybody,” Riff said to them, “huddle up. We are communing here in order to imbibe the spirits of the Earth.”

“Oh goodie, it’s ‘shrooms time.”

“Is there a special incantation that goes with such a momentous occasion?”

“*Dominus vobiscum.*”

“Cool.”

“To those about to fly, we salute you.”

“Punny.”

“There’s a fungus among us.”

“An oldie but goodie.”

“*Flores para los muertos.*”

“Okay, that one’s a little ominous.”
“Bravery is a quality of the soul.”
“Yeah, okay,” Riff said. “I think we’ve delayed long enough.”
“Right,” Cindy said. Her next words were half-portentous and half-sarcastic: “Let the ceremony begin.”

A bulging sachet of mushrooms was reverently removed from Cindy’s backpack. With smoky glances into each other’s eyes, she and Riff handled the package with care. The pink-and-teal Hello Kitty wrapping paper was slowly pulled back. Seven portions had been pre-cut and individually enfolded in purple tissue paper. With a nod and a smile, Riff handed a serving to each of them. There was a moment of hesitation and then the seven consumed the prized contraband slowly, as befits a ritualistic endeavor.

Whispering intensely, Cindy informed her friends, “Time is a relative concept. Just let these moments flow while the potion works inside you.”

There were momentous seconds of silence, until:

“How is—” Ralph began.
“Ouch,” Riff interjected.
“Speak softly, please,” Cindy instructed him.

“Oh, right, right,” he semi-whispered. “I just was wondering something.”


“How the high from ‘shrooms differs from LSD,” Ralph inquired.

“Excellent point,” Riff replied softly.

The sounds of the city echoed in the distance. A gentle breeze produced an undulating whooshing in the nearest row of trees. A bird chirped overhead. Shouts from the spectators at the soccer match resounded across the span of well-trimmed lawn.

“Uh,” Ralph said quietly but earnestly, “so, is there an answer to my question?”

“Oh, sorry,” Cindy whispered. “Thought that was rhetorical. Okay, well, lysergic acid diethylamide is acid, or LSD. Magic mushrooms are *Psilolybe cubensis*.”

“Right,” Riff continued, at half-normal volume, “but both substances—and this is the main thing—both contain psilocybin. It’s the active ingredient.”

“And that, ladies and gentlemen,” Cindy whispered to the group, “that’s what is going
to take your mind to another level of experience.”

“Yeah?” Ralph asked.

“Oh yeah,” Riff said. “It does a little tap-dance on your central nervous system.”

“I’m not a fan of musicals.”

“Okay, it screens the ending of 2001: A Space Odyssey on your central nervous system.”

“Cool!”

“You will see reality altered.”

“Nice!”

“You will see new colors and different textures.”

“Excellent!”

“Food will taste different. Hell, you will taste different.”

“Well, I have Altoids...”

“Time speeds up and slows down.”

“I have a watch...”

“It’s not just the physical sensations,” Cindy said.

“No?”

“No. There’s something else.”

“Like what?”
Cindy’s voice got very low and intense as she explained, “There can be a deep inner peace as you become conjoined with the universe.”

There was a pause as they all considered their part in the cosmos.

“Oh psilocybin, we salute you!” Ralph said.

“That’s the spirit,” Cindy told him.

And they surrendered to the onrushing array of colors, tastes, shapes, emotions, and ghosts from each of their pasts.
Part Two

Waifs at Play
Among the Wolves

“It is through art that we can truly realize our anger.”

— Oskar Wyllt
Seven people were standing in a circle among a grove of dripping-wet spray-painted trees. They were all chanting: “‘Shrooms of doom! ‘Shrooms of gloom! ‘Shrooms of boom!” It was not something any of the soccer moms and dutiful dads wanted to encounter, especially when the chanters ended each invocation by making nonsense noises like “bwissshhhh” and “krrrusssshhh” in an attempt to simulate the sounds of explosions.

Fortunately for all concerned, the gang of seven kept moving further away from the soccer game; they did not want to interact with any of the fine upstanding middleclass folks who were busy second-guessing and rage-cheering the young fútbol players who were eagerly sweating it out on the flat part of the Muir Park lawn.

All the while, the psychotropic drugs were working their spiritual enchantment on the neural highways within the all-too-
receptive noggins of the seven young men and women...

Riff and Cindy were holding hands and admiring the way the sunlight dappledanced on the unpainted side of the trees.

Ralph, looking calm and dignified, quietly recited names of the portions of his brain that he thought might be reacting to the effects of the drug. “Cerebrum, cerebral cortex, white matter, neocortex, allocortex, frontal lobe, temporal lobe, parietal lobe, occipital lobe, brainstem, pons, medulla oblongata, cerebellum...”

Jeff and Samantha were performing a dance routine they had showcased in several talent contests across the city. They twirled and cavorted as Jeff’s phone played *Seven Come Eleven* by the Benny Goodman Sextet. Towards the end of the piece, they beat-boxed the rhythm, hummed the supporting chords, and took turns harmonizing on the lines from the clarinetist and the solos by guitarist Charlie Christian.

Angelo was using the camera in his phone to capture an image of every tree in his vicinity. He told anyone who he imagined
was listening to him, “They think they’re so clever, but I can tell that they are planning some new outrage.”

Jeff was inside his own psyche. He was quietly considering all of the twenty-first century’s sources of anxiety, and marveling how none of them made him anxious any longer. “All can be bliss, all can be bliss,” he whispered.

Buddy was lying on a picnic table, happily regarding the shapes he could see in the clouds. “A dog... a cat... Of course it’s a white cat,” he said. “A whale... Of course it’s a white whale,” he mused. “A tugboat... a yo-yo...” he continued. “Ooh, Dick Gregory doing stand-up...” he enthused. “A grizzly bear...” he muttered. “Oooh, Halle Berry in Die Another Day... Oh yeah: Jimi with his guitar in flames... an elephant... an ocean liner... a bunny...”

Riff and Cindy hugged and exchanged a brief kiss. Pulling back, they stared into one another’s eyes. “How are you doing?” he asked her.

“I am a living dichotomy,” she said with a smile.
“Aren’t we all?” he said.
“Often,” she agreed.
“Details?” he inquired.

“Me? I am bewitched and bewildered, but somehow unbothered.” They held each other’s glance for a moment. They moved together and this time their kiss was more serious.

A bolt of lightning creased the sky. The five who still had their eyes open flinched. Buddy, who was regarding the heavens, said, “Wow,” but made it several syllables long.

The lengthy peal of thunder that followed caught everyone’s attention.

“Wow!” Buddy said again, louder.

They all meandered their way to the picnic table on which the grinning Buddy was pointing at the cloud formations. “A snake...” he said. “A lighthouse... a Black Power salute... a horse... Mount Rushmore... the grille from a nineteen fifty-seven Lincoln Premiere!”
Everyone craned their heads back to enjoy the slow-motion display of altostratus cloud formations, none of which looked like what Buddy was seeing. The sky didn’t appear to be hosting anything other than altostratus cloud formations, but everyone agreed they were very attractive all the same.

Eventually, Angelo tired of this activity and said, “Hey, I don’t know about you guys, but my neck hurts.”

“Sure,” Ralph said, “that’s because you’re a pain in the neck.”

“Up yours,” Angelo said without malice.

“Angelo’s right,” Jeff told them. “It’s a struggle, looking up like this.”

“Got an idea,” Ralph said. “Let’s pretend we see shapes in the bushes. That’s closer to our eye-level.”

“How about if we go for a walk?” Samantha asked. She pointed to a break in the trees.

The other six looked at the trees, then at the shrubs. Even Ralph had to admit that the walk seemed like the better idea.

“Okay,” Riff said, “everybody grab Buddy’s arms and legs to get him upright.”
“What if he can’t stand?”
“What if he can’t stand who?”
“I can’t stand it when you guys do that.”
“Hey, people?” Buddy noted. “I’m standing.”
“Bravo, strong man. We did all the work. You’re just balancing.”
“Yeah, Buddy, you want congratulations on being a biped?”
“No,” Buddy said without any ill will. “I just mean that we can move out now.”
“Oh. Right. Sorry.”
The seven ‘shroomheads moved slowly through the trees as sunlight feverishly competed with shadows everywhere they looked. The wind tried to raise itself above a murmur but succeeded only in masking the far-away sounds of traffic and the near-away sounds of soccer.

The line of trees ended and the group emerged onto open ground next to a roadway. They stared at the empty pavement curving away from them in both directions.
“Not a lot of traffic,” Ralph said.
“It’s the service road leading to the museum,” Riff explained.
“Not a lot of service,” Ralph said.
“This afternoon they’re going to be unloading a bunch of art,” Riff told him.
“Bunch of art?”
“Clutch of art.”
“Art clusters.”
“Art by the crate.”
“A veritable shipload of art.”
“Whatever,” Riff said, smiling. “The point is: workers will work on unpacking art works.”
“And you know this, how?” Samantha asked him.
“My dear mother is on the exhibition committee, remember?”
“Oh, right. What’s the new exhibit?”
“Medieval tapestries, I think.”
“Don’t need to see it,” Ralph informed them. “My grandmother’s church makes quilts.”
“Yeah, the tapestries don’t thrill me, either,” Riff admitted. “It’s the current installation that’s a gas.”
“Yeah?”
“Absolutely,” Riff said.
“What is it?”
“It’s called ‘Real + Surreal + Dada.’ That’s got to be a total blast.”
“That sounds good to you?”
“Undeniably.”
“What makes you say that?”
“The show was banned in several countries.”
“Oh. Cool!”
“C’mom,” Cindy said. “Let’s check it out.”
“I already took Art Appreciation,” Buddy said.
“Then you’ll appreciate this,” Cindy replied.
“I love museums!” Samantha told them.
“What do you like about them?” Ralph inquired.
“I love the way they echo.”
“So let’s go-go-go-go...” Jeff said.
“Wait—we’re going to sneak onto the grounds?”
“Yeah!”
“I don’t know...”
“Group dare!” Cindy said.
Everyone exchanged glances. It had been some time since their last group dare, an
incident that prompted neighbors to notify both the police and the fire departments. But since none of the seven teens ended up incarcerated, the failure of that event was not enough to make them avoid this new challenge. Slowly, they nodded. With that settled, they headed up the road.

“Onward to culture,” Ralph intoned.

“The show has petri dishes?”

“With Dadaists, probably.”

As they strolled along the asphalt, the museum came into view. It was the only structure in the park. Buildings in the downtown area were a mile away.

The design approach taken by the building’s architectural firm was, according to many accounts, “aggressive.” The upper floors were seen through a steel latticework that resembled an erector set. Many visitors described this design as “intriguing.” An equal number called it “clunky.”

The building was suspended thirty feet aloft by forty-nine columns arranged in seven rows of seven—one row each of Egyptian, Greek Doric, Greek Ionic, Greek Corinthian, Roman Tuscan, Roman Doric, and Roman
Composite columns. With the museum proper hovering overhead, visitors could wander through an outdoor sculpture garden on what would have been the museum’s ground level.

“Those columns in the sculpture garden always remind me of Chris Burden’s Urban Light,” Cindy said.

“Oh yeah,” Ralph said. “I knew they reminded me of something.”

Cindy turned to Ralph. “Are you giving me attitude?”

Ralph regarded Cindy impassively. “Meh,” he replied, “maybe a little.” They both made the “brushing off the shoulder” move with their hands.

“The only thing it reminds me of is a big building,” Jeff noted. Everyone turned to stare at him. “Hey, I’m just saying.”

As they walked around the edifice, they heard the sound of engines. The sound grew louder until they found themselves confronted by three eighteen-wheelers rumbling up the service road. With roaring from their diesel motors and a cacophony of warning beeps, the huge trucks backed up to the mammoth elevator/loading dock that emerged from the
building above. Men wearing jumpsuits, boots, and work gloves guided huge wooden crates from the gaping maws of the trucks onto the elevator. Some crates were taken up into the building while others were sent down into the museum’s underground storage facility.

“Seems like awfully big crates for tapestries,” Ralph said. “Don’t they just roll them up and put ‘em in tubes?”

“Some of them are too delicate to be shipped like that,” Riff explained. “And some are packed with humidifiers and air purifiers inside the crates.”

“Fuddy-duddies put a high value on old draperies,” Buddy said.

“You’re a philistine,” Angelo stated.

“You’re a curtain fetishist,” Buddy retorted.

“I am a fetishist,” Angelo replied with a smile, “but not about curtains.” They both made the “brushing off the shoulder” move with their hands.

Several security guards watched the workmen impassively. Some guards leaned against the building while others made a
pretense of patrolling the area around the vast hangar-sized opening. A curator flitted about, continually checking and re-checking the identifying labels on the crates and comparing descriptions with voluminous data covering a sheaf of paperwork that was barely clinging to a clipboard.

“Let’s go inside the museum,” Cindy said.

“It’s closed today because they just painted the offices.”

“Making it the perfect time to visit.”

“And why is that?” Jeff asked.

“So we can see the surrealism without families dragging their brats through everything.”

Surveying the scene, Ralph asked, “How are we going to get past security?”

“Only one of us needs to get past them,” Riff said. “The girls will create a distraction, and I’ll slip inside while you guys walk around to the front of the museum. Don’t go up the stairs or the wheelchair ramp. Go around behind the stairs. There’s a door at the bottom in the back. It’s the staff exit. I’ll let you guys in.”
“Won’t that set off an alarm?” Jeff asked.

“Good instinct, but no,” Riff replied. “The alarm would go off if you tried to open the door from the outside, but there’s no alarm for someone exiting the building. Once we’re in, we’ll text the girls, and they’ll walk around to meet us.”

“Time out,” Samantha told him.

“What?”

“Just how are we going to be creating a distraction?” Cindy inquired.

“Well, darling,” Riff replied, “your very presence will spark interest in the male heart.”

“I think you’re considering the wrong part of the male anatomy,” Cindy said.

“Hey, I’m not responsible for the fact that you two are hot.”

“Thanks,” Samantha told him, “but fuck you.”

“A man can hope,” Riff said.

Cindy whapped him on the arm but she was smiling.

“C’mon,” Cindy said to her friend, “let’s go distract them.”
“Wait a minute!” Samantha protested.
“Problem?” Cindy inquired.
“The problem is we need a plan.”
“I’ve got a plan,” Cindy stated.
“You do?” Ralph asked.
“Sure,” Cindy told them. “It’ll be easy.”
“Easy?” Samantha said.
“Look,” Cindy explained, “we’ll say our car broke down and we’re not getting a signal on our phones. They’ll gather around us so they can pretend to be concerned about the phones while they check us out.”
“What if some of the guards are gay?”
“Then they’ll ask us about skin cream. This will work. Trust me.”
“Okay,” Samantha muttered. “But you have to be the lead slut.”
“Vamp.”
“What?”
“Not slut,” Cindy stated. “Vamp. I’m the lead vamp.”
“That makes Samantha the vampette,” Jeff said.
Samantha glared at him.
“I take it back,” Jeff said. “You’re both full-fledged vamps.”
Samantha sighed, but she went along with the half-baked plan to draw attention away from Riff as he circled around the moving vans to slip into the elevator behind two large crates. The four others acted as nonchalant as possible as they headed to the front of the building.

The plan worked to perfection. Within fifteen minutes, all seven of them were inside the front lobby of the museum, giggling like grade-schoolers staying up past bedtime.
Trespassing was not one of their regular offenses. When they broke the rules, it was usually on a smaller scale... Cutting a few classes? Once in a while. Recreational drugs? To be sure. Rolling through a stop sign? Frequently. Underage consumption of alcohol? On occasion. Casual sex? Absolutely. However, the unlawful invasion of a public building was something new to them.

“This feels weird,” Buddy said.
“What does?” Jeff asked.
“This. What we’re doing here.”
“Well, technically, we’re not really doing anything right at the moment.”
“Oh no?” Buddy said. “I believe this is called breaking-and-entering.”
“We didn’t break anything.”
“Don’t be literal. This is illegal.”
“It’s only a problem if we get caught.”
“I didn’t know you were a Republican.”
“Fuck you. You know what I mean.”
“No, I don’t know what you mean. We’re breaking the law right now,” Buddy insisted. “And how long until we’re found out? The guards are going to go back to their posts and they’ll see us on the security cameras. We’re being watched. Take a look.” Buddy pointed to the corners of the lobby ceiling where Lorex 2K high definition video surveillance devices peered down at them with inanimate resolve.

“Whoa,” Jeff said. “They’re aimed right at us.”

“Come on, you two,” Riff told them. “Relax.”

“Relax, he says.”

“It’s okay,” Riff insisted. “As far as the guards are concerned, the security system is dormant at the moment.”

Buddy pointed at the cameras again and said, “The red lights are on.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Riff said. “They won’t see us. I reprogrammed the system to play old files on their monitors. When they look at their screens, all they’ll see is last night’s empty museum.”

“How?” Jeff asked.
“It’s what I do,” Riff said with a flourish and a self-satisfied smile.

“Okay, wait a minute,” Buddy jumped in. “I want to hear how you did it.”

“You guys are like puppies nipping at a sock puppet,” Riff said. He stared at them. They stared back. “Fine, I’ll show you. Step right this way.”

“Nope, you blew the line,” Ralph told him. “It’s not ‘step right this way,’ it’s ‘walk this way.’ And then you limp. That’s the Mel Brooks joke.”

“You’re a Mel Brooks joke,” Riff said.

Ralph cocked his head to consider the jibe. “I’ll take it.”

“Focus, people,” Riff said. “Look at this.” He indicated a computer terminal behind the information counter. “They have these all over the museum. I used the terminal in the storage bay to get into the system.”

“And once again,” Buddy stated evenly, “some of us are asking: How?”

“Hey,” Cindy said, “he’s got a Black Belt in coding.”

“Thank you, darling,” Riff told her. He turned to the others and said, “I’m the guy
they hired to program the security cameras in the first place. Double major: computer science and TV Production, remember?”

“Yeah, and...?”

“And so I programmed a back door so I can get into their system whenever I want.”

“Cool,” Angelo said. “Can you do that at the bank? Because I’ve got some whopping big college expenses coming up...”

“Again, focus.”

“So wait,” Jeff broke in. “You’re saying that we’ve got this whole place to ourselves?”

“For most of the time.”

“What does that mean?”

“Security walks through the galleries every two hours—”

“Oh, man...!” Jeff said.

“That’s no good!” Ralph added at the same time.

“—but they only check out one floor at a time. All we need to do is move into the stairwell when they walk through. Believe me, they always use the elevators.”
As the seven young men and women moved from the lobby to the first of numerous rooms devoted to the dada/surrealism exhibition, they passed by the museum bookstore, which featured an array of volumes on the exhibit theme, including *Surrealism at Play*, by Susan Laxton; *Generation Dada*, by Michael White; *Surrealism*, edited by Mary Ann Caws; and the most entertaining of them all, *Destruction Was My Beatrice: Dada and the Unmaking of the Twentieth Century*, by Jed Rasula.

“Looks like a ton of words were written about these art movements,” Ralph noted.

“You can learn from boooooks,” Jeff said, badly imitating Ringo from *A Hard Day’s Night*.

“If you know how to read,” Ralph said.

“Fook you,” Jeff responded, still doing a bad Liverpool accent.

“Eat shite,” Ralph said, using a good Liverpoolian inflection.
Shuffling through the pristine staging of the sometimes-controversial art, they were assaulted by the calculated outrage of the dada works.

Cindy, Riff, and Buddy relished the sensations. The others, not so much. Cindy and Riff attempted to communicate their enjoyment of the art movement.

“Dada may seem frivolous now,” Cindy told her friends, “but it was a protest against the insanity of The Great War, or what we now call World War I.”

“And it was a protest against the stupidity of political ideologies,” Riff added. “The dada artists were against everything we’re all probably against.”

“Surrealism emerged from dada as the artistic representation of dreams,” Cindy said.

“This isn’t art in the traditional sense,” Ralph replied.

“What is it, then?” Samantha asked him.

“These are political statements,” Ralph replied. “This is social commentary.”

“Isn’t that what we just said?” Cindy asked him with a trace of sarcasm.
“Sure,” Ralph said, “but these are therapy sessions presented to the public in order to draw more attention to the benefits of putting artists under psychoanalysis.”

“Okay,” Cindy responded, “you just described all vibrant art.”

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree,” Ralph said a bit too primly. Everyone mocked him by repeating the phrase and imitating his stuffiness.

“Fuck you guys,” he said, but he couldn’t completely suppress his laughter.

“Here,” Riff said, handing him a copy of the 304-page monograph bearing the same title as the exhibition itself, Real + Surreal + Dada. “Read what the art critics have to say about all this.”

Ralph took the volume with interest. “You bet,” he said. “Well, okay, first of all, this is going to be pretentious.”

“How so?”

“Listen to the whole title: Real + Surreal + Dada: Contemporary Justification for Artistic Anarchy, Kinetic Somnambulism, Existential Harmony, and the Unwavering
“The title is bigger than the exhibit,” Jeff noted.

“Only Z is missing,” Buddy said.

“What?”

“That title uses twenty-five letters of the alphabet. Everything except Z.”

“Let me see that,” Samantha said. She silently went through the alphabet, finding the letters in the title. “He’s right.”

“How does your brain do that?” Angelo asked Buddy.

“Dunno. It just do.”

“That’s weird.”

“I know,” Buddy agreed.

“You mind if I ask you something else?”

“Sure,” Buddy said.

“No, it’s nothing, really...”

“Uh-oh,” Buddy said.

“It’s about your name,” Angelo said.

“My name?”

“Yeah. I mean, ‘Buddy’ doesn’t sound like a black name.”

“Tell that to Buddy Guy, Buddy Bolden, and Buddy Young,” Buddy said.
“Um...who?” Angelo said.
“Do a search on Buddy Guy.”
“Okay, I will. Thanks.”

They alternately admired and mocked the dada and surreal artworks, including:

*Baster (Slightly Enlarged for Dadaistic Study)*, was a gigantic needle and syringe. “And I thought I hated getting shots,” Angelo noted.

*La baise* was a huge industrial nut screwed partway onto a threaded bolt. “Oh look,” said Jeff. “A dada sex pun.”

