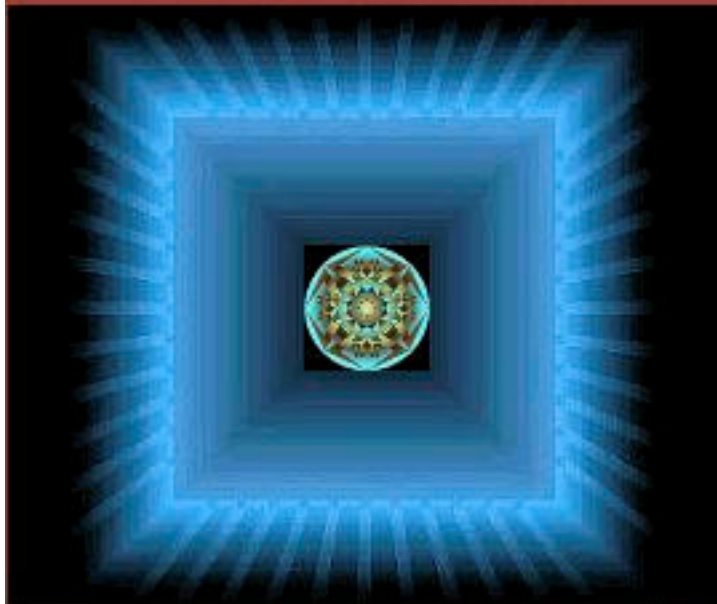


Future.Con



Nowick Gray

Future.Con  
A Novel Of Alternate Reality  
by Nowick Gray

# FUTURE.CON

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1	
PROLOGUE: THE DREAM CAR .....	5
CHAPTER 2	
MOIRA'S BED .....	13
CHAPTER 3	
THE HOOKUP ROOM.....	57
CHAPTER 4	
SIDEFAME MODULE: THE SHIP .....	99
CHAPTER 5	
SARAGOSSA STATION .....	111
CHAPTER 6	
WITCH BAY .....	128
CHAPTER 7	
THE SPIRAL LINKS.....	141
CHAPTER 8	
THE VIRTUAL BRAIN .....	186
CHAPTER 9	
ELEUSIA .....	238
CHAPTER 10	
BIOTECH BOUTIQUE .....	266
CHAPTER 11	
DESERTIA.....	328
CHAPTER 12	
THE HOME BRAIN .....	365

*Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.*

—Carl Jung

## Chapter 1

## PROLOGUE: THE DREAM CAR

I go to my car in the parking lot, stumbling against the broken asphalt and scattered gravel underfoot. The street is deserted; garish signs leer at me. Overhead the wires moan against a dirty-sheet sky—murky and full of warm October air so foul you could spit it out.

Ah, there's Myrtle, her sleek lines of molded steel a lovely polished green. But what's this? A square of white notepaper flaps from the driver's side vent; propped against the door are two pieces of a disassembled scope rifle; and a compact leather carrying case lies dumbly on the asphalt. Quickly I look around: still no one but me. I ignore the note for the moment, fascinated by the gun. When I pick it up, I get grease on my fingers, and discern from the blue-metal sheen that it's new. Then from the half-opened case on the ground, specially packaged in shrink-wrap, one silvery bullet winks up at me.

A bullet—for whom?

I'm a stranger to guns, but this question pops crystal clear into my dreaming head. The note hangs idly against the window. I really should read it: but now I'm afraid to. I want to hold onto my ignorance.

The question keeps knocking on the back of my brain. In a slow funk I get into the car, putting the gun and case in the back seat casually yet deliberately, as if they were a small hydraulic jack and evening newspaper. I'm mesmerized by a vague sense of purpose, but can't identify its source or destination. There is only the next action ahead of me, what I know to do. Pulling the key out of my pocket, I insert it into the ignition, and give it a twist . . .

In my waking sweat I thought I might have chosen a way out of it—an alternate future, enticing as a carrot to my donkey mind. But no; it was all part of some previous choice. I'd already committed, somehow, to this strange fork in the road, and it was too late to go back. Like saying to Moira, "I'm sorry," after sleeping with her sister Sheila. Or telling my boss Gerald, "I told you so," after our company has been dissolved in the great merger. Or at any point along the way, finding that the heaven I'd been promised (even if it was only a promise I'd made to myself) turned out to be just another version of hell.

The covers were off and I could see my fairly long, medium-fat, moderately hairy middle-aged body shivering in my shorts in Moira's big circular bed. I grabbed some of the covers back from Moira. My bed-mate lay breathing heavily beside me, her flank in a pink nightgown rising and falling with the rhythm of sleep. I'd come partly awake, but

the dream was not over. I had the distinct feeling I was stuck in that green dream-car for the duration of the ride. My eyes drifted shut again.

Dead oak leaves swirl silently in the rear-view along Tourney Crescent. I lean back in my driver's seat, strangely satisfied with the automatic motions of steering, my two-forefinger method. Everything in the drab outside world seems normal. I crank the window down for a breath of the familiar, dank breeze. The unread note ripples harmlessly outside the window. Maybe I should read it—when I get home to Moira's. For now, I'm content to watch the brown and gray buildings file past.

Time-beaten love songs filter down from upstairs apartment windows. There is life in Philadelphia, contrary to media reputation: men in pastel sweatshirts and windbreakers, women in perm jobs and plastic boots, dogs pissing on mutant trees.

And now I'm afraid: it's all too easy. Something in my brain rebels. My inner ears prick up. My instincts call me back to waking light—but getting back from there is like learning to crawl on hot tar.

Then I hear an eerily mechanical voice, crackling like a drive-in movie speaker: "Wanna see a new film, chum? Come on in. Just step through the revolving door."

What?

There's no window speaker at this drive-in. No revolving door I can see. No one in the back seat, with the gun.

But there was a voice: of this I'm certain. With an indefinable accent comprising something of London, Chicago, Tijuana.

My eyes are focused ahead, seeing nothing different. I want no part of this scenario that's developing. But my foot remains on the accelerator; my fingers continue steering; the "dream" continues. I begin to realize that I'm effectively accepting this grimly pleasant voice's invitation, still without knowing exactly what's in it for me.

Underneath my anxiety is a kind of grace that accompanies the inevitable. A peace that settles in beyond the moment of choice: though in this case, I can't see where there was a choice to be made. Unless—well, I did pick up the gun.

I glance behind me again to check that it's still there. Okay, I consider, but I didn't deliver this artifact to my car in the first place. I just took the next logical step. When the drink is mixed by another's hand, it can go down oh, so easy.

The voice chimes back in: "Oh, by the way, did I tell you? It's a horror movie. Hmm—what's the mattah? You prefer romantic comedies? Ah, too bad! There are, sad to say, no refunds. No exit doors in this here show." Then, hollow, metallic laughter.

I want to panic. Instead, I drive on, an automaton in my own flesh. The voice consoles me: "Cheer up, chum! There's a perfect place for you just over the horizon. In fact, my friend, that's where we're headed right now."

Friend? My skin puckers like used aluminum foil.

"Why me?" I want to protest. "I didn't ask for any damned horror movie or romantic fantasy. I just want to get on with my life. I'm happy enough right where I am . . ."

And in nearly saying so, I momentarily regain the comforting sense that I'm merely lying in Moira's bed, and not driving that hellish car I thought was mine. I want



to explain to my unseen hitchhiker: “It’s basically a queen-sized bed, y’see, which is good because Moira’s a large woman. That bed is her pride and joy. The circle shape takes some getting used to; you sometimes wonder where you are, half-asleep in the middle of the night. And I still haven’t figured out if it’s really big enough for both of us. Moira likes to lie smack in the middle of the bed, sprawled with her heavy arms way out. She likes, I think, the fact that she bought this bed originally; that she owns it. But half the time, I’m not there, so we figure it doesn’t pay to put a lot of cash into a bigger one. One of these days, we might finally get ‘serious,’ and I can move in with her on a more permanent basis, instead of this kind of semi-commitment we have going at the moment—or should I say, the past four years. We haven’t even bothered to invest in furniture yet. Other than that bed, we just make do with the bare necessities that came with the apartment that Moira still insists on paying for . . .”

The “voice”—temporarily reduced to a passive ear—indulges me in my unspoken chatter only so far; then interrupts with its own shrill, unwelcome pitch:

“We’re selecting a few of the most deserving . . . call them souls if you wish. And introducing them, one by one, to old Uncle River: the river of time, that is. Remember, no deposit, no return . . .”

“Yeah, I get it,” I bark back. “No purchase necessary.”

To hell with his would-be chumminess, I decide. I’m determined to offer nothing gracious of myself to this faceless huckster.

The voice keeps on talking, now taking on a resentful edge: “Look. Every experience, even on your blessed earth, is a doomed adventure which will, likely as not, scar you for life. The slice of time’s cutlass is marked on every face.”

Yeah maybe. But what does he mean, “on your earth?” Myrtle, what have they done to you, and where are they taking us?

Shivering, I grip the wheel and force the green beast right, merging with traffic on Haliburton Boulevard. The voice goes silent. I breathe a little easier.

This is my earth, my ancient earth, I console myself. Downtown Philly, in fact. This is without a doubt my own and only green 1978 Oldsmobile, with full-sized retractable and reclining seats, medium chrome trim, power to burn. I know I walked up to it as I do every working afternoon, in the parking lot outside the computer consulting office where I work, in the same tacky part of town: bits of newspaper blowing around, stray mutts roaming, homeless beggars huddled against the walls of abandoned warehouses . . .

Christ, now I’ve circled the block. We’re back at the parking lot ringed with scraggly young oaks wrapped in anti-dog cages. I pull over and stop, taking stock. The voice remains silent, but my own head rattles in its cage.

How and why have I ended up back here? Have I forgotten something at the office, something I was supposed to bring home? Did I neglect to turn off my computer before I left? Strange, I can’t remember. There’s a light on up there—Gerald’s office. He’s working overtime again.

Me, I just do my job, and then punch out.

Is that why I haven't got farther ahead in this once-promising career?

Is that what this voice is telling me, to get back to work?

I'm forty-eight. So yeah, it's crunch time, as they say. Now or never. Maybe it is time to pay some extra dues.

But . . .about this car . . .going somewhere, for someone . . .?

This gun out of nowhere: to do something, to someone . . .

(Going . . .) But no: I'm going home.

Home . . . now where the hell is that?

I feel the cold sweat again, even as I tell you that I came, much further downstream in that dusky river, to discover that you can go home for only a while. You think you are waking up with a chilly memory, that your body and the body beside you are rousing from an actual sleep pure and innocent. But meanwhile the jealous other, the nightmare you call it, this certain other affair tugs at your soul in the unending dark, telling you that you can't cancel your return reservations, not any more. Because you've already chosen—or been chosen. (It comes to the same thing in the end.)

And the choice will beckon again. Only tonight, the next night and the next, it's not really the same time or place, because you're farther along, deeper in.

You tell them, you tell yourself, you're just doing a job. Forget, for now, whether it's your job or their job. The problem is, the imagined target always eludes the little roving window of your scope, their scope. The bullet never gets fired, not just yet. Because you're looking for the sure way in, the way back home.

You go to see, for instance, the other, the secret object of your desire. Her eyes are vibrant and alive. But those eyes are also windows to a farther shore, twin discs headed out in the one-way night. To enter her, those eyes, is to enter it, the spiraling path, with no backspacing, no escaping the hungry parasite in the computer mind:

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Only later could I give it this name: the name it was given. When I first came awake, which is to say, more or less but not yet truly awake, I had only the echo of its voice as warning:

“Coming Soon to a Workstation Near You.”

Yeah, right, I said to myself, shaking off a poor night’s sleep. But it had already happened.

## Chapter 2

### MOIRA'S BED

“What is it, Nort? What’s wrong?”

I must have slipped back in. When I came out again I was grabbing onto her pink nightgown in a childish panic.

I started to form the words to tell her about it. But then I thought, maybe she’s not supposed to know.

“Just some kind of weird dream. It’s going away now.” I knew inside that it wasn’t going away. I took in the stale smell of lavender from Moira’s neck and tried to use it to mask the memory. But that was like wishing away the smell of death with a whore’s perfume.

The stippled ceiling above Moira’s bed looked lower than I remembered it. Daylight was filling the room slowly. Moira pressed me: “What do you mean, nothing? Look at you. You’re covered in sweat. You’ve gotten me all wet, and my sheets too. Are you sick?”

“I guess I had a nightmare.” I reached for the still-silent alarm on the bed-table beside me and shut it off.

“You guess you had a nightmare.” She sat up abruptly, lit a cigarette, and blew the smoke out in a blue huff. “Hon, when I have a nightmare I know it.”

To call it anything else was crazy. And yet I knew there was more to it. I recalled it now in a flash, as a real event . . .my driving home from the office yesterday, for instance. When I ran the reality check of thinking back on that verifiable day at the office, however, and retracing my steps to the car, I went right into the dream-scene again, complete with rifle, bullet, note, and taunting voice.

All I could say to Moira was, “This one was different. It seemed so real.” I was confused, and I wanted to leave the whole thing behind. How could a nightmare be real? I needed to get up and sort it out for myself. I leaned over and reached for the white T-shirt on the floor beside the bed.

Moira’s curiosity got the better of her, and she changed her tack, laying a soft hand dreamlike on my elbow. “Nortie, you’re still shaking. Why don’t you tell me about it?”

I sat up and put the shirt on, nearly finding words to begin again. Moira leaned back against the curved, cushioned headboard, flicked ashes over the inverted tortoise shell on her bedside table, and waited for me to attempt the impossible.

It was still close by—waiting for me in the hush of a still-indistinct day.

I didn’t want to believe that anything else mattered except getting up to go to work. But now here was this other job: alien at first yet, in a larger sense, familiar—the continuing chore of trying to making sense of my life . . . a 24/7 contract which was

already tough enough to honor. And in that moment of weakness at the sudden enormity of the task, I thought Moira might be able to help.

So I told her about it. It wasn't easy, since to retell is to relive. I finished with the confession, "I'm afraid to dream again."

All she could say was, "Boy oh boy."

"It's hard to explain, Moira. It just feels like there's more—a lot more." What I didn't say was, "I'm afraid when I dream again, I'll be putting myself in their hands."

Moira asked, "Whose voice do you think it was?" Her own voice was at once exasperated and condescending.

I shook my head. "I don't have a clue. Except the fake-sounding accent, which gets me nowhere. I don't get it either, Moira. It just seems like they want me to . . . to—"

"You mean in the dream."

"Yeah, but—you're still not hearing me. It feels like it's not over." I began to get a sense, from Moira's lack of response to my reality, of how the beginning of one thing can be the end of another. But what the fuck? It didn't much matter, did it? Either end of the seesaw could move—the dream, the relationship—and either way, my situation was going to get worse, or it wasn't . . .

Moira turned away and lay staring up at the ceiling. Her long auburn hair lay splashed over the pillows. Her large, liquid blue eyes glistened with starpoints of light. She had an otherworldly kind of beauty, in that moment, and I almost wished to have married her, even as I felt her hardening against me.

I brought my hand away from the clammy fabric of her nightgown and wiped it on the sheet. “Hey, Moira, I’m sorry I told you about it. You’re right. It was just a bad dream.”

She blinked her eyes, looked at me blackly where the starlight had been, and turned away.

I looked over at the alarm clock. “Shit. I’ve got to get moving.”

I got out of bed and dressed in high gear. Moira lay in state, as if mulling over her mummihood. This was Friday, her morning off, which meant I’d have to hustle up my own breakfast.

Despite my preoccupation with getting to work on time, the dream visions stayed with me through bathroom, closet and hall, on the windshield inside my forehead. I had the feeling that when I went down to the street and got in the car, I’d find that scope-rifle in the back seat—maybe assembled and ready to go, this time.

And if I found Myrtle clean as a whistle, what then?

I’d be wondering when and where the bastards would turn up next.

Moira stood at the kitchen doorway in her bathrobe, arms folded as if to hold herself for comfort, watching me gulp toast and coffee. Her stringy brown hair hung uncombed around her jowls. Her fleshy nostrils quivered. With a half-dose of caffeine down (I’d brought my daily tithe to her bed) she was ready to have another go at it.

“I still don’t get it,” she said. “Let’s give you the benefit of the doubt for a sec, and call your dream ‘real.’ What does that mean, to you or anybody? Do you really



expect to see this note turn up again somewhere, with your instructions on it? Tell me. What would someone want you to do for them? Is it about your work, do you think? Or is the stress finally getting to you?”

I just let her go on. What would be the point—

“Okay, let’s take a leap and imagine that it means you have an important task to do for somebody. The gun’s just kinda this male thing, for effect. Gerald would have to be in there somewhere—”

“Moira, just give me a break, will you? I don’t know! I just told you what happened, okay? I’m sorry I didn’t read their goddamned note the first time. And there was no instruction manual with the gun and its pet bullet.”

She answered with an eerie calm: “Maybe you’ll find their note still on the vent window.”

Strangely, her comment made me feel better. Even if it was just a game to her, a playing along. This tacit form of support shone a ray of perspective on an invisible adversary. Maybe I’d have an easier time with this dark riddle if I just “played along.” If I actually assumed, for “just a sec” or two, that whatever had happened to me last night in sleep, or yesterday, was still happening as we spoke, and in some fractal version of fact, was real.

So I took up the thread—lifeline or spider-trail—she had handed me. And found myself swinging in the void. Quickly I looked out for a foothold and clambered back onto the solid land of mutual condescension. “Thanks for that thought, Moira, but somehow I don’t think so. I’m afraid the note’s gone by now. I’m sure I would have

noticed it when I got home. It probably blew away at some point when I was driving down the street.”

They say burnt toast is good after poison.

The whole thing was preposterous: I’d simply had a normal day at work, driven home, eaten supper with Moira, gone to bed . . .

Moira kept me in the game. “But you said you drove around the block once, first. Maybe it’s still out on the street somewhere.”

“Right,” I said with my last swallow of coffee. “I’ll cruise the block again before going up to the office.”

I neglected to kiss her good-bye. Ah, well—it wasn’t the first time.

Of course the note was gone from the side window. The back seat, as well, was empty. Was I surprised?

During the twenty minute drive through the morning streets of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, NAmerica, Earth, October 2009, I couldn’t resist stopping to inspect a few stray bits of paper I passed along the way (including part of a *Herald-Examiner* which lent credence to my supposed coordinates in reliable space-time), but found no “mission note.” Was I in the clear, then? Naturally I couldn’t have expected to find a dream-note on a real street; yet Moira’s indulgence in my fantasy, however mocking, had nudged me to a cautious suspension of judgment.

Either way, I thought, I can’t tell Gerald about this.

Gerald Scanlon was “hacker-in-chief” at the microcorp I worked for. We were situated in a newly remodeled office suite occupying the second floor of a former warehouse, a block away from the bustle of Haliburton Boulevard and the West Side Mall. Approaching the building, one sees a venerable yet humble “6,” in faded black, marking through the ages an otherwise plain, gray-painted and weather-stripped door, giving access to a locked inner door and quick turn right to a flight of stairs. One admires the polished banister leading the way up to a dark walnut finish on the official portal to our hard-copy site, the second-floor door sporting new and classy gilt lettering—”Scanlon & Hart”—on its lightly textured glass panel.

It was curious, I might add, how Gerald had kept the old company name even after Kenneth Hart’s departure. Was it to retain old customers? Why not “Scanlon and Associates”? Too much of the lawyers-and-accountants feel? Whatever the motivation, the old name had a certain ring; and we associates allowed Gerald his prerogative.

Proceeding to the inner spaces as through the directories on a new operating system, the sexy tour guide presents in husky virtual seduction our new pastel-salmon reception counter, waves with a casual hand toward a couple of redecorated back offices and a conference-cum-coffee room, and, alas, with heavy-lashed eyes lowered, almost bashful . . .beckons us to my work-area which somehow was left adrift by the rogue architects (Jeevers and Associates) under the putative direction of Mr. Scanlon. “My office” was a mere space with three walls.

A dentist used to operate here: you could still see the circles on the original hardwood floor near my desk, where the big swivel chairs had been mounted. Reflooring

would have been a nice touch, and in the hands of other management may have been considered essential; but in this case it wound up in the “overbudget” column of Giselda’s books. Giselda, the office secretary missing from the Scanlon and Hart travel brochure we have just perused, is late as usual because, she will claim, she forgot to let the dog out and had to go back.

Gerald was visible through the open door of his office, talking on the phone: his short, peach-colored hair receding halfway to baldness, his ropy forearms folded over a white, short-sleeved, silk shirt. Gerald was always talking on the phone—a throwback to the days before e-mail took over the communications division of *homo sapiens*.

I had an uneasy feeling that it had been days since I’d been here.

But I had a ready strategy against such an anxiety: just check my logon file. The screen looked at me as I approached, its cartoon one-eye half-lidded in “Ready” mode. I sat down, and the eyelid sprang open.

Don’t be alarmed. It was programmed to do this.

The eye seemed to smile, to welcome me into my—into its—workspace. I could leave the mingled smells of old and new varnishes, stale and fresh coffee behind, and dive into cool, sterile waters . . .

I logged on and called up my last entries. Date column: October 22—yesterday. Time logged off, 4:25. Everything shipshape, according to the computer. Its low, hushed hum purred, lulling me into normalcy. But on this day, I slipped right past normal into a vague yet sudden panic.

I didn't so much remember my dream, then, as re-experience it in some more vital, almost cellular, manner. If such an effect is obscure I can only further describe it by saying that I started shaking, rapidly yet lightly, all over.

Lance Harrison sauntered by, coffee mug steaming. "Hiya, Nort. You on the wagon today, or what?"

I willed myself into control enough to speak, but avoided looking at him directly. "Hairy. How's it." I didn't care to banter with him further, to probe his meaning—had he noticed my shakes or simply the absence of my first cup of joe? Instead I just grunted, pretending a preoccupation with getting my work files warmed up.

"Harry," or "Hairy," as I more affectionately called him, was a New York kind of guy, who normally would have brandished bravado and hard-edged humor in order to expose whatever was hiding under my skin. But something in my manner put him off this time, because he raised a quick thumb and disappeared with a curt "Later," down the corridor to his own properly four-walled office.

I took a deep breath. My position in this company was marginal enough, without my coming out as some kind of an alien-abductee.

The glass pane rattled in the door as Giselda came in, sighing and talking to herself loudly enough for her office-mates to hear her excuse of the day, which we have all heard before.

"Good morning, Giselda," I called out. That's what she needed to stop herself nattering and to settle down to work, every day. Today, I needed it, too.

"Ahhhhhh. Is it a good morning? Hello Nortie."

For a moment, I thought she said “Gordie.” It was Sheila, my other fantasy mistress—Moira’s younger sister—who called me Gordie.

I had a direct line of sight past the partition to Giselda’s chair at her desk behind the reception counter, and with a brief glance I saw her flashing her big sparkling, made-up green eyes for me. She knew I was in a relatively stable relationship with Moira. I knew Giselda was single and, at thirty-six, feeling like she was losing time. True, I felt some affection for her. But in my personal life right now, there was just no room for her—either the real or the fantasy version.

As I had with Harry, I turned my attention to the computer screen, cultivating a neutral silence between us as I arranged my current files and went to work. Along with the office renovations had come a slick new computer system, the 510-E Series Synphase. Gerald, Harry, Giselda and I each ran a workstation; the four machines were linked to operate in tandem. Giselda didn’t use a tenth of her share of the combined computing power, as she handled standard secretarial duties with relatively undemanding system calls: accounting, correspondence, file management. But the rest of us were now able to breeze through once-formidable tasks; since with the four units linked together as quaternary system modules, we had the speed and memory capacity of a virtual mainframe.

I took pride in this job—mixed with frustration at not advancing appreciably in salary or position. We crunched data for aircraft designers; we projected future trends for government agencies and academic research groups. For a variety of corporate clients, we supplied custom software to handle bid-analysis, account mergers, and insurability

factoring. In short, we occupied a node in a vast and intricate network of industry, bureaucracy and information management. Within walking distance of Scanlon and Hart's were half a dozen similar outfits, all filling different niches in the network. While my personal aspirations to upward mobility had stalled, I took consolation in playing a useful part in some larger, if vaguer, social enterprise.

The morning routine put me back into a more normal, if still vaguely haunted frame of mind. Yeah, I considered, nightmares do feel real; that's just what they're supposed to do. Otherwise we're not scared enough to pay attention to what they're trying to tell us. Psych 101. As cited in the literature. Delusionary projections and so forth. The well of the unconscious. The spiraling links . . .

I let it all dance away on streaming VRUSIC, datastring variables and an interlude of cupcakes which arrived, courtesy of Giselda, for coffee-break. That institution, with variable participation from any or all of us Scanlon-and-Hartlings, depending on the degree of our absorption in the day's work, took place in the central office room adjoining the lobby. The necessities included an old-fashioned percolator we all hated, and an assortment of castoff cups and mugs. A box of pastries might appear if one of us happened to have come in by way of Haliburton's HotSpot or Shorty's either before work, or during the first shift. On this occasion Gerald was missing, his voice still droning on the phone from the office farther down the hall; and Harry, with the dark good looks of his Italian mother and a cocky self-assurance that said "New York on the road," was putting the usual fake moves on Giselda. He didn't say much to me. I was polite if not forthcoming. Had he taken note to leave me some distance, or had he forgotten my

earlier funk? It didn't matter, really. I took it all in—cupcakes, coffee and meaningless flirtation, with simple gratitude that I was just one of the human gang, again—back at the home brain.

I cranked up the VRUSIC controls and donned the vir-leather headgear for the stretch run to lunch. Harry's salsa and jazz . . . Gerald's Vivaldi and Ravel. Red lights and maracas Saturday night in the cantina; green ocean swells. Simco space-station coefficients, the Jennings account. Blue lights at midnight in the desert camp. Playing with fire . . . why? Because I wanted to find out.

Before lunch Gerald came to me with an armful of hardcopy, a four-inch multilayered sandwich of printout and colored manila: "Can you package this up and run it over to Leonard's?" Pouting with his lip in just such a way that you kind of felt sorry for him, and your doing his errand would fix up his day, or his life.

"It's too sensitive for the dataline," he explained. "I can't trust this one to the binaries, with all the bit-lifting going on. With Siltech Genex on the other end, heads would roll."

I was a bowler and I didn't like the idea of my own skull rumbling down Haliburton Boulevard. "Sorry I asked. You want a sandwich from Shorty's?"

"Yeah, how 'bout roast beef. Some of their coffee, too. I know it's the same brand as ours, but somehow it tastes better brought in."

"I know what you mean. Okay, no problemo."



Actually I resented having to do this officeboy work, the little extra stuff like the packaging, on top of the lunch delivery. I saw part of a Defense Department logo on a page easing out of the stack of papers. This was a new twist, I thought; usually we worked a few layers back from the “D-boys.” Was Gerald showing off? At least he trusted me. And right—I didn’t really care to snoop. I tucked the papers back together and packaged them up. Just doing my job, what was asked. On this day of days, it seemed important.

I checked by Giselda’s desk for her lunch order. Usually she asked first. This time I could preempt her with my own offer to pick up something. She smiled sweetly, her combination of flaming red hair and green eyes giving pleasure to my offer. No trouble, I told her; I was going anyway.

The finishing touches were being applied to a billboard a block away, advertising an island paradise: sparkling waves, suntanned flesh, obligatory palms. I started to daydream. I had some vacation credit. December would be a good time to take off. Moira might not go along with such a frivolous plan; but I could spring for one ticket. Who knows what it might lead to? Then the street sign, Haliburton, hit me with its associations of sandwiches, donuts and coffee, and I realized I liked this cold, gray place, this pedestrian routine. This was home.

“Hey bud, kinda chilly this mornin, ain’t it?”

A bum on the corner sidled up to me like an old friend.

It was cold, I told him.

“Yeah, well, ‘specially with no meals in a couple days. Say, you wouldn’t—”

The light changed. My new friend with the red rheumy eyes started across the street with me. Going in the restaurant with him, I considered, might be embarrassing, his shiny wingtip shoes notwithstanding.

“Here you go.” I was in the habit then of carrying a lot of change. It gave me a sense of security, a confidence that I would be prepared for any eventuality. Walking with its weight swinging against my thigh made me feel in some small way like a successful man—as some feel with the power of fully loaded keyrings. The downside of a pocketful of change was that it left me vulnerable to panhandlers. I fished out a small fistfull and gave it to the guy, experiencing in return the gratification of small power. Meanwhile I was careful to hold onto my briefcase with the other hand. The bum cupped his hands double to catch the coins. Some spilled along the crosswalk and he scrambled for them as they rolled away. Traffic started moving again. I kept a brisk pace, glancing over my shoulder to see him cursing the traffic, cursing me for my generosity.

The strange thing was, by the time I got back to the office with the carton of coffee and sandwiches, I had no memory beyond the bum: no memory of Leonard Martinson’s DataBoost agency, nor Shorty’s Cook Nook, nor the walk. I searched back and found nothing: as when waking from a dream you know you had, you cannot recall a single glimpse of it. I felt as if I’d been sleepwalking, and figured that I must have found my way back to the office by sheer habit. Briefcase empty, lunch in a box: mission accomplished—or so it seemed.

I deposited the food and drink quickly in the empty conference room and retired to my computer, feigning work as I tore into a sandwich and tried to recover my lost senses.

I almost wanted an outlandish theory to believe in now—that I had been abducted by aliens, say, and that I had traveled with them on an unimaginably long journey. Following this fancy of an otherworldly force, however, came an intuition that to reach such interstellar distances, I had to look no farther than my own brain: that raw and wrinkled thing inside, pulsing uncontrollably.

Body, brain, mind: were they different, separable? My body felt prickly, as if from a thousand probes; my mind strangely cleansed, or scoured. What else might these conceivable—therefore possible—kidnappers have done to me? If they return, what will they want of me then? And with what purposes would they use me, to experiment, to illustrate their point, the points, the million points of light oh my God—

“What’s the matter, Norton, the old lady didn’t make brekky for you this morning?”

I looked up sheepishly at Harrison and took another bite of sandwich. “S’matter of fact, she didn’t.” I didn’t like where my thoughts ran back to, like water down a drain. “Hey, this meat loaf and chili sauce is excellent, y’ever try that?”

Giselda came up and tittered at his side. “Crumbs on the keyboard—” Quoting Gerald.

Crumbs or no crumbs, I was beginning to feel like a candidate for somebody’s zoo, on this or some other planet. Back to the tribe I ran: dutifully getting up to join them

in the lunchroom. I even managed to pass this minor hurdle of a group feeding ritual with no real consequence: with Giselda, oblivious of her BLT, going on about her dog Chipper's urinary habits, and Harrison waxing prophetic about the Eagles. Gerald was once again preoccupied on the phone, so the role of sympathetic listener fell to me. My hunger, and their desire to talk, saved me from saying anything stupid.

"Gotta get back at it," I said finally, making the first exit from the room. Walking back into my work area, I was drawn by some unidentifiable, almost parental concern to the window looking down on the parking lot, where I'd parked Myrtle this morning and where she'd remained during my outing for lunch.

She stood green and innocent on the pocked asphalt, in a swirl of blowing leaves.

At afternoon coffee break, Harrison came by again. "How you doin', today, chum?"

Chum? He never called me chum.

Harry looked a little worried now, and I figured I'd have to tell him something. Maybe I was coming down with the flu.

"Uh, good, Hairy. A little slow on this new data looper from Western. They're using their own protocols, it seems, more and more. But they don't tell you until you're halfway into the routines."

"Yeah, well. That's progress. One step forward, two steps back. Anyhow, Nort, I was just wondering. You look a little washed out today. Heavy date last night?"

Harrison's slick black hair shone under the overhead fluorescents, and his teeth gleamed in a broad smile as we saddled up and rode into male-bond mode.

"Moira's a little on the heavy side," I told him, "but I wouldn't exactly call her a date. Not after four years."

"I call that as good as married." He chuckled and started to walk away. "Coming for coffee?"

Waltzing down the hall beside me, Harrison proceeded to expound on his theory of relationships. "The way I see it, a week's about max with one woman. After that, it's like, haven't I seen this face before? This breakfast? This whatever? Know what I mean? You just can't sit still and watch the action pass you by; you gotta go for it, taste it, try it all. Cause before you know it, you're forty, or whatever. Dead meat." He paused for my reaction, and when all he got was a smirk, added, "No offense intended." He grinned at me as if it were just a joke.