*Poster Claiming All Dada is Anti-Dada* contained a hand-painted announcement:

```plaintext
The Central Council of Dada in Support of Worldwide Revolutionary Tactics is accepting new members! Those who do not enlist in the Party may consider themselves drafted into the Party!
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“According to this, we’re all in the revolutionary movement,” Buddy said. “I want to be a Major.”

“You’re a major pain,” Riff said.

“You dare to mock a member of the...” Buddy leaned toward the poster and then read
To See With the Eyes of God

by John Scott G

aloud, “Central Council of Dada in Support of Worldwide Revolutionary Tactics?!” He pointed an accusatory finger at Riff and said, “You have committed artistic blasphemy. You could be court-martialed.”

“By you and what army?”

“Hey, guys?” Jeff’s voice came from the next room. He poked his head back through the doorway connecting the two gallery spaces. “Come look at this,” Jeff told them.

The group moved around the corner into the next exhibition space.

“Whoa.”

“Wow.”

“What the hell?”

“Yipes.”

All seven of them stood awestruck by the conceptual piece occupying most of the center of the room.

Three full-size Chris-Craft powerboats were frozen in the throes of a triple head-on collision. Bloody manikins aboard each boat depicted people in pain, shock, and devastation. Flames danced on the wooden surface of one boat and smoke poured out of the engines. Hanging down from the ceiling
was a large tin funnel that sucked up the smoke. Stenciled on the funnel was the phrase, “Art is Rat Spelled Backwards and Wrong.”

Beneath the wreckage was a pond in which an animatronic lawyer swam in circles, briefcase in hand.

Ralph consulted the monograph. “Let me look up the story on this... here we go...”

“What’s it called?”

“Zeitgeist.”

“Gesundheit.”

Ralph ignored the bad joke and read aloud: “Zeitgeist. By Han Sarpe. Boats, manikins, blood, water (chlorinated for your viewing enjoyment), and animatronics.”

“It has impressive dimensionality.”

“Yeah, it’s big.”

“And it has good attention to detail,” Ralph noted. “Listen to what it says about the shyster in the water: ‘Looking closely at the circling attorney, one can see it’s licking its chops’.”

“Let me see that sentence for a sec’,” Buddy said. Ralph held out the book so Buddy could read the passage. “Very good,”
Buddy said. “They used it’s, contraction, and its, possessive, correctly.”

“Am they do good English?” Jeff inquired.

“Gooder than much,” Buddy replied.

“So, you’re saying that the manikin in the three-piece suit sticks out its tongue?”

“I’m not saying it; the museum monograph is saying it.”

Slowly, all seven of them peered into the pool. They watched carefully and they all saw an animatronic tongue lick the animatronic lips.

“What a waste of electricity.”

“Is that a bunch of remora fish attached to the attorney?”

“Jeeze, yes!” Cindy said with delight.

“You’re right about the attention to detail!”

“So is this also dada?” Angelo asked.

“No, this is surrealism,” Riff replied.

“I think this is trash,” said Ralph.

“I think it’s scary-movie scary,” said Samantha.

“I think it’s the modern age,” said Jeff.

“I think it’s controlled insanity,” said Buddy.
“I love it,” Cindy said.
“You do? Why?”
“Because it causes all those different reactions.”
“Oh.”
“Yeah, okay, I guess I can see that.”
They continued viewing the exhibit, four of them rolling their eyes, three of them enjoying it immensely.
“Hey,” Angelo said, holding up his phone. “You gotta listen to this!”
They danced to the next gallery accompanied by the Buddy Guy guitar solo on *Stone Crazy*.
“Who’s that?” Jeff asked.
“Some Guy named Buddy,” Angelo said with a grin. He and Buddy fist-bumped.
The music over, they gathered around one of the larger paintings. Ralph read from the monograph. “This is called *The Tenacity of Fear* by Dory Salvadal. Oil on canvas. On loan from MOMA PS1.”
“It looks so real.”
“Which part, the flaming horse, the plants with the vagina flowers, or the melting coins?”
“Well, all of it. The horse looks like it’s coming at you; the vaginas look, um, ready; the coins seem three-dimensional; and that frame around it is not a frame, it’s part of the painting.”

“Ohhhh, you’re right. It’s trickery and deceit!”

“It’s trompe l’oeil.”

“What?”

“Fool the eye.”

“It reminds me of the tunnels that the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote would paint on the side of mountains in those Looney Tunes cartoons.”

There was a pause and then Ralph began choking back laughter.

“What?” Samantha asked.

“Meep Meep!” he exclaimed, doing his best Roadrunner impression.

Even Cindy had to laugh.

Cries of “Meep Meep!” echoed through the gallery as the dreams of surrealism were derided by four-sevenths of the group. While Cindy, Riff, and Buddy remained elated by the art, the others laughed and practiced their Roadrunner impressions.
“Meep Meep!”

They moved to the next work, one that the museum considered of great importance as it was the only painting on one wall of the gallery.

Ralph again read from the museum book: “Gossamer by Henri Mayreet. Oil on canvas. On loan from the artist’s estate.”

“How is this one described?”

Ralph read, “The delicacy of the surface image is belied by the convention-defying choice of subject matter.”

They regarded the massive canvas for a moment. In the background of the painting was the Palace of Versailles against a bright blue sky. The foreground contained three sets of nearly identical kangaroos caught in a moment of time. It was impossible to tell if the figures were descending to the ground like ’roo rain, or rising like hot-air balloon animals.

The marsupials were arranged in hexagonal grids; seventy-eight of them appeared in the air above (and presumably behind) the palace; forty-nine of them were closer, seeming to be halfway between the
Palace and the viewer; and nine were near enough to see the pouches on the females.

“I have an uncle in Australia,” Jeff said slowly, as they all still stared at the painting.

“Yes, and...?”

“He says kangaroo steak is pretty good.”

There were a couple snorts of laughter at that non sequitur.

“My God, you are so literal,” Cindy told him.

“That is often literally true,” Jeff replied.

“I mean, can’t you see any allusions here? Any metaphors? Any commentary on the inelasticity of society’s norms?”

“Maybe he’s comfortable with society’s norms,” Angelo said.

“Maybe he’s hungry,” Ralph said.

“I’m hungry,” Samantha said.

“Me too,” Jeff added.

“I could go for some food,” Angelo stated.

“Let’s get out of here before we have to go hide in the stairwell,” Ralph suggested.

“Too late,” Riff said, checking the time.

“Wait, is Security coming?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”
He led the group to a door with the word “STAIRS” stenciled on it.

“Don’t you just love the contrariness of this style of art?” Ralph said.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a door, but the artist titled it ‘Stairs’.”

Riff gave him a look that would curdle milk. “Just go through the damn door, okay?”

“Anything for you,” Ralph said. He tried the door but went nowhere. “What the hell? It won’t open.”

“Let me try it.” Riff groaned as he put all his strength into the attempt.

“Riff? Look at this.”

“What?”

Just to the side of the “door” was a small plaque reading:

**Doorway from Oblivion**, by Joe Artist.

Wood, matte gray paint, brass hinges, stainless steel handle. On loan from the artist’s mom, who was glad to be rid of it.

The rest of the group was getting impatient with the lack of movement.

“C’mon, you guys!”
“Yeah, what’s the hold-up?”
“It’s fake,” Ralph told them.
“What’s fake?”
“The whole thing. The door, the sign. None of it is real.”

Several of them tried to find a seam that might indicate an opening. No one could make any headway; the wall was solid.

“There was an exit door in the last gallery.” Samantha said.
“Right, let’s try that.”

They moved rapidly into the adjoining gallery, shoes and sandals clomping and clacking on the hard floor.

“Where’s the door?”
“It was here,” Samantha said. “I know it was.”

“Well, there’s nothing here now.”

As the others scoured the walls for any way out, Angelo looked up at the row of windows high on one wall of the gallery. A ladder led to a metal catwalk just below the windows. With mounting trepidation, Angelo climbed the ladder and peered out through the glass. “Guys?” he said softly. He cleared his throat and said it louder. “Guys?!?”
The others looked around, not seeing Angelo anywhere near them.

“Guys? Up here.”

They turned to see him on the catwalk.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“You should see this,” Angelo said.

Something in his voice convinced them he was serious. Riff climbed up to join him.

“What are you so—” Riff was caught short by what he saw.

“Riff? What is it?” Cindy said.

“There’s a building out there,” Riff said.

“You mean in the city?”

“No, I mean right next to this building.”

“There is no building next to this building.”

“Come up and see for yourself.”

One by one, they climbed up until all seven were standing on the catwalk, looking out the windows at the huge steel-and-glass office building that was only several feet away.

“It’s got to be a trick.”

“Yeah, it’s that tromp loy thing, the fool the eye deal.”

“There are people moving inside.”
“Where?”
“In the center, uh, one, two, three floors above this level.”
They all raised their glances and saw people on the other side of the glass walls of the towering office structure.
“Hey,” Jeff said, “there are also people on the same level as us.”
They all lowered their glances to see young men and women stepping close to the glass and staring back at them.
“One looks like you, Riff.”
The figure in the other building looked exactly like Riff.
“And there’s Cindy.”
“And Jeff.”
“Is it a big mirror?”
“Wave at them.”
They waved.
After a second, the figures in the other building waved back.
“It’s not a mirror, unless it’s a mirror with a time delay.”
The figures in the other building shared a laugh and waved again.
“It’s our doubles over there.”
“I know, all seven of us.”
“Nope,” Ralph said.
“What do you mean, ‘nope’?”
“There are seven of us but six of them.”
Each quickly turned to the building and silently counted their doppelgangers.
“One of us is missing from their line-up.”
“Hey,” Cindy said. “Where’s Buddy?”
Only six of them were on the catwalk.
“He was right here!”
“Well, not now he isn’t.”
From across the gallery, Buddy watched his friends scurry back down the ladder and go in search of him. He cried out to them. They did not hear. He tried to move to them. He had the sensation of running in place. He was not on the same plane of existence with his friends. He was inside a painting called *The Infernal Machine*. Already frightened by that realization, he was suddenly confronted by a new terror.
Buddy was ensnared in a painting that depicted a line of captives being marched to an enormous mechanism that was dispatching men and women by impaling them on a
gargantuan trident and then tossing them into a flaming cloud bank hovering just above the horizon.

Buddy was herded into the line of prisoners, some white, some brown; he was the only black person he could see. He was approaching the head of the line, much too near the device. The apparatus emitted a continuous, malevolent blending of shriek and groan. The atmosphere was so cacophonous that Buddy could not hear the sound of the trident’s tines piercing the flesh of each victim, nor their screams as they writhed throughout their impalement.

The line of prisoners began moving again. Buddy tried to flee but found himself chained to the woman in front of him and the man behind. The line of captives moved steadily forward, bringing Buddy closer to the hellish device.

Closer...
Closer...
Too close.
Part Three

Festival of the Hungry Ghosts

“Questions about life will be answered after the questioner’s death.”

— Hermann Waltz
Banks of lights, five video cameras, seven ultra-HD viewing screens, an adult choir on the left side of the amphitheater, a children’s choir on the right side, and pews positively packed with perspiring parishioners—all contributed to the overtaxing of the tabernacle’s antiquated cooling system.

Despite the rising temperature, the Pastor was still going strong: orating, proclaiming, decreeing, and pontificating at a feverish pace. Pleading, supplicating, and accusing, the Pastor harangued the crowd, his voice sometimes emitting enough volume to make the light fixtures vibrate, and other times falling to a whisper.

Because the Pastor brought his mouth right up against the microphone every time he lowered his volume, the whispers were processed by a massive sound reinforcement system and pushed through the air at the
parishioners’ ears from a twenty-five speaker array.

“Each and every one of the excesses of our modern age is perdition! Woe unto our species if we allow our cherished public discourse to fall prey to exaggeration and overstatement! We must seek to avoid the taunting, tempting whimsies of magnification, overemphasis, and embellishment!”

Pulling a royal blue silk handkerchief from his suit vest pocket, the Pastor mopped the sweat from his face, all the while humming a low note that began rising in pitch and volume until the next part of his sermon seemed to explode out of his body.

“WWW We must emphasize the spiritual goodness of God! WWW We must denigrate the physical poison of the sorcerous! WWW We must revel in the divine magic that is The Lord! I sayeth unto you—”

There was a loud POP, a puff of smoke, and the upper part of the Pastor’s body jerked to the side. After a beat, the Pastor recovered and was once more speaking forcefully to the crowd:
“—denigrate the physical poison of the sorcerous! We must revel in the divine magic that is The—”

Another loud POP occurred, producing a similar affect on the Pastor.

“—physical poison of the sorcerous! We must revel in the divine magic—”

POP.

“—We must revel in the—”

POP.

“—poison of the sorcerous! We must—”

POP!

“We must—”

POP!

“We must—”

POP!!

“We must—”

POP!!!

“We must—”

“We—We—We—We—We—We—We—We—”

The parishioners were nettled by this new turn in the sermonizing.

“We—We—We—We—We—We—We—”

BLAM!
The sermon and the Pastor came to a grinding halt. Thin tendrils of smoke began emerging from the Pastor’s body, traveling upward on their own shifting path, eventually entwining before they reached the ceiling.

The Pastor remained frozen in one of his favorite positions, eyes open wide and staring down at the congregation, one arm still grasping the pulpit, the other arm raised, finger pointing to heaven.

Another explosive report shook the interior of the church and now there was dark smoke pouring out of the Pastor.

The worried murmuring from the crowd quickly turned to cries of woe and frantic calls for medical assistance.
Inside The Office, the atmosphere had achieved a dangerous level of boisterous revelry. Customers were delighted to find that their glasses refilled themselves as soon as they finished swallowing the last drop. No one seemed to mind pushing the blood alcohol content in their bodies to the point of blackout. And no one appeared to notice that each body disappeared the moment it keeled over into unconsciousness.

The volume level had been significantly boosted on the digital jukebox and most of the patrons happily warbled the lyrics to each of the selections. They just finished their group singalong to Dirty Water by The Standells. Playing now was Bang a Gong (Get it On), by T. Rex.

Physical alterations were not limited to the magical refilling of cocktail glasses, beer bottles, and tumblers. The constellations painted on the ceiling began to rearrange themselves, forming outlandish patterns
which would have been unrecognizable to astronomers, had there been any in the tavern.

At the end of the ornately carved wooden bar, the owner stood with a bottle of wine in one hand, a champagne flute in the other, and a beatific smile on his face. He was delivering a word salad version of his well-practiced speech about the origins of the bar. Instead of attempting to compete with the raucous group, he spoke quietly, as if he was his own audience.

“This work is a bar of art,” he said. “The history of wood can be found inside the America of this bar. Yessiree, this is an all-wood hunk of Paul Bunyan. It was stripped and cured by Great West Indian Jack the Rippers.” He poured himself another glass and then took a swig from the bottle. “Look down at the paint. Reflective! Introspective! Picasso’d! Pollock’d! Warhol’d!” He paused a moment and then stood up straight and tall and proud. He took a deep breath, held it, and loudly proclaimed, “Wheeeewwww!” He wavered slightly, then lost touch with consciousness and fell into nothingness.
As the crowd thinned out, the couple from the religiosity event decided they had reached their limit of libation intake. “Let’s go,” the woman said, “while we’re still able to walk.”

“I think you’re right, dear,” said her husband.

They stood up, struggled to maintain their balance, turned, and aimed themselves toward the entrance. Reaching it was quite an accomplishment, but exiting the bar proved a more daunting challenge. Neither pushing nor pulling on the door handle had any effect.

“What’s wrong?” the woman asked.

“The damn door’s stuck,” the man muttered.

“There is no door,” said a deep male voice that came from everywhere and nowhere.

They turned... and found themselves in what was left of Restaurant Yojimbo.

“Oh my God!” said the man.

Blood was everywhere.
Chapter 11

The sushi chefs of Restaurant Yojimbo greeted the man and woman with loud shouts of “irasshaimase” and “irasshai.” The couple stared at the chefs in amazement; each was dressed in a fish outfit and brandished a bloody samurai sword.

Two of the chefs, the ones dressed as cuttlefish, used their swords to gesture at the bodies writhing on the floor. The couple gaped at the remains of the foursome they had met when all of them had escaped from the church.

“We have to get out of here!” the man whispershouted to his wife.

“Hold on,” she told him. She looked at one of the men in the cuttlefish costumes and asked, “Is that brocade?”

“That’s correct,” one man said with a smile. “Do you like it?”

“Oh my yes,” the woman said. “And that’s a good color for you.”
“Dorothy!” her husband hissed. “What are you doing?!”

She turned to him in surprise. “What do you mean?” she said. “Take a look at the stitching. This is very fine tailoring.”

“Thank you,” the chef said. “My mother-in-law,” he said proudly. “She has a small shop, does work for commercials, country singers, marching bands, that sort of thing.”

“It’s exquisite,” the woman said.

“Jesus, Dorothy,” the husband said urgently.

The woman patted her husband’s arm and told him “Hush now.” She turned to see another chef, this one dressed as a trout. “And look at this!”

“I am quite pleased with this outfit, even if I say so myself,” the chef stated.

“Oh my, yes indeed,” the woman told him. “Is that tulle?”

“Yes!” he replied happily.

“I love tulle,” she said.

She turned to see another chef step up to them. His costume was of an arcana ornata.

“Oooh,” the woman said. “I’ve never seen lace with such fluorescent colors!”
“I have my own special dyes,” he admitted.

“Very nice!” the woman cooed.

“Thank you. We all thank you. But now you must both come this way.” He pointed toward the opening behind the sushi bar, the doorway leading to the kitchen. “Please, we should be moving now. There is work to be done.” He strode toward the kitchen, gesturing for the couple to follow.

The woman started forward but was pulled back by her husband who remained rooted in place, shaking his head “no” and fearfully holding onto his wife.

“If you don’t accompany him, there could be consequences,” a woman behind them said.

The couple turned and saw a woman dressed as a koi.

“Who are you?” the man demanded.

“I’m Joyce. I’m with the technical staff,” she explained. “We all are.” She directed the couple’s attention toward the men who had been holding bloodstained swords. The implements of destruction were gone. The
maimed and dead bodies were gone. The blood was gone. The couple scanned the room from one sushi chef to the next. They were not all Japanese. They were not all men. No one was wearing any kind of aquatic costume; all of them were dressed in light gray overalls. Some wore tool belts while others had cases or backpacks.

“Come,” Joyce said gently. “We need your help.” She put one hand on the woman’s shoulder. “It’s all right.” She smiled, nodded, and began walking toward the kitchen, stepping on the bright clean floor where there had once been the torsos, arms, and legs of the fallen. Joyce was now in a well-tailored teal jumpsuit.

Suddenly, the couple found themselves moving toward the kitchen. They worriedly looked down but their path was clear. No body parts, no blood. Now they were at the sushi bar; now they were behind the bar; now they were at the door to the kitchen. They went through it and found themselves back inside the church.

“Holy shit,” the man said.
“Amazing!” the woman said. “That’s very trippy.”

All of the pews in the Nave were deserted and no choir members were in the Transept, but the Pastor was still at the head of the church, one hand grasping the pulpit, the other hand pointing skyward.

A team of men and women of the technical staff were working on the Pastor. “Hey, Jimmy,” one tech shouted across the church. “I thought you said this one used the Robotronix operating system.”

“That’s what I was told.”

“Well, there’s no way that could happen.”

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“Because this damn thing has the old LAH0009 circuit boards.”

“You’re kidding.”

“See for yourself.”

Several technicians joined the tech team around the Pastor.

“Hey, hey, hey—c’mon, give us some room to breathe here!”

“Sorry.”

Most of the techs stepped back.
The husband and wife from the sushi bar found themselves moving toward the Pastor, accompanied by Joyce.

“Wh—what’s happening?” the man said, justifiably frightened by the fact that he was moving without walking.

“It’s all right,” Joyce said soothingly. “We just want you to see the problem with the ‘bot.”

Joyce ushered the couple right up next to the Pastor. His torso was split wide, with the front of his body swinging away from the back as if on hinges. The Pastor stood there like an open refrigerator.

“For Christ sake, Marty,” one tech said to his partner, “Look at this connectivity module. What the hell is that?”

“Dunno,” Marty replied.

“Um,” the man said involuntarily.

“Yes?” the tech asked him. “Do you know what this is or what it’s from?”

“Actually, yes,” the man admitted, still unsure of what was happening to him. His wife patted him encouragingly on the arm. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

“So,” the tech asked, “what is it?”
The man nodded and contributed the information he knew. “That’s a Prosonix-90aIII from an XRBOT.”

“Wait, what?”

“It’s Chinese,” the man told the tech.

“He’s right,” another tech exclaimed. “We saw those at that huge trade show two years ago. Remember? That clusterfuck in Hong Kong.”

“Oh yeah. But when we tested their components with our gear, they weren’t worth shit.”

“Well,” the man broke in, “if they get enough power, they can work fine.” The man was growing a little more comfortable now that he was exchanging shop talk.

“How can they work fine with added power?” the first tech asked him.

“You just gotta make sure you dissipate the extra heat.”

“Okay,” the technician admitted, “I’m with you on the heat. But do you know what OS works with this crap?” He used the voltage tester in his hand to point inside the Pastor. “These circuit boards are way out of date.”
“And remember,” another technician said, “it has to accommodate a Prosonix-90.”

“Ninety-A-three,” the man said.

“What?”

“It’s a Prosonix-90aIII. The one that came before the 90.”

The tech peered into the Pastor. “Oh yeah, he’s right.” Looking up at the man, he asked, “You work on these before?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“So, tell me something.”

“What?”

“Are we shit out of luck on this?” the tech gestured at the Pastor.

“Not at all,” the man said.

“You sure?”

“Absolutely,” the man said confidently.

“You see, you can marry the Robotronix OS to the older technology if you—oh hell, here, let me at some of those tools.”

And with that, the man eagerly joined the team of technicians working to restore and reboot the Pastor.

Joyce and the man’s wife exchanged smiles. “He’s very good at technical stuff,” the woman said with a smile.
After a brief moment of tinkering...
“...the spiritual goodness of God!” shouted the Pastor
“There we go!” said one tech.
“Back to Bible-thumping!” said another.
After an additional tweak or two, the front of the Pastor’s torso was swiveled shut and his bright, shiny suit was once again fastened shut with Velcro.
“We must denigrate—” the Pastor shouted.
“He’s part way back,” a tech said.
The man made an adjustment on the Pastor’s torso by reaching into his shirtfront.
“We must denigrate—” the Pastor said again.
“Oh man,” another tech complained. “Thought ya had it.”
“Hang on,” the man said as he worked on one of the connections inside the torso. There was a CLICK and then...
“We must denigrate the physical poison of the sorcerous!” shouted the Pastor, his arm starting to wave in the air. “I say unto you this encyclical. It is vital! It is essential! It is a Christian imperative!”
“That’ll keep the sheep coming back for more,” said one tech.

“And when we have cast out the demons, only then shall we turn to celebratory activity. It is our reward! It is our destiny!”

“He’s on a roll now,” another tech said.

“We must revel in the divine magic, the divine majesty, the divine divinity that is The Lord!” shouted the Pastor.

“Preach it to leach it,” another tech said.
Chapter 12

The blood-stained trident attached to *The Infernal Machine* whistled through the air as it came straight down at Buddy. He screamed when the razor sharp edges pierced his flesh. He writhed in excruciating agony as the device elevated his impaled body and hurled him toward the flames above the horizon where he...

...emerged into the scruffy offices of DUC!, the independent recording label called Decidedly Unusual Content. Once Buddy ascertained he was all right and got over his WTF shock, he glanced around the room. Rock posters were affixed to the ceiling as well as those parts of the walls that were not blocked by shelving units holding thousands of vinyl albums, cassettes, and CDs.

A large stereo system was playing *Monkey Gone to Heaven* by Pixies. Buddy began involuntarily nodding his head to the beat when a woman burst into the room barking orders into a phone.
“Write this down so you don’t screw things up like last time.” She was a generation older than Buddy and would be beautiful without her perpetual frown. “Get two dozen boxes of the tee-shirts to Steven so he can get ‘em to the merch tables for tonight.” She listened a second. “ Fuck that,” she said. “Hey! Don’t give me any shit about it and I won’t have to give you any shit about it. Capiche?” She listened a second and added, “You better make it happen.” She ended the call and turned to Buddy. “Well?”

“Uh,” he said. “What, um...?”

“DANGERhOX,” she said.

“What?” Buddy asked.

“Earth to marketing manager, come in please,” the woman said. “Did the band approve the cover sleeve for the single or not?” She glanced at the computer screen a few steps from Buddy. “Oh wait,” she said. “Here’s their answer.”

They both looked at Buddy’s email. The band’s reply was short and sweet:

“LIKEITLOTS! Love, DANGERhOX.”

“Okay then,” the woman said. “Bless their little rock ‘n’ roll hearts.” She punched a
few buttons on the computer. As she was angrily typing, she shot a glance over her shoulder, saying, “You don’t mind my touching your computer, do you, sweetie.” It wasn’t a question.

“No, um, not at all,” Buddy replied.

The woman punched a few more keys and the design appeared, filling the monitor. The woman tilted her head toward Buddy, then toward the screen and said, “Voila.”
“Okay, everybody,” the woman shouted to people in the other rooms, “we’re going with this for the 12-inch DANGERhOX single.” She turned to Buddy and spoke in the same take-no-prisoners tone but at a conversational volume. “Have someone find the original hi-res and send it to the printer.”

“Right, sure, okay,” Buddy replied, “but I don’t actually know—”

The woman was already moving out of the room shouting for something or someone called “Tinfoil! Somebody get me what I need, now!”

Buddy stared apprehensively at the door where the woman had exited. He was unsure what to do.

“Want some help?”

Buddy turned to find Samantha standing beside him. But it wasn’t Samantha, just someone who looked a lot like her.

“Sure,” Buddy said.

“I’m Ava,” she said, holding out her hand.

“I’m Buddy. Nice to meet you.”

Her handshake was firm.

“Likewise,” she said. “So...?”
“Some help could be... very helpful.”

“Coolest,” the girl said. “I’ve already been interning here at DUC! for two months but all they have me doing are the mailing labels and shit like that. I’d love to finalize these files for you. I know the drill, okay? You marry the high-resolution image to the back of the sleeve that has all the logos and credits and shit, zip it, and use PikPak to send it to the printer. You can watch to see that I know how to do all that. Okay?”

Buddy was inwardly overjoyed but tried to remain outwardly cool. “Sounds like a plan,” he said.

“Great!” she said and turned to the computer.

“So,” Buddy said, “how do you like it here at DUC!?”

“Yeah,” she replied, “mostly it’s super. Where else can you get stoned to go to work and when you get there, they play music all day?”

“That is pretty cool,” Buddy agreed, thinking of the ‘shrooms in the park. Is this part of that trip? He vacillated between ‘It can’t be’ and ‘It must be.’
“Lots of cool stuff here,” the girl went on as she tapped on the computer keyboard. “The area is the only bad thing.”

“The area?”

“This part of downtown L.A. is, uh, what’s the best way to put this? Oh, I know: questionable.”

“Questionable,” Buddy repeated.

“Euphemism for seedy.”

“Oh, right,” Buddy said.

“On my first day,” the girl said, still working on the computer files, “my brother dropped me off. He wanted to come inside and see that everything was okay. He’s very protective. I told him it was fine, but he pulls the car around the corner and stops next to what probably used to be a curb. He gets out, sees somebody walking to work, and asks them if we can park the car there, and you know what they said?”

“What?”

“The guy said, ‘If you don’t want to see your car in one piece again, sure.’ You should have seen my brother’s face.”

“Not much of an endorsement for the neighborhood,” Buddy said.
“No, it’s not.” She made a show of hitting “send” on the keyboard. “There we go. The first 12-inch single from DANGERhOX is about to be unleashed on an unwary world.”

“Sounds like you don’t like them.”

“No,” she said. “I love DANGERhOX and that whole ‘audio cataclysm’ thing they do. They’re in one of my top twenty favorite genres. I just don’t know if they’re a cult fave for some of us or if they’re about to tap into the Geist der Zeiten. You know, the ‘spirit of the times’,” she added.

“Yeah,” Buddy agreed. “I guess DUC! is betting that DANGERhOX has their fingers on the pulse of the bleeding edge of the uppermost part of the deep underground.”

“Exactly!” she said. “Wow, I feel I can talk to you. Want to go for coffee after work?”

“Sure,” Buddy said, just before he was no longer in the room with her.
Riff and Cindy held each other tight as the vortex subsumed their bodies. Amorphous nebulas in iridescent colors shot past them at dizzying speeds, accompanied by sonic thunder that was all encompassing. No matter how loudly they shouted love and encouragement, they could not be heard over the tsunami of sound created by Birgit Nilsson singing Brünnhilde as Herbert von Karajan conducted the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus in a performance of *Die Walküre*.


The fearsome aural onslaught increased in intensity until the sound pressure was so powerful it buffeted their hair. Louder, louder, and louder it grew until... It abruptly ceased as they were deposited in the bar of the Grand Pacifica Hotel, the finest establishment still standing after the San Francisco earthquake of 1906.
They warily glanced around the room.
“What the hell?” Cindy said.
“What the fuck?” Riff said.
“I don’t get what’s happening to us,” she told him. “This isn’t like any ‘shroom trip I’ve been on.”
“This isn’t like any ‘shroom trip anybody’s been on,” Riff replied.
“So,” Cindy said. “Where are we, and what do we do now? And what the hell is this place?”

Looking more closely at their surroundings, Riff said, “I don’t know about you, but this reminds me of that old time theater in Disneyland, the Golden Horseshoe Saloon.”

“Well, I’ve never been there,” Cindy said, “but this room reminds me of a Buster Keaton movie.”

“Why is there all this dust in the air?” Riff asked.

“And why are you wearing a bowler hat?”

“What?” he exclaimed, taking it off and regarding it with suspicion.
“Better without the hat,” Cindy said. “After all, you’re not posing for a Magritte.”

Before he could reply, the ground began trembling.

“Look out!” shouted a man at the bar.

“Goin’ for a ride!” yelled the bartender.

There was a gut-punch rumble that shook the walls. Cindy and Riff reached out to each other as part of the foundation cracked open, splitting the room apart. A gaping chasm separated them.

“Riff!” Cindy shouted.

“Darling!” Riff shouted.

And then, in an instant, they were gone.
Samantha was floating in a sea of knives. Daggers danced in the swells all around her while switchblades sashayed through the foam. Machetes marched across the top of the waves while sabers cut through the seaweed underneath. Grimacing in terror, Samantha contorted her body to avoid the rotating rapiers and the bobbing bayonets.

Gasping for breath, she struggled, squirmed, and flailed as the ocean began slowly forming itself into a gigantic whirlpool. The massive weight of water inexorably spun Samantha and the knives clockwise as they slowly sank into a widening hole of dark, foam-flecked water.

“No!” she shouted. Despite the gravity of the situation, she found herself thinking, “I regret never listening to all of Scarlatti’s 555 keyboard sonatas!” The elements responded with a splat of briny water across her face. Perhaps the sea was mocking Samantha for
her choice, preferring the works of Couperin. She redoubled her efforts to escape but it was hopeless and her body was dragged under the churning waves.

Submerged amidst the dark liquid maelstrom, Samantha knew she was about to die. Her lungs pleaded for oxygen one last time and then—

Samantha found herself in the Summer Palace of Aranjuez as Scarlatti was giving a harpsichord lesson to Princess Maria Barbara. Master and pupil were so engrossed in the music-making that they remained oblivious to the young woman watching them from across the sumptuous chamber.

Giving them their privacy, Samantha quietly glided out of the room though an open set of double doors. Walking softly, she made her way through the palace, following her nose. The air was filled with mouth-watering aromas: roast fowl, braised fish, sautéed vegetables, and fresh-baked pastries.

She entered the antechamber next to the royal kitchens and discovered that she could easily hide behind several oaken barrels of wine. Peeking out between the huge casks,
she saw that the chefs handed off the platters to the kitchen maids who then placed the heaping mounds of food on a table just a few feet away from the wine barrels. The food would remain there a moment until the serving maids came and took them away.

Timing her movements carefully, Samantha would dart to the table, grab a succulent portion of the feast, and scurry back out of sight. She performed this series of moves over and over again. In this manner, she was able to enjoy a delicious repast. She was nibbling on a piece of fruit for dessert when she heard the voices of workers who began to remove the wine barrels.

She spun around, hoping to discover a door or passageway. Nothing! Samantha was literally cornered. She decided to brazen it out. After all, she had taken three years of high school French. So that meant that she’d be able to communicate with indentured servants of a palace in eighteenth century Spain, right?

“Merde,” she said.
Ralph watched reality disappear and reappear while experiencing an escalating series of emotional reactions. Incredulity came first, followed almost immediately by shock. Next, shock was replaced by anger; anger was exchanged with awe; awe gave way to panic. There was a moment when he nearly lost control and the upheaval of regurgitation seemed eminent. “No!” he berated himself. “Be strong!” Although it was closer to, “Be straaaaugh!”

Steeling his mind to confront whatever horror came next, he attempted to lead Angelo and Jeff to some avenue of escape: a door, a window, a secret passage. “Man, you’re losing it,” he thought to himself. “Secret passage,” he said sarcastically.

Ralph was still thinking how silly his idea was when Angelo and Jeff disappeared into a secret passage that opened to consume them and just as rapidly sealed itself shut.
Once again, Ralph was flummoxed. Should he remain here? Should he try to run away? Should he try to follow his companions? He opted for rejoining his friends. But there was no way to access the passage. “Oh come on!” Ralph said.

He stepped back to study the space where there had been an opening. Rich dark wood had been set in diagonal strips and rimmed by bronze rivets. Ralph thought about how it had swung wide to admit Angelo and Jeff. Far off in the distance, Ralph thought he heard a choir sing one beautiful harmonized chord. The door opened without him touching it. He peered into a brightly lit landscape. Tentatively, he stepped forward.

Sudden darkness. “Hey?” Ralph said. “What’s happening?”

Sudden ascension. “Hey!” Ralph yelled as he was propelled upwards through clouds of alternately hot and cold vapor.

He came to an abrupt halt before a set of very tall wrought iron gates. They stood, proud and imposing, all by themselves, unconnected to any kind of fence. Ralph glanced around. Everywhere except beyond
the gates was a wrathful jungle. Animal noises broke through the sound of a nearby waterfall.

Ralph tried to walk around the gates but he could not move. “Oh, for Pete’s sake,” he muttered, unconsciously aping his mom, who was consciously aping Frances McDormand’s characters in *Fargo* and *Burn After Reading*.

It was at that point when he became aware of a new danger. Snakes. *En masse*, they were coming for him.

“No!” he shouted.

There were pythons, cobras, mambas, boas, sidewinders, vipers, copperheads, and more. They slithered forward, cutting off all possibility of escape.

With a force of will, Ralph imagined the gates opening and they did so. “Yes!” He peered past the gates. No snakes in sight.

Just as the first few adders, asps, and rattlers coiled their bodies and prepared to strike, Ralph leaped through the gates and...

...found himself inside Pause for Paws, the largest cat café in the state. One shorthair feline was sitting nearby, tilting his head
toward Ralph to accept the gentle skratches he was providing with his left hand.

“Hi, furry beast,” he said. Still petting the cute critter, he sipped from the delicious café au lait in his right hand. Turning back to the cat, he spoke in a soothing tone. “I know you’re a monster-size creature of the jungle and that you’re currently disguised as a lap-size puddytat. But don’t worry,” he assured the animal, “I will keep it a secret from the others unless you want me to reveal it.”

The cat made a feline sound of contentment, a sort of “mrrrumphf.”

“Mrrrumphf back atcha,” he told the cat.

“Everything okay over there?” the store owner called to him with a smile.

“More than just okay,” Ralph replied. “Really nice. Friendly cat and excellent coffee—can’t beat that!”

“Glad to hear it,” the woman said. She took a few quiet steps in his direction. “You look like you’ve made a friend,” nodding toward the now purring cat. “Yowza likes you.”

Ralph grinned in reply. “Yowza knows a cat person when he sees one.”
“When she sees one,” the woman said. “When she sees one,” Ralph repeated. “All right then,” the woman said. “Just tell any of us if you’re interested in adopting Yowza or any other of our cats. They’re spayed or neutered, had all their shots, and they’re eager to play and purr.” “Thanks,” Ralph told her. “I’ll let you know.”

She nodded, flashed him a grin, and went to talk with another customer. “This is pretty good,” he thought to himself. “Isn’t it, puddy-tat?” Yowza flopped down on her side to accept more petting. “Pretty good,” he repeated to himself. “Wonder how long it will last?”

A long, deep, vibrating blast of a ship’s foghorn let him know he was about to depart. He felt his body propelled forward. A strobe flash marked the instant his frame left the cat café and entered the forecastle of the SS Andrea Doria on the evening of July 25, 1956.

On deck a little after eleven p.m., Ralph was chatting with two passengers, Meryl and Mike Stoller. The conversation naturally
began about the fog banks that surrounded the ship.

“It’s like being inside a gigantic mound of white cotton candy,” Mrs. Stoller remarked.

“You can barely see the waves down there,” Ralph said, leaning over the railing.

“Don’t do that!” the woman said.

“Sorry,” Ralph replied. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“So what do you do, Ralph?” Mike Stoller asked.

“I’m getting ready for college.”

“What are you studying?”

“Girls, mostly.” Both of the Stollers laughed. Ralph continued, “Girls, and the possibilities of creating educational modules that could reach more people than with traditional classrooms.”

“Good for you!” Mr. Stoller remarked.

“That’s excellent,” Mrs. Stoller added.

“And you?” Ralph inquired. “What do you do?”

“He writes songs,” Mrs. Stoller said, smiling while squeezing her husband’s arm.
“Really?” Ralph said. “Anything I’d know?”

“Well...” Mike Stoller said modestly.

“He and his partner wrote a song called Kansas City,” Mrs. Stoller said, “and another one called Hound Dog, and what’s that new one? Oh, Smokey Joe’s.”

“Smokey Joe’s Café?” Ralph asked.

“That’s right. Do you know it? Do you like it?”

“Wait a minute,” Ralph said. “Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller wrote those songs.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Stoller said proudly. “My husband is Mike Stoller.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No!”

“You guys are great!” Ralph said. “There’s a college radio station that has a show that plays all that R&B stuff. It’s so nice to meet you!”

“Thank you.”

“You know—” Ralph glanced to the side, forming a sentence that would never be spoken. “Oh my God!” he said, the words catching in his throat.
Slowly emerging from the fog was the MS Stockholm, another ocean liner that was as much a leviathan as the Andrea Doria.

The atmosphere was now full of fog horns, alarm bells, shouts through cupped hands, hollers through megaphones, screams, and the sounds of the ship’s orchestra still performing a syrupy sweet rendition of *Arrivederci, Roma* in the main ballroom below them.

The icebreaker bow of the Stockholm advanced inexorably through the fog and the waves, ramming the larger vessel so violently that the two enormous ships seemed fused together for several seconds. Then the Stockholm broke free from the Andrea Doria with a shuddering shriek of tortured metal. The Swedish ship was still able to maintain some semblance of seaworthiness but water poured into the Doria and it began listing. Five percent, ten, twenty.

Crew members rallied to get passengers into lifeboats. Ralph was swept along with the rush of panic-stricken men, women, and children who were hustled along the decks
and herded into the small boats that were lowered into the cold dark water.

One final blast of the ship’s foghorn blended with the turbine engine whine and rotor wash of a Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter, and Ralph transitioned again. He was now part of Operation Frequent Wind, the 1975 evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, South Vietnam.

Ralph enjoyed the ride until the horror began. As the ‘copter laboriously descended toward the Embassy compound, he could see a mass of humanity on the roof of the building, with dozens of people on ladders leading to the uppermost flattop building used as the helipad.

People surged forward to enter the ‘copter before it had fully settled on the structure. Frantic hands grabbed anything to pull themselves into the belly of the Sikorsky.

Frightened and grimly determined people thrust themselves aboard, people who were desperate to escape the enemy forces nearing the city. They flailed their hands to obtain a hold of the metal frame, the door, the
seats, Ralph’s arms, Ralph’s legs, Ralph’s belt, until...

“Hey!” he shouted. And then he was falling out of the helicopter, past the roof, and past the ladder still clogged with panicked people. His shout turned into a scream but even as he was sinking into frozen fear, his mind was calculating: “A body falls at the rate of 32 feet per second per second in a vacuum, but the atmosphere will cut into that speed by approximately—”

Smashing into the Embassy’s concrete courtyard ended his reverie about the velocity of falling bodies.
Angelo and Jeff tumbled down the secret shaft for such a long time that they grew tired of screaming. As their bodies twisted and turned during the impossibly long descent, they caught fleeting glimpses of splinters of light. A beam would appear below them and seem to bend up to meet them as they fell past.

“Jeff?” Angelo yelled.
“Yeah?” Jeff replied.
“What the fuck?!”
“I know,” Jeff said, “I know.”
Suddenly, light was everywhere.
“Look out!” Angelo shouted.
“I can’t see anything!” Jeff yelled.

Their bodies passed through the membrane of an air bubble within a bottle of sparkling wine on the shelf of The Office tavern behind the Paul Bunyan oak bar.

Still they descended.

Most of the patrons of The Office had exited the premises. Some disappeared into
the mesosphere. Others entered into the same kind of transition currently affecting the two young men.

Still they descended.

Their mode of transportation—the bubble in the bottle of sparkling wine—underwent contraction, expansion, and contraction one again, the pressure building, building, building, until...

The bubble popped.

“Whoa!”

“Aaahheeeeee!”

Jeff and Angelo descended faster.

“Jeeeeeeeeeereeeeeeeussssss!”

Their yelling continued for a moment but they now knew that their very vocal protests did no good and they fell silent.

“You okay?” Jeff asked at last.

“Kind of,” Angelo replied. “What about you?”

“Well, okay so far.”

The thought that they would eventually reach the bottom of the shaft was too frightening to contemplate. Air whistled past them; they whistled past the air; and still they fell deeper into the pit.
One decibel at a time, the audio ambience changed. Other sounds competed with the whoosh that buffeted their ears.

“What’s that?” Angelo asked.

“What’s what?”

“That sound.”

“I don’t hear anything,” Jeff replied. “Oh wait, I do hear it.”

“It’s churning and rumbling.”

“It’s music!”

“No. Wait, yeah. You’re right. What the hell is that?”

They continued to fall but kept twisting themselves this way and that in an attempt to keep facing the music.

“It’s... no, it can’t be.”

“What?”

“It’s DANGERhOX.”

“What?”

“DANGERhOX.”

“Oh, the band?”

“Yeah.”

They listened as their fall continued.

“I can’t quite get the lyrics. Do you know what they’re singing?”
“Not really, but they’re a sound band more than a word band.”
“Seems like they’re chanting.”
“Yeah.”
“I can almost make it out... It sounds like... ‘The past becalms the putrid on the boat to mohair.’ That can’t be right.”
“No, I think it’s ‘The past becomes the future on the road to nowhere.’ I think.”
“Well, that doesn’t make any sense, either, but it’s more poetic.”
“Yeah.”
The auditory onslaught became crystal clear. The organ tones politely screamed; the synthesizer lines delicately attacked; the guitars graciously crunched.
“My god, listen to that. They must be awesome to see in person.”
“They are!”
“Sludge metal rules!”
“What?”
“What’s wrong with that?”
“Nothing.”
“What?!”
“I hate that term.”
“Sludge metal? I thought that’s what they called their music.”
“Somebody said that they call it funeral doom metal, but I hate that term, too.”
“Oh. What do you call their music?”
“Slow mayhem of mortality.”
“Can’t call it that.”
“Why not?”
“It’s the name of another band.”
“It is?”
“Yup.”
“Damn. Well, I’ll come up with something else.”
Still they descended, the music growing louder.
“Do you think we’re headed down to one of their live shows?”
“Seems that way.”
“Are we going to fall into the crowd?”
“I hope it’s the crowd.”
“Yeah?”
“I’d rather land on people than smash into the stage or their stacks of amps.”
“Oh. A little selfish, but better for us.”
Still they descended.
“I kind of like these guys.”
“Me, too.”

“Their sounds multiply and vibrate outward, but they still kind of keep you rooted in place—something we could use in here.”

“I like ‘em more every time I hear them. When you’re in the mood to just surrender to the sound, that’s when they’re the best. But they’re not for everybody. I mean, they’re wicked weird.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“There’s one song of theirs called *The Onset of the Start of the Beginning of the Commencement of the Inception of the Launch of the Creation* and it kind of sets the scene for their whole deal—you know, their whole approach to making music.”

“You understand their whole approach to making music?”

“Yes.”

“Do tell.”

“Sure. So, the first keyboardist hits a big, fat, two-handed chord on a Hammond B3 organ played through a Leslie cabinet.”

“What’s a Leslie cabinet?”
“A Leslie is a rotating speaker that the keyboardist can speed up or slow down, controlling the Doppler Effect of the sound hitting your ears.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. We studied it in Physics.”

“I’m taking your word for it.”

“Okay then.”

“So, what happens next?”

“The other keyboard player plays a pattern of notes and triggers a synthesizer arpeggio so those notes repeat forever...”

“Right...”

“And the guitarist strums a barre chord and establishes a feedback loop so that the guitar chord reverberates and echoes endlessly...”

“Yeah, and...?”

“Sometimes they add a choir, sometimes a jazz drummer, sometimes a bass player, you never know. They once had a saxophonist and a flutist accompany them. Another time they had Jasmine K, the accordionist.”

“Wild.”

“You bet. But mainly, they establish what I think is called multimodality and then
they alter the bass frequency until their music meshes with the sonic properties of the room. Once the whole building starts to pulsate with their sound, they hold that for a while.”

“Then what?”

“Then the band leaves the stage.”

“Wait, what?”

“They go get a drink together. Maybe have a bite to eat.”

“That’s strange.”

“They’re just letting the machines make the music and try to shake the building down.”

“You’re making that up.”

“It’s what’s posted on the fan boards. If the venue doesn’t collapse they come back and go for a chord change.”

“And the audience doesn’t mind?”

“Some people do. Fans don’t.”

“Really. That seems odd. I mean, I would think they would. Mind, that is.”

“Well, everybody in the audience is stoned.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Acid, meth, ecstasy, ‘shrooms, plus weed and caffeine and alcohol.”
“Well, I salute their commitment and dedication to getting completely fucked up.”
“Plus, there’s a light show.”
“Oh, nice.”
“Plus—”
“There’s another plus?”
“Yeah. A lot of their fans wear virtual reality headsets at the concerts.”
“So they miss the light show?”
“No, the VR puts them inside the light show! It’s supposed to be a trip and a half.”
“That sounds interesting.”
“Plus—yup, another one—the VR headsets let everyone make their own mix of the music, play their own solos, chant their own incantations, add some percussion, that sort of thing.”
“A personalized group experience.”
“Exactly.”
Still they descended.
A sudden increase in sound pressure level accompanied their appearance inside the Palace of Fine Arts Theater.
There was a party goin’ on. A loud party. A very loud party.
Jeff and Angelo found themselves among 1,122 rabidly enthusiastic and extremely stoned fans packed into the 966-seat auditorium. Bodies swaying and heads bobbing, the crowd gleefully capitulated to the audio avalanche of the band.

“This is so cool!” Jeff shouted.
“This is great!” Angelo yelled.

Their delight was short lived. Before Angelo and Jeff could begin adjusting their VR headpieces to make their own changes to the music and lyrics, all decision-making was taken out of their hands. Both of them became part of the light show.

They flew through the strobe lights, prisms, and laser beams. They darted in and around the film loops featuring Betty Boop, Buster Keaton, and Casper, the Friendly Ghost. They dodged the projections of portraits by Da Vinci, Raphael, Botticelli, Van Eyck, Holbein, and Durer.

They bounced back and forth between broken mirrors, sheets of reflective Mylar, and translucent colored shards of glass. They were confronted by Op-art chessboards, raspberry forests, black roses, M.C. Escher’s impossible shapes, glittering jewels, NASA photographs, World War II battle scenes, and squiggly animations from art therapy projects conducted in mental institutions.