"Hey man," I said with bruised pride, "I did my share of one-week stands—twenty five years ago." I wished it were true. There were a couple of misadventures; I wished there were more. It never occurred to me in those days that satisfaction with a woman might come from long-term intimacy. Instead I chased the illusion of better sex, trading these occasional lovers-of-the-week for a chance to grab the ever-more tantalizing rings still whirling by in the merry-go-round. Now I had a chance to build a stable relationship with Moira; and there were enough challenges to cope with from her side, with her own attempts at "keeping the relationship fresh." Frankie Porterfield, Chas the

stockbroker. These were the ones I knew about. Was I all played out? Maybe the opportunity in recent years hadn't knocked loudly enough.

We reached the coffee machine. I poured for Harry.

“Look at Gerald and Connie, for instance.” Harry glanced quickly around to see that Gerald was out of earshot. “De old folks at home. What does he do for fun, play golf once a year? Does he have any friends? Naw, man, that kind of married life is old hat. Hey, Nort, look at it this way. You're not really married—not yet. So that's a good start. You're still a free man. You have ultimate freedom. And you still got a half-decent mug on you, when you remember to shave.”

This remark caused me to run a double-check with my hand across a stubbly, fat-rounded chin. He was right, at least about the razor. As for the mug—my blue eyes and bulbous nose nullified the pale blue eyes, but in the balance I figured I qualified for Moira's league, and I figured I should be happy to take what I got; especially considering that I got it when I was already four years past Harry's magic number. I wasn't a fitness freak: I got off instead on bowling, especially the automatic resets. But I liked long walks; and though I ate your standard poison diet, my paunch was par for my age, and my health was, let's say, lucky.

The pep talk wasn't over. “You got to get off your butt, bro, or the world'll pass you by.” He slugged back half his coffee, still too hot for me.

His attitude pissed me off.

“‘Ultimate freedom’—where'd you pick that one up? Some airhead French writer?”

“You kidding? I don’t know, prob’ly some ad. Toothpaste, deodorant, tampons. What’s the diff? No, now I remember. It was for that new SuperVR place downtown— ‘the Spiral Links,’ they call it. Have you heard about it?”

“No.” My own leisure life these days was pretty tame: in front of the BigScreen with Moira; home at my own place alone with a book; the odd night out with friends for dinner, bowling, or cards. But most nights, it was the BigScreen. Why put yourself out, when it’s all available in the comfort of your living room?

“It’s set up kind of like a golf course, with eighteen different experiences as options. You can play just one, or as many as you like. One of the options, actually, is a round of golf.”

“But not actually.”

He gave me a wise little smile. “Hey, like I said, what’s the diff? You just gotta get into it.”

“Virtual golf, eh? Sounds kind of ordinary to me. What is it, for seniors?”

“Naw, man—”

Gerald came in just then with a cup of coffee and patted Harry affectionately on the shoulder. “What’s this about golf?”

Harry told him, “Oh, I was just telling Norton about the Spiral Links.” Then he resumed his pitch to me: “The trips you can go on, it’s amazing. I been to ‘em in New York; there’s one a block away from where I grew up. Not just sports. They got sex, adventure, horror, sci-fi, anything. You just decide what you want, and it happens. Way beyond what we get with the fuckin mickey-mouse ears here.” He was referring to the

\$600 set of SEE phones (“Sensory Enhanced Earphones”) on the shelf by my workstation, designed to boost the bandwidth of the VRUSIC virtual music files. Harry was way ahead of us. “I’m talkin’ total immersion. It shakes up your routines, lemme tell ya. Anyway . . .”

To me the VR craze just seemed like a glorified BigScreen. Cartoons and video games in three dimensions, with a few whiffs of scent thrown in. Harrison always had some new thing to get excited about: the next major sport, a cybertoy, another “trial relationship.” Mr. Action. Only twenty-eight, already Gerald’s wunderkind. He was a good guy, but there was a generation between us. No, I could handle my own affairs, thank you very much.

Harrison prattled on, and I indulged him with half my attention.

As he spoke I felt a growing discomfort with the whole subject: a gut response deeper than my usual dismissal of VR as just another wave of techno-toys. Today’s session on the SEE phones—only the third or fourth time I’d used them—was unremarkable, but now instead of thinking of them as trivial or silly, I was filled a kind of dread.

Gerald came on the scene and brought me out of my psychic quicksand by shifting the conversation back to golf, his game of choice. Sand traps, at least, were dry and safe places for mature boys to play.

At the end of the day, I got in my car, spun a little more gravel than usual on the turn into Haliburton, and drove home to Moira. I’d have to tell her that Myrtle purred,



that Harry was his usual braggadocio self (omitting the details), and that Giselda minded her own business. Oh, and I delivered a package to Leonard Martinson's . . .

Moira's was no palace. But I couldn't complain: she shared it with me: a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor of a dingy brownstone in a quiet neighborhood, with three steps leading up to a glassed-in front with locking door, and obsolete mailboxes in the lobby. From the lobby a short flight of stairs led down to one apartment, and another stairway gave access to two apartments on a first floor up. These neighbors of ours were obscure: an old black lady down below who lived alone; a couple of middle-aged, somewhat retarded brothers named Drudge; a male bus driver with two kids part-time, tenish. We kept to ourselves, Moira and I, in our larger suite above, and by all appearances, the others did likewise.

The extra room was supposed to be for Moira's work, which meant her "independent career" as a graphic designer. It was set up with a drawing table, light table, file bins . . .but I never saw her work there while I was around. She always went "to the fucking office," where she did grunt work for a real design outfit.

We sat down to soysteak, broccoli cubes, pre-fried potatoes. All from the microwave, of course. Moira the graphic artist didn't work on Friday mornings and Moira the cook didn't work at all unless she felt "inspired," a rare occurrence. That was fine; we both accepted the fact that neither of us had the time to spare nor the proper inclination for home-style cooking.

"The steak's a little dry," I said. "No reflection on you."

"Here's the soy sauce," she answered flatly, passing me the bottle.

I avoided her eyes. I didn't want to be the one to bring it up. A stream of inky liquid made a brave splash upon the lifeless slab on my plate.

Moira took up a forkful of would-be meat and looked at me expectantly, waving the fork idly in the air. "No note, I suppose." Apparently she was going to wait for confirmation before committing to the next mouthful.

"Note . . .? Oh, yeah, that silly note. Ha. Well, I did look for it this morning."

"Really. I wonder what could have happened to it."

"All right, Moira, let's just drop it, shall we?" I decided the bland potatoes needed saucing up too. "Tell me, how was your day?"

She eyed me cautiously, took fork into mouth and then proceeded to tell of the catastrophe of the cracked water cooler at her office. Doris clipped it with her handbag. Something hard in there. A gun? was the serious joke then. Doris was mum.

When it was my turn, I ran into trouble when I came to the Martinson file and so I faked it, telling her how nice it was to be out strolling at midday.

"Yeah? What city were you in? It was miserable out when I went to work. It took half an hour for my fingers to thaw out enough to pick up a pencil."

"Well, you know, just to have a break from the computer, and the office politics."

Moira still looked dubious, so I threw up a diversion with a rehash of the upcoming merger.

It was a painful business, protracted through past and future. Our outfit was respected, and had a solid clientele. But now the small fry were being swallowed up, one by one, by the big conglomerates from New York, LA, Tokyo. So much for the

“decentralist” promise of the cybernetic revolution. Scanlon and Hart had been approached the previous month. It wasn’t as if we had a real choice. Gerald’s old partner, Kenneth Hart, on behalf of his current corporation, Siltech Genex, was offering to buy us out—or take our contracts out from under us if we refused.

Gerald had brought it to an in-house meeting in August, and wanted to know our feelings. Something inside me was against the deal. But would saying so leave me out when it happened anyway? I said I’d go along with “whatever made the most sense for the company, in the long-term”—trying to show my loyalty. I went so far as to mention a point that Moira had mentioned seeing in *Time*: that the trend for success in computer services seemed to be away from the mom-and-pop scale. I was going to oppose this current wisdom with my own thinking, but Gerald cut me off. Everyone else came out against going big. I tried once more to come across as being in agreement—this time, for proceeding cautiously. But then Harry took my words and rode with them in order to parade his own flag. And finally I just plain wasn’t sure anymore, and kept my peace. Did it matter, really? I knew I could be out of a job either way, the industry was so volatile. I’d sensed ever since Lance Harrison was hired six months after me, that he was being groomed to absorb my job description within his own more ample talents. It was a matter of time.

In recent weeks, since that earlier meeting, office opinion had shifted in favor of the merger—Harry’s flag still visible in front. In summary of my latest stance, I said to Moira, “I still think it’s the wrong move for the company, but I’m willing to go with the punches.”

She nodded, mouthing the soggy broccoli, wanting to hear more.

I reasoned like a hedgemaster. “At least with a big firm, I might be given the ball once in a while, and a little daylight to run with it.”

Her pained expression told me to ditch the sports analogies.

“Well, you know how it is,” I explained. “I’m getting paid the same salary I started with three years ago. Harry’s already passed me as number two man, and now Gerald’s talking buyout to the same gang I worked for before. I can see how if I’m lucky and do everything I’m told, I might get some security, at least, for the rest of my working days.”

“I don’t quite follow you, Mister Norton. Could you state for the viewing audience once more, where you stand on this compelling issue?”

Moira the anchorwoman held the cayenne shaker to my mouth. The fumes caused me to sneeze, and then I said forget it and started to leave the table.

Moira re-anchored the shaker in its side of the cherrywood holder which I’d given her last Christmas and said, too late for this conversation, “If it’s not too late.” The other side was still empty.

Still I found myself saying, before leaving the kitchen, “What do you mean by that?”

“I’ve had a long day,” she said and sidled past me to the Big Screen room, her floppy house slippers mocking me with their departure.

“Oh God, Moira.” I padded after her in my own brown slippers.

“God yourself.” She didn’t look back.

“Now what is it?”

She turned the corner and pretended she was out of earshot. She’d got the jump on me for channel selection again. Oh well, it wasn’t like the Phillies were in the World Series this year.

Maybe it wasn’t the dream. Maybe it was just typical. I reversed direction, went back to the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher. Would I ever feel like whistling again?

We didn’t speak any more as I finally calmed down enough to go in and sit beside her on the couch. She was already into a show. I brooded on the bitterness of our relationship, and on the rut my career was in. In either case, I was just putting in time.

Moira smoked and watched, as if I weren’t even there. Maybe I wasn’t.

I was sitting at my workstation enjoying the slick new Synphase computer that had just been installed, crunching the facts and figures for Congreve Aviation so they could look good for their upcoming contract bid, 2.5 billion Pentagon bucks for a hot new baby called the AirStar . . . thinking, Norton, what’s it all for?

Moira had kicked me out after an argument about her sister Sheila, whom I’d not so much as touched. I had responded by confiding in Harry, “At least Sheila has a sense of humor, allows me to lighten up once in a while. Maybe I should just go for it, since Moira’s bitching about it already, anyway.” But of course I didn’t have the guts to follow through.

I watched the figures fly by on the shiny new monitor screen, my own brain idling. I knew I could continue to get by here—provided new management didn’t mind

my previous defection from their own prideful ranks. The defense work didn't bother me any more: I was insulated from morality by habit. Just like at home, where there was the BigScreen between me and the ugly events the news reported; a stained and leaded window I could hide behind as long as I wanted.

The Synphase workstation came with a custom monitor with an intriguing screensaver: a realistic animated eye, heavy-lidded as Buddha's, if you idled too long or went away; or bright and piercing at your close approach, just before giving way to the brains inside. The Synphase and its peripheral software were a Siltech Genex production, wouldn't you know: so in a way, we were already in. In my most defensive moments I had the uneasy sense that the monitor's eye could actually see me, or read my thoughts.

And what were my thoughts, my very own? If I looked for myself below the surface, into my past, could I discern clues of a lost direction, a latent opportunity I might still revive before it was too late?

In college I'd gone for the easiest courses, geogs and business, then was rewarded with a year-long career pushing a button in a Newark car wash. So I went back to school in computer sciences at the community college level, performed well enough to go into the job market feeling choosy, and turned down some fat jobs in defense industries because of some temporary scruples. I wound up languishing in credit unions and college administration offices for five years instead, before finally landing a real job with a big company—S.G., we call it, for affection—handling everything they gave me, no questions asked. By then I'd learned not to ask.

Coincidentally, Kenneth Hart came to Siltech Genex while I still worked there. But I never met him. It's not like this mom and pop shop of Gerald's, out there in the real comcorp world.

When I got together with Moira—a relationship built on the dubious promise gleaned from a singles' sex workshop in Woodlawn—she convinced me I'd have better job security with a small outfit. So I jumped to Scanlon and Hart, at a time when Gerald was back down to a one-man show, plus Giselda. Kenneth Hart, so the story went, had already lured his own replacement out of Gerald's hands and over to the SG side. Now I was replacing the replacement. Did I say Moira and I forgot whatever we might have learned in that suburban love-camp?

Hart had made a name for himself while in partnership with Gerald. He was characterized as having “inventive brilliance” in fields as diverse as VR and biofeedback technology. I guess that's why Gerald couldn't divest himself of the esteemed name. I kidded myself (and Moira) that I was taking Hart's place—until this hotter-shot named Lance Harrison came along soon after.

All that was history. And I was thinking, new computer, great. But, as I recalled telling Moira in a still-earlier argument, I needed to look a little deeper: “You pushed me into this nickel-and-dime outfit. You said it was the wave of the future. You told me I'd be head of the firm someday. Now where am I? Right where I started.” She was unsympathetic, denying that she'd badgered me into trading down.

Maybe this was mid-life crisis. Which meant, what? The absence of adventure or fame? I could qualify for that on a hundred counts. Or maybe, merely an absence of

crisis—though that, too, was nothing new for me. I never got busted for speeding, or loud parties, as a teenager. Always did my school assignments, and later paid my parking tickets, on time. Maybe I just kept forgetting to look in the obvious place for a fix—a decent vacation. The most exciting place I'd ever been to was the Delaware shore, a couple of summers ago with Moira, her sister, and their parents.

Who the hell knew? A shrink would probably say I was suffering from the insecurity of being passed back and forth between my parents after they split up, at the impressionable age of ten. . . .

As on and on I continue with my daydreaming, the virtual eyelid goes sad and heavy on me. Stolid . . . reproachful.

What about all the fun I should have been having with my new 510-E Series wife-replacer? It was only two-thirty—not time for coffee break yet.

And so the following solution occurred to me: a little strain of gypsy music, to transport the weary soul.

I know Gerald likes all this old-fashioned stuff, I consider: like . . . let's key up the menu and see . . . ah, right, *Bolero*: that's the VRUSIC selection he was telling me about. Pre-installed courtesy of Ken Hart himself, who knew Gerald's tastes to a tee. I put on the calf-soft SEE headset and gently lean back, letting it happen.

The violins begin, and the distant drums. I can feel the hot dry breeze against my cheek, can see dusty bulls grazing under a bronze sun. Wild! I sway to the slow, building pulse. Is this me, am I there? Eyes open to half-lids, no, the office. But yes, back in. It certainly seems so. Amazing. Where was I? Just then, a couple of notes



ago . . .let it go, Norton. This is what these things are for. Small breaks from eye-work are beneficial, Gerald once said. Swaying, in the dust. The music swelling. All right then. It works if you let it, I see. This really is me, or another me. A carriage takes us, no, just one me, through stone city gates, to an arena humming with the roar of a crowd. Inside the stadium, I'm definitely smelling dung and dust and faintly, roses, I'm surrounded by a holiday profusion of colorful dress and flashing jewelry; now, intoxicating scent of roses in the air. I look down: and calmly accept that I am dressed in the gilded brocade of a bullfighter, standing alone by a low wooden gate half-open onto the beaten earth of the arena floor. The music builds, races ahead. My heart pounds as I realize my time has come: my first time in the ring.