They transitioned again.

Their next experience was, as Angelo put it, “icky-sticky.” The two young men
became molecules mixed with the liquid oils, dyes, grain alcohol, and glycerin being poured into shallow glass platters atop the display surface of overhead projectors.

The light show artists and operators (known as “freaks” to their friends and various law enforcement organizations) brought additional glass platters into the process; they placed one platter atop another, pressing down on the brightly colored ooze, sending the incompatible liquids squishing and sloshing and splooging in every direction and sometimes through each other, all projected a hundred feet high on the beaded white Cinemascope screen behind the band.

The musical madness built to a crescendo. Suddenly, there was a pause between the band’s chord changes. The hiatus was brief, but Jeff and Angelo were transported to another plane where time stood still for them. Their bodies were restored to normal size but they were now on gurneys in a hospital ward.

“Fuck this!” Jeff said.

They both rolled off the gurneys, stood up, and were ready to flee when they were
confronted by two male Licensed Vocational Nurses approaching them while brandishing cables and electrodes. Without a word, the LVNs moved forward and attempted to attach the electrodes to their bodies.

“Hey!” Jeff protested.

“Get away from me!” Angelo ordered.

There was a tussle. The nurses were amazingly strong and were about to overpower the boys.

“Eargasm?” Jeff shouted.

“Eargasm!” Angelo yelled back.

“One, two, three,” Jeff said and they both slammed their hands on the ears of their attackers.

There was crack of thunder that felt like it was splitting open time itself. The thunder morphed into a “mmmppfftTHRUMP” sound and everyone just seemed to freeze in place. Seconds ticked by. Long, painful seconds. Jeff and Angelo worked at maintaining their balance, but the two LVNs were motionless. The boys shot glances from each other to the nurses and back again.

“Guys?” Jeff inquired, looking at the LVNs.
The nurses did not move.
“He’s being polite,” Angelo admonished them gently. “The least you can do is reply.”
The nurses did not move.
“This is ridiculous,” Jeff noted. “Hey!” he shouted at them.
The nurses did not move.
“Who are these guys?” Angelo asked.
Jeff considered the possibilities for a moment. He swallowed hard at the thought that popped into his head. Tentatively, he said to Angelo, “Robots, you think?”
“Must be,” Angelo replied. “Nobody can hold that still for this long.”
Slowly, Jeff relaxed and straightened up. Slowly, Angelo did the same.
Nothing happened.
“Now what?” Angelo asked.
“Now we—”
And they were in suspended animation, serving as props for the crew producing the light show. The nurses, revived, approached their bodies. Using adhesive gel, they affixed Ag-AgCl Snap Electrodes to the arms, legs, and chests of Jeff and Angelo. Then the two LVNs turned and moved over to a portable
electronio device and confirmed that the Cambridge Heart Interface Cable-to-Patient Module was conveying data for two EKG readouts. The nurses disappeared.

To assure maximum cardio activity, fantasy sexual partners became part of the young men’s virtual reality experience. For Jeff: Rita Hayworth from You Were Never Lovelier. For Angelo: Farley Granger from Senso.

As Jeff and Angelo made virtual love to Rita and Farley, fluctuations in their EKGs controlled the colors of the laser patterns crisscrossing the theater’s dome as well as traversing the enormous screen above the stage. The complex light-webs of multicolored laser beams frequently revealed portions of the theater’s gleaming ceiling with its newly restored mural depicting Leif Eriksson as he first set foot on North American soil.

Just as the band smashed into their next chord, Angelo climaxed. The orgasm was intense. For a moment, he was achieving maximum voltage. He took a few moments to catch his breath. After one last deep gulp of
air, he turned and attempted to express his thanks to Farley but was so flummoxed he called him “Mr. Granger.”

As the music pulsated, Jeff climaxed, and climaxed again. The energy field around his body was life-threatening. He enjoyed it. Several minutes elapsed before he could speak. Finally returning to a normal breathing pattern, he turned to gaze admiringly at Rita. She turned to him, smiled and said—

But Jeff and Angelo were gone.

Undaunted, Rita and Farley each selected several dozen concertgoers with whom they became virtual reality sexual partners for the evening.
— Chapter 17 —

Three physicians, seven psychiatrists, two nurses, and one astrologer entered the long, wood-paneled room and took their places around a table of polished oak. At the far end was the First Lady, sitting ramrod straight on the edge of her chair. She waved a hand, indicating everyone should sit. As they settled into their chairs, she poured herself a glass of water from a stainless steel pitcher glistening from the ice water inside.

Everyone was now seated, including Buddy, who wasn’t certain of his purpose in the scenario. “Am I a participant or an observer?” he asked himself. He also noted that he was the only person of color in the room.

Decorations from the recent inauguration party still hung from the ceiling. Helium balloons drooped at the end of their strings. The table centerpiece was a bit battered but still in place: a white papier-mâché cake
displaying a message in bright red cursive, “Happy First Four Years!”

Scattered around the frayed fake cake were congratulatory notes, some handwritten and others typed: “Have a great first term!” “Hope to work with you on the re-election in four years!” “Congrats on winning the Electoral College AND the popular vote!”

There was an uncomfortable pause as throats were cleared, hands were wrung, and sheets of paper were shuffled. Of all the high-priced professionals seated around the table, no one wished to meet the gaze of the First Lady.

“All right, what is it?” she asked, her voice diamond-hard.

Buddy looked in turn at all the serious, somber, sober faces in the now-stuffy room. Glances were exchanged and facial tics abounded, but no one spoke up.

The First Lady said with resolve, “Tell me what you have learned.”

“Yes,” said the lead physician gravely. “Well, we have our findings, and we will get to the data in just a moment, but right now, it appears that we face a problem.”
“A problem?” the First Lady asked.
“Yes, well, a bit of a conundrum.”
“A what?” the First Lady asked.
“A setback,” said the lead psychiatrist.
“A snag, if you will,” added the astrologer.
“Oh for fuck’s sake,” the First Lady barked at them.
Several of them were taken aback.
“I’m sorry, but I’ve never heard you speak quite like that, Madam First Lady.”
“Just spit it out, for Christ sake,” she ordered.
“Well,” the lead physician began. “Uhh...” he let the thought trail away as he crumbled under her flinty-eyed glare.
“God damn it,” she said through clenched teeth, “someone better start telling me something...!”
“If I may,” the lead psychiatrist said, “allow me to read a passage to you about this situation.”
“Read a passage?” she responded. “Are you talking about something from the fucking Bible?”
“No, no,” he said.
“What then?”
“A moment, please, Madam First Lady.” He flipped over a couple of pages in his notebook, cleared his throat, and began reading, “Cognitive decline proceeds at a glacial pace at first, which often prevents those around the subject from addressing the process of degeneration. However, once the subject has begun the descent into a lack of acuity, the process has thus far proven to be irreversible.” He closed his notebook, tapped it in a satisfied manner, and turned to regard the First Lady with a condescending smile.
“I am going to take this pitcher,” she angrily stabbed a finger at the gleaming vessel of water, “and I am going to start beating you people over the head with it. Stop the bullshit and fucking tell me what the fuck is going on!”
“We’re trying to, but—”
“Try harder! In English, shitheads!”
“Yes, certainly, Madam First Lady,” the lead physician said. “The facts show...” he paused, took a deep breath, and continued, “The facts show that the President is in the onset stages of Alzheimer’s.” There was a
pause. “The President will not be able to perform the duties of the presidency.”

“Well why the fuck didn’t you say so?” the First Lady snapped. “That’s not a problem. That’s not a snag. That’s not a conundrum. Jesus fucking Christ. All right, listen up, all of you. Here’s how we’ll handle it,” she said, beginning to count on her fingers. “One, we have the cabinet. Two, we have our major donors. Three, we have Joan,” she indicated the astrologer. “And four, we have me. We will tell the President what to say. He’s very good at speaking his lines even if he doesn’t know what the words mean.”

There was a pause while the three physicians, seven psychiatrists, two nurses, and one astrologer glanced at each other. In a Ballet Mécanique parody, they exchanged shrugs back and forth across the table.

“Well...” the lead physician said.

“Umm...” the head psychiatrist said.

“Yes,” the lead physician told her, “that might work.”

“Yes,” the head psychiatrist said, “the country will be in good hands with that plan.”
Buddy again scanned the faces in the room. People looked worried but no one was speaking out against this farrago. Buddy took a deep breath and stood up to protest, but one of the psychiatrists spilled the water pitcher, causing several people to jump to their feet and others to bark words of warning or dismay.

And then, just as the president-elect was mentally gone, Buddy was physically gone.
indy and Riff were standing next to each other inside The Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama’s largest city. They were in front of a magnificent oil painting, one of a number of J.M.W. Turner works in what was called the Romantic Era Landscapes & Portraits exhibit.

The brass plaque underneath the framed canvas read, “The Slave Ship (originally titled Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on), 1840. On loan from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.”

“Nice brushwork,” Riff said, “but that painting is depressing.”

“Well, it might be depressing,” Cindy said, “but I’m not.” She put her arms around him and they kissed.

Above them, one of the floodlights aimed at the artworks came loose from its mounting and plummeted toward their heads, stopping only because it was still tethered by the electrical cable.
Across the gallery, a tourist began making an illicit video of the museum interior. As the tourist’s camera panned, Cindy and Riff appeared in a blue-white aura, their bodies lit from above by the spotlight, now dangling at the end of its electric wiring.

The tourist glanced at his phone screen and saw Cindy and Riff kiss, their heads framed perfectly in front of the glowing yellow-orange of the Turner painting’s angry sky.

Cindy and Riff concluded their kiss, pulling back their heads, eyes closed, savoring the taste of each other. Cindy slowly opened her eyes and found herself looking directly at the savage imagery of the painting.

“You know,” she began, “I think we should probably—”

One of the rope lines from the sailing vessel in The Slave Ship snaked out to ensnare her and Riff.

“No!” was all they had time to say.

The rope pulled their writhing bodies into the painting and onto the ship.

Once aboard, Cindy and Riff recoiled at the horror that was everywhere. Lash marks
on torsos, dead and dying bodies chained together because some people had deemed them unnecessary. Perhaps their demise could be a means to a profit, if, for example, the coming typhoon were to be blamed for the loss of the human cargo, then the insurance company would pay a bounty for each of the dead. Bounty, did we just say bounty? No, we meant a dividend. No, that’s not it, either. What we are searching for is a phrase, and that phrase is: a sum of money. For what the property owners are concerned with here is not kindness, hope, charity, fairness, or equality; what they are concerned with here is: profit.

The sight of human beings casually murdering other human beings offended Cindy. She was electrified from her core to her fingertips, fingertips that were digging into the flesh of the nearest sailor, tearing into the skin of his neck. He tried to fight her off. She administered a spinning head kick that sent him reeling. He let out a cry of pain and—

Cindy and Riff found themselves bent over and vomiting onto furrowed earth. Their
eyes darted to each other. Each quickly looked away, surprised to see cornfields around them instead of the roiling sea.

“I need water,” he said.
“We both do,” she replied.
“Come on,” he told her.
“Where to?”
“That looks like a road over there,” he said, and pointed past the end of the rows of corn.

“Worth a try,” she said.

They took two steps toward Rural Route 19, formerly the Baker North Forty Road, and they began sinking in quicksand.

They yelled.
They struggled.
They screamed.
They disappeared.

And appeared on one of the well-trimmed lawns of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, during the Faculty Wives’ monthly brunch.

A down-on-their luck piano trio was playing the world’s lamest version of The Rolling Stones’ You Can’t Always Get What you Want.
Cindy and Riff stood near the buffet line, transfixed by the braindead souls milling about and appalled by the decomposed sounds the musicians were making.

“We were pulled under the earth,” Cindy said. “We should be dead.”

“Listening to this crap-fest, I wish I was dead,” Riff said.

“Oh come on,” Cindy said. “It’s not that bad.” She listened a moment and shook her head.

“See what I mean?” Riff said to her.

“Well, give them a chance,” she said. “Imagine having to play for people whose spouses are using religion to con students out of money.”

“They suck and I want to move on from here. I’d rather die than talk with any of this scum, and I’d definitely rather die than listen to this crap.”

The trio segued into Elton John’s *Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word.*

“You’re right,” Cindy admitted. “Death would be preferable.”
— Chapter 19 —

Ralph squirted out of a glossy photograph of a vintage Sikorsky CH-53 helicopter. The photo was the September pictorial on a calendar called “Rotors of Rescue, Rotors of War.” The tattered calendar was hanging on one wall of the art museum’s lobby level maintenance supply room. Smashing through the supply room door on his way into the museum bookstore, Ralph staggered forward, regained his footing, and came to a halt by colliding with one of the shelving units. There was a loud thump and he found himself sprawled on the tile floor.

“Damn it!” he spat out. He took a moment to rub his shoulder and catch his breath. “Fuck,” he said aloud.

Angrily getting to his feet, he grabbed one of the exhibition catalogs and went to sit on a stool behind the counter, irritably flipping pages. He barely glanced at the glossy photographs of the art, but stopped
when he was confronted by an essay in the center of the book.

**HYPER SYMBOLISTIC**

*Magic Realism, Mystic Actuality, and the Potential Onslaught of Neo Nihilism*

by Dr. Mujer Irreal

“Anything in there about cross-dimensional time travel?” Samantha asked.

Startled, Ralph looked up to see his friend entering the bookstore. “Where did you come from?”

“Eighteenth century, I think,” she said.

“How was it?”

“The food was good but I didn’t mix well with the populace. My style of dress was ‘inappropriate.’ Those people were so judgmental. Like it’s my fault they don’t know from jeans and tennies.” She hoisted herself up to sit on the counter near the register. “What are you doing here?”

Ralph looked a bit sheepish. “Nothing.”

“What kind of nothing?”

He hesitated a second. “Okay, look,” Ralph told her, “every time I move, I get sent
somewhere. I figure if I just stay put, this nightmare will be over.”

“Nice idea,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“But it doesn’t work.”

“No?”

“Nope. The time-space continuum comes for you anyway. Believe me, I know.”

“Shit,” he said.

“Yeah. We just have to ride this out.”

“Man...!” he said. “Some of this is, like, haunted house scary. Kind of fun.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

“But a lot of it is really frightening. I mean, you know, sometimes.”

She said, “Is it from the ‘shrooms, do you think?”

“I don’t know about that,” Ralph told her. “It feels like I’ve been shooting across the ages for, well, for ages now, and even a hellacious, humongous, monster-size ‘shroom trip wouldn’t last this long.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, not sounding completely convinced.

“I will admit that the music is cool everywhere I go.”
“It is!” she said, perking herself up.

“Wild stuff,” he said, staring off into space.

“So,” she said, “what are you reading?”

Ralph tapped a page with his fingers and began reading aloud: “Ours is a tale for those who seek immersion in the refulgence of a multiplicity of certainties and manifold dimensions of truth.”

“That sort of describes us right now,” Samantha said.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “it does.”

“Read more of it,” Samantha said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I like it.”

“So do I,” Ralph said. “Why do you like it?”

“I like the way it sounds. Read some more.”

“Okay.” He found his place in the essay and began reading again: “Enchantment and magic are to be welcomed into your life whenever they are encountered.”

“Excellent advice,” she said.

He nodded his agreement and continued reading: “Truth can be both liberating and
painful. While there are multiple dimensions that surround each truth, the actuality never changes. People must guard against relinquishing their grip on actuality. Living the real is to be valued; embracing the actual is to be welcomed; standing for fact should be the norm rather than the exception.”

“Wish more people acted like that,” Samantha said.

Ralph nodded again and continued: “Readers can be curators. If a story touches you, pass it on to a friend.”

Samantha was going to make a comment when she was suddenly aware of a huge sculpture that had appeared in the room. It was made of hammered copper and was moving slowly toward her. The sculpture turned slightly and she could see it contained letterforms. They spelled out one word.

MYSTIC
Samantha had a premonition of imminent alteration of location. “Ralph?” she said.

“What?”
“Take my hand.”
“Sure,” he said. “Why are we—”
And they were gone.
Jeff and Angelo sat in the luxurious leather seats of a gleaming cobalt blue-and-silver Chevrolet Corvette Stingray C8. The vehicle’s LT4 engine, rated at 490 horsepower generating 470 pound-feet of torque, was idling. The spectacular sports coupe was using one one-hundredth of its power as it crouched amongst a line-up of unmoving cars and trucks waiting for the traffic signal to change.

There were two lanes devoted to traffic wanting to turn left at the major intersection. Both cars in front of them and both SUVs behind them had their left turn signals blinking.

“Click-click, click-click,” Angelo said from the passenger seat.

“What?” Jeff asked, his hands resting on the steering wheel. “What’s clicking?”

“The turn signal lights,” Angelo said, pointing at the cars in front of them. “It’s
funny how the cycle rates of the blinkers are independent of the others.”

“Yeah,” Jeff said. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw more blinking. “Hey, if you use the vanity mirror on the visor, I’ll bet you can see the blinkers behind us at the same time.”

“Really?” Angelo said as he reached up to adjust the make-up mirror. “Oh right. They’re all blinking at different rates and—no, wait, now two of them are in sync.”

“Do you suppose they’ll all light up at the same time?”

“They’re way apart now.”

“But watch, they’re getting closer... closer... closer... Oh!”

“Aaugh!”

“Just missed.”

“So close.”

“Okay, the beat goes on...”

“Click-click, click, click...”

“Click, click-click, click...”

“Click-click, click-click—almost...!”

“Annnnnnnnnndddd...”

“CLICK!” they shouted.

“Synchronicity!”
“Ta-dah! Thank you, thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the left turn lane. You’ve provided a powerful bit of unintentional entertainment.”

They high-fived.

“That was fun. We should—”

And then they were gone.
Chapter 21

Buddy was impressed at how many volunteers were willing to help set-up the folding tables in the lobby of Qudos, the primary theatrical space of Queen Margaret Union on the campus of the University of Glasgow. Less than an hour remained before the venue would begin admitting the line of music fans that reached from the entrance and around the building, snaking almost all the way to Café Twenty2.

“You can’t put these ugly tables here,” said an officious woman holding a sheaf of manila folders. “You need to have these removed immediately.”

“Don’t worry,” Buddy found himself saying, “we have tablecloths that will make everything look fine.”

“That’s not the point,” said a fussy man approaching Buddy from the other side. “You can’t sell merchandise here.”

“We’re not selling merch,” Buddy replied.
“Oh no?”
“No,” Buddy explained. “The band’s fanclub will be adding fans’ emails to the social network lists.”
“Don’t you lie to me, young man.”
Buddy recoiled from the man’s hostility. Holding his annoyance in check, he said, “Since I’m telling you the truth, it is not possible that I’m lying, now is it?”
“Are you getting smart with me?”
“No, sir,” Buddy replied evenly. “But it may be that I am being smart in comparison to you.”

The man took a second to process that comment before recognizing the insult. He was about to explode when the voice of a young woman interrupted them.
“He’s correct, you know.”
Buddy turned to see his friend Samantha. Only it wasn’t Samantha but someone who looked like her.
“Hi,” he said.
“Hi,” she replied and turned to confront the two bureaucrats. “We’re not selling merch here,” she said definitively. “We’re not selling anything. We’re acting in accordance
with the band’s contractual arrangements with the University, the Queen Margaret Union, the University Student Union, the venue, and Asylum,” referring to the monthly goth/industrial music night at the college. “So you have no worries,” she added.

“Oh really? Then what are those doing here?” the man sniffed as he pointed at a stack of cardboard boxes bearing the DUC! logo.

“That’s the band’s new release,” Buddy said.

“You cannot sell—”

“They’re not being sold,” Buddy said.

“What?”

“The recordings are not being sold here,” Buddy said with quiet grit in his voice. “Everyone gets a free copy on the way out.”

“Well,” sniffed the man, “that’s not something we approved.”

“You might not have approved it,” Buddy replied, “but it’s in our contract.”

“No,” the man retorted, “I wasn’t—”

“If you like,” the girl who resembled Samantha said, “I can pull up our contract and show it to you.” She wiggled her phone at
them. Before either of them could reply, she continued: “Better yet, give me your email address and I’ll send a copy to you.” She looked down at her phone and began tapping instructions on it. “Would you like to receive it in HTML, as a .docx file, or as a PDF?”

Stymied by the facts, the two petty functionaries squirmed and nervously glanced at each other.

“That won’t be necessary,” the woman said with a frown. “Just you see to it there are no commercial activities performed in this space.”

The two glowered at Buddy; he stared back at them impassively. The two scowled at the young woman; she sent them an angelic look and was still poised to enter an email address on her phone.

The woman sniffed, the man sighed, and then both scurried away, back to their office space elsewhere in the building.

“Sheesh,” Buddy muttered.

“Yeah,” the girl said.

Buddy turned to her and said, “Thanks. That was good thinking.”

“Hey, it’s a joint effort,” she said.
“I like that approach,” he said.
“Team DUC! versus the desk jockeys,” she announced. Both of them smiled. She extended her hand and told him, “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Elise.”
“I’m Buddy, pleased to meet you.”
“Likewise,” she said.
They shook hands. Her grip was businesslike but there was something more. She held his hand just a little longer than necessary.
“Help me get the table coverings on?” she asked, turning to a polycarbonate case bearing logos of the band.
“Sure thing,” Buddy said.
She passed the cardboard cartons and asked Buddy, “Is the new single in these cartons?”
“Yup,” he replied.
She tilted her head to one side, sizing him up. “All right if I have a peek?”
“Well, it is top secret,” Buddy told her solemnly.
“Is it,” she said, her voice fairly dripping with sarcasm.
“No,” he said, smiling. “Help yourself.”
Elise opened the flap on one carton and looked inside. “Oh, cool!” she said.

“I like their graphics,” Buddy said. “They seem simple at first, but then you look again and there are mysteries and anomalies in them,” Buddy added.

“I agree,” Elise replied. “Their iconography is iconoclastic and ironic.”

“Extra points for three ‘I’ words,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, nodding her head in acknowledgement. “Okay now,” she said
with resolve, “let’s get this party ready to start.”

“You got it,” Buddy replied.

Together, they checked off all the items on the pre-concert worksheet supplied by the anal-retentive office manager in the DUC! office in Los Angeles.

They went for coffee at Café Twenty2 while the crowd entered the venue.

“Oh shit,” Elise said.

“What?” Buddy said.

“I never even looked to see who was the special guest artist who’s playing with the band tonight. Do you know? Are they any good?”

“It’s a surprise,” Buddy said.

“Duh,” she said. “So surprise me.”

Buddy debated holding back on the info, but relented and said, “Yo-Yo Ma.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“The classical cellist?”

“Yup.”

“Does he know about the volume level?” she asked. “Because if not, I am genuinely concerned for the man’s cochlea.”
Buddy smiled. “His cochlea will be fine. I made sure he has these.” He held out a small black plastic container labeled Eargasm Earplugs.

“Oh,” Elise said, “I’ve heard about those. Good for rock concerts, yeah?”

“The best,” he said. “Here, take a set.” She took the container and then asked, “What about you?”

“Mine are in my pocket. Those are new. See? The case is still sealed.”

“So, what’s the deal here? Did these ‘fall off the back of a truck’ or something like that?”

“No,” Buddy replied, chuckling. “The distributor sent DUC! a carton of them. They’re trying to get record labels to pay to have their bands’ logos on the plastic case.”

“Ugh,” she said in disgust. “That seems cheesy. Is that how you say it in America?”

“Yup. Cheesy,” Buddy replied. “Also: hyped, flacked, jacked, and crapped.”

“Whoa,” she said.

“What?”

“A bit angry with some of the faults of capitalism, are we?”
Buddy grinned. “A little, yeah.”
“Good for you,” she said. She closed her hand around the earplugs and told him, “I thank you, and my future hearing ability thanks you.”

Buddy smiled, started to speak, and then thought better of it.

Elise noticed. “Come on,” she said.
“Come on with what?” he teased.
“Out with it,” she told him “You were going to say something. Was it standard misogyny or a clichéd pick-up line?”
“Neither,” he said.
“Yeah?” she asked, unconvinced.
“Really,” he insisted. “It was a joke that I regretted almost making.”
“Oh,” she said. “But now it’s okay because you’ve diffused the situation.”
“How so?” he asked.
“You can claim that the comment was for purposes of discussion. Is it a joke? Is it a bon mot? Is it actually funny or does it get a laugh because it’s juvenile? And so on.”
“I am really liking this approach,” Buddy said.
“All right, then,” Elise said. “Spill it.”
“All right, then,” Buddy said evenly. “In reply to giving thanks for your future hearing, I was going to say: Don’t worry your pretty little ears about it.”


“This technique will get me past a lot of bad jokes,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

“Ouch,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said with a rueful smile. “Now you know how that feels. On a related topic, my brother used to say I had elf ears.”

“You’re inviting me to gaze at your ears and make a comment?” he asked.

She nodded. “Sure.” Reaching up with both hands, she pulled her hair back and rotated her head slowly from one side to the other. “Our model Elise,” she crooned in an emcee tone of voice, “is wearing a ruby stud in her right ear and an aquamarine stud in her left ear.”
“Nope, that won’t work,” Buddy said.
“What won’t?” Elise said, looking at him straight on.
“Mentioning the jewelry in a feeble attempt to call attention away from your elf ears.”
“I have to warn you,” she said quietly, “you are not likely to get to first base if you mock my elf ears.” Without batting an eye, she instantly changed her tone of voice and asked, “Is that how you say it, ‘get to first base’?”
“That depends on whether you’re talking baseball or dating, because—”
“Dating,” Elise said, and his heart leaped. She immediately altered her tone and asked, “What time is it? Shouldn’t we be getting back?”
“I have to warn you,” Buddy told her sotto voce, “I may sometimes mention your lovely elf ears.”
“That’s nice! I knew we could work things out between us,” she said, rising. “Doesn’t it feel good to end our first fight so quickly? We are going to have to figure out a really good way to make up.”
Also rising, Buddy said, “I agree.”
“Goodie,” she said.
Buddy grabbed the check and began doing calculations in his head to figure out the tip while frowning at the unfamiliar currency in his wallet.
“Here,” she said, “Let me help. Are you a stingy, medium, or generous tipper?”
“Generous,” he said.
“Good on ya,” she said.
“That’s Australian, I thought.”
“Fook you,” she said.
“That’s Liverpool,” he said.
She grinned at him. “We say ‘fook’ in lots of places. C’mon. Let’s get back. There might be a crisis or something.”
“No crisis,” he said. “Everybody in the building, including those two fussbudgets, has my number.” He held up his phone.
“Okay then,” she said. “Let us move love forward with this superlative example of EU/USA inter-racial relations.”
They held hands until they entered the theater. She turned to him and said, “Perhaps we should at least pretend to be keeping things businesslike. For the benefit of the
other volunteers. You wouldn’t want them to think you were playing favorites.” With that, she gave his hand a squeeze before letting go.

“So if I was going to kiss you,” he said, “I should have kissed you when we were still outside, right?”

She looked at him a moment, a smile forming on her lips. She checked the time, nodded to herself, grabbed his arm, and pulled him toward the door. “Let’s move it, mister, we don’t have much time.”

“Okay,” he said, happily allowing himself to be guided out of the building.

They took a dozen steps away from the exit, turned to each other, moved easily into each other’s arms, and kissed as if there would never be a tomorrow.

“Wow,” she said at last. “See you after the show?”

“Yes,” he replied with a wry smile on his lips. “Is this a trick question?”

She grinned, gave him a peck on the lips, turned, and marched into the theater. He followed, shaking his head at his good fortune.
The concert was a blast, figuratively and literally. The band opened with *Knee Deep Mine Sweep Time Keep Lover’s Leap*, a thirty-seven minute modulated psychodrama with the band supplying a 93-decibel sonic stew that allowed Yo-Yo Ma to improvise on J.S. Bach’s *Six Suites for Solo Cello* before deftly transitioning to the *allegro molto vivace* of Zoltán Kodály’s *Sonata for solo cello, Op. 8*.

At the conclusion of the piece, the audience whooped with joy, delivering an ovation that continued for several minutes, finishing with chants of “DangerMa, DangerMa, DangerMa!”

The middle of the concert alternately slurried and rocked, with the band twisting and distorting every possible definition of “song” and “music” and “melody” and “harmony.” The group’s sea of sound was accompanied by a light show of mesmerizing moiré patterns projected onto every surface in the auditorium, including the audience. Other than inducing a dozen cases of vertigo and one epileptic fit, the barrage of sonic and
visual energy was a stone solid hit with the crowd.

The last number was their new track, *Move Love Forward*, prompting Buddy to move back to the tables in case any help was needed handing out the singles.

As he entered the lobby, a university security officer walked over to him, holding a woman’s purse in the self-conscious way men sometimes hold women’s purses.

“Excuse me, sir, but are you with the band?” the officer asked.

“Yes, sir,” Buddy replied evenly.

“This fell down from the roof,” the officer said, holding out the rhinestone-covered clutch.

“It’s raining purses?” Buddy said.

“Well, one purse, anyway,” the officer said. “There are five girls climbing down the fire escape. Apparently, they listened to the show through an air shaft.”

“Thanks,” Buddy said. He held out his hand for the purse. “I’ll return the purse and ask them to stop climbing on rooftops.”

The officer hesitated. With the briefest shrug of his shoulders, he handed Buddy the
purse. “Okay,” the officer told him. “But this is now your responsibility.”

“No problem,” Buddy said. “It’ll be fine. We get this in America, too. I’m used to it.” Buddy grasped the purse unselfconsciously, grabbed some copies of the band’s latest release and went outside.

The girls were just dropping to the ground from the lower level of a wrought iron fire escape. Now they found themselves in a dead end; the only way out was past Buddy.

“I think one of you may have dropped this,” he said, slightly lifting the purse. “Also, I am totally amazed at your dedication to hearing the show. Fans like you should be recognized in some way, so I hope you’ll accept their new single as a thank you from the band.” He held out the purse and the vinyl.

The girls didn’t move.

“I can just put this down on the pavement, if you prefer.” He did so, turned away from the girls and took a few steps out of the dead end. He stopped, turned back and said, “By the way, you can help me with some research for the band, if that’s okay
with you. They’re arguing with their record company about releasing their next single through a phone app. What do you guys think? Do you like or hate that idea?”

They hesitated. They glanced nervously at the purse and the singles. They glanced at each other. They nodded their heads.

“Like.”
“Like.”
“Like it.”
“Sounds good.”
“Yeah, that’s cool.”
“Thanks,” Buddy said, sincerely. “I’ll pass that along.” He smiled and gave them a wave.

And then he was gone.
indy and Riff sipped mocha lattés at a sidewalk table in front of the How Ya Brewin’? café. They had moved their chairs together so they were both facing the boulevard where a viewing stand was being erected for the city’s annual Art Faire and Pride Parade scheduled for the upcoming weekend.

One of the construction workers passed near them. He glanced at their steaming mugs and asked, “Good coffee?”

“¡Delicioso!” Cindy said.

The man nodded. He looked at Riff and told him, “Te preocupas por la hermosa señorita.”

Cindy smiled and replied, “Gracias por el cumplido.”

The man touched the brim of his hard hat, turned, and got back to work.

Riff looked at Cindy. “You speak Spanish?”
“Only on this plane of existence,” she replied.

“Ah,” he said.

They returned to quietly sipping their coffees while idly watching the construction going on across the street.

Two men sat down at the table directly behind them. It was impossible to avoid overhearing their conversation.

“So, how was your day?” the first man inquired.

“Interesting!” the other man replied.

“Really?”

“Oh yeah! So, I’m on set and John, the stage manager, comes over, and what he tells me about craft services you’re not going to believe!”

“Okay, time out. You know that I don’t know about any of this crap. I don’t know any of these people or what they do. Hell, I don’t even know what you do.”

“Right, right. Sorry. Okay, so I’m on set for the production of this TV infomercial called ‘Magical Musical Memories for Geezers.’ Okay, it’s not called that, but it might as well be. Anyway, the stage manager,
John Stewart, comes over to warn me that some of the food at the craft services table has been spiked. ‘You watch,’ he says, ‘the cast and crew are going to be freaking catatonic by lunchtime.’ And he was right!”

“Hang on... you’re telling me that Jon Stewart is now a stage manager for TV productions?”

“Not Jon Stewart, the comedian. John Stewart, the stage manager. You know, Kristen’s father.”

“Kristen?”


“Oh, yeah...”

“Why are you looking like that?”

“Sorry. It’s just...”

“What?”

“Well, somehow I didn’t think Kristen Stewart had a dad or a mom.”

“Sure she does. Jules and John Stewart.”

“Huh.”

“What does that mean?”

“I guess I didn’t think about it because Kristen just seemed to suddenly appear, you
know? I mean, one minute the world didn’t have Kristen Stewart and the next minute she seemed to be everywhere.”

“How’d you think she got here, Immaculate Conception?”

“Well, I don’t know how neat and tidy it was...”

“Yeah, I guess you’d have to ask Jules and John about that.”

Cindy and Riff found it impossible to suppress their laughter and quickly got up to leave.

A man burst out of the alley two doors down the block. He was wearing black lace-up boots, army green pants, and a dark gray windbreaker. On the right sleeve of the jacket was a small flag of apartheid-era South Africa. On the back was a large Confederate States of America battle flag.

From his belt, he drew a Glock 41 handgun and began firing .45 caliber rounds into every customer in sight.

“She’s on that, jew libtards!” he shouted. When he had emptied the weapon, he contemptuously threw it at the plate glass
window of the café and pulled an M67 fragmentation grenade from his belt.

The degenerate screamed at the top of his lungs, “Conservatism now, conservatism tomorrow, conservatism forever!” He was about to throw the grenade at the viewing stand across the street but the device detonated during his wind-up. The explosion eviscerated him and damaged the bodies within a twelve-foot radius.

Cindy and Riff were already in transition to another place and another time. Only their voices remained for a few seconds.

“We should be dead,” Cindy observed.

“Again,” Riff added.
Buddy found himself answering to the name of Gerry Larry, which was confusing at first, but gradually it became clear to him that Gerry was an entertainment writer for the Immedia Wire Service and had been assigned to interview the two founding members of DANGERhOX: the female keyboard player, Hox, and the male guitarist, Yörnng.

With a list of questions in one pocket and a digital audio recorder in another, Buddy-as-Gerry showed his laminated All Access pass to the glowering security team stationed outside the stage door at the rear of the Hollywood Palladium. The concert had concluded an hour ago but fans still lingered around the venue, eager to snap a photo or ask for an autograph.

“Hold on a second,” the monster-size bouncer said. “Lemme zap the pass.” A turkey-size hand brought an electronic scanner up to read the bar code on the
laminate. There was a beep from the device. “Okay,” said the giant. He reached out a log-size arm to open the large metal door.

“Thanks,” Gerry said.

“Yup,” replied the mini-mountain.

Once inside the theater, there were more bouncers, each one progressively less colossal in size. The same routine took place: Name. Purpose of Visit. Scan the Pass. “Okay.”

Finally, Gerry made it into a hallway with a long row of dressing rooms. He knocked on the door adorned with a hand-painted sign reading, “The Stahhhhs!”

The portal opened and Buddy, Riff, and Cindy were reunited. Except they were not themselves. Inside the dressing room, inside this new level of reality, the interviewer was Buddy-as-Gerry, the keyboardist was Cindy-as-Hox, and the guitarist was Riff-as-Yörnng.

The two band members raised digital recording devices, switched them on, and began interviewing the interviewer.

“When did you become a writer?”

“Have you always wanted to write?”

“Are you working on a novel?”

“Did you go to college?”
“Do you love noise-rock?”
“Do you hate it?”
“Or just tolerate it?”
“Is your name really Gerry Larry?”
“How much does Immedia pay you?”
“How do you feel when something you wrote gets taken out of context?”
“Does Immedia censor your work?”
“This is interesting,” Gerry cut in.

The ping-ponged enquiries from the band continued:

“If we say ‘motherfucker’ or ‘shit-for-brains,’ will it be deleted from the story?”
“Do you interact with your readers?”
“Were you depressed as a child?”
“What are your political views?”

“Plus,” Gerry noted as he clicked on his device, “we’re all recording it together.”

The two-pronged interrogation from the duo continued:

“Are you gay?”
“Are you straight?”
“Are you neutered?”
“What’s your diet?”
“When you masturbate, do you think of movie stars?”
“Are you vegan?”
“Do you wear sweat-shop clothing?”
“I want to join in on this!” Gerry exclaimed.
“Okay, point made,” Hox said.
“Yeah, that’s close enough for rock,” Yörnng said.
Both band members set their recording devices aside (but didn’t turn them off). “It’s just as well we stopped,” Hox said, “we were running out of questions.”
“Not me,” Yörnng said.
She stuck out her tongue at him and received a grin in response.
“That was an information overload,” Gerry said. “Is that how you guys feel when you’re being interviewed?”
“Sometimes.”
“Sorry.”
“It’s all right. Musicians and journalists are scum. We deserve each other.”
“Ouch,” Gerry said.
“We’ve all got plenty of company,” Hox said. “Proletarians are scum. Politicians are scum. Business people are scum. Music business people are scum-and-a-half. We’re
starting to get used to it. So, Mr. Interviewer, Mr. Journalist, Mr. Scrivener, what is your hidden agenda? You have part of our attention. How will you use it? Or...” She held up her hand for silence.

There was stillness for a moment. All three of them listened to the sounds of the building, the sounds of the air in the room, the sounds of their breathing. Each of them cocked their heads and smiled during their contemplation.

“Wow,” Cindy-as-Hox said.
“Nice,” Riff-as-Yörnng said.
“That was the best listening session ever,” Buddy-as-Gerry said.

GERRY LARRY: Okay, so, I’ve come prepared with a list of questions calculated to show that the Immedia Wire Service maintains only the very highest standards of journalism, etc., and that we
are totally committed to excellence in every possible way, yada yada yada, but in addition, the queries have also been designed to demonstrate our willingness to pursue a story to the ends of the earth, relentless in our fortitude, resolute, if you will, and so on and so forth—but wait, there’s more!—it turns out that these questions have also been developed to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that members of our esteemed staff of writers are scholarly, erudite, well-mannered, good-looking, and masters of the English language. But that’s all complete bullshit. The truth is that I’d just like to chat with you about your music.

**HOX:** That was delightfully circuitous. Did you partake of that vile energy drink that sponsors us, or are you always hyped up like this?

**GL:** Yes, and yes.

**HOX:** Sorry, and it must be exhausting.

**GL:** Hence the energy drink.

**HOX:** Touché.
GL: Let’s get the standard stuff out of the way. Hox, you only go by that name, is that right?

HOX: It’s my name now. My birth name was Hudson Olivia Xavier.

GL: Hudson?

HOX: Yes. It’s why I had to kill her and re-emerge as Hox.

GL: Did your parents mind?

HOX: Doesn’t matter. They’re lucky I didn’t kill them.

GL: And you, Yörnng. Any tale surrounding your name?

YÖRNNNG: It’s pronounced “yorning.” And feel free to call me Yörn.

GL: Okay. What were your backgrounds in music?
HOX: None for me, unless you count accordion lessons. Yörn went to Julliard.

GL: Really?

YÖRNNNG: Five years, never graduated.

GL: Why?

YÖRNNNG: They didn’t accept my thesis project.

GL: Which was...?

YÖRNNNG: The first DANGERhOX single.

GL: That was The Meet Cute at the Meat Market Boycott on Boylston Heights Cha-Cha-Cha, isn’t that right?

HOX: Correct. Although it’s a misleading title since it’s a samba.

GL: You guys only put songs online then.

HOX: That’s right.
YÖRNNG: Now we release 45 rpm 12-inch singles on 180 gram vinyl. Fans convert the analog to digital and distribute them online.

GL: There’s not much revenue stream for you in that.

HOX: All the money in the music business is in touring and publishing.

GL: Which you control.

HOX: Which we control.

GL: No wonder there are stories of you guys having flare-ups with DUC! [The band’s record label, Decidedly Unusual Content. — Ed.]

HOX: Creative dweebs will always fight with business dweebs. I think our arrangement is something new for them. They are overseeing everything related to merch. When we make money, they make money.

GL: If you guys are in charge of the cash, that’s rare. Usually, the business people gobble up the
gross profits and give artists the crumbs. Or sometimes even decide that the artists will not receive any cut at all.

**HOX:** And they’d probably try that on us were it not for our having family members who are CPA dweebs. But we’re not getting into that.

**GL:** What auditing firm are they with?

**HOX:** I guess that will require the services of an investigative reporter.

**GL:** Ouch again.

**YÖRNNNG:** She’s good at that. Don’t ever miss a chord change coming out of the bridge. Her glare can hurt. And it can last for days.

**GL:** You can keep up a glare for days?

**HOX:** God no. But I can turn it on multiple times a day when required.

**GL:** Okay! I understand there’s a rift with DUC! about credits and band photos on your releases.
YÖRNNNG: A rift. Yeah, that’s what it is.

HOX: Right. We wanted no photos or credits because what you hear is by the entity called DANGERhOX. We lost that battle and now so there’s this.

GL: This will be, what, printed on the back cover?

HOX: I imagine the label dweebs will do whatever the hell they want to do. How do you like it?

*Written, programmed, performed, recorded, & produced by DANGERhOX*

Hox: Kafkaesque keyboards. Yörng: gimmicky guitars.
GL: Well, uh, this is, um...

HOX: My six-year-old niece made it for us. The dashes are her signature artistic flourish this year. Last year, it was exclamation points. Year before that, asterisks. You watch, she’ll wind up creating the next Wingdings or Webdings and the price of online publishing will go up, damn her.

GL: So she’s a...

HOX: A vicious, decadent little capitalist, yes.

GL: Did she decide on the small “h” in the band name?

HOX: That was Yörn.

YÖRNNG: With one lowercase letter, the name looks like a logo no matter what type font is used.

GL: That’s cool! Okay, now, the Immedia dweebs said I should be sure to segue to the clothing, whatever that means.
HOX: Ahh, the product placement crap. Okay, my Luxe Wrinkle-Free Graystone shirt is from UNTUCKIt.com. These are Brooks Brothers Regent-Fit Wool Tuxedo Pants. The vest is from Second Life Thrift Shop. The Nevermind Black Steel Toe Combat Boots are from Sinister Soles.

GL: Nice.

HOX: Thanks. And my lingerie is from Victoria’s Secret.

GL: Really?

HOX: Don’t be daft. Of course not. I have to say that for contractual reasons.

GL: Okay. And Yörnng...?

YÖRNNNG: My Scarf Tie Flowy Midi Dress is from & Other Things. It’s in tempting turquoise, a color to die for. The tights are Capezio Ultra-Soft Matte White. The footwear is by Jimmy Choo. These are my ‘do me’ pumps.

GL: Patent leather?
YÖRNNG: But of course.

GL: Highly polished.

YÖRNNG: That’s to let the little boys look up my skirt.

GL: How very thoughtful of you.

YÖRNNG: I’m giving back to the community. I’m a giver.

GL: Obviously.

[There was a knock on the dressing room door.]

HOX: Avanti.

[Angelo-as-Assistant entered, handed a piece of paper to Hox, nodded at Yörnng, and exited. Hox glanced at the paper and laughed. She used saliva to affix it to the mirror.]

YÖRNNG: That’s delightfully odd.

GL: Did you say ‘gothicomedic’?

HOX: I did, and I am not apologetic about it at all.

GL: No, I like the term.

HOX: Thank you.

GL: No problem.
HOX: You have to admit that’s the best No Parking sign you’ve ever seen. It’s quite lovely, don’t you think?

GL: Sure. I also like the latticework behind the sign. But, um...

HOX: Yeah, right, okay. Digression is officially over. Please carry on.

GL: How did the band start?

HOX: The world wasn’t quick enough to stop us.

GL: Seriously.

HOX: [Does a passible Jack Nicholson impression. — Ed.] You can’t handle the seriously! Wait, wrong line, wrong movie. We’re doing Almost Famous, not A Few Good Men. Sorry. Okay, the seriousness of our approach to music. Both of us heard harmony in the air molecules around us. Both of us felt compelled to embrace the sounds of the universe. Both of us wanted to bond with the music of the spheres, the music of the stratosphere, the music of beating hearts. To
accomplish that, we had to do whatever was necessary: Entice the sounds. Entrap them. Capture them. Nurture them. Feed them. Praise them. Lead them to lie down with one another, layer upon layer. Organize the noise. Make the machines play the rhythm of the clouds. Create a concentration of tintinabulation. Guide listeners through our auditory landscape. Dance and revel in the sonics, subsonics, supersonics, ultrasonics, and the just plain godawful miasma of melodies. We seek to make the space between human ears a den of din.

GL: That’s excellent!

HOX: Plus, Yörn needed to say ‘fuck you’ to Julliard and I needed to say ‘fuck you’ to my parents. So, musically, we were a match made in heaven.

YÖRNNG: It wasn’t a match made in heaven. It was the fix-up from hell.

HOX: Ooooh, tension within the band. Fook you!

YÖRNNG: Fook you!
[They made obscene gestures at each other and then cracked up. — Ed.]

GL: When I described your first couple of singles, I said—

HOX: You said it was as if the gloomiest metal band in the world made hypnotic horror-movie music that combined the passion of Puccini’s love arias with the divine dissonance of Stravinsky, then performed the tunes at a volume equal to the birth of creation and at the approximate speed of the continental drift.

GL: You memorized that?

HOX: Best review ever.

YÖRNGG: That’s why we picked you for the interview.

GL: Thanks. I appreciate it. So, what I was leading to is the genre of your music. I’ve read reviews with lots of different terms.
HOX: The one that we see a lot is ‘sludge metal.’ It’s often used as a pejorative but we think it’s complimentary. I love sludge metal. The sludgier, the better.

YÖRNNG: I still like ‘funeral doom metal.’

HOX: The thing is, I don’t think we play metal at all. Just because our music is full of sonic explosions doesn’t make us metal. Go hear the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra perform *Le Sacre du printemps* or Hindemith’s *Mathis der Maler* for proof of that.

GL: If it’s not metal, it’s... what, exactly?

HOX: Robot fornication music.

YÖRNNG: Slo-mo car crash music.

HOX: *Die Götterdämmerung*.

YÖRNNG: Walpurgisnacht.

HOX: Christmas music for heroin addicts.
YÖRNNG: Satan’s sweet sonics.

HOX: Atomic particle crunch.

YÖRNNG: Oat bran crunch.

HOX: It’s duck season.

YÖRNNG: It’s wabbit season.

HOX: It’s duck season.

YÖRNNG: It’s wabbit season.

HOX: It’s wabbit season!

YÖRNNG: It’s duck season!

[They both make gunshot noises. — Ed.]

YÖRNNG: Speaking of [gunshot noise], maybe you should tell him about the end game.

GL: Yes, do tell me about the end game.
HOX: Our goal is to make one final release with an over-mastered final chord that shakes the foundation when you play it loud. We want to interact with fans of the band all around the globe to arrange for everyone to play the track at the same time. The idea is that the sonic shock wave from the concluding chord will create a quiver which grows into a tremor which expands into a quake that shakes the earth out of its orbit, thus enabling this science experiment called the ‘human race’ to start over and maybe this time do it right.

GL: There’s an element of pessimimism in many of your statements.

HOX: You wanna make something of it?

GL: I am making something of it. I’m asking you to comment on it for the record.

HOX: Oh, right. Okay, well, let me ask you a question first. Do you think I’m mistaken for being pessimistic?

GL: Not necessarily. Depends on your reasons.
HOX: I could take you through it.

GL: Please do.

HOX: Eons ago, God made a decision.

GL: Which God are we talking about here?

HOX: A God, the God, any God. Whether God is a he, a she, or an it remains to be seen upon death.

GL: An it?

HOX: God could be an energy field.

GL: Ah, good point.

HOX: Anyway, God decided to conduct many tests, trials, and investigations.

GL: Did he...

HOX: Or she or it.

GL: Right, right.
HOX: And thus, the experiments were set in motion.

GL: Experiments...

HOX: These were scientific investigations involving creation and evolution. There may have been a hundred experiments or a hundred billion. Earth was just one. Unfortunately, Earth is one of the failed experiments. Instead of humanity in harmony, we have discord, distress, disaster, and death. We are literally destroying our water and air. The path we’re on leads only to extinction.

GL: There was a thesis paper written a year ago at Princeton that made similar points. It was called ‘The Universal Petrie Dish Research Trials.’ There was a bit of controversy over it, I believe.