A woman's rich voice calls out to me: "Toreador!" I turn and see a dark-haired, proud-mouthed beauty smiling defiantly: a mole high on her left cheek, a small gap between her front teeth. I'm struck by the desire to fly into that gap before it vanishes upward with the toss of her head. In the same motion she flings out a handful of prickly-stemmed roses which land with a dry splash at my feet. I bow, slightly, hesitating to pick them up. Unsure of the protocol, I think I'd better not. The crowd is hushed, expectant, and I realize I'm overdue to march ahead into the ring, in time to the stately music.

A door opens across the arena, and there the snorting beast emerges, twitching his tail and pawing the dirt. His red-rimmed eyes are sad but steady, fixed upon me with the force of tragedy. He brings his massive pair of horns up and then rolls them at me casually, impishly, before beginning a slow, but steady, circling trot in my direction. I realize that I am without cape, without sword.

I switch the music off.

Icy sweat trickles down the skin under my armpits.

Christ, Gerald, I thought this stuff's supposed to be relaxing!

“Lost in space, soldier?” It was Giselda's velvet voice that brought me out of my reverie. “Just a line I use for Kenny when he gets too absorbed in the BigScreen. He likes those old nineties space operas, or whatever you call them.”

Kenny was her seven-year-old, the offspring of Kenneth Hart.

Thinking about Giselda brought me out of my telescoping trance, back to the couch in front of the BigScreen with Moira. But there was nothing there to get involved in: Moira absorbed in the Screen, the Screen dedicated to some inane comic mystery set in the all-too-near future. So I was back, but back it was to wondering how I might upgrade this legacy program, call it NortonJoe 1.0, before mid-life workarounds gave way to system lockup, silent crash, game over. Maybe Harry had the right idea. Maybe there was some organic chemistry to be factored in, between Giselda and me.

It would take going out together for a beta-test, on one of Moira's bowling nights. That would be a Saturday or Wednesday. Moira was in two leagues; I just bowled for fun. We no longer bowled together; the competition thing between us was just too much of an issue for her. Or was it that she preferred to play with her own friends?

Maybe Giselda was a viable alternative, and maybe not. I couldn't really swallow Harrison's enthusiasm for the VR-dating idea. So, maybe just a friendly drink, or intimate dinner sometime.

Moira, suddenly bored with the BigScreen, got up without a word and went to the bedroom. Had she read my mind?

As it happened, I needed to sleep too. When I crawled into bed shortly after her, Moira, eyes closed but with the shallow breathing of the still-awake, lay as distant as a blue star beside me. Thinking about her, and Giselda, and Sheila, I forgot my other problems. And so, when sleep did finally come, I dreamed again.

I'm walking across Haliburton Boulevard, briefcase in hand. Looking both ways for traffic, I come to a stop in mid-stride. There's a soft but powerful blue light shining down from above. I stare up at it, blinded, transfixed, apprehensive in the pit of my stomach. Then I feel my elbows and biceps gripped from behind. I turn to see the alien eyes: green highlights deep inside huge black pupils, eyes covering half the face. I don't look long. A shiver runs through me: more than a shiver. My spine courses with a tingling energy, almost overwhelmingly powerful. It's a little painful, but most of all frightening. What are they doing to me? I'm whisked upward, and in a flash find myself hovering outside a vast, humming hull graced with rows of twinkling blue lights, running lights. Beautiful, but for the awful sense of what might lie in store for me inside.

A door opens; I glide through it without volition. A reception committee stands waiting: more trans-humans gesturing to one another with thin long limbs which are strangely flexible, rubbery, perhaps boneless. I see that there's no way to escape; but as the tingling in my spine subsides, my fear begins to calm.

Like a boy at a science fair, I become fascinated by the bank of glittering controls, the window of winking stars. We'll be travelling, I'm given to understand,

incomprehensibly far—and for how many eons I don't want to guess. The committee continues to regard me with their battery of giant insect eyes. Then a small party of taller figures enters the room. Again without words I am told to give my trust to these stern, silent (indeed, mouthless) inquisitors, who proceed to hold me down, and with supple fingers begin to insert a series of long, thin wires into my skull, penetrating the inner recesses of my brain.

It doesn't hurt, surprisingly, though I tremble again with unknowing dread. After I'm stuck with about a dozen of the things, the wires begin singing, and I feel my thoughts, memories, threads of knowledge streaming out through them . . . draining.

Now the whole experience takes on a different tenor: it feels somehow liberating. And I'm grateful to these beings. I want to go with them, to where they come from or where they go next. Out there, so far . . .

In an instant the scene changes. I find myself in a flight cabin of ordinary looking, human passengers, reading newspapers, sipping cocktails, chatting. A faint trail of music issues from the headset resting on my leg. Then engines groan and whine in what feels like a smoothly jolting deceleration, and I see, through the small porthole at my shoulder, a smoking red landscape looming under a fiery sky.

I try to stand up, but the seat harness is strapped tight around me. I see no way to undo it. I begin to panic. A prim blonde stewardess in a tight blue suit and matching bellhop's cap comes to chide me, saying, "Please, sir, remain in your seat until we touch down. It'll only be a few more minutes."

With a thud we hit ground, amid a cloud of red dust. The engines whirl down to silence. The other passengers begin collecting carry-ons and filing out of the cabin through a rear door. I fumble with my harness, still unable to locate a release mechanism, yet unwilling to embarrass myself by asking that prune-eyed stewardess for assistance. She slips away in the collective exodus. Two more identical stewardesses chatter gaily to one another as they follow the last of the passengers out the exit door.

“Hey!” I finally call out to them. “Can you help me with this thing?”

The twins-in-blue throw me a last pitying look before closing the cabin door behind them.

A light flickers at the main control console under a broad window in front of the cabin. For the first time I realize—or has it changed?—this is no airplane of the cigar age: but rather a disk-shaped airship. The dust has settled and I look with astonishment to see, coming from the distance, moving objects, live objects, creatures gigantic and menacing as dinosaurs. Heavy-legged, fat-bodied. Moving toward the ship slowly, deliberately, singly and in groups, packs of them advancing. Each creature, on closer view, is many-headed: each head writhing with long, tentacle-like necks; each neck supporting another, smaller head; and each of these heads sprouting more necks, more heads. The whole ship begins to shudder, from the impact of their monstrous legs on the ground outside. Unable to bear looking at them any longer, I twist my face away. It’s time to get out! I thrash in my harness—to no effect.

With desperation I attempt to reason with myself. To find the party responsible for what is happening, and to say, “This has all been very entertaining for a while, but now—” Or failing that, simply to scream.

Then the ship's lights blink out, all but one flashing red light on the console. The fiery dusk has quickly deepened into darkness; sounds of the creatures have passed by and gone mute. My harness straps fall loosely from me, as if of their own accord. I stand up, slack-jawed, and shamble forward, drawn to that mesmerizing red light on the console. Why doesn't the devilish thing leave me in peace? Lurching against the console, I slam my palm down against it.

Saturday—in theory. Moira stirred, then was up out of bed, dressing. She had a list of things to go out and do today; which, I vaguely remembered, included an afternoon appointment at the hairdresser's, where Sheila worked as a manicurist. I lay in bed feigning sleep until she left the bedroom.

A simple act, you might say. But not in my case. Caught between an unsavory darkness, and going through the waking nightmare of another dream-sharing session with Moira, I chose an uneasy limbo until the front door clicked shut behind her.

Then I got up and dressed, but all was not sweetness and light in day-land. I wove about the apartment with a certain haunted preoccupation, on the hunt for a dark-espresso dose of factoid reality.

I settled in front of a days-old newspaper which I tried to read over the Shreddies. The passing events of the world had little relevance to me any more: this planet and its

petty fixations seemed so miniscule in the larger picture. Distracted from the flimsy newsprint, I felt I was being carried along on a wave—no, a rising tide—of compulsion towards a greater reality: into a fuller, more expansive dimension than I had previously known existed. At the same time I was not joyful, or bounteous in my heart. There was too much dread, too much of the taste of black ooze in my mouth. And I don't mean the coffee.

Maybe there was something real going on, something actual to these experiences of mine. I thought these words as if Moira were there, held them in my mind and ear and tried them out, in Safe mode. I'd heard about alien abduction. Countless real people told consistent stories under hypnosis. They came back with puncture marks on their skin, scars in their nostrils, unexplained absences.

If it happened to one and not both partners, marriages tended to break apart.

The Shreddies tasted like papier-maché. I reached for my coffee and tipped the mug onto the table, soaking the Herald-Examiner's sports section.

So much for the conventional version of reality.

I swabbed up the mess with the wadded paper and tossed it to the sink. Two fucking points.

I sat down again by my unfinished bowl of pulpy milk, unable to eat or move. There were more sections of the paper on the floor, still unread. What next?

I had scanned reports of ordinary events happening to well-known people. Travels abroad; corporate investments; summit meetings and cabinet reshufflings.

Coming back to my own situation, I had to ask, why me? If there are aliens out there looking for a fall guy, why choose Joseph F. Norton?

I was nothing if not ordinary. I made a virtue out of it. I was a functionary in a cybernetic society. Not, certainly, an emissary for the human race. I had no special ambitions, no secret calling that I was aware of. No shady connections in my dossier; no past lives calling to me from jewel-encrusted crypts. I got up in the morning, ate my breakfast and went to work. Did my job well: whether programming the computer or delivering messages by hand, debugging new software or trying to iron out faults in the commercial systems we sometimes used. It simply made no sense to target me. I felt like lashing out: but there was no one to hit.

And it wasn't just me, now, either. The whole relationship with Moira, which over time had started to feel almost workable in the long term, now seemed shaky to the point of collapse. Looking at it from the outside, you might say that I didn't have a whole lot invested, there; but it had always seemed better than nothing. It was what you might call a major-league relationship, but only if you were inclined also to say that the cellar-dwelling Phillies played major league baseball. We had never really considered marriage. It was day to day. Or year to year, as it happened. Commitment was taboo; Moira called it "the C-word." But our arrangement suited her, and it suited me. At least, that's what we always told each other, and told ourselves.

The bottom line on that whole deal was, I still had my own place if I needed it. And I sensed I might be needing it again soon.



Before the business of the merger came up, we had talked about things—about us. We were lounging together, on another Saturday morning, in Moira’s bed. Still unclothed, after long sweet lovemaking. Sitting up, with my arms draped around her from behind, I had the audacity to open the topic, though I should have known it was a venture into treacherous waters.

“Do you think we might do better to move out of here and buy a little house of our own?”

She stiffened in my arms, bristling like a scrub-brush. “You mean, like marrieds?”

“Well, you could make that comparison, but we wouldn’t have to think of ourselves like that.”

She kneeled and moved away from me, reaching for her cigarettes. “It would be practically the same.”

“We could have a contract drawn up to define our separate shares of the property, if you wanted.” I heard myself sound like a lawyer, and knew then the idea was dead.

“What’s wrong with this place?” Her place.

“The rent money’s going into thin air.”

“You mean the landlord’s pocket.” She blew a long cloud of smoke out into the room.

“Same thing.” I tried not to breathe for a moment. I hated this habit of Moira’s. But I put up with it as a small favor to her. Nobody was perfect. We had to live with each other’s failings.

Sitting back side by side now, her bare hip shifted against mine.

I needed her, maybe more than she needed me. It was hard to guess what the secret formula was, for this idea I had of domestic happiness. Were other couples we knew any better suited to one another? The Thompsons, who were married, argued good-naturedly all the time. Jeff Jaeger and his partner Rhonda were not married, openly had other affairs, and seemed to do fine year after year. I didn't know the answer; but the idea of shared house-ownership seemed like a good foundation.

“Besides,” Moira said, “where would the money come from, for a mortgage?”

“I could get another job, a better one.”

“Oh you could, could you? Look at what happened last time you tried to change jobs.”

She was referring not to the move from Siltech Genex, which she'd championed, but an abortive attempt only a year later, to step up from my generic programmer's position at Scanlon and Hart's. Also her idea. There were a dozen options, and when it came down to it, I had a hard time choosing among them. Eventually I whittled them down to two: the air traffic control tower and the city administrative offices. I applied and was turned down at both. By that time, the other openings were filled. I lost heart and decided I was doing fine where I was. “You should have applied to all of them, and then decided,” Moira told me then, with her impeccable armchair wisdom.

“But what if more than one employer wanted me?”

“Simple,” was her view. “Choose one, and say no to the rest.” Now she fixed a calculated gaze on me, smoking sullenly. She would never let me live down that “missed opportunity.”

“So what?” I countered. “I haven’t really needed the extra money, yet. But I have the feeling I may be at a kind of threshold with Scanlon and Hart. I think I’m ready to jump up the ladder.”

“What ladder? There’s just Gerald, hon, and he’s not giving you squat.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Nort, I thought we’d been through all this. Nothing’s changed except that another year has gone by, and you’re that much older. Gerald Scanlon isn’t going anywhere, and so neither are you. He might play the patriarch role with that ‘wifey’ of his wrapped around his little finger, but from what I can tell, he runs a lax ship. And lax ships sink in today’s business climate, as any rag off the newstand will tell you. Gerald’s a softie, and so are you.”

I sneezed on Moira’s smoke.

She twisted it deeper. “Now if we were talking about Harry’s chances, that’s a different story. He’s fast-lane material; anybody can see it.”

“Yeah, I know. Well, it so happens Harry’s been getting some feelers lately from other companies. He’s happy to stay with Gerald for now, but with a good word he could help me get an interview with someone.”

“Like with who?”

“One of the client firms. Or there’s a software designer, whom I know pretty well.”

“So you don’t think you’d have to relocate?” (I thought she asked this with some disappointment.)

“No, I don’t think so. There are plenty of good outfits in the area. But like I say, I’m not sure what I’d do with more money. Without a house to put it into, or kids, what’s the point? I’m not into all the toys they try to sell you. Maybe a vacation somewhere, though. How does that sound?”

“It might be a while in a new job, hon, before you’d be able to take a vacation.”

“That’s okay. What do you think?”

“I thought you were interested in buying a new house. Now it’s a vacation.”

“But you said you weren’t interested in a house.”

“Me? I never said that.”

Just thinking about our squabbling was depressing. I tossed my bowl with a clatter into the sink, wandered into the living room, and plunked myself down in front of the empty gray BigScreen. Something was definitely missing in this Saturday of a life. That much was clear, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was. My job was reasonable. My relationship with Moira, despite the periodic or even chronic bickering and nagging, was still afloat. My health was okay. What more does a guy need? I had a few casual friends, with whom I went bowling once in a while, played the odd game of poker. And yes, I also flirted rather innocently with Giselda at the office, or with Moira’s

sister Sheila when she came over to visit. Nothing too dangerous, though; nothing too exciting.

The barren BigScreen glared at me. I glared back, projecting my own soap opera onto it—sour aspirations, more knotted memories.

I'd seen a film at a theatre once with Moira about stone-age people, living in caves. Their lives had plenty of danger and excitement; but I was struck by how, apart from the adventures, their lives were actually similar to my own. You just wouldn't think so, I said to her before she shushed me. Here we were, at the pinnacle of civilization, in twenty-first century NAmerica, on the verge of completely mastering nature, poised at the threshold of cosmic knowledge . . .sitting there in the darkness gazing at a flickering screen which showed a hairy family in the dark gazing at the flickering flames of a hearth fire. What was the bloody point of it all? Why had we bothered with this whole long technological and cultural trip? Had we really got anywhere at all? I continued reflecting on these questions all the way home, that night. When I tried to talk to Moira about it again in the car, she muttered about the grimy, sordid lives of the cave people. "Let's go somewhere for a drink," she said when we were almost home. We had liqueurs at an eighties lounge that was too loud for talking. We danced a bit; Moira's hands were all over me. "Home now," she whispered. Back at the apartment, she dragged me to her bed. I wasn't into it, still mulling over the film and the questions it had raised about my life, our life, the drift of civilization.

That made her mad. "Why are you here, then?"

"You mean, on earth?"

She shook her head in exasperation. “I mean, here, in my apartment. In my bed.”

I should have taken the cue then. I was a stranger to her. It was no use arguing that night, and I slept on the couch. I took her final query into sleep with me that night, brooding on its larger dimensions: why was I here, indeed? The job I happened to hold at the moment was a meaningless detail, a red herring, a non-issue. What was my purpose in living? Not that I was suicidal, not at all. I wanted to live; I just wanted a good reason for it.

Now the trouble was, there were some weird indications that someone or something seemed to have plenty of reasons of their own, earmarked for the person I was used to thinking of as me.