HOX: There was indeed.

GL: Were you aware of the thesis?

HOX: Yes.
YÖRNNNG: She wrote it.

GL: Really? That’s cool! I wonder if—

End Transcription.

The dressing room door crashed open and Samantha burst into the room in an aura of pheromones and Si Passione. Except it wasn’t Samantha but someone who looked like her.

“Hi,” the young woman said to the startled duo and their interviewer. “I’m Heather. They call me Heather the Heathen. Okay, I know what you’re thinking. People say I’m a groupie, but I’m not. I’m just a fan who’s horny.”

Jeff-as-Bouncer appeared in the doorway, with Angelo-as-Cop behind him. “Everything okay in here?” the bouncer asked.

“Fine,” said Cindy-as-Hox.

“Peachy,” said Riff-as-Yörnng.

“It’s all good,” said Buddy-as-Gerry.
“You sure?” the bouncer asked, pointedly sizing up the gatecrasher.

“Yes!” said all four simultaneously.

“Okay, okay,” the cop replied. “We’ll just leave you be.” With one final suspicious glance around the room, they departed, closing the door behind them.

Heather said, “I thought they’d never leave.” She glanced at Buddy and looked him up and down. “Um-hmm,” she said. She glanced at Riff and looked him up and down. “Um-hmm.” She glanced at Cindy and looked her up and down. “Um-hmm.” She surveyed the room. “Okay,” she announced, “who wants to be first?”

All of them came before they went.
Jeff and Angelo were dressed as grubby humanoid extraterrestrials. Several dozen other men, women, and children were in similar attire. Everyone was hungry and thirsty but grudgingly endured the annoying instructions coming at them through a bullhorn as one of the production company’s Assistant Directors harangued the throng.

“All right, people, listen up!” the A.D. barked. “We’re going to try it one more time. You all have your groups. Groups A, B, and C will mill about until the first cue. And what’s the first cue? Anybody?”

“Laser blast,” came a voice from the crowd.

“That is correct,” replied the amplified voice through the megaphone. “The first cue is the laser blast. You all flinch. Then comes the second cue. And what’s the second cue?”

“Explosion by the back wall.”
“That is correct,” the A.D. blared through the bullhorn. “After the blast, Group A crouches down and takes half steps left and then right, or right and then left. Group B tries to grab one another in fear. And Group C begins to run toward the cameras but be sure to miss the cameras this time! Okay, let’s try it again. Places!”

“In position!” shouted the three Group Leaders.

“Lights!” shouted the A.D.

The lights came up, sending an almost painful amount of illumination over every square inch of the 10,000 sq. ft. studio. “Lights at level!” shouted the lighting engineer.

“Sound!” shouted the A.D.

“Active!” yelled the recording engineer.

“Video!” shouted the A.D.

“Recording!” shouted the video technician.

Quietly, the A.D. said, “Ms. Argento.” He held the bullhorn near her face.

Asia Argento—actress, director, singer, model, DJ, and writer—surveyed the tableaux
before her and said into megaphone, “Action.”

The laser sound effect zapped, the controlled explosion blasted, and the humanoids went through their choreographed movements.

“Cut. That’s got it,” Asia said. “Let’s move in for the medium shots.”

“All right,” the A.D. blared through the bullhorn, “cameras to fourth, fifth, and sixth positions. Lighting crew, we’re moving on to cues 67 through 72. Humanoids, you have fifteen minutes. Thank you.”

Asia began conferring with the director of photography, the A.D., and the stunt coordinator.

Jeff and Angelo looked askance as their fellow humanoids made a beeline for the craft services tables and began nibbling pastries and sipping coffee.

“Jeff,” Angelo said quietly, “what the hell is going on here?”

“Let me get one of the call sheets,” Jeff said. He picked up a sheaf of papers left on the studio floor where the director had been sitting a moment before.
“According to this,” Jeff told Angelo, “we’re in production on the first season of a History Channel series called Technoplane.”

“Are we getting paid?” Angelo asked.

“Probably, but based on what’s been happening lately, I doubt we’re going to be around long enough to collect.”

“What are all those acronyms?” Angelo pointed at a sheet of paper with many mentions of VFX, CGI, Mocap, 3D Mocap, and the like.

“VFX is visual effects,” Jeff said. “CGI is computer generated imagery. Mocap is motion capture. And 3D is three dimensions.”

“Whatever happened to just making a movie?”

“That still happens,” Jeff replied, “but those are now called documentaries.”

“Comin’ through,” a crewman said.

“Lady with a baby,” a crewman said.

“Hot soup,” a crewman said.

“Move it or lose it,” a crewman said.

Jeff and Angelo stepped aside as four crewmembers maneuvered a 23-foot-high latex tree across the soundstage.

“What’s that?” Angelo asked Jeff.
One of the crew heard him and replied, “This is the hero of the next scene.”

“There’s somebody inside that?”

“There will be,” the crew member said.

“Hey Animal?”

“What?”

“Who’s playing the plant?”

“Byron.”

“Oh right.” The crew member turned to Jeff and explained, “Guy named Byron Smolka is playing the Cypress Roboticus.” He nodded at the flora. “He saves your ass, but then he gets laser zapped and goes nuts.”

“So,” Angelo asked, “we’ll be in a scene with a schizophrenic tree?”

“If you’re lucky and the tree’s not careful.”

A voice boomed through a slightly distorted public address system. “Asia? The promo arrived.”

Asia said a few words to her A.D. He nodded and used his bullhorn to reply to the voice on the P.A.

“Asia says put it on the monitors.”

“Okay, will do,” boomed the P.A. voice.
Within a moment, most of the cast and crew gathered in front of the monitors at various points around the soundstage. The sixty-second promotional announcement began with moody images of people morphing into animals, plants, and robots, accompanied by Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana* on the soundtrack. The half-naked actors were being menaced by gargantuan animals, sap-dripping trees, human-eating Venus flytraps, and robots of every shape and size.

After 45-seconds of the shocking imagery, the cast members appeared in artsy grainy stills as the soundtrack music made way for a deep-voiced announcer intoning the hype: “The fate of humanity is in their bloodstained hands. By joining them, you will be in for the ride of your life as you inhabit *Technoplanet*, airing Friday nights at 10 Eastern, 7 Pacific, only on The History Channel.”

The cast and crew burst into applause. Backs were slapped, arms were squeezed, and high-fives were exchanged.

Angelo whispered to Jeff, “That was stupid.”
Jeff whispered back, “That’s not the point.”

“What is the point?” Angelo whispered.

Jeff waved Angelo over to a corner of the soundstage so they could speak in a normal tone.

“The point is,” Jeff told him, “the network is putting some money into hyping the show. That’s why they’re happy.”

“It’s still stupid,” Angelo muttered.

“Yeah, okay, fine,” Jeff said. “But keep it to yourself when we’re around these people.”

But Angelo couldn’t let it go. “I’m talking to one of the suits,” he said adamantly.

“No!” Jeff warned, but Angelo was already on the move towards a group of men in expensive business attire. “You can’t—” Jeff stopped, surprised to see that both he and Angelo were now also dressed in Brioni suits.

“Excuse me,” Angelo said to one of the men.

“Hello,” the man said cheerfully. He extended his hand and said, “Marty Morrison, head of publicity. Great show, huh?!”
“Yeah, great,” Angelo said without conviction. “But what I’ve seen in this program is fantasy.”

“No, it’s all researched and based on fact!” Marty said enthusiastically.

“No it’s not,” Angelo stated.

“It’s based on commonly accepted scientific speculation,” Marty stated proudly.

“What does that even mean?” Angelo asked.

“It means it’s based on ideas that are genuinely scientific-adjacent.”

“Oh for crying out—Look, the question is: why is The History Channel showing fiction?”

“You don’t know their new approach,” Marty told him.

“A new approach to history?”

“It’s all summed up in their new rebranding campaign,” Marty said with a trace of pride. “Take a look at what the marketing guys have come up with.”

“You mean this right here?” Angelo asked.

“Yeah! Is that a great tagline, or what!”

“That’s very funny,” Angelo said.
“What’s very funny?” Marty asked, doing an excellent job of faking sincerity.

Angelo turned to Jeff for help.

“Marty,” Jeff said, “when the History Channel tagline is: ‘History: Then, Now, and Beyond,’ that displays a fundamental misinterpretation of the term ‘history.’ That’s what’s funny.”

Marty smiled the smile of the well-practiced hype monger and began to give Jeff and Angelo a bright, facile, and unctuous reply, but—

Jeff and Angelo were gone.
Part Four

Unforgiving Clouds of Razors

“Life is bliss, pain, and nonsense. The ratio depends on will and blind luck.”

— Claude Aron
To See With the Eyes of God by John Scott G

Chapter 25

The organist expertly played J.S. Bach’s *Toccata and Fugue in D minor BWV 565*. Many in the congregation swayed slightly to the magnificent music, but the Pastor sat rock-still on his lonely bench between the rostrum and the choir. As the piece neared its conclusion, sensors inside the Pastor gave him his cue and he stood up. After three purposeful strides, his body appeared to slide into his comfort spot at the pulpit. Because of the algorithms loaded into his memory chips, the Pastor felt truly at peace when he took his place behind the microphone and before his audience.

Samantha and Ralph materialized amidst the congregation. Nervously glancing around, they saw Cindy and Riff in another part of the flock. Samantha nudged Ralph and pointed out their two friends. He nodded at their friends, then nudged Samantha and directed her attention to the front row where she saw
Jeff, Angelo, and Buddy, each of them looking around nervously. All of them were relieved that no one was reacting to their appearance.

The last notes of the mighty organ recital reverberated off the walls of the church and then faded away. The Pastor cleared his throat and began to speak in a friendly tone of voice.

“Today’s sermon,” the Pastor said, “is brought to you by Twisted Tales, on American National Broadcasting every Sunday evening at nine. Don’t miss tonight’s episode as fate and misfortune dispose of special guest victim John Mulaney.”

The Pastor took a sip of water from a gold goblet, patted his lips with a radiant pink silk handkerchief, and began his performance.

“We gather in the name of the Holy Spirit! We come together to act for the greater glory of God! We bow our heads and pray, oh Lord, for the everlasting advancement of our faith to the four corners of the earth, but we do not stop there—thanks to your everlasting guidance, we are reaching into the infinite! We affirm, solemnly and mutually, our allegiance to God Almighty. Hear us now, oh
Lord! Hear our covenant as we combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, with the aim of better ordering, preserving, and furthering our faith’s just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, establishments, and offices for the greater good of the colony of man. We humbly beseech thine divine intervention in bringing these miracles to pass, for which we will display eternal gratitude, submission, and obedience to the Word of God!”

Just as no one in the pews had noticed when the seven teens joined the congregation, no one reacted when they departed. All eyes were on the Pastor. All ears were on the sermon. All minds were blank.

Some were amazed when the altar burst into flames.

And then the pulpit.
And then the hymnals.
And then the pews.
And then the Pastor’s hair.

The congregation dissolved into panic and chaos while the Pastor kept right on preaching until his circuits overloaded from the heat. He halted in mid-sentence, his latex face beginning to melt.
The organist took the Pastor’s silence as her cue and launched into César Franck’s *Chorale No. 3 in A minor*. The triumphant nature of the piece was in stark contrast to all of the screaming by the parishioners.

“That’s awful,” Cindy said as they began their next transition.

“The fire?” Riff asked.

“No, the voices,” Cindy replied. “They aren’t harmonizing at all, and most of them are badly off-pitch.”
any of the theater patrons were obviously on dates, others were with friends, and still others were on family outings. A few of them were awkwardly balancing tubs of popcorn and soda as they slid sideways past people already seated in the rows of the multiplex.

“Why are we here?” Riff asked.

“Don’t know,” Cindy replied. “Why are we anywhere?”

“We can get up and leave,” he hinted.

“Let’s stay for the previews and the opening credits,” she suggested.

“What if it’s one of those flicks where they put the credits at the end?”

“We’ll curse them and storm out of the theater.”

“That will upset the people who are here for the movie.”

“We’ll make it a quiet storm.”

“Glad we have a solid plan,” he said sarcastically.
“Hey, somebody has to be organized,” she informed him. “I’m logistics; you’re muscle. Except when we’re talking about computer coding. Then it’s reversed.”

“There’s no muscle needed in computer programming.”

“Which shows how brilliant I am in taking on all responsibilities in that area,” she said.

“Uh-huh. So, what movie are we here to mostly not see?” he inquired.


“What the hell kind of universe would want us to see that?” he wondered.

“A perverse one,” she said.

“How do you know the name of the film?”

“It’s on our ticket stubs,” she said, fishing them out of her jeans pocket and giving him one.

“Why do you have them?” he asked.

“Did you pay?”

“Dunno,” she said.

“Well, if you did, thank you.”

“No problem,” she replied.
“Just don’t think buying me a movie means I’m going to sleep with you,” he told her.

“We’ll see,” she said with an impish grin.

“Because I’m going to sleep with you no matter what.”

“Works for me,” she said. She glanced around. “Sheesh,” she said quietly, “look at this crowd.”

Riff scanned the theater. “It reminds me of something,” he said.

“That time we went to a Walmart?”

“Yes! That’s it.”

“Well, the advent of sound in motion pictures dumbed down the audience,” she said. “And the advent of massive foreign distribution dumbed things down even further.”

“How’s that?” he asked.

“Silent films had intertitles. You had to know how to read if you attended silent films. Sound came in and movies were suddenly a hit among the semi-literate.”

“I’m with you so far,” he said. “Please, do continue, darling.”
“Foreign distribution works best when the stories are easily grasped by all ages in many cultures. So now we have movies that are aimed at the sub-literate.”

“And yet you still want to stay and see the previews?”

“I am keeping my hand on the pulse of society,” she asserted.

“Hmmm,” he said. He took a sideward look at her and shifted in his seat. “Cindy,” he said while trying to keep his voice free from any emotion, “my mom asked me to ask you something.”

“Oh?” Cindy said, immediately sensing an opportunity to exercise her skill in verbal torment.

“It’s no big deal,” he said.

“No big deal,” she said evenly.

“Right,” he said. The ensuing silence was uncomfortable. He didn’t want to have to fight through the silence. He suppressed an urge to squirm and said, “I mean, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“I see,” she said. “I don’t have to answer because, as you indicated, it’s no big deal. That’s what you’re saying, am I correct?”
“Jesus. Forget I brought it up.”

“I think I’ll remember it, darling,” she told him softly. “Perhaps what you meant to say was, ‘Drop the subject.’ Am I correct in this part, at least?”

Riff was silent. She could be the best girlfriend he ever had, and then she could be like some sort of inquisitor. Fuck it, he thought, I’m going to get this over with. He turned to face her.

“You don’t like my parents, do you.”

She tilted her head slightly, considering his statement-question from as many angles as possible. She turned to face him. “That’s what your mom wants to know?”

“Yeah,” he said. He glanced away, irritated.

“Tell me something,” she almost purred. “Why does your mom think she’s so special? I don’t like your parents. I don’t like my parents, I don’t like anybody’s parents...” She changed the subject abruptly. “Those tubs of popcorn are glistening with glop.”

“They call it butter,” he said.

“They can call it butter all they want,” she responded.
“So, can you at least say why you don’t like parents?”

“A lot of reasons,” she said. She sighed contentedly and put her hand on his arm. She slid down a little in her seat.

Riff relaxed a little. The verbal attack seemed to be over. She liked doing that to him every now and then. Practice for college classes, she called it. They both were bound for schools at opposite ends of the country, he to UCLA, she to Georgetown.

“Reasons,” he said quietly.

“What about them?” she said, matching his tone.

“You said you had lots of reasons for not liking our parents.”

“I do,” she said.

“Name three,” he told her.

She considered his request for a moment. “Oh-kaaay,” she said at last, “but remember, you asked for this.”

“I’ll remember,” he replied. “Hit it.”

“First, they’re hypocrites. They get angry at us for doing exactly the same things they did at our age.”

“You’re right,” he said. “Good point.”
“Second,” she continued, “they measure things by what they cost, not what they’re worth.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Yes they do.”

“And I think the third one is the most telling,” she warned.

He turned to look at her. “Lay it on me,” he said.

“They’re the kind of people who demand to see the manager of the coffee shop to blame the barista for what they ordered wrong.”

He thought about that for a moment. He took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “You’re right,” he said matter-of-factly, “I hate parents, too.”

“There ya go,” she said, gently patting his arm.

The lights went down and they endured previews for seven films and commercials for three local retailers.

Once the film began, they were able to sink into the lustrous dark vision created by director Janos Artiste, cinematographer Volos Fizke, production designer Kevin Crowley, and composer Jan S. Z. Immer.
At one point during the screening, Cindy leaned her head on Riff’s shoulder. The lean led to a hug. The hug led to a kiss. The kiss might have led to something if a mental case with modern weaponry hadn’t burst into the auditorium to kill twelve and wound fifty-eight.
Hox was in Santa Barbara, Yörn was in London, the FLUX string quartet was in New York, and the Scrap Arts Music percussion ensemble was in Vancouver. Although they were in multiple time zones and hundreds of miles apart, they were playing together, linked electronically, feeding the computer storage drives, pumping sound into speakers and headphones in all their studio locations as they recorded a piece entitled Coffee Beans, Bluejeans, Mob Scenes, Drag Queens, Smokescreens, Collard Greens, and Guillotines.

Hox had six keyboards in her studio but was currently playing just two, the Waldorf Quantum and the Dave Smith Instruments OB-6.

As the swirling, twirling, and bombastically pulsating sounds came to a conclusion, everyone held their breath. The notes trailed away into the beyond. The
seconds roiled in silence until everyone heard Yörn say quietly, “Yeah!”

Shouts of triumph broke out from musicians and onlookers in the four studio locations on two continents. Sitting alone in her studio, Hox clapped her hands once, and exclaimed, “Ha! Fooled them again.” She turned off her back-up recording devices and joined the conference call of musicians chatting enthusiastically about their current musical outrage.

Adjusting her earpiece to listen to the gab fest, she opened the studio door to admit her dog, a tri-color Basenji. “Hi, cutie,” she said.

“You talkin’ to me?” one of the string players asked playfully.

“Sure,” Hox replied. “But also to my shorthaired hound.”

“What does he play?” another musician asked.

“Chew toy,” she said.

“What’s his name?”

“Leopold III, Bastard King of Bohemia.”

“That’s a mouthful,” said a violinist.

“I just call him Beau,” Hox said.
Yörn could sense that his musical partner was losing interest in the conversation so he assumed his businesslike persona and rapidly ended the various connections with promises to get in touch after completing the preliminary mixing of the tracks.

Hox called Yörn on his private line. They traded ideas for the upcoming mixing session and discussed some tweaks to the computer algorithms programmed into their two studios.

“Gotta make sure the machines play well with each other,” Hox commented.

“And with us,” Yörn added.

They turned from music to the music business. “DUC! sent two sleeve designs,” he said. “Here’s the first. What do you think?”
“I love how the yearning and love in the eyes of a cute puppy have been turned into a bat out of hell who is debating if it’s even worth the time to take a bite out of your hide. I adore this. It’s great.”

“Well, it’s okay,” Yörn said.

“Duo disagreement! Duo disagreement!” she happily noted.

“No, I like it,” Yörn replied. “But it’s not great. It’d be great if the eyes glowed in the dark.”

“That is both tacky and brilliant,” Hox told him. “Instead of the eyes, the whole cover will glow.”

“I was kidding,” he said.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t matter,” she said. “Brilliance shines from many spheres.”

“You’re doing that thing again.”

“What? Oh, writing bad lyrics?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding and managing to have his voice convey the head movement.

“I’m not doing lyrics, bad or otherwise,” she said. “The point is that your ‘glow little glowworm’ idea is terrific if we do it to the bright spots on the cover. That way, DJs will be more likely to lay their hands on the
remixes of our miniscule contribution to music.”

“I would say we were a tad larger than miniscule,” he told her.

“Compared to Mozart,” she replied.

“Oh,” he said. “Well then: small.”

“Slight,” she said.

“Minor,” he said.

“Insignificant.”

“Trivial.”

“Itsy-bitsy.”

“No fair,” he protested. “You just used two adjectives in one turn.”

“Teeny-weeny,” she said.

“Stop that,” he said with a burst of good-natured laughter.

“Yellow Polk-dot Bikini.”

“Oh jeeze, didn’t make that connection!”

He thought a moment. “We should cover that.”

“You’re nuts,” she said.

“Probably,” he admitted.

“Okay,” she said. “Now onto the singles sleeve.”

“I am awaiting your reaction with great anticipation,” he said.
“I tawt I taw a puddytat!” she said, doing Mel Blanc doing Tweetybird.
“I did! I did taw a puddytat!” he said, doing Mel Blanc doing Tweetybird.
“I say we go with both of these designs,” she said in a normal tone of voice.
“We’re too easy on the label,” he said.
“Is that why we fight with them so often?”
“I’ll tell them it’s yes on one of them but they have to guess which one.”
“Yörn,” she said quietly.
“Fine. I’ll tell them it’s a go on both. You are sometimes no fun.” There was a pause. “You there?” he asked.

“I’m here. Just trying to find the ‘fuck you’ emoji that best summarizes my response to you.”

“Well, it’s too late now,” he said. “Goodnight, my muse.”

“Goodnight mon petit chou,” she said.

She ended the call and lovingly scratched Beau on his head. “We have a choice, Beau,” she told him in the same voice she used with her partner. “We can skritch your noggin for a while before we shut down the studio... Or,” she said, pulling her hand away. Beau put a paw up to hold her arm in place. “Oh, I see,” she said. “You think we’ve already voted on this and you’re getting your way. Well, I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” she said with mock seriousness, but continued scratching Beau on his head, behind his ears, and on his neck. The love-rubs continued for a moment and then she spoke again. “Here’s what we’ll do,” she told the dog. “I’ll take a moment to stop the machines from drawing unnecessary power, and afterwards we’ll go
sit on the couch and I’ll skritch you all over. Deal?” She held out her hand and he offered his paw. “You are one hell of a fine animal.”

Her mobile beeped an alert.

She looked at the screen and froze, a look of dread on her face. In an instant—Hox vanished.

Cindy had taken her place.

**CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS**

**LEADING UP TO THE HOMICIDE**

1. Cindy is in the studio with Beau.
2. Her mobile alarm beeps.
3. She checks a video feed from the home security system and sees an intruder breaking in the back bedroom window.
4. Cindy unlocks a studio storage cabinet and activates Darla, a prototype from her brother’s firm, Body Electric Design Corporation.
5. She maneuvers Darla by a keyboard, leaning it forward, its back to the door.
6. Cindy exits the recording studio.
7. Cindy leads Beau into a panic room accessed through a bedroom closet.
8. The intruder sneaks through the house.
9. The intruder enters the recording studio.
10. The intruder attacks what he thinks is Cindy, pushing Darla down on the keyboard, creating a hideous dissonant chord.
11. The intruder commits what he believes is rape, only to find that the sex doll is equipped to deliver a stun-gun level electric shock to any penis penetrating any orifice.
12. The voltage coursing through the intruder’s body causes him to jerk uncontrollably for a few moments before passing out.
13. Cindy waits patiently for the intruder to regain consciousness.
14. Cindy reactivates the electric shock for another few jolting moments.

The intruder took a long time to die. Between each jolt, Cindy used her mobile to take high-resolution photos of the intruder’s
slow demise, every now and then chasing Beau out of the frame before clicking the shutter.

She told herself she was a good person for ridding society of this evil person, although she didn’t fully believe it. Still, she got more satisfaction from her documentary photographic essay than from the departure of the rapist.

After determining that the man no longer had a pulse, Cindy made a cup of herbal tea and debated whether she should get rid of the body on the premises or somewhere off San Marcos Pass. Either way, disposing of a corpse would be tricky, she thought.

Her reverie was cut short by the arrival of the police. There were two plainclothes detectives and four uniformed officers at the door, an eight-ton Alpine Armoring Pit-Bull VX SWAT truck double-parked in the street, and patrol cars blocking all access routes to the house.

With Beau padding eagerly at her side, Cindy opened the front door to meet the police officers.
“It seems as if death is always nearby,” Cindy told them philosophically. She shook her head in regret for the human race.