Saturday in the dumps: I needed to change something—and I needed the agent of change, for a change, to be my own recognizable self. I went for a walk around the neighborhood to clear my head.

What was I worried about—my dreams? Dreams are supposed to be weird. Where would we be without them? Christ, look at the BigScreen. It’s nothing but a collective dream machine. Indeed, circling the block, I came home to a comforting diet of sports, nineties reruns, and forty-odd minutes of fast channel-surf.

I needed more: someone I could talk to, straight up.

I thought of calling Edgar, a bowling buddy. But he was a lawyer, and would not appreciate my delving into “unsubstantiated claims” of extraterrestrial-orchestrated dreams. Then there was the poker crowd, whose company I’d foregone in the Friday

evening kafuffle with Moira. Just as well: they were another bunch of hard-nosed guys, into basketball and the stock market, not wild-eyed fugitives from dreamsville.

I could just try to forget about my “problems,” maybe call up Harry and go out to a bar . . .escape into an evening of girl-watching, guy-talk and trivia. Would it work? Who was Joe Norton, to anybody else, when you got right down to it? Someone to bowl with; another guy with loose change in his pocket. No, it was time to go deeper; and I had to do that alone.

I was sitting eating potato chips in front of the Screen when Moira returned from the hairdresser’s, changed her clothes, and departed again for her bowling league at Pixie’s Lanes, where she would sup from chicken-in-a-box. All this with little more than a “Bye, see ya later” tossed my way . . .a non-rose to a non-bull.

Twenty minutes into the next show, just as I started wondering what the microwave might sacrifice to my minor stomach gods, there was a knock on the door.

Sheila’s big blonde head appeared, long curls bobbing. “Anyone home?”

My pulse did a couple of stutter-steps. “Yeah, just me. Come on in. Moira’s gone bowling.”

Sheila was already in. “I know. She was at the shop today. Are you hungry, Gordie?”

(“Why do you call me Gordie?” I had asked her the first time. She’d just smiled and said, “You look like a Gordie, hon. More like a Gordie than a Nortie.”)

She came in carrying a giant pizza box. Like Moira she was a large woman, who carried herself with a certain boldness. She wore a red and white abstract pantsuit, with a lightweight olive, flower-print coat swirling around her like a robe.

The pizza box went on the coffee table and Sheila sat on the couch beside me. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I? Your plans for the evening?”

My pulse counter did some quick double-clutching going into the straightaway.

“No. Not at all. In fact, it’s perfect timing. Just what I needed. I’m starving.”

Sheila gave me a confident, almost triumphant look. Her big blue eyes were wide, alive, eager. I was almost overwhelmed by her.

I overheard a little voice, BigSis’s presence, scolding: “Just because you’re my sister, doesn’t give you carte blanche.”

Sheila opened the pizza box.

“Hey, look at that,” I said. “A fifteen-incher. This is really nice of you, Sheila. Can I give you something for—”

“Ahh.” She waved me off. “I got paid today. Hey, we even get napkins. But look, they’re already soggy.”

“I’ll get some more from the kitchen.”

“No you won’t. Just sit; I’m treating tonight.”

Not like Moira at all.

I remember marveling then, how sometimes fate has a way of bringing the right things at the right time.



## Chapter 3

### THE HOOKUP ROOM

“Let’s turn out the lights,” she said with a girlish grin. “I like to watch thrillers that way.”

“Thrillers?” My heart started to close. “Can’t we keep it simple? How about the Fifties Channel?”

She uttered a canned laugh.

I wanted to say, you choose, but keep a light on. Or, okay watch whatever you want . . .but hold me close. The BigScreen is too big, the child inside wanted to scream. Nearly a whole wall, big enough to drive a truck through—or a brain called Joe.

I submitted to the next episode, in the dark. What else could I do, wall myself up in a padded cell? I would save that for last.

I don’t recall who chose the program, her or me. And I don’t know that it mattered, in the end. It seemed at the time, well, what you do. Until the real action starts. Does content ever matter? It wasn’t *Rear Window*, I know that much.

It was a plain enough tableau. There was a room with the quality of a large metallic cube. Haggard men were filing in, guarded by blank-faced goons. No chairs,

shelves or benches: just a long stainless steel table, suitable for a morgue. The men, with their spirits draining out of their eyes, shambled forward, stumbling as the guards roughly pushed them along. Their voices—an indistinct, mournful hum—were punctuated by staccato shouts of despair which echoed from the gunmetal walls.

Sheila settled herself deeper in the pillows beside me, couched in the normalcy of it all. I wasn't convinced. In fact I began to sweat, slightly at first, then in a torrent, on the inside. What was going on, this time? It was not about plot, dialogue, or cinematic technique. There was no time for that, for the usual warmup to the action. I was midstream in the oily current and from the swirling surface sucked right in, deeper in than in.

Destination, vertigo: direction, down.

Last thoughts flashed before me: Where was Sheila, the couch, my former body?

With the uncanny detachment of the dying, I wondered: was this a next-gen VR experiment, premiering on the BigScreen?

I lashed out with my arm, reaching for Sheila, a ripcord to yank me back to Moira's apartment. To Moira's bed—

Sheila was gone. I was still on the couch, alone. The apartment seemed darker than before, though the BigScreen flickered on, silently. Had Moira come in yet? What time was it? I felt as if drugged: was it the pizza—weird mushrooms from a punkster running the shop?

The program we'd started watching was still in progress, with the action still set in the prison room. Its metallic walls were shaking. The prisoners were screaming, all

too silently. The guards had gone and left them alone there, in the shaking room. The men were falling down, their arms and legs jumbling like limbs of marionettes. Then I noticed something in that room: a circle on the floor, old bolt-holes.

My goddamn office.

My teeth ached, resonating with a high-pitched whine. Now the walls of Moira's apartment began to spin and shake, and I wanted to tell Sheila—Moira—anyone—that these new dentist boys meant business.

I groped for the remote, found the red button.

“What’s this all over the arm of the couch?” Moira stood blocking my view, halfway through the first quarter of the Eagles’ game.

“Uh, I dunno. Lemme see.” Third and long, on their own twenty.

“It looks like tomato sauce. We haven’t had tomato sauce in a week. Did you order in pizza last night, or what?”

“No, “ I said, because I hadn’t, and because I was caught off guard. I had found Moira in bed asleep. She must have been out late with the bowling gals, and just missed Sheila leaving. Now I wished I’d said “Yes.”

“Then where did this come from?”

Major penalty. I took a deep breath. “It’s pizza.”

“But you just said—”

Punt time. “Sheila brought it over. Your sister.”

“I know who she is. Or is there another Sheila?” Moira shook her coifed hair dangerously. It had been puffed up into a kind of inverted bowl, but was losing its shape already. “My little sister. So that’s what happens when I tell her my schedule, is it?”

“Well what’s the matter with her bringing pizza over?”

“She got a little sloppy, I notice. Or somebody did.”

“Give me a break, Moira.”

She stood over me glaring like a spurned Iberian matron. “You made love with her, didn’t you?”

“Wow. Talk about jumping to conclusions.” In truth the thought had occurred to me. But did that make me guilty? A perverse compulsion came over me then, to play the part just to get Moira’s goat. “Hey, suppose I did. You and I do have an understanding about that stuff, right?”

“Oh, and what is that?”

“Dates are okay; long as it’s not in your bed.”

“Hey buster, fucking my sister is not okay.” Now she was turning red, and her nostrils were flaring. A tree was going to fall, in the gathering storm. But she managed to contain her fury, for now. “Fine. Just fine. If that’s how you want it. You’ll see what this means, Norton.”

Now that I’d got my dig in, it was time to play it straight. I snorted in a smug display of disgust at her overreaction. “If you want to know the truth, sweet, we didn’t do anything.”

She looked at me with eyelids now half-closed in suspicion. Two nervous front teeth were working a shred of inner lip like a couple of mice at a rind of melon.

“You sat there and ate together and spilled pizza on the couch.”

“And watched the BigScreen. Nothing more. You can believe it or not. Ask Sheila.”

““Ask Sheila.”” She wheeled and walked out of the room, muttering about her “fucking furniture.”

With Moira shifting into reptile mode, it was time for me to move out for a while. I didn't even stay for the second half of the game. The Eagles were losing badly already, and I felt it best to leave them to their brand of misery. As for mine, I could stand to leave it behind: some in the BigScreen, some in Moira's bed.

I didn't have a lot of stuff at Moira's; a load of clothes, a few books. I was used to going back and forth. My place, a long and narrow basement suite on Denman Circle, near the Planetarium, was a one-man cave: a living room as you walk in, a kitchen beyond, then a bedroom and tiny bathroom with a toilet and shower stall. A double bed, just in case. No computer, an old TV. The rest of Sunday I curled up in bed there reading, then went out walking.

It did happen that, as early as Monday night, Sheila came to visit me, at my lonely outpost—on a hunch, she said. The accommodations struck her as “a little spartan”; but as I pointed out, at least there were no “fucking furniture rights” to get in the way. So

quickly it came to pass that we did spend the night together, in my own bed. Since we were already guilty, in Moira's eyes, I figured I didn't have much to lose. And if Sheila lost a customer, so what? That was her problem, her choice.

What I gained was a revelation: being appreciated for who I was. Joe Norton . . . or "Gordie"—the name meant nothing. It was the joy she showed for me, and the joy I discovered in her: the new body, novel movements and ingenuous manners of speech. Every nuance was fresh, untainted by stale routine and predictable habit. Not for one minute did I miss Moira, with our dutiful "lovemaking," our daily loveless shuffling past one another to meals, to work, to our seats in front of the BigScreen. What amazed me was how long I had taken the whole package for granted, assuming that my present circumstance was the most that life had to offer me.

Forget the free rent at Moira's, the cozy apartment, the big bed. What counted was caring for one another, truly caring.

The "little sister" was a little shorter and not so big in the hips, and so made a better fit in a smaller bed; I appreciated that.

Maybe Harry had made his point. It had been a long time, for me.

When Tuesday rolled around, I awoke dreamless and content, and left Sheila smiling on the pillow behind me, with a spare key out on the dresser, just in case. Driving to work that morning, however, I decided I wasn't quite ready to confide in Harry or anyone else. I wanted to sort out where this was heading. After work on

Tuesday I found her already in my apartment waiting for me, complete with homemade pizza and a bottle of Chianti.

We began with kisses and caresses interspersed with sips of wine, at the kitchen table. Then without warning Sheila broke down into tears. I tried to soothe her, to hold her, to ask her what was wrong. She blubbered something about not being as good as Moira, her older sister. I soaked up her tears with a napkin, held her some more, took her onto my lap on the hard wooden chair until she got too heavy, and promised to work with her on this. We could overcome it together. J. Norton, kitchen therapist, could cure a lot with a little loving.

Another glass of wine?

She was all right now, thanks so much. Oh, there was so much. And it wasn't just about my living with Moira for the greater part of four years. There was more that went back to their growing up together, daughters of Irish immigrants. Moira was better educated, and, with a good job as a commercial artist, thought of herself as a professional. Sheila, with her "low-class" work as a manicurist, thought I possessed some kind of social status as a computer programmer.

"Do you do, like, secret work for the government?" she asked me when we finally got down to eating. As if sexual intimacy, or her own confession, had opened the doors to all other secrets.

I played it cagey. "No, no, nothing like that."

I guessed she would have been thrilled if I had said yes. And I could have made a case for it, with the contracts we had with defense industries. But her question made me nervous. I spilled gooey, tomato-streaked cheese on my lap.

“It doesn’t matter, Gordie. Anyway, I like your tongue.” She tried to inhale it as I wiped up the mess; then rubbed at the stain with her napkin.

“Later,” I said, laughing; “I’m still hungry.”

Her flattery did manage to loosen my tongue in other areas. Between zealous flurries of lovemaking—hard on the heels of dinner—we talked of psychic phenomena and UFO’s. These were pet interests of hers, nursed by research from grocery store tabloids. Finally, inevitably, I wound up telling her of my unsettling recent experiences.

I wished I could have called them simply dreams, fantasies. But her open-mindedness—no, her eagerness to add my tales to her cognizance of the paranormal universe—had invited me to heap them into the common-knowledge bin of the somehow-believable. So I told all: the car and gun, the VRUSIC bullfight, the Haliburton airlift, the hookup room. I think that by treating these episodes as real by her suspect definition, I was able to feel somewhat released from the weight of reality they had been imposing on me. For all that, Sheila more or less dropped them right back in the “dreams” bin.

“That’s funny,” she said when I was finished. “I don’t remember anything weird about that show we watched. Then again, I think I fell asleep right at the beginning. A little later I woke up and looked at my watch. It was eleven o’clock and I thought I’d better skedaddle before Moira walked in and found us practically sleeping together. And you, well, you were snoring like a rhinoceros.”



“Hmm.” I didn’t know what to think now, myself. I felt disappointed that I hadn’t impressed her with the seriousness of the problem.

“Anyway it’s pretty wild, some of that stuff.” She leaned over to the bedside table and poured out the last of the wine into her glass. “Oops, I guess that’s it for the old vino. Do you want a sip? I wish I could have dreams like that. With me it’s just shopping in these huge stores that go on and on, or having sex with strange men. Oops, maybe I shouldn’t be telling you that.”

“No, that’s fine. As long as it’s only in dreams, right?” I did take a sip from her glass. It caught in my throat on the way down—you know the dusty aftertaste of the dregs of dry red like right on the floor of the arena where the bull is pawing the packed ground—and I choked and coughed and came up with tears blurred in my eyes.

“You okay?” She cuffed me on the back.

I nodded fine, thanks, and caught a vision of her then as a fifteen-year-old, actually chewing gum instead of drinking wine. She really began to chomp on it as she warmed to her subject, as her self-confidence and openness increased, as she bared her very soul and personality along with her body. And as she chomped, her whole bare chest bounced into the act. It wasn’t as pretty as it might sound. In fact the effect as a whole was to make me rather drowsy.

“Actually,” she continued, “I did have this really weird dream once, where I was driving; you know? And it was night? And I didn’t know where I was going, but then I saw these blue lights, kind of in the rear-view mirror, but not exactly, and I wondered if

they were, you know, my first thought was, is this a UFO? But then it was just a police car. Except I wasn't speeding . . .”

Next thing I knew, I was a shadowy figure in an unrehearsed plot:

“Welcome. Did you have a pleasant journey?” The mask-like expression on the statuesque stewardess told me otherwise. “I hope our flight attendants made you feel comfortable. Here, let me take your traveling case for you. No? Listen, sir, you'll have to cooperate, sooner or later. You know that, don't you?”

Somewhere along the line, I had written somebody a blank check.

There was a foot-square, flat monitor mounted with a small keypad in front of my seat. The screen was blank. The stewardess, if that's what she really was, said, “Push any selection, one through six.”

I hesitated. What was I getting into?

“What's the matter, Mr. Norton, afraid to choose? You'll find these choices ample, I assure you.”

I looked around me, at the darkened windows, the empty seats. I saw no one else in the flight cabin except one man, the back of his head in the seat directly in front of me. Very well, I thought. Nothing to lose. I pressed “1.”

The man in front of me immediately turned around and peered at me from over the seat. He had unpleasantly ruddy skin with large pores, a long craggy nose and thin lips.

“Now you’ve done it,” he said to me with a slight British accent. “You’ve punched their number. I have to tell you that I appreciate your intention, because it was ever so similar to mine when I was in your shoes.”

I started to interrupt him, to ask him what in hell he was talking about; but he kept right on talking. His voice had a crackling, robotic overtone.

“And I don’t mind telling you I’m thankful that you’ve made the same mistake I did; because now you’re committed, and I’m free to go elsewhere. Good luck to you.” He rose to leave, gathering his coat and travel bag. “I hope you do better here than I did, in this \_\_\_\_\_ place.”

I missed a word as he turned to fetch a gray felt hat from the overhead rack. Had he said “horrible”?

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. But what’s life, if not a dangerous—ha, I may as well be honest and say fatal—experiment.” He gave me a smile full of cracked and crooked teeth, said “Au revoir” with a passable French accent, and then left me alone.

Except for the stewardess. Looking over my shoulder I saw her standing in the aisle, watching me. She held a clipboard stiffly, marking on it with a clinical air. Then the cabin walls began to shake; the lights died. I blanked out.