And then Cindy and Beau were gone.

The officers were confounded by the sudden disappearance. Before they could gather their wits, they were shocked to hear Cindy’s voice whispering in their ears: “Death is the new beginning.”

The officers held their positions as if pieces of statuary, but they jumped when Beau barked from beyond their plane of reality.

Then the officers were gone.
Samantha drove her brother’s SUV into the hotel driveway, bypassed the lobby portico and headed to the valet parking area in front of the entrance to the Grand Ballroom. She left the motor running and removed her house key from the ring holding the vehicle ignition key.

A parking attendant ran up to the SUV and opened the driver’s side door. He froze, fascinated by the sight of Samantha’s nyloned legs. She had hiked up her gown and was replacing her white tennies with high-heeled pumps.

Showing only the slightest irritation at the ogling, she slid her dress down and smoothly swung herself out of the vehicle.

“Watch the wheels the way you watched my legs,” she told the guy without a backward glance. She was positively regal as she headed into the reception.

Just inside the ballroom entrance stood two gangly high school juniors wearing
tuxedos. Samantha paused to survey the crowd. She became aware that one of the boys was aware of her. She gave him a sideward glance and saw him look her up and down, nodding in approval. She turned slightly to look him up and down, shaking her head in disapproval. His face reddened.

She turned back to the reception, spotted her mother talking with the Mayor and several members of the City Council, and moved over to them. Her mom introduced her to the group of pompous and overstuffed politicians. She remained gracious and equivocal as the men shook her hand, holding it a bit too long with both of their meaty paws and smiling a bit too broadly at her. One even used the term, “feminine pulchritude.” With effort, she managed to refrain from rolling her eyes.

Her mother brought the conversation back to a proposed city ordinance that was under consideration. As the adults droned on, Samantha began scanning the crowd, hoping some of her friends had arrived from their part-time jobs. Samantha didn’t see them. Instead, she saw Bette Petersen.
Bette was 29-going-on-fifty and well practiced at the art of the *double entendre*. She could look coy, then lascivious, then faux-innocent, all in the space of several seconds. She was going through her routine for the benefit of a middle-aged man who should have known better. Samantha flinched when the man turned slightly and she saw it was her father. Excusing herself from the group, Samantha headed across the room to confront her dad.

“Stop this! Control yourself.” Her mother had caught up to her. “Whatever you think you’re doing, just stop it,” her mother told her quietly but forcefully.

“He’s flirting with her,” Samantha said. “Right in the middle of the reception.”

“This isn’t the time or the place for this topic, Samantha,” her mother said.

“Damn it, mother, what *is* the time or the place?”

“Leave it alone,” her mother warned.

“I’m tired of being embarrassed,” she told her mother.

“Samantha, just be quiet. Mind your manners and—”
“Mother, I don’t want it to continue a moment longer and I think—”

“This isn’t about you!” her mother said sharply. “Drop it. Now.”

Samantha stared hard at her mother, paralyzed by conflicting sentiments: anger at her father and frustration with her mother, and the other way around. She was also experiencing something akin to mourning because the love she had for her parents was not strong enough to halt the disintegration of respect for their actions. She wanted to shout at both of them but clamped her mouth shut, turned, and marched out of the reception.

In her mind, she was confronting the ugly situation with all the ferocity of the righteously indignant, slapping sense into the offenders, one at a time, in pairs, and all three at once. Welling up within her was an inferno of emotion. She saw herself shaking Bette, her father, and her mother, spinning them into extinction, and then joining them. Without warning, there was—

Nothing.

Samantha’s dream state was peaceful. There was no horizon line, no difference
between land and sky. She was literally in the middle of zilch. She experienced a moment of vertigo. Take control of yourself, she thought. Get a fix on your bearings. Look around. There was nothing to the left or right. She turned a hundred eighty degrees but there was nothing behind her. She looked up and saw only empty air. Was she floating? She began tilting her head forward—No! Never look down! But she had to know.

She took a breath, exhaled, took in another lungful of air and shot a quick glance at her feet. There was the exact same nothing below as above and all around.

“You are confused,” a female voice said.

“Ahhhh!” Samantha gasped. “You scared me,” she told the woman who was now beside her.

“I did not mean to do so. Are you all right?”

“Yes, well, no, not really,” Samantha said. “Where are we?”

“Where do you want to be?”

“On earth,” Samantha said. “I want—”

And they were on earth, standing on a gorgeous promontory, overlooking a calm
sea, luxuriating in the embrace of a gentle cool breeze.

“Is that better?”

“Well, yes, but...” Samantha looked carefully at the woman. “Wait, I know you. You’re Akiko Wakabayashi!”

“That is simply a form in which—”

“I loved you as the Princess of Sergina in Ghidorah, the Three-Headed Monster.

“If you will take a moment to—”

“I just saw that at the university film society GodzillaFest.”

“If you could just—”

“But wait,” Samantha said, “that film came out in 1964, so how can you still look the same?”

“What about now?”

“My God!” Samantha exclaimed. The woman was gone, replaced by a human-sized Cheshire cat. “That’s not possible!”

“What about this?”

The apparition was now a Tibetan monk.

“I— You can’t— It’s not—”

“We are not of your earth, so there are no restrictions on outward appearance.”

“You’re a, a what, an E.T.?”
“Yes.”
“An alien life form?”
“Alien to you, yes.”
“This is insane,” Samantha said.
“Calm yourself. Or, as you might say, be cool.” The alien smiled and asked, “What form comforts you? Simply think it and it shall be.”

Samantha thought of her grandfather when he was young and vibrant, before the cancer took him. And she was standing next to her grandfather.

“Papa Ethan?” Samantha said.
“This form,” the alien told her, “will be both pleasant and melancholy for you. Is that not so?”

Samantha shook her head. “That’s not my grandfather’s voice.”
“Sadly, some of us have not yet mastered voices. Come. Walk while we talk.”
“Um...” Samantha said.
“I sense that you would like to see yet a different form. How about this?”

The alien now bore a slight resemblance to her favorite teacher from when she was in middle school.
“That’s nice,” she said.
“Good. Let us walk.”
“Walk,” Samantha repeated in a daze.
They moved along the clifftop, slowly traversing a wide path that ran alongside the rim. The alien was basking in the sunlight, admiring the vast expanse of ocean, and reveling in the gentle breeze. Samantha kept stealing glances at the apparition next to her.

“Perhaps you will tell us what puzzles you,” she said.

“What?”

“Oh dear, I keep slipping into our language. My apologies to you. Allow me to explain. You see,  is the word we use to describe your planet earth. And  is what we call a female.”

“That’s what those sounds mean?”

“Yes.”

“Literally?”

“That is very astute of you to ask. No, the literal translation for earth is Blue Speck.”

“And your word for female?”

“That would be womb-human.”

“Wow,” she commented. “That’s not very attractive.”
“Our language can be as harsh, misleading, and contradictory as yours.”
“Point taken,” Samantha said.

As they strolled under the canopy of sky, Samantha thought of the Lewis Carroll poem, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, and the alien said quietly, “‘The time has come, the Walrus said, to talk of many things: Of shoes, and ships, and sealing wax—Of cabbages and kings.’ Is that what you were thinking?”

“Yes,” Samantha replied. “Is that going to happen often?”

“Do you want it to happen often?”

“No,” Samantha said, “not really.”

“Then it shall not,” the alien assured her.

They did, however, speak of many things: The vastness of the universe. The diverse parts of each person’s life that might exert influence on parts of other people’s lives. Infidelity and its adverse effects on other family members. The complications of reconciling multiple sets of interplanetary physical laws.

Samantha was pleased to be viewing humanity from an otherworldly perspective. “So much of what we accept here on earth, or
at least here in the United States, seems misguided,” she said.

“True,” the alien said ruefully.

“I was raised with ‘the golden rule’ repeated many times in school classes, church classes, children’s books...” She sighed.

“And?” the alien inquired.

“And then the very same people who kept pounding that idea into our heads would break the rule.”

“I see.”

“Every one of them, eventually, I am sorry to say.”

“That is an unfortunate aspect of humanity,” the alien said.

“And that’s not the only problem,” Samantha continued. “The intense battles over politics are a particular puzzle to me,” she admitted.

“I can well understand that,” the alien remarked.

“I don’t fully comprehend all the arguments over legislation,” Samantha said, “or the lack of legislation. U.S. political procedures seem completely at odds with reality.”
“It is complicated,” the alien said, “but I can provide you with an explanation, if you like.”

“Please,” she said.

“Within the United States, there are two factions in a peculiar battle. On one side are decent, well-meaning people. They are the ones called liberals and progressives. They seek to make things better for the entire population. The liberals want to move forward slowly.”

“I’ve observed that,” Samantha said.

“Liberals want to form a committee, make a small change, assess the effect, reflect on the situation, and then make the next small change. And there are many instances where that approach is prudent.”

“I see that,” Samantha said.

“Progressives, on the other hand, want to dive headlong into the future. Their cry is ‘Change Now!’ They leap forward, and make additional changes as they go. And there are many instances where that approach is warranted.”

“I’m with you so far,” Samantha responded.
“The arguments and discussions between liberals and progressives are healthy. The problem is that they do not always get to fully experience these discussions.”

“Yes,” Samantha said. “They have to fight the people who do not wish to move forward.”

“Correct,” agreed the alien. “Democracy has enemies within its gates. The biggest enemy is the conservative faction, and here it gets a little more controversial.”

“That’s okay,” Samantha said.

“There are two types of conservative. First, there are the fear-mongers and traitors. In other words, the people who run the conservative movement. They have one singular purpose. Once you grasp this concept, the legislative shenanigans of their party, the GOP, become understandable.”

“So we’re now getting to the juicy part?” Samantha asked.

“Ach, the ‘juicy part.’ Very good. Yes, the core of the problem. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“It concerns the primary goal of conservatism.”
“Yes?”

“The aim of conservatism is: Give more money and power to those who already have money and power.”

The alien watched Samantha as she digested that fact.

“Conservative legislation does seem to be all about greed,” Samantha noted.

“Yes,” the alien told her. “That is the sole purpose of the conservative cabal: give currency and control to those who already have both.”

“That explains their policies,” Samantha said.

“Yes it does,” the alien continued. “However, conservative politicians cannot stand in front of a crowd and say, ‘Vote GOP so we can financially rape you.’ Even people as uninformed as conservative voters would not like that. So, conservative politicians have to prevaricate.”

“You mean lie,” she said.

“Distort, hedge, evade, dither, distract, misinform, dissemble, fib, misstate….”

“But conservative lies are frequently exposed,” Samantha noted.
“Yes, but it turns out not to matter,” the alien form said with a sad smile. “That brings us to the second type of conservative: their voters. Racists, Klan members, Nazis, conspiracy theorists, the mentally challenged, and the willfully ignorant. That is the conservative base. They believe in whatever makes them feel good at the moment. It is a continual problem for democracy.”

She began running over in her mind every conservative political decision she had ever encountered in her lifetime. Viewed with this perspective, all of their perverted decisions made sense. “That explains so much,” Samantha told the alien. “Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” the alien replied. “In the galaxies that monitor your \( \bullet \uparrow \leftarrow \rightarrow \downarrow \wedge \), your Blue Speck, there is a saying about your politics.”

“What’s that?” Samantha asked.

“There is the Left, which is right; and there is the Right, which is wrong.”

The alien disappeared into the clouds. What had been a breeze became a gust. The gust became a zephyr. The wind whipped up
into a gale force that pounded Samantha violently. There was a blinding flash of light accompanied by an enormous orchestral chord, and Samantha was in transit to another portion of the multiple planes of existence formerly hidden from humans’ sight.

The orchestral chord became Mozart’s *Great Mass in C minor*, and the beauty and passion of the composition engulfed her.

“I’m getting excellent music with my voyages now,” she said to herself.
Ralph and three men walked past the tiers of enormous water pipes beneath NA/USA Bank Stadium (formerly Citi Stadium, formerly Walmart Muni Stadium, formerly Buffalo Community Park Stadium). All of the men wore work boots and water-resistant overalls. Each of them carried a half sub sandwich and a soft drink from Hoagie Haven. Reaching their favorite spot, they sat down, removed the layers of paper from their luncheon entrées du jour, and began powering them down.

One man activated the music player on his mobile and they ate to the carnal rhythms of Willie Dixon’s *Evil is Goin’ On*, recorded by Howlin’ Wolf.

Ralph was happy to hear the song and enjoyed the sandwich, but he was not going to speak unless the others spoke. He wasn’t sure of the protocol with this new group of people. In addition, he didn’t really know if they could see him.
“So,” one man said, “this guy is talking to his doctor. He says, Doc, we took your advice and the next time me and the wife had the urge, we just went for it. We were about to have dinner, our hands touched, and it was like electricity, you know? And so we did it, right there on the table. Wild, uninhibited, total physical pleasure. It was great, Doc, absofuckinglutely great. Of course,” he said, changing his tone, “we’re no longer welcome at the Lamplighter Steakhouse, but hey, it was worth it.”

The men laughed, but one pointed out that the story was “an old joke.”

“Hey, sometimes the old jokes are the best.”

The music track ended and Muddy Waters began singing Willie Dixon’s *I’m Ready*.

Ralph nodded in appreciation of the selection of songs. He couldn’t help noticing that the men munched on their sandwiches in time with the music. “Way to eat to the beat,” he thought to himself.

From far off in the distance came a howl of fear. As it got louder, Ralph looked at each
man in turn. None of them appeared to hear the human cry that was turning into a scream and rapidly approaching.

Angelo materialized from the darkness at the end of the underground facility. Running at full speed, his face was flushed and covered with sweat. He was alternately yelling and gulping for air. Ralph started to say something but Angelo was right on top of him, knocking his sandwich and Pepsi into the air. Everything was now in slow motion as Angelo grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the improvised industrial picnic area. Moving at a snail’s pace, their bodies chugged through the cascade of soda droplets and the flying bits of bread, salami, tomato, and lettuce. Ralph and Angelo both disappeared from the bowels of the stadium and emerged in—

A back alley in the warehouse district of Philadelphia. Angelo kept glancing over his shoulder as they ran.

“What’s happening?” Ralph shouted.

“Just keep moving,” Angelo yelled.

They continued for another hundred yards but gradually slowed. When they were
down to a walking pace, Angelo took a few uneasy steps backwards, scanning the alley. Only bare pavement was seen in the glare of a single streetlight mournfully hanging above the asphalt passageway.

“Are you okay?” Ralph asked his friend as he continued taking in as much oxygen as possible.

“Yeah,” Angelo said, “but that was,” he took in two more breaths, “intense.”

“What was chasing you?” Ralph asked.

“There is,” Angelo gasped for air, “no way you’ll,” Angelo gasped for air, “believe it.”

“Try me,” Ralph said. “Today I’m about ready to believe anything.”

“Okay,” Angelo said, bending forward, one hand on his knee, the other hand holding up a finger to indicate he was going to need a few more seconds.

“No problem,” Ralph said.

Angelo finally caught his breath and straightened up. He smiled sheepishly at Ralph. He said, “The thing is...” He froze.

“What?” Ralph asked. “What’s the matter?”
“Run!” was all Angelo said. He turned and began racing up the street once again.

“Wait! What the hell...?” Ralph started after his friend.

They turned a corner onto a street with a number of large trucks parked at curbside. One of the trucks was blocking a “Not a Through Street” sign. They soon discovered they were running down a curving dead end lane.

“Shit! God damn it!” Angelo said, skidding to a halt.

“What the hell is going on?” Ralph demanded.

“That,” Angelo said. He pointed back the way they came.

Pouring around the corner was a mass of undulating, galloping, growling animal ferocity. Altogether, four hundred paws strained to propel themselves toward their prey. There were standard size dogs of 45 to 70 pounds, Moyen sized dogs of 20-30 pounds, miniature dogs of 15-17 pounds, and toy dogs of under 10 pounds.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ralph exclaimed.
“We have to climb up one of these buildings,” Angelo said in a panic.

“C’mon, man,” Ralph said, a mixture of consternation and sarcasm in his voice. “They’re poodles, for christsake!”

“Yeah,” Angelo shouted back at him. “And they bite anything in their path.” He ran to the building at the end of the street and attempted to climb up to a window ledge. He thought he could dislodge or smash open a window.

Ralph took a couple of steps after his friend, but he just couldn’t bring himself to run. All of the dogs were freshly trimmed, bathed, and done up with multi-colored ribbons and bows. “Nice poodle pups,” Ralph said. And then he noticed them snapping their jaws, the streetlights glinting off their fangs, saliva dripping from their mouths.

He turned to run but it was too late. They were all over him with growls, snarls, grunts, and howls of delight as they feasted on human flesh.

Mercifully, Ralph disappeared.

The pack was confused at first but heard Angelo as he tried to climb up the side of the
building. The dogs galloped to the end of the street and the larger ones leaped up far enough to pull Angelo down into the mass of teeth and jaws.

Angelo disappeared, leaving the puzzled poodle pack to calm down, regroup, and pad up the street to seek other victims.
Cindy stepped into the recently cleaned but scruffy-looking waiting room of the Free Clinic located in the Haight Ashbury section of San Francisco in the summer of 1967. Before she could sit down, a girl who described herself as a witch surreptitiously offered her a joint.

“Thanks,” Cindy told her. “That’s very nice of you, but not here, and not right now.”

“Paco kaj amo,” the woman said to her with a smile and a nod of the head.

“Peace and love to you,” Cindy replied.

She signed in at the reception window and sat down. Two members of The Food Bank entered the clinic. With big smiles, they offered fliers to the patients. “Good health to you,” they told each person they encountered. Cindy took the paper and nodded her thanks.

“All of the advice is healthy,” the female Food Banker said. “Try it. You’ll like it.”

Cindy quickly scanned the list of recommendations.
Sujin Lee’s Prescriptions for Combatting Unwellness

• Chicken soup. (A cliché, yes, but a classic.)
• Thai curry soup. (Okay, any steaming hot soup.)
• Hug a pet. (A furry pet. Do not try with goldfish).
• Juice of ½ lemon in 2 ounces whiskey. (Serve hot or iced. Or at room temperature, for that matter.)
• Listen to Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*.
• Pint of herbal tea. (And/or other herbal selections.)
• Turn off alarm clock. (Don’t go out into the world, dearie. Keep your icky sticky self at home.)

Publisher’s Warning: Sujin Lee is not a physician. Her recommendations, while superb under many circumstances, should not be considered medical information. I mean, come on, people, her opinions are for entertainment purposes only and are not intended to serve as a substitute for professional healthcare advice, diagnosis, prognosis, or treatment. For a medical emergency, don’t be a doofus—contact your physician or dial 911. Otherwise, enjoy Sujin’s suggestions. In fact, we are enjoying some of them right now.
“Well,” Cindy said, “I could go for the soup, the whiskey, the Vivaldi, the herbal selections, and the hug from a furry pet. But who wouldn’t?”

“You’d be surprised,” the male Food Banker said.

“As a matter of fact, I—”

Cindy was in another changeover.

Two technicians were working on the Pastor. As before, the animatronic torso was open wide. Circuit boards and memory chips were stacked on the pulpit.

Cindy watched from a seat in the choir, unsure if they were aware of her presence.

“Hey, do you have a table of resistance handy?” the first tech asked.

“Hold on, I’ll pull it up.” The second tech tapped on his phone. “Okay, what’s our log-in for this job?”

“One, zero, two, five, seven, R, E, L, dash, and then your employee number.”

“I’m not putting my number in there.”

“Why not?”

“You put in too many requests, they ding you for not downloading the data to your own device.”
“Since when?”
“Since the start of the last quarter.”
“That doesn’t make any sense,” the first tech said. “They can’t expect us to download a couple hundred exabytes of data. You’d never have any room on your mobile for anything else!”
“Hey, I’m just tellin’ ya what I know. That’s the way the company is workin’ it.”
“Well, that sucks.”
“Yeah. So, what’s your vote on this situation—you want to get Bible Boy here up and preachin’ again?”
“Not really, but that’s the job.”
“So give me an employee number.”
“Shit,” the first tech muttered.
“Up to you, man.”
“Okay,” the first tech said. “Use Larry’s number. It’s on the work order in my pack over there.”
“That doesn’t seem fair,” the second tech said.
“He’s retiring in a month, so no biggie.”
“Oh. Okay.”
Cindy watched the techs as they worked. The data was accessed, the boards and chips
inserted, and PASTOR 409-3323-TX-118-284 was reconnected to the signals from the mainframe at Dynexus, the newest corporate giant in the ‘bot service industry.

Working smoothly together, the two techs performed the necessary calibrations, double-checked the boards and chips, and made all the appropriate adjustments.

“Playback activated,” a voice said.

“What the hell?” the first technician said, pulling back from the Pastor.

“Recording from...this Thursday at...four sixteen... p.m.”

“What’s wrong?” the second technician asked.

“That’s not the Pastor’s voice. I’ve heard it perform. That’s not what he sounds like.”

Cindy nodded to herself. That wasn’t the Pastor’s voice.

The two techs looked down at the speaker in the head cavity of the Pastor. They heard a recording of a phone conversation.

“Dynexus, how may I direct your call?” a receptionist’s voice said.

“I need to speak to Stephen Robinson in account management,” came the Pastor’s
voice. The two technicians noticed that the Pastor’s animatronic lips did not move.

“One moment,” the receptionist said without hesitation.

There was a pause. The two techs looked at each other, wondering what to do.

“Go ahead, please,” the receptionist said.

Both techs looked back down at the Pastor, fascinated by their inadvertent electronic eavesdropping.

“Stephen, my man! How they hangin’?”

“Now that’s the Pastor’s voice,” the first tech said.

“Shhhh,” the second tech said.

“Ike, baby!” Stephen said in his most insincere exuberant tone. “Hey, sorry, but we have to do this security thing. It’ll only take a second or two...”

There was a CLICK and a mechanical voice said, “Identify.”

There was another CLICK and the Pastor’s voice said, “PASTOR 409-3323-TX-118-284.”

There was a lot of CLICKING and then the mechanical voice said, “Verified.”
“Okay, Ike,” Stephen said, “what’s on your mind?”

“Yeah, here’s the deal, man,” the Pastor said. “The figures you sent over are definitely something we can discuss, but tell me this: what’s the back-end, man? We gotta agree on my take of the merchandizing.”

“Well,” Stephen said, “we can take a look at—”

“And then there’s the gift shop sales,” the Pastor interrupted.

“Sure,” Stephen said, “but we—”

“And let’s not forget about the reprints of the sermons, and the audio books, and the DVD/Blu-Rays, and all of that shit. You gotta make me healthy on this, man.”

Cindy suppressed a laugh.

“Ike, Ike, Ike, babe, we can work all this out! Everything’s going to be A-Number-One-Supremo, I can assure you.”

“Plus,” the Pastor said, “we need to talk about this made-for-TV movie on my life. I see Ryan Reynolds playing me.”

“You’re kidding,” Stephen said.

“No,” the Pastor said.
“But you’re a sixty-eight year old black man,” said a puzzled Stephen.

“They can do a lot with CGI.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Stephen muttered.

“Look, Ike, let’s get together next week and we’ll thrash all this out. The actor playing you, the script, the percentages on merch, everything. How’s your schedule for lunch Wednesday?”

“Naw,” the Pastor said. “That’s when I get oiled and lubed.”

“Yeah,” Stephen said. “You gotta stay on top of that. You don’t want to rust.”

Cindy could not prevent herself from laughing out loud. It echoed in the mostly empty church.

The two technicians looked around, trying to see the source of the laughter.

But Cindy was gone.
Jeff held the microphone confidently in the glare of two spotlights as he stood alone on the bare stage in front of a packed nightclub. He expertly held the audience’s attention just the right amount of time before delivering the punchline: “And that’s why she’s so mean!” Jeff paused as the audience laughed appreciatively. “Thank you,” he told them. “Good timing will make even the oldest joke seem funny.”