I don’t know if this dream (if that’s what it was) brought a source of tension between us; or rather, if my keeping it to myself created a barrier, an uncomfortable distance; but the way it came out was, there really wasn’t room for two of us in that

cheapo basement suite. Sheila cited claustrophobia, the scant light from the single front window, the clammy surfaces and musty smell. At any rate, two nights was enough and my shareware wife retreated to her tasteless wardrobe, her full-sized tub, and her two lesbian housemates. She had her own bedroom there, with a certain compromised privacy. “It can get tiresome listening to them going at it through that thin wall every night,” she told me. “Still, home is home.”

Loneliness is a strange beast: half-domesticated, unforgiving, ever-faithful. I spent Wednesday night cold and miserable, and come Thursday, I ended up at Moira’s again.

The welcome was not a warm one. When Moira arrived home from work, she took off her coat and hung it up with some deliberation where my street shoes were parked, then walked, with a subtle, almost stealthy hesitation in her step, into the living room where I was sitting in front of the BigScreen trying to become invisible.

“You’re back,” she stated. Her eyes were polished stones.

“Yeah. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“We’ll see. Have you made anything for supper? I’m starved.”

So far so good. I breathed a sigh of relief, and said carefully. “I brought home some pizza for the microwave.”

“Great.”

Her tone said it was not great. My clever initiative, hoping to overwrite, in our official history, the tainted pizza Sheila had brought here the previous weekend, was backfiring.

As we ate, though, a kind of truce seemed to settle between us, as if there were no point going into anything too heavy—questions of my sanity or loyalty, for instance. At least not until we got warmed up. I got Moira to talk about her work, a neutral subject she was normally glad to expound upon. This time she went through the motions. I listened with half attention while still regretting the pizza, resolving to undertake at least a month-long pizza fast after this meal was done.

“We got a new promo contract for a company that wants to sell mud to people,” Moira was saying. “Little portable hot and cold mud baths for their living rooms, to stick their feet in. I don’t know. Try coming up with a snappy logo for mud.”

“Yeah, I can see the problem. Browns and grays.”

“Yup.”

Virtual cheese dribbled onto my chin. Moira frowned at me.

I mumbled, “So there’s actually a market for these mud things?”

We endured the pizza, the conversation, and the cleanup, and then sank onto the couch in front of the BigScreen—together, but apart with an electric silence, a vast foot-wide space between us.

I hung onto that wavering island of space, that unsteady silence, the rest of the evening. Though I supposed there was a storm of mind and emotion raging inside her, I feared even looking at her dark and brooding face for more than a glance.

We both knew the next conversation by heart but each avoided playing the first raw note. We undressed for bed in that same thick, muddy atmosphere of fell silence. Moira turned away from me, put on her flannel nightgown, and sat heavily on the bed.

Careful to lay down well away from the center, she slid her legs slowly, deliberately, under the covers. From my side I gingerly followed, in my faded plaid pj's, afraid to so much as brush against the electricity of Moira's body. After a full minute of rigid tension, I cleared my throat of the steel fibers collecting there. It occurred to me that there might be one way out. Couldn't I simply imagine, and so testify, that the little two-night stand at my place, just Sheila and me, was only a dream? Once consigned to memory, what was the difference anyway? What happened, what never happened, what might have happened . . . it was not really relevant anymore. History of Everything Made Simple, by your friend Joe.

“Look, Moira, obviously something's still bothering you.”

At least this brought a response: she rolled around to look at me with her hard black eyes.

I forged ahead: “I've been straight with you. The night Sheila came over with pizza—we did nothing, really. Ask her—she'll tell you.”

“She already told me. And I didn't even ask.”

“What did she tell you?”

“She said she was getting strong vibes from you and it was hard to control herself anymore. Her roommates told me where she went to sleep the last two nights.”

I lay stony beside her, staring at the big white screen of a ceiling and breathing stiffly.

“So, I've got just one thing to say to you.” I felt that Moira delivered this rehearsed line not so much to me as to that hovering presence above. She was breathing

heavily, and I could see small beads of sweat starting to come out among the fine black hairs of her upper lip. “And that’s,” she continued, “to fucking make up your mind. Is it going to be me or her—or some other bimbo?”

“Moira—” I tried to be calm—“it’s partly up to you. What about Frankie, and Chas, and who knows who else.”

Her whole face tightened as she glared at me. “Those are over and done with. Frankie’s married and Chas is in Altoona. You’re talking ancient history.”

I was almost tempted to try the soothing hand on the thigh, but thought better of it. “Okay; but we’ve talked about this before. It’s not a problem, until it comes to me. Until it actually happens both ways. It was all fine before. Am I right?”

“You’re full of shit.” She pursed her lips at me in a leathery non-kiss, and lurched away, before turning back in a fury. “How long has it been going on, can you tell me that? Did it start with pizza for the big Saturday night, or did it happen before? Whose idea was it, hers or yours? Oh, fuck it and fuck her and fuck you. I don’t even want to know.” She sat up and reached for a cigarette, lit it and blew smoke out into the air. “Just tell me, where do you stand now, huh?”

I didn’t know what to say. I had not bothered, through all this muck with Sheila (and maybe never before that, either), to really, deeply try to figure out what I wanted, where I was headed, what the fuck I was doing. I was just rolling with the punches.

“I don’t what’s happened to you, Norton. Ever since the night you had that strange dream, you haven’t been the same. I thought we were going to get married. Now I don’t even know if you love me any more.”

Married? That line should have carried a sarcastic edge, but it didn't bite very deep. It sounded almost as if she were serious.

Still I could say nothing, and so Moira went on, her voice hoarse with new smoke and turning bitter again:

“Sure, why not sleep with my sister, that spoiled slut. I'm beside the point, right? I guess I just don't count with you anymore. You're taking orders from your alien friends now. Isn't that the case? I think, really, Norton, you may be losing your mind. But what do I know? I'm just a stupid broad, right? I only know you haven't been the same, lately. I have a life to live, goddammit. But you never listen to me anymore. Only to those weird voices of yours.”

“Wait a minute.” I sat up beside her, as if to appear more respectable, more awake. “Just because I had a nightmare—”

“A nightmare, huh? You didn't tell me about the other dreams, the day-fucking-dreams. But Sheila did.”

That two-faced bitch, I said under my breath.

“I dunno,” Moira continued. “Maybe you've been working too hard. Maybe you've been infected with some computer virus.”

“C'mon, Moira, you know better than that. They're not the same as real, human viruses. That's only the jargon. A computer virus affects programs, not people.”

“Well, your program is sick, honey. And I gotta wonder, is it contagious? If it is, I'm gonna have to protect myself, one way or another. The obvious thing is to tell you to leave, seeing as I'm paying the rent here. But I'm not even sure I want to stay. Maybe



this thing of yours sticks to the walls.” She let out a huge cloud of smoke then, as if to send it into every cranny of the present room. Moira the fumigator. She looked at me as if in pity, though I was calm, stoic. “Anyway, you don’t need me. You have your own slimy den, for entertaining Sheila, or whoever you please: sluts off the street, go for it. Maybe even that voluptuous, green-eyed little secretary of yours.”

I had to laugh. “Oh, Jesus. Giselda, voluptuous? Now you’re the one sounding crazy. She’s a scarecrow! She’s . . . anyway, she’s not my secretary, she works the office as a whole.”

“Oh, she does, does she? That figures.”

“God, Moira, I didn’t mean that.” I shook my head in frustration. “Look—”

“Not that I should be surprised. The way she carried on at last year’s Christmas party.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“You said it. But you’re right. It’s you and me we’re supposed to be talking about, isn’t it? Now I get to be part of Norton’s harem. Aren’t I lucky. Or do you go by Gordie, now? Funny, how the number of your names goes up with the number of mistresses you keep. Is that it? You think you’ve figured out a way to be a different person for each one of us?”

She stubbed out her cigarette with a vengeance, and kept talking.

“I wonder, are you still the same in there?” She looked clinically at my bare chest through the open top of my pj’s. “Who knows what your new masters and mistresses have done to you? Maybe there’s been a substitution somewhere along the line.”

Shaking my head, I said half to myself, “I should have known better than to tell Sheila about what happened to me.”

“Frankly, Nort, I don’t know what to believe anymore. I can’t even say I know you anymore. Or maybe it’s that . . . I don’t want to know you anymore.”

Her eyes were cold as ice, and I shrank further from her, even as I lay back down.

Was this the end, then? Just because of a couple of strange dreams, and a little experiment with another woman, who happened to be Moira’s sister? It wasn’t as if we’d used Moira’s bed.

She seemed to be waiting for a response.

I took a deep breath but knew that nothing constructive was going to come out on the exhale. So I just said, “Thank you for sharing all that, Moira.”

I got up, avoiding any final eye contact with that Medusa face, and went to sleep on the couch. It was a safer option at this point in my day, than risking a return to my basement refuge with the possibility of finding Sheila there. I stretched myself out in full display of the BigScreen—less concerned, on this night, with “alien” influences, than with my prospects for a serious, working relationship. It didn’t take me long, as I drifted toward sleep, to begin earnest speculations about Giselda.

“What do you mean, gone? Gone where?”

“Just gone. How the hell do I know? Oh my God . . .”

“What? What’s going on with you?”

Harry's intrusion snapped me back from it, but the image was still vivid in my mind. "Whew. There goes my appetite."

"Will you tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"You really want to hear about it?"

"C'mon." Harry fixed an intense gaze upon me as he stuffed another roll in his mouth and chewed like a goat. The rest of the customers at Shorty's continued feeding with abandon, as if nothing in their dreams, or mine, could touch them.

I lowered my voice and leaned toward my private audience. "I just remembered the dream I had, on the couch at Moira's last night. Giselda had asked me to this Halloween party, a dance party, with costumes. There was this guy who came as the Creature of the Black Lagoon. I thought nothing of him at first. It was all kid stuff; none of the costumes really bothered me at the time."

"Yeah, yeah, kid stuff. So what happened, she goes off with him?"

"Just listen. Giselda's wearing a fairy costume—you know, a fairy-tale fairy. We watched as the monster got up on stage with the other contestants, for the prize of 'best movie character.' When he was introduced, he stepped forward and pulled off this horrible green-gilled mask—only there was another Creature-face underneath."

Harry grinned devilishly. "Hey cool. I like that. Original."

"Yeah original. But too weird. Giselda gripped my hand hard. The audience wasn't sure what to do with this; there was a combination of screams and nervous laughter. I opted for the laughter but just barely pulled it off, lemme tell ya.

“Then this new Creature who wasn’t new at all, kind of grinned through his mouthful of needle teeth, and tugged again with that webbed, clawed hand of his—everyone in the room anxious for the second mask to come free—and he had a little trouble with it. A snarl came from his throat. Finally, the mask came free: and there again was the same Creature-face underneath. Some people started running for the exits—Giselda included. I let her go. I wanted to see the unmasking go on. Don’t ask me why.”

“Why?”

“Shut up. I’m not finished.” I looked around at the crowded lunchtime clientele, immersed in their own garbled noise, awash in metallic yellow light. They paid me no mind. I leaned forward again over the plate of dead fries, lying limp in their bloody ketchup. “So again the clawed hand reached for the top of the scaly, wrinkled head. The other contestants had already scrambled off the stage. Now the emcee backed away, with a stupid grin frozen on his clown’s face.”

“Okay, then what happened?” Harry’s shadowed mug had taken on a more sober cast; his trusty jaws had stopped working.

“I heard this voice. ‘Gordie, I’m home.’ I woke up. Moira was back.”

“Huh? I don’t get it. She went out? Or you dreamed this too?”

“She’d been away for weeks, months, I don’t know. And just came back, so to speak rescuing me from this dream.”

“Uh-huh.” Harrison leaned back, let out a large sigh, and wiped his mouth. “I get it. A dream within a dream.”

“Yeah maybe. But I woke up on my own, thank goodness, in the actual morning, because like I told you, Moira was already gone, really apparently gone.”

“Maybe she got up early to go to work”

“No. Moira out before seven? No way.”

When I got home from working late that afternoon, Moira was still gone. No note. Where would she be now? Shopping, at an appointment, taking in some extra bowling?

I waited awhile before heating up my own supper from leftovers. Still she didn't show. I watched the BigScreen till eleven, as a deepening chill settled into the apartment underneath the hush of the central heating; then slept in Moira's bed alone. It wasn't the first time; but this was different: not so much depressing as unsettling. This time, there was no other affair going on; at least, not that I knew of.

Saturday was Halloween. No dance party, no date with Giselda. I slept in late, stayed in bed with a book until noon, took a long walk through three city parks. I was feeling lonesome yet free, my feet moving rhythmically through the swirling leaves. Still I was pulled to Pixie's Lanes around the time of Moira's league play, just out of curiosity. The lanes were decorated with orange and black bunting, plastic pumpkins, and green monster faces with black witch hair. It all gave me the creeps. Moira's usual crowd wasn't there—teens and bikers instead. I made a quick exit and returned to the apartment. Started doing some serious wondering; even browsed among Moira's things

in the bathroom, her clothes closet, to determine if she'd packed up and left for an extended boycott of my questionable services. But I didn't know her personal habits well enough to be able to calculate what she would have taken and what she would have left behind. In this inconclusive state, I slept a blessedly dreamless Saturday night.

Sunday, it looked like the main event would be Eagles football on the BigScreen. Feeling unsociable, even surly, I turned down an invitation to watch the game at Edgar's. Said I was fine. Watched it alone, brooding. At halftime I made a few calls to Moira's bowling chums, who told me that their league the night before had been bumped an hour, and Moira hadn't showed. Her sub rolled up a 197.

Harry kept me at arm's length, I thought, all week after our lunch hour chat . . . as if I were carrying a virus. Meanwhile the visions, the dreams, whatever the hell they were, also stayed away. The wet gloom of November came on to droop its shroud upon our crisp and sunny city. I thought of calling the design studio where Moira worked, but then figured I'd just let her be, wherever she wanted to be. There was only my stuff, my personal inner self-made stuff left to work on, and I guessed that somehow, with this middling hand I'd been dealt, I'd continue to survive: muddling through, as the English say. And as if in answer to the accented air of my resignation,

Midway through the following Friday my stoic independence wilted, and I asked Giselda out for a drink after work. Why? Maybe it was the gold lipstick.

Conant's was two blocks away. We ordered Black Russians.

“But what about—?” My new drinking companion was afraid to say Moira’s name, as if naming her would call her back into living presence in my life.

“Moira’s not around. I can do what I want.”

“All right.” She spilled out a smile with too many teeth.

For her smile, I gave Giselda the longer update on Moira. This version—in the moment, expanded by a whimsical notion that I had nothing to hide anymore—included my brief fling with Sheila.

Giselda looked into her drink, then up into my eyes with a deep, imploring gaze as if to say, “Why not me, then? I’m available.”

I backed off, changing the subject: “So how’s things with you and Kenny—your little Kenny, I mean?”

She shook her head a little, avoiding my eyes while hers grew wet.

“Sorry for the dumb question. Relationships, huh?” I lowered my gaze in commiseration with her; swirled my drink and let the silence settle; then cast about for a topic less threatening. “How about this buyout?”

I waited to see if her eyes would clear. They did, though she still worked a hanky in her fist, with unsteady, bony fingers.

“It looks like it’s going ahead, wouldn’t you say?” She sipped her drink and looked around the bar at the other figures stooped in the gloom, in discussion over just such matters as these. Mergers and divorces, the business of relationships. Our troubled world, and our uncertain progress through it. Another drink?

“I prefer staying small,” I told her. “There’s a lot of creative leeway, with Gerald. How about you? I haven’t really heard you express a strong opinion. But you’re for the takeover, right? You don’t mind working for Ken Hart again? The computer industry magnate of the, well maybe the next decade?”

She set her slim jaw, and flipped a wispy red curl away from her ear, exposing a dangling earring that gave her a gypsy air.

She was fairly attractive, I surmised, in the right light.

“I can handle it,” she said. “I think a larger office staff might be nice. Maybe I’ll get help with some of the tedious work that gets dumped on me while you brains do your ‘creative leeway’ stuff.”

“Hm. You find some of it tedious.”

“Yes, I do. The payroll, for instance. The renovation hassle.”