Jeff spotted his friends sitting at two tiny tables scrunched together near the front of the crowded club. Together, Cindy, Riff, Samantha, Angelo, Buddy, and Ralph raised their glasses to cheer him on. None of them were of legal drinking age, but they all had alcoholic beverages. What’s up with that, he wondered. And why was he onstage at a nightclub? He had no stand-up experience. Well, might as well go for it, he thought.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Yes, I said ‘ladies and gentlemen’—I’m giving
many of you the benefit of the doubt.” He paused for a small laugh. “But now we come to the political part of the show, so some of you better hang onto your wigs and keys! A word of warning: if you’re a Nazi, you won’t like this next part. Out of curiosity, how many Nazis are here? Show of hands...” He raised his right arm in the *Heil* salute.

That got a titter of embarrassed laughter.

“No Nazi douchebags? Good! Glad to hear it. Okay, so, here is a brief history of American politics from Tricky Dick Nixon right up until today. In this bit, we’ll have two people represent the two main political movements of our nation. On the one hand, we have the well-meaning but namby-pamby liberal. And on the other hand we have a piece of bovine excrement in human form... in other words, a conservative.”

Conservatives in the audience booed him.

“So, you guys lied,” he said, shaking his head. “There were supposedly no Nazis here, remember? Cut the booing crap when I point out that conservatives are a pestilence. It’s just a fact. Plus, conservatives are bovine
excrement, right? Bovine. So even if you objected to my pointing out the perfidy of rightwing nutjob douchebags, you would moo, not boo.” Jeff shook his head in mock amazement. “Conservatives,” he said. “They don’t mind being Nazis but they get upset when someone notices and points it out.” That got a laugh of realization.

“Thank you,” Jeff said. “So, okay, here we go with liberal versus conservative...”

~

**Liberal:** As decent American citizens, we are going to actualize the ideals of democracy from now on, so that means no more racism.

**Conservative:** We’re going to be racist!

**Liberal:** No, you can’t be racist because of equality, fairness, justice—the things democracy is supposed to represent. We’re going to be a decent country, so no more racism.

**Conservative:** We’re going to be racist!
Liberal: No, from now on, there can be no more racism, only equality.

Conservative: Racism.

Liberal: You’re not listening: Equality.

Conservative: Racism.

Liberal: Equality.

Conservative: Racism!

Liberal: Equality!

Conservative: *Racism!*

Liberal: Well, look, we can reach a compromise here. You conservatives can be racist... but only in the states of the Old Confederacy. Tell you the truth, everybody expects you to be racist there, anyway, so, there’s that.

Conservative: Racism everywhere.

Liberal: No, there will only be limited and controlled racism.
Conservative: Racism everywhere.

Liberal: Well, look, we can reach a compromise here. You can be racist, but only in the states of the Old Confederacy and some Midwest states.

Conservative: Racism everywhere.

Liberal: Well, look, we can reach a compromise here. You can be racist, but only in the states of the Old Confederacy and most of the Midwest states and the Rocky Mountain states.

Conservative: Racism everywhere.

Liberal: Well, look, we can reach a compromise here. You can be racist, but only in the states of the Old Confederacy, the Midwest states, the Rocky Mountain states, and selected districts of every other state. *But that’s it!*

Conservative: We’ll take it. (For now.)
**Liberal:** There, you see? I knew we could all come together like good Americans and reach a workable compromise!

~

Regretful laughter greeted the concluding statement of Jeff’s set, followed by strong applause which was suddenly cut off when most of the crowd disappeared. Jeff stepped to the lip of the stage and regarded his six friends still sitting in the audience. “What the hell?” Jeff said, the microphone at his side. He raised it to his lips and started to say it again but—

The club vanished and all seven were falling...

Cascading into their next level of time.

Tumbling to their next physicality.

Surging into their next realm.

Entering their next canto.
Part Five

Dream Status Flux

“Is anyone else alarmed at the increasing number of creases in the fabric of reality?”
— Ian Smythe
Darkness and snow flurries descended on the abandoned graveyard. Many of the headstones were cracked or broken, and all of them glistened with moss. The clinging tendrils of *Epipremnum aureum*, or devil’s vine, wove their way around the silent sentinels made of marble and granite.

As the heavens slowly deposited their feathery ice crystals (“Every one unique!” according to human lore), a layer of white transformed the hues of the gray slabs and green flora.

Seven furtive silhouettes made their way through the maze of grave markers. Six of the figures watched as one of them turned to peer up at the diffused moonlight behind the clouds. All of them saw Ralph stick out his tongue to taste the snowfall. The six friends burst out laughing because they had just done the same thing.

Ralph spun around to see the outlines of human forms, each one gloriously backlit by
a gibbous moon beaming through bright and frosty clouds. That can’t be right, he thought—how can they all be in front of the moon? Off to his right, a branch snapped and he strained to peer into the gloom.

“Ralph, is that you?” Samantha called out as she made her way around a sepulcher covered with white moss, white vines, and white leaves. The inscription on the crypt read, “Charlotte Haze, Beloved Wife & Mother.”

“Hi, Samantha,” Ralph called back. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“We’re here, too,” Cindy called out. She and Riff emerged from the door of a mini mausoleum with chiseled letters reading: “In Memory of the Sheila Green Family.”

Other familiar voices ricocheted through the cemetery and the seven friends reunited. They stared at each other, marveling at their one hundred percent survival rate.

“It’s great—”

“Thank God you’re—”

“This has been—”

“I can’t believe—”
They all stopped at once. There was a second of silence and then the group erupted in laughter.

“Oh man,” Angelo said, “it feels good to see you guys!”

“It sure does!” Samantha said.

“Feels good to share a laugh again,” Ralph added.

“Hilarity is healthy,” came a voice that was unfamiliar to most of them.

“What the hell?” Riff snapped.

“Oh,” Samantha said to the space alien, who was once again in the guise of Akiko Wakabayashi. “You’re back!” she said excitedly. “Guys, this is... I am so sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“My name is unpronounceable in your world,” replied the alien. “I will know when any of you are addressing me.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Riff said. “What gives?”

“Don’t push it, Riff,” Samantha warned. Ralph was behind the alien and made a “what the hell is this” gesture to his friends.

“That is not very helpful, Ralph,” said the alien without turning around to see him.
Ralph looked like a schoolboy caught setting off a fire alarm. “Sorry.”

“Come,” said the alien with a comforting smile for all of them. “Sit. We have things to discuss.”

“Sit?” Jeff asked.

Grave markers rose to provide seating for eight. “Hey!” Angelo protested.

“The fuck?” Riff said.

“Please sit down,” the alien invited them. “I believe you will find solace in our conversation.”

Samantha moved in front of a marker, ready to sit.

“Wait,” Buddy said. “Wouldn’t that be desecration? I mean, sitting on memorials?”

“Not at all,” the alien assured him. “However, if you feel it is more respectful to acknowledge the names of those who are providing our temporary resting places, we may do so. I shall begin. The name on this grave marker is John Simon Ritchie.”

“Mine is Bernard Quill,” Samantha said.

“I’ve got Madeline Elster,” Buddy said.

“I’ve got Judy Barton,” Angelo said.

“George Brougham,” Jeff said.
“Richard Greenleaf,” Cindy said.
“Frederick Miles,” Ralph said.
“Mine says Maureen Lyon,” Riff said.

“Very well then,” the alien said. “Please sit down.” They all sat. “Now,” the alien continued, “we need to briefly discuss something.”

“Is it... death?” Cindy said with a rising inflection that brought a laugh from a couple of them.

The calm demeanor of the alien never faltered. “What you call death, yes,” the alien replied. “You might be comforted to learn that your dynamism moves into another part of the universe after death. Your energy lives on.”

“That’s all?” Samantha wondered. “Just our energy? Nothing else?”

“Perhaps ‘energy’ is not the proper way to describe the phenomenon,” said the alien. “Possibly I misused the word. My apologies if I did so. Let me phrase it another way. Your essence moves on. Your core moves on. Your soul moves on. Yes, your soul. That may be the best way to think of it.”
“Does the soul contain our memories?” Samantha asked. “I mean, this might be silly, but I think that memories of my grandfather enable his soul to live on.”

The alien regarded her with a smile. “Very good! That is an excellent way to consider the situation. If you truly feel that way, your memories will live on, as will memories of you.”

“Doesn’t that mean memories of me will be up to other people? Because I’m not sure I trust a lot of humanity. Present company excluded.”

“You will find all that out after death.”

“So, you’re saying we shouldn’t be afraid to die?” Jeff asked.

“I am saying you have nothing to fear from death,” the alien assured them. “I, for one, find it very relaxing.”

“So you’re dead but you’re here?”

“I was alive, then dead, and now alive again. The process has a catchphrase on every inhabited planet. Death/Life Cycle in one place and—”

“Circle of life?” Cindy asked. “Please don’t let that be significant.”
“Diverse marketing slogans for diverse tastes,” the alien said.
“I don’t like marketing,” Buddy said.
“That is understandable,” the alien replied. “Even many people who work in marketing do not like marketing. But this is a trivial matter. We have something else of importance to discuss.”
“That earth is one of God’s failed experiments?” Cindy asked.
“Yes,” the alien said. “God set in motion a number of experiments throughout the cosmos.”
“A number?” Angelo asked.
“Three billion, one hundred forty-one million, five hundred ninety-two thousand, six hundred fifty-three experiments,” the alien said.
“Pi,” said Buddy. “Well, to nine decimal places.”
“That’s correct,” said the alien. “Very good. To continue: God caused experiments to take place across the universe. Planets were created in solar systems where life could form and evolve. In a few cases, civilizations emerged. Societies where there was a shared
desire for serenity. Where people did not just say they felt every person should treat every other person the way they would like to be treated, but they acted on that principle. Where people shunned war and sought justice. Where people revered knowledge, health, harmony, and peaceful coexistence.” The alien paused a moment. “But in most cases, the population behaved like those on Earth: Selfish. Spiteful. Silly. Stupid. Wanton. Wasteful. Wicked. Wrongheaded.” The alien looked intently at each of them in turn. “I could continue, as I am sure you all recognize. But we will conclude by stating, as was previously noted: Earth is one of God’s failed experiments.”

None of the seven had anything to say. Each of them silently contemplated the implications of what they had just heard. A great many people had told them, “you have your whole life in front of you,” and now they were supposed to accept that they were on one of the planets that was a botched lab test.

They were so intently focused on their predicament they nearly failed to notice that night had become dawn.
The golden glow at the horizon became an incandescent sunrise. They now could see that the landscape had changed. The headstones were gone. The snow was gone. They were in a valley surrounded by graceful curving and rain-soaked dunes in shades of flamingo, carnation, lavender, and thulian pink.

“Excuse me,” Angelo inquired politely, “but are we inside a pussy?”

That produced a reaction from everyone except the visitor from space. “No,” the alien said calmly. “This is a human brain.”

“Why are we—”

“What is the point of—”

“Which ones of us will—”

“When do the—”

The alien silenced them by raising one hand. “Just know this: Your essence will continue. Your memories will abide. Be satisfied with possessing this knowledge. Few receive such information.”

The seven friends sat in silence for a moment. In the distance, floating gently to their ears was the peaceful frenzy of Terry Riley’s *A Rainbow in Curved Air* playing
very softly through a small intercom speaker. As the volume faded up, the seven friends faded away, merging into the folds and contours of the medulla oblongata.

“Hey!” Buddy yelled, his voice muted by time and distance.

“Wait!” Cindy shouted, her voice blending into the hyperactive loveliness of the music.

They were gone, leaving only the pink membrane which was shrinking and changing hue, becoming a deep French rose, shrinking further, turning cerise, forming itself into an orb, and resolving as a laserbulb of bright crimson.
The red bulb blazed above the warning sign reading, “In Session, Please be Seated.” There was no need for the light to be on; the waiting room was unoccupied because the final session of the day was in progress behind the locked door. There was no need for music, either, yet playing softly through the ceiling-mounted speakers was *A Rainbow in Curved Air*.

Inside the session room, a calico cat opened its eyes, yawned, stretched, slowly got to his feet, stretched again, sat on its haunches, and began grooming its fur.

Nearby, an orange-and-white beagle watched the cat impassively for a moment and then turned to regard the two humans in the office with them. The dog was giving the humans his best soulful stare, the one that said, “Gosh, I could sure use some loving and affection aimed in my direction.” The humans ignored the dog.
Throughout the well-appointed room, the aroma of Sai Baba Super Hit incense intermingled with the feline and canine scents as well as the competing fragrances of men’s aftershave and woman’s perfume.

One of the humans was seated in an ergonomically designed office chair. The other human lounged on a long faux leather couch.

The licensed professional in the chair was jotting notes in a bound leather book of lined pages using a Montblanc Meisterstuck Geometry Solitaire LeGrand Fountain Pen.

The client on the couch stared at the ceiling and talked about things that were seen in the mind’s eye of memory and visions.

The psychoanalyst was an officially recognized Freudian. The patient was an unofficially recognized depressive.

“Are we having an enjoyable mental moment of rest?” the analyst inquired gently.

“Yes we are,” the patient admitted. “At present, I am living vicariously through many other people.”

“I see,” the analyst noted. “Perhaps we should discuss this. Who are these people?”
“Okay,” the patient said amiably. “Well, there’s Cindy and her boyfriend, Riff. They’re both pretty smart, especially her. And there’s a really smart guy, Buddy, who seems able to adapt to any situation life throws his way. Because he’s black, life throws a little extra at him.”

“Go on,” the analyst said, scribbling in the notebook.

“There’s Angelo, a gay guy who’s determined and smart. Hell, they’re all smart. Samantha is smart and also beautiful. She talks to this really wise space alien from time to time. Oh, I almost forgot one of the best parts. Cindy is sometimes Hox, a super smart woman who’s in a heavy metal band. She’s the one who points out that Earth is one of God’s experiments that failed. That theory was confirmed by the space alien.”

“Interesting,” said the analyst.

The dog laboriously got to its feet and moved closer to the fireplace.

“There are also some people who are animatronic,” the patient continued. “There’s a lawyer and a pastor. The lawyer is underwater, so he doesn’t talk. The pastor
talks too much and it’s usually a bunch of religiosity crap, so I avoid him as much as possible unless I need a laugh.”

“Um-hmm,” said the analyst, writing faster.

“And there are Samantha’s friends Jeff and Ralph,” the patient continued. “They both get into misadventures but they come out of them unscathed. I think that may be symbolic of something.”

“That’s a possibility,” said the analyst, writing furiously.

The cat lithely jumped up on the analyst’s desk, then onto the wooden filing cabinets, then to the top of the bookshelves.

“I really don’t know why all this is happening to me,” the patient said, “but I get to live part of the lives of these people. It’s great! It’s like I’m in my own premium channel series and I get to play all the parts. But it can sometimes be distracting. It makes me pleased and perturbed at the same time. It’s a dichotomy. And to think, all I did was have a few nibbles of a brownie.”

“A brownie?” the analyst inquired.

“Right. A marijuana brownie.”
“Ah, I see.”
“A really good one,” the patient noted.
“It was made with weed, oil, and budder.”
“Butter?”
“Budder. Concentrated form of THC. Kind of like powerful hashish.”
“Okay,” the analyst said slowly, “let me ask you one question about this.”
“Yeah-huh,” the patient said.
“You got stoned to come to your therapy session?”
“Yup. I wanted to experience it from a different perspective.”
“Is it a good perspective?”
“Seems fine to me.”
“I see. Well, do you want to discuss your friends?”
“My friends?”
“These, men, women, aliens, and animated people you mentioned.”
“Animatronic,” the patient said. “But no, we don’t need to talk about them. It’s my life that matters now.”
“Of course,” the analyst said.
“And now, with the help of the THC, everything is, well, different.”
“How is it different?”

The patient took in a deep breath, held it a second, and said, “I can hear... time.”

“Go on,” said the analyst, seriously interested.

“I can see emotions.”

“That’s fascinating,” the analyst said in a soothing tone.

“I am in the stratosphere and yet bound to this couch while Wagner plays at a significant volume in my head. And,” the patient said portentously, “the world is my Rorschach Test.”

“Wagner?” the analyst asked.

“Richard Wagner,” the patient said. “German composer of opera.”

“Yes, I know Wagner,” said the analyst. “You have an opera playing in your head?”

“Sure,” the patient replied. “Don’t you?”

“Which opera?” the analyst inquired.

“Lohengrin. The live recording with Birgit Nilsson and Wolfgang Windgassen.”

“That’s a lovely one,” the analyst said.

“Yes it is!” the patient said.

The analyst knew it was unprofessional to offer personal viewpoints, but the urge was
too great. “Equally nice, I think,” the analyst said, “is the Claudio Abbado recording with Siegfried Jerusalem and Cheryl Studer.”

“I should check that out,” the patient said.

The dog’s paws twitched as it lay by the fire. The cat was immobile as it lazed in the warmth of the upper corner of the room, next to a dusty copy of *The Urantia Book*.

“There are many, many excellent recordings of that opera,” the analyst said.

“How many recordings do you have?” the patient inquired, genuinely intrigued.

“I have several,” the analyst replied, “but I have listened to, let’s see, uh... ninety-seven different performances of Wagner’s operas. Some of them several times.”

“Ninety-seven,” the patient marveled.

“That is correct,” the analyst stated. “You see, I belong to a kind of club. For true opera buffs only, and very hush-hush.”

“A club?”

“Yes.” The analyst seemed to be smug and embarrassed at the same time. “Club members obtain recordings of operatic performances and, well, then we trade them.”
“So you guys trade bootleg recordings?”
“That’s correct,” the analyst replied. “A trading session takes place every Tuesday.”
“And you participate in that?”
“Oh yes, indeed,” the analyst replied.
“You know, doc,” the patient said, “I believe that officially makes you a nerd.”
“Well, I don’t—”
“A nerd with a fetish for Wagner.”
“Oh, no, it’s not a fetish,” the analyst protested.
“No, of course not,” the patient replied.
“I just enjoy the way his operas sound.”
“I see,” said the patient. “Go on.”
As if confessing a sin, the analyst explained, “They soothe me.”
“Well,” the patient replied, “I use Wagner to get excited instead of soothed, but hey, to each his own. But doc, tell me something, are any of these bootleg recordings legal?”
“Oh absolutely!” the analyst said.
There was a short pause.
“Of course they’re legal,” the analyst said less emphatically.
There was a short pause.
“Mostly, anyway,” the analyst said. There was a short pause. “I’m sure some of them are legal.” “Uh-huh,” the patient said. “I am almost positive,” said the analyst without much conviction.

The dog got up, turned around, and flopped back down in more or less the same position as before. The cat groomed its whiskers and returned to contentedly ignoring the dog and the humans.

“So basically,” the patient told the analyst, “you are part of an international gang of intellectual property thieves.”

The analyst paused to consider that statement. “Why, yes, you might put it that way.” The analyst started to smile. “Yes!” the analyst said with a burst of contentment. Suddenly, the analyst grinned with newfound pride. “Gang of intellectual property thieves, yes, yes, that’s us.”

There was a moment of silence. The lack of conversation roused the animals. They stared balefully at the analyst.

“Should we get back to the session?” the patient inquired.
There was no response. Mind and spirit far away from the session, the analyst’s face alternated between blissful relaxation and guilty pleasure. There was a distinct aura of schadenfreude in the atmosphere.

The analyst was saying something at a very low volume. The patient sat up on the couch. The words were still indistinct. The patient leaned forward and strained to hear.

The analyst was laughing quietly, emitting a “heh-heh” sound while swiveling back and forth in the chair, imagining all the opera traders wearing pirate costumes.

On the floor near the fireplace, the dog flailed its legs and awkwardly got to his feet. Atop the bookshelves, the cat did one of the quick head-turn with wide-eyed-stare things that cats sometimes do. Both animals were gawking at the empty ergonomic chair as it slowly spun to a halt.

The analyst was gone.

“Ah,” the patient said. “I see our time is up.”
— Epilogue —

The Pastor received extra circuit boards, started a megachurch, and married Darla.

Cindy is founder and CEO of VV (Vagina Victorious), the largest North American management company representing female athletes, especially mixed martial artists.

Riff is the director of information technology for the nation’s third largest supplier of security systems. He lives in Cleveland.

Samantha exercised her dual citizenship and moved back to Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Quickly rising in local politics, she burst on the national scene when she joined an anti-fascist protest on the streets of Gatineau, Quebec, took over direction of the crowd, and led them on a march to the capitol in Ottawa. She is currently Canada’s representative to the United Nations General Assembly. She works tirelessly in an attempt to prove that earth is not one of God’s failed experiments.
**Buddy** is president and lead negotiator of PeopleStrong, Inc., a firm specializing in strengthening unions and championing workers’ rights.

**Ralph** teaches online education courses at nineteen community colleges, twenty-six vocational centers, and three institutions that insist on calling themselves “universities” despite not having a physical campus or accreditation. Ralph’s robotic instructors use several dozen aliases. “Take a class online, it’s probably mine,” Ralph states.

**Angelo** obtained his law degree and is a lead attorney for EQL, a firm specializing in advocating and legislating for LGBTQ rights. He has argued nineteen cases before state courts of appeal and six before federal courts of appeal. He was on the prevailing side eighty-eight percent of the time.

**Jeff** never emerged from the otherworld. He was last seen in the form of an adorable shorthair dog, a Chihuahua/dachshund mix. “He’s one of the world’s cutest snuggle-pups,” his owner states.
DANGErhOx recorded seven more singles, each lengthier and sludgier than the last. Their penultimate single, *Drone Ode*, was their interpretation of Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*. Their version of the symphonic piece utilized the Kronos Quartet and members of the Jocelyn Pook Ensemble.

The band’s final single, *Salute to Our Japanese Friends with Their Rock ‘n’ Roll Haircuts, You Bet*, was twenty-seven hours long and could only be distributed on flash drives. A sonic onslaught that never dipped below 100 decibels, *Salute* was a meditation on seven barre chords. (“Any seven,” according to the sheet music.) The percussion track was recorded live and the one hundred thirty-eight minute drum solo resulted in the percussionist being hospitalized.

“He’s okay,” a band spokesperson stated at the time of the incident. “It was just dehydration coupled with a touch of carpal tunnel syndrome. This shouldn’t come as a big surprise to anyone—sooner or later, this fate befell every drummer they ever had.”
DANGERhOX, personally supervising their portion of the continuing DUC! Records retrospective series, has now released an outstanding collection of singles, live tracks, remixes, and private recordings. This sonically superb 7-disc set, entitled *Hell is Here, Grab Two Cocktails and Lower the Thermostat*, (lengthy pause for a chord change) does to sludge metal (extended pause for a chord change) what needed to be done to (eternity spent waiting for a chord change that never comes).... There is no getting around the fact that listening to this collection straight through is a mind numbing experience that is not for the faint of heart. You have been warned. Nine-and-a-half bruised thumbs up.

—*Immedia Wire Service*
Like his characters, John Scott G is a living dichotomy. Consider: (1) He is honest at cards but cheats at jigsaw puzzles. (2) He eats fruits and vegetables but only to justify consuming a copious amount of chocolate. (3) He lets waiters know if he has been under-charged but will steal pennies from your loafers and replace them with outdated subway tokens.

Having escaped the Grim Reaper’s clutches no less than six times already, Mr. G is planning to remain a part of this world for another hundred years. “There are still a lot of stories to write,” he wrote.