“The refreshments for the Christmas party.”

She licked a shiny, gold upper lip. “I’m glad you’re aware of what I do.”

“I’ve never heard you complain about it before now.”

“Well, there’s not exactly a union,” she cackled, looking out to catch the waiter’s eye for a refill.

I felt a twinge of guilt. Was that a barb at my own complacency about our working conditions?

“With Siltech,” she went on, “there’ll probably be a whole department for each of the jobs I’ve been doing.”

“No doubt. A refreshments committee to take care of all our holiday needs.”



She laughed. The waiter came by and we ordered more Black Russians.

“Still,” I probed further, “you seem happy enough working with Gerald—”

“I am; I guess. But what’s happy? It’s what you’re used to.”

Maybe her father (or one of her teachers in business college?) was just such a beneficent patriarch as Gerald. I wondered if, being single since Kenneth left, Giselda found in our chummy office group the relative happiness of family. Up to a point, I figured.

We sucked on ice until the new drinks came, comfortable in the cool darkness together. I had an idea, a bit of flotsam nudging up to me in the current.

“Can you tell me anything about the work Ken was doing here when he and Gerald had their ‘parting of the ways’?”

She gave a blank expression to my query.

“Anything to do with virtual reality technology?” I ventured.

She wrinkled her brow. “He had some patents he was working on. Enhanced interactive software, I think he called it. I don’t know if that’s what you mean. But then he was canned. Why do you ask?”

We all knew the soapy part of the story. Gerald forced Ken Hart out on the pretense that Hart’s getting their secretary pregnant was a breach of trust, or a conflict of interest, or just bad manners. Incest, in a manner of speaking. Their secretary was the ever-faithful Giselda. The partner left the firm, married the secretary . . .and Giselda continued working for Gerald. The boss even gave her paid leave for the Paris honeymoon.

Probe. “I wonder if there was more to it, Ken being pushed out.”

“Oh, there was lots more to it. Kenneth was a little too flaky for Gerald. His idea of a funny joke was to put bugs in programs shared by our competitors, the ones on the so-called cooperative network. He justified it, of course, in the name of Scanlon and Hart profits; but Gerald didn’t like it.”

“Did you guys need to go to such lengths back then to stay afloat?”

“Oh, not at all. That was just Ken’s nature. He was a genius, but with a large impish streak. He saw his pranks as good deeds—said he was keeping the other guys on their toes; it was for their own good and would motivate them to help us all develop common defenses against the hackers who were really out to mess things up.”

“He must be an interesting guy to work for.”

“You may get your chance to find out.”

“Yeah, I guess; if Gerald lets him have his way. Do you think he will?”

“Knowing Kenneth, I’d have to put my money on it.”

I briefly considered the prospects of continuing the conversation into the evening: either at her place or at Moira’s. I looked at my watch. “So where’s little Kenny now?”

“He was going to a friend’s after school, and spending the night. His Friday night out. Mine too, I guess—what time is it?”

“Just after six.”

When I didn’t come through with the dinner invitation, Giselda said, “I could offer you a microwave special.”

I finished my drink and got the waiter's attention, fishing out my wallet to pay. "That's nice of you," I said to Giselda, trying to forestall a quick decision. "Hey, listen to that rain. It's coming down in bucketloads now."

When we got outside we were quickly drenched. We ran back the two blocks to the office parking lot, laughing like a couple of teenagers. We stood by the cars face to face and I held both her hands, our breath coming in great gasps. Giselda's long wavy hair had dissolved into a ratty, tangled mess. On impulse I took a quick look over my shoulder at the office window where I thought a light still shone, half expecting to see Gerald looking out at us. He wasn't.

"Are you worried about Gerald?" Giselda Hart said gaily. She looked up at me smiling expectantly, her crooked teeth framed in gold.

She was no princess; just a hag. I thought about Kenneth leaving her with a five-month old baby, and a new last name.

"No, no," I lied. "It's Moira I'm concerned about. She could turn up again at any moment. And I'm not really ready to throw in the towel, completely, with her."

"What are you saying, Nort?"

"At this point in my life I think I'd better just go on home. It's been lovely."

Her glad gilded face melted in the rain, and she turned away to her little brown car.

After another lost, dull weekend in front of the BigScreen, I decided I could use a little more support from the male side of my life. Harry must have read my mind because he suggested a late lunch together at Shorty's, the first time in a week. It was time for me to open up a little, or a lot. After we ordered our double-deluxe burgers, nacho fries, and milkshakes, I told him that, strange as it might sound, I actually felt as if I missed Moira.

My new-old friend drummed his fingers on the formica. Specks of salt and pepper danced over the embedded glitter. "Has this ever happened before?"

"You mean her taking off? A couple of times. Other guys. That could be it, this time, too. She hasn't seemed very satisfied with me lately. She gets frustrated with the way things are going . . .or not going. With my life, I mean. She sees me as kind of stagnating with this company, for instance."

I averted my eyes from Harry's penetrating stare. It was hard not to let my resentment of him show, even though it was strictly professional and not personal. I shifted back to the subject of Moira: "We had an understanding, y'know. She had these couple of affairs, which we worked out. But this time it's different. We had a pretty big blowup." I wondered if I would tell Harrison now about the dreams.

I told him about Sheila instead—leaving out the Hookup Room from the first Saturday night get-together, and also neglecting to reveal my eventual distaste for my new bedmate.

"Hey, all right!" He clapped me on the shoulders. "Now, what'd I tell you. When a guy's down and out, that's when he needs some comforting. So it's her sister. So it makes her all uptight. Well, what does she do in the first place, like you said?"

Leaves you hanging while she checks out for let's politely not assume what. It looks to me like you're all fixed up now. And in fact you know what else occurs to me? It's kind of funny that those two were together at the hairdresser's and then the sister shows up on your doorstep primed for action, while Moira discreetly stays out late enough to let you two play a little."

I considered this. "No, wait, Moira didn't know about the pizza, and she was genuinely pissed at me, I'll tell ya."

"No, but listen. It could still be a setup, an act. So this way it could be your fault, and she could skip out with her other boyfriends guilt-free. The perfect crime."

"Ah, I don't know. If Moira had your mind, maybe."

Harry smiled, preening the hair over his ears.

I threw my hands behind my head. "I don't think either Moira or Sheila is really my type, you know what I mean?"

"Hey. Whatever. It's your call." He sagged away from me, as if in disappointment. He always made things happen to get his needs met. If I couldn't do the same, that was my problem.

"The thing is, I feel kind of funny staying on at Moira's. I mean, she pays the rent and all."

"So what? It's her choice to be there or not. If she's got something else going on the side, chances are the guy's paying for that. It all evens out, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Where's our lunch?"

Harry rolled his eyes. “You guess so. Look, this is so typical. You have the green light, but then when you go for the pedal, wham-o. It’s the reverse screws.”

“The reverse screws?”

“So, what are you gonna do? Is Moira the forgiving type?”

“This is the first time, for me. After her last departure, let’s call it, she took me to dinner at Ricosio’s and splurged like it was a wedding. That evening ended in a fight, and me back in my basement. Next day I got a nice phone call from her at the office, though, apologizing. It was all her fault, she said.”

“Interesting. Back to daddy.”

“So this time, yeah, she could give me the benefit of the doubt. But it being her sister and all, kind of complicates it.”

Our orders finally arrived in a cloud of fragrant steam.

“Ah here we go,” Harry said dryly as the waitress turned away. “Bout time. I could eat a whore’s . . .”

I didn’t laugh: just dug in.

He got back to the point, after his cheeks were bulging. “So she might kick you out, when she gets back. If she gets back. Nacho fries. What’ll it be next? These’re not too bad, actually.”

“She could. On the other hand it’d be more like her to let the decision be mine—so she wouldn’t have to take responsibility for it.”

Now Harrison was stuffing fries in with both hands. “Gotcha,” he managed to say. “Which explains her gambit now, the overnight away from home. Your move, right?”

“Yeah.” That meant, on her return, another strained chapter of coexistence. I’d be sleeping on the couch and cooking my own meals. There’d be a surly silence in the mornings and evenings as we passed each other on our way to closets, bathrooms, doors to work.

“Whatsa matter, not hungry?”

Looking much too large, the platter of greasy food heaped under my nose stared back at me with accusing silence.

Bravely I started in again while Harry gulped from his thick-glassed milkshake and then offered some stinging advice: “Okay, you wanna know what occurs to me? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with Moira. She controls you, man. Tofu-fucking-burgers. The bitch—excuse me, but hey, uh?—bitch owns the apartment, kicks you out when she gets a headache or another stud; in effect, see, tries to run your life. She talked you into this job, then told you to quit last year, remember? You couldn’t do better than with Gerald, man. A small company, he lets you go at your own speed, gives you room to be yourself. What does Moira want you to do, suck up to some corporate dick in pinstripes?”

This from Gerald’s latest booster in the move to merge with Siltech Genex. Suddenly I saw Harry’s game: tell everybody what he thinks they want to hear. So this was the secret to success. I pushed my plate away.

“I dunno. The whole thing just makes me want to shut down, sometimes: like a program shell with too much multi-threading going on.”

“Well, so this Sheila, maybe she’s just what you need. Moira doesn’t like you anymore, fine. Try out the new improved model for a while. I bet she’s not puttin’ any strings on you yet. You’re not having that shake?”

I handed it to him, and sat on the edge of my stool glumly considering his advice. “What about you, Harry? Any going concerns?”

“Naw, man, too much work to do. Day and night. When I get desperate, I go strictly to the low-maintenance shelf.”

“There must be a new kind of doll I’m not acquainted with.”

He chuckled and we paid our check. As we walked out onto the gray and bitter street again I said, “Ever thought about Giselda?”

“Her? She’s almost as close to forty as I am to thirty. And been married, too. That almost goes by the name of damaged goods.”

“You’re sick, Hairy.”

“Slick, did you say?”

That evening, still no Moira. I took a deep breath and phoned Sheila.

One of her roommates answered, sounding surly. Then Sheila came to the phone and said abruptly, “You haven’t called.”

“I just did. I mean I am.”



“I went by your place once. You weren’t there.”

“I know. Moira’s apartment is . . . I don’t know, brighter.”

“So you and Moira . . .”

“Moira’s been gone for over a week. I was wondering if you knew where she’s gone. Has she talked to you at all?”

“Actually we did have a conversation. She sounded pretty mad, just after you and I, you know, got together.”

“Mad. Yeah, I guess that’s the simple word for it. Anyway, do you have any ideas—”

“Nope.”

Some sisterly concern, I thought. Maybe she had more loyalty to Moira than she had showed in my bed.

“How’re you doing with it?” Now Sheila sounded sweetly concerned for my well-being. Whether she meant it or not, I felt touched with that spirit of genuine caring for me which I’d valued so highly, so briefly with the intimacy we’d shared. And I felt badly now about keeping her at a distance, the past two weeks.

“Not too bad; it’s given me time to think.”

She waited for me to continue.

Then her patience ran thin and so did her voice:

“Do you want me to come over?”

I had an instant of panic imagining Moira walking in on us there, in what I still thought of as her apartment; but said yes.

Sharing a bowl of popcorn in front of the BigScreen, I queried Sheila about her lack of concern over Moira's whereabouts. She merely quipped, "It's her life." We agreed that Moira must have gone for one of her old boyfriends, married or not; or maybe she'd found a new one neither of us knew about. Whatever, I told Sheila; this game had more than one player.

We slept together on Moira's big bed that night. And the next. This time I didn't get cold feet. I invited her to stay.

It was like rubbing a genie's lamp: on Wednesday appeared a blue fabric suitcase of lingerie; an old trunk of other clothes; two cardboard boxes of knick-knacks.

No more lonely evenings in front of the BigScreen. Couch-based pizza and popcorn became part of the ritual we were creating, night by night. It was almost as if Moira had never left, but rather had chosen a brighter wardrobe, a sunnier complexion and disposition. Inside of a week I enjoyed that rare state known as contentment. My initial doubts and insecurities faded into obscurity.

Sheila lapped up the attention I gave her and was glad for the change in her own domestic scene. "Three was a crowd," she explained one evening as we talked, with an episode of "Hogan's Heroes" lamely competing for our attention. "Especially after those nights I spent with you."

"But you had other men before me."

"My roomies told me it was different, with you. They saw something in me they didn't like."

“Oh, yeah . . .like what?”

“We didn’t go into it very deep. Dykes. Ya know?”

I took her word for it.

She nestled her face against my chest, creamy cheek on my black lambswool sweater. “Funny how things work out, isn’t it? As if they, were, I don’t know, fated to happen.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” I stroked her ribs, the bulging side of her breast.

The popcorn bowl was empty. Sheila leaned into my arms. The BigScreen flickered on the wall, its channel selection set to autosurf . . . bringing us newswethersports and fifty years of reruns, rendering the past week we’d spent together here timeless, meaningless. I was content, but something seemed not quite right, almost sinister. Indefinable images appeared and disappeared as if subliminally, interspersed with memories of my dream-car and of dentist-chairs; shadowy figures came and went through the plots and scenes without discernable parts to play; and I felt an unsatisfied conscience concerning a mysterious mission—a simple, raw dread of forces beyond my control.

For an instant, in that darkened apartment, I imagined I was holding Moira again, and almost believed it. I broke into a sweat and had to look to be sure. No, that was Sheila beside me, all right. Dirty blonde curls and all.

This was all too real.

What the hell was I doing?

A dozen dour-faced men sit naked in a room in front of a big video screen. On the screen is a man on a couch in his living room, a woman leaning against him, an empty bowl on his lap. They appear to be sleeping.

The men around me sit morosely, chins on hands, uninterested in the screen. I sense a brotherhood with them, as if we may be collaborators in some underground movement. Yet I have no evidence of our plot or capture that I can recall. Then, I see on the screen, as into a restricted part of my mind, the flash of a side-frame, a static shot of an open back door of a deserted warehouse, with a battered trash can tipped over. A figure that strikes me in some indefinable way as one of Them is caught by the camera, snooping in the foreground spillage. Our camera; a shot from our files; now in their hands. Will I now be treated as a spy, or as an assassin, even before the act I was destined to complete? What will they do to me, to all of us?

The gold-uniformed attendants who brought us here come back in, carrying equipment. They go to each of us and place electrodes on various parts of our bodies, by means of little hooks which dig into the skin. This procedure is both bloodless and painless, as if the points of entry are dulled by an anaesthetic. Each hooked electrode connects to a long, fine wire attached at the other end to the base of the video screen. The attendants explain, in the cheery manner of tour guides, that the electrodes feed into a computer as coordinates mapping our inner characteristics, our psychic blueprints. We listen as with one mind but we do not respond. Then the attendants stand aside, working controls. The video screen goes blank. There is a brief sensation of coolness. The screen lights up with pinpoint flashes in unidentifiable patterns, and a flush of heat

courses through our bodies. It occurs to me then, that there may be more to this “blueprint” procedure than they let on.

Afterwards the attendants come around and unhook us, taking the wires away and leaving the electrodes planted, like so many leeches, on our skins. We allow them also to pin thin medallions—individualized metallic shapes and symbols—onto our shirts. Mine is an elongated isosceles triangle, evoking the image of a spaceship.

In response to a silent command from the chief attendant, we stand. I have an empty feeling inside: not just light-headed but light-bodied . . . as if I am floating, insubstantial.

I realize why: I have a new consciousness now, beyond separateness and individuality. Apparently each of the prisoners feels this change, because thin, hollow, thoughtless laughter passes between us as we are escorted out of the room by the smiling, brisk young men in gold.

But the banded birds are not to be set free. In the long anteroom stands a row of tall, coffin-like containers, gaping for us in an austere rank, factory-fresh, cobalt blue. Here we instantly know the husks of our bodies will be stored.

For how long? For what purpose? These questions do not occur to us. We are prisoners; we accept our fate. Our captors proceed to shut us in, our eyes open all the way to the private darkness to come.

Once encased in my coffin, I bemoan the breaking of the common spirit. We who were one are now left to our own solitudes. I finger my insignia absently while wondering where my familiar mind, my particular soul has gone; though at the same time

I know where. Into Their electronic files, so They can keep tabs on me forever. I'll lose track of the other prisoners now, that much is clear to me. But somehow it doesn't matter. I'm on my own, from now on. I've got my own destiny to follow: if a destiny can be imagined once you're in the box.

If only I can remember a certain old thought, a vital mission I had once, a vision of a certain silver projectile, a gun-case open under a green car door . . . I could bang on the case of this blue sarcophagus, and convince them to let me out.

I choose (if choice is a word allowed inside such a prison) not to push my luck. I remain standing in that dark tomb, waiting for them to make the next move.

The BigScreen was blank. My hand dangled over the side of the couch; the control lay nearby on the side table. I must have turned it off when it got too crazy. The night was still full of darkness.

Sheila stirred at my side, all her weight against me. One eye opened lazily. "What time is it?" she said.

"I don't know. The middle of the night, I expect." I tried to steady my shaky voice.

"Must have been a boring movie," she said.

I took a deep breath. "Yeah. And I've got to go to work tomorrow. I mean today. Let's go to bed now."

We slept the rest of the night in Moira's bed. Thankfully I awoke not remembering any more dreams—just the hookup room. I didn't want to tell Sheila about it—Moira was a bad precedent.

Besides, I didn't want to hear any more alien-abduction theories. I still preferred the more pedestrian alternative: I'd simply dozed off, half-dreaming, while watching an eerie sci-fi show.

Except that I found myself, even on the safer, morning edge of sleep, pinching up pieces of skin looking for holes.

Sheila rolled over to look me in the eye. "That bitch will never commit herself to anyone."

Moira's bed, I reflected, was big enough for two, but not for three.

I was a little surprised at Sheila's language. "What's this about?" I said to her.

"Bad dreams about Moira. They're getting me every night. This one, I could just see her game. She set me up with you, sent me over with the pizza, even told me she wanted an excuse to leave you. But she felt sorry for you, didn't have the heart to just leave; so now it's made out to be your fault. And mine, of course. I thought it was a dirty trick, but I played along, like I always did with her stupid games. She wants one thing, and that's to be queen slut."

"Wait a minute." I remembered what Harry had told me, this same notion that Moira had set us up. "Is this for real?"

"Gordie. I'm offended." She rolled away in a sulk.

I put a hand softly on her upper back, toyed with the wisps of hair at the nape of her neck. “No, Sheila, look, I’m just asking because when you put it that way, it does sound realistic. I mean with Moira, I wouldn’t put it past her. But I know how you care for me, on your own terms. I mean, how you really care.”

She turned back to me pouting, and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Okay, then. But I told you, this was just the dream.”

I held her hands between us, wanted to know more. “So the other thing you said about Moira . . . you mean she was always seducing and ditching guys, before me? She never told me she was like that.”

Sheila snorted. “She went through plenty, my boyfriends included. We were always fighting over guys. She had the jump on me: bigger tits, and she was bolder. She’d ask guys to dance; she’d invite them on dates and offer to go Dutch. I’d get the leftovers.”

“Gee, thanks.” Now I put on a fake pout, crossed my arms on my chest and started to turn away.

Sheila leaned closer and kissed me lightly in the ear.

“Don’t take it personally. Like big sis always used to tell me, it’s better than nothing, right?”

She had me there.

A tenacious memory tugged at the loose sleeves of my brain-shirt. I shook it away and lay quivering naked inside.

“Gord, you’re shivering.”



“Yeah. Give me some more of those covers, will you?”

“Aren’t you going to get up? It’s half an hour since the alarm went off.”

“Jesus. I never heard it.” A huge black yawn gathered me into its folds.

“You had bad dreams again, too?”

“Not as bad as yours,” I lied.

As soon as I mounted the stairs and walked in our office, I saw the circle of lighter wood on the dark-finished floor, the old bolt-holes filled in.

“Oh there you are,” Giselda trilled. “We’ve been wondering what happened to you.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes shit happens.”

“Oh?” She looked at me askance, shrugged and turned back to her computer.

I couldn’t take my eyes off that spot on the floor, as I skirted it and went to sit at my workstation. The eye on the screen opened and glared at me. I didn’t want to engage this machine in any manner today. I wanted to get out and go—but where?

For a little stroll down Haliburton Boulevard?

There was no place I was safe any more.

Where had Moira gone, anyway? Being unfaithful is one thing. But simply disappearing?

I resigned myself to another day of it. One day at a time, Norton, I told myself. Dream after dream. And only one life to live.

Over lunch, Harrison popped the idea of going down on a chartered train car to D.C. to watch the Eagles play on the weekend. An avid member of the Eagles Road Boosters, he'd found an extra ticket for me to use, in case I was up for it.

I jumped at the chance. It was somewhere else: a real-world somewhere else.

## Chapter 4

## SIDEFRAME MODULE: THE SHIP

The football game was a wonderful diversion, even in the sleet. There was a seating block of a hundred of us from Philly, mostly men; all keeping warm with flasks of whiskey and collective body-English: standing to cheer, chanting in unison, cuffing each other on the backs after a long fourth-quarter touchdown pass clinched it for the Eagles. The Redskins crowd around us didn't appreciate our hollering, but what the hell. We'd paid our due respects with thirty seconds of halftime silence for JFK, the President murdered forty-six years before on this day, November twenty-second.

This wasn't Britain or Ecuador, where in a soccer stadium you could get killed for rooting the wrong way. It was the capital of the good old U.S.A. In this city I felt the same tingle of imperial pride the Romans must have felt, watching the staged battles in their Coliseum. And I imagined, as we crowded into the aisles and moved in slow rivers toward the exits when the game was over, that all the home town fans here worked for the government. Some of these ruddy faces, no doubt, were but festive masks worn by military agents, high-level advisors and diplomats, even spies. The curious thing was, I felt like one of them, rubbing shoulders as we walked the ramp down to the parking lot. I

too had an important role in this empire. I compiled programs for key defense contractors; ran data comparisons for geostrategic think-tanks. When Kennedy was shot, I was two. Now I was a middle-aged middle-NAmerican, with a job to do . . .

A gun to assemble and a bullet to fire.

No! They had no right.

And then, as the alcohol-enriched blood drained from my face, I began to realize: could it be that I was the victim; that Joe Norton was not the assassin but the target?

There might be a perceived value, for a foreign intelligence agency, say, to get to a functionary like me. Not a case, this capital-inspired logic went, of outright execution, but rather of psychological torture, for information purposes. Someone could be using a clever form of subliminal or hypnotic espionage in order to break me down, to get inside my head to extract secrets of the companies whose programs I handled. I looked wildly around me, suddenly disoriented and paranoid. Had they tracked me here? Where had Harrison gone?

My breath poured out in vaporous gasps. Oh, there, his head bobbing up from the moving throng in front of me. I tried to calm down, while still caught up in the hurrying step of the crowd. Maybe it wasn't aliens of the extraterrestrial sort that I should be worrying about. Instead I had to consider that the earth-based enemies of my country might be using methods more advanced than I could yet imagine. Heck, it could even be an inside job: the diehard Canadian separatists, *par exemple* . . .

A bus took us to the train station for our chartered cars back home. A hundred drunken idiots piled in, stumbling and still shouting about the great play that won the game “for us.”

I had the aisle seat. I didn’t like the looks of the stewardess. She reminded me of someone . . . that false smile as she catered to the other slobs. Then I did remember, just as the train shuddered forward. Something in me started to panic.

“What’s the matter, Nort?” Harrison said from the seat beside me. “You look a little pale. Train-sick already?”

“Yeah, I guess. Or the hot dogs and raw whiskey catching up with me.” I burped, by way of confirming this supposition.

“Here, this’ll fix you up.” He caught the attention of the passing stewardess and ordered a couple of Bloody Marys.

I had no desire for more to drink but accepted it anyway when the stewardess returned and placed a glass in front of me. The contents indeed suggested fresh blood. The stewardess leaned over me to give the second drink to Harrison, who immediately gulped from it, thanked her, and paid. Her tight, coarse navy suit bulged in my face. She drew away, her cheeks thickly powdered, her eyes severe and, I hated to realize, familiar. She stood hesitating, as if waiting for something from me. It wasn’t spare change. She knew me. I waved her off.

Some of our fellow passengers were turning the double seats around and starting to play cards. Harrison looked out the window at the steel-gray sky and the sodden hills; he was now nursing from the rest of his drink through a straw.

I went so far as to lift my glass, but still couldn't get the Mary past the Bloody.

Harrison noticed. "So where's the fighting spirit, there, Nort? Y'ever see a finish like that? Man, Junior Creggs. What a catch! I don't see how those guys can do it, in the freezing rain. They just seem to ignore it."

"I guess for sixteen million bucks a year a guy can put up with just about anything."

"You're right, there. Say, how about next week, in Cleveland? You up for that one if I can get another ticket for you?"

"I don't know, Hairy. I appreciate it, but check with me later in the week."

"Oh yeah, how could I forget. Woman trouble. Any word from Moira?"

"No."

"You still seem kinda down about it."

"Yeah, well, it could be worse. At least there's Sheila."

"Whaddya mean, 'at least'? What more do you want, man?"

"Well, it would be nice to know what's happened to Moira."

"It's not obvious to you by now?"

"Yeah, but not even a word, Harry. It's like she just dropped off the planet."

"Just let her go, man. She showed where she's at. She cares about one person in the world, and that ain't Joseph J. Norton."

"You've got a point there." I stared glumly out at the drizzle.

It didn't seem the time or the place to unload my latest, full-scale paranoia, regarding one J. Norton as lynchpin in a game of international espionage. I knew just

how Harry would respond: “It doesn’t make any sense to me. Maybe you should see a shrink.”

“Well,” he said after a moment, “looks like these three guys over there have room for another. You play poker?”

“That’s okay. You go ahead. Mind if I take your seat by the window?”

I watched the grimy gray landscape outside for a while, and then shut my eyes. Immediately I saw a scene I liked even less: stainless steel walls framing a windshield, with control consoles and gleaming monitors beneath it. But “liking it or not” quickly passed from the range of relevant parameters. I was in again, wherever “in” was. The windshield showed no real visibility, only points of light. Though they stippled the field of view like stars in a night sky, I conjectured that they were generated, rather, from an onboard energy source, as a map of the heavens.

I felt strapped in, though I knew I’d been wearing no seat belt on the train. A dull murmur of voices, the thin clatter of chips told me I was still riding north to Philadelphia; but now I was powerless to open my eyes to confirm that mooring-line of reality.

A sensation of heat at my temple pulled my attention to the side, to the aisle of the dream-ship, where I was struck by the gaze of the unsmiling stewardess. No, I demanded: not again! And I forced my eyes to open.

I saw Harrison and the others casually playing cards, talking. The train stewardess—same face, same uniform I’d just glimpsed in my darker vision—glanced at

me from the front of the car and went about her business. Everything was normal: but not normal.

For an instant—only an instant—I shut my eyes again to see what I could see.

Darkness; clattering chips.

I opened my eyes again, and saw these football boosters for what they were: other functionaries, footsoldiers in the larger plot. They reminded me of those nameless, plain-uniformed soldiers, the armies of clones who always worked for the megalomaniacs in the old James Bond movies that ran every week on the BigScreen. Is that what I was watching that night with Sheila? And was I one of them—or one of their targets?

There was a foursome of women playing cards and chatting near the front of the car. I could smell their perfume clear down to where I sat: right through the fumes of the drinks, the stale train smell. My stomach pitched and yawed again. I fought down the nausea.

The dingy landscape rattled by, grounding me. I had to come to my senses, forget these nightmare visions; or if I couldn't forget them, at least come to terms with them for what they were. Nothing really was happening to me. Nobody was out to get me. There was no mission; I was nobody's patsy. I was slightly drunk right now, and a bit confused about my relationships, and my career . . .right, that was all. I didn't need a shrink. I just needed—

The blue-suited stewardess, making her way down the aisle, forced a smile at me and stooped over, saying: "Looks like you're on your own now, Mr. Gordon." She



walked on, with a jaunty bounce of her girdled hips. I felt like hissing at her, but it was too late.

Harrison stole a glance at me, then turned his attention quickly back to his cards, muttering. Had he told her that pet name, Gordie?

An ugly thought showed its face to me for the first time. What if Harry was in on this, too? Aw, fuck. Without thinking I closed my eyes, wishing it all away.

This train car is a hull, just another hull. A room with metal walls; a sleek moving coffin. With ports and controls and airlocks and engine rooms. I know nothing about the payload, the drive mechanism, or any of that.

I just ride here.

And if the starlog is lost, well . . .

*You're on your own now, Mr. Gordon.*

Maybe she just heard wrong. They had me all wrong. I fluttered my eyelids . . .

“Get back to the ship,” a dim voice called to me from somewhere deep within.

“Come back.”

I obeyed. I dared to shut my eyes firmly—and found myself navigating a single-passenger craft into what I knew were unexplored reaches of space. Free, unencumbered . . . I succumbed to the giddy joy of the first aeronaut, the proud independence of the first astronauts. I could go anywhere!

Anywhere in the fucking universe—

But it was a sham universe.

With the starry heavens all glittering before me, all direction became meaningless.  
I was floating in the void.

The space I flew through may well have been unexplored . . .but encoded within the console were the coordinates of a pre-set flight plan. My freedom consisted in the carrying out of dummy movements, the working of controls to give the illusion of control.

Anywhere?

I was riding a train to Philadelphia.

*No—back to the ship.*

At the controls (their controls) I pushed buttons, twirled dials. Off to another world, and never, I feared, back to Earth again.

A time of blankness, of no-time.

Then a plush and cozy apartment rich with scents of gardenia and frangipani . . . and there she was (Giselda) leaning back on the bed, waiting for me. Her wet tongue flicked out over the gold-painted lips on her glowing face.

I heard myself asking her: “Ah, love, how did you get here?”

“A faster ship,” she said, laughing. “La Vitesse.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“Pas de tout. Viens. Do you like the color of my new sheets?”

They were deep dark rose, in satin sheen swallowing her, about to swallow me. I fought another wave of nausea from this ride, the too-abrupt descent.

She reached out a slender arm to me, hand wavering in the air, nails green-painted.

“Norton, do you remember when you . . .”

“When I what?”

She bit a lip lightly, then thought better of her question. She dropped her arm.

She began to lose definition, her outline blurring. “No, wait!” I said. I wanted to be able to do, to be, or at least to play the role she expected of me now. She came back into sharp focus. And then the walls around us faded, becoming indistinct of color, shape, texture: fell away wavering into the inky blackness that lay beyond.

Giselda began to remove her sheer white blouse, and I fell spinning to her in the gathering folds of the wine-deep sheets.

Strapped in: the hookup room again. This time it’s a field-monitoring session, in which my cerebral connections are traced by etheric sensors, to relay ahead where I’ll choose to go next. But of course my choice is not my choice, because all the parameters are delimited by their program constraints.

I’m the only one here this time, strapped alone in the barber chair.

I have within my head the echo of many conversations with Them. All about choice, the choices I have, the choices I’ve made. I think it’s a kind of brainwashing, this hookup business, despite their claims that the information is flowing the other way.

As for the matter of choice: I cannot, for instance, go out of this room, or even this chair—though I might imagine comfort in infinite measure beyond these straps.

Are they getting tighter?

I fight a little for my breath now. I was going to speculate that, if I might ever find my way out of this ship (if it is a ship), or out of this galactic path to assume another orbit . . .ah, I've lost it.

Now on the instant of such a thought crossing my mind, I am given to understand that any move for freedom on my part will be futile, because they'll use long-range sensors to track me down.

I may as well face it: I am their man. There is no longer any question about that.

But why me? I intend the question and await their answer momentarily.

This time, the voice-tracks tell me that it's because I fit their profile. I am an electronic courier of sorts.

A hundred years ago I might have worked the stock market, ridden my bicycle from telegraph station to telegraph station. Now, I am doomed to roam more etheric paths: condemned to follow in the predetermined footsteps of this time-extended errand, one that is not my own. What is it? The contents, of course, are confidential.

And what if the mission, the message on the note I never read, proves to be of an entirely personal nature?

A courier of one's own fate—a curious concept.

I wanted to rewrite the whole unsigned contract. To run the tape backwards until it ran out flopping like old celluloid on the whirling reel. To pack it up in its clanging metal case and send it spinning frisbee-like to the end of this cardboard stage-set cosmos.

But in so desiring, I mocked myself, my own sense of continuity, of survival. The tape was me.

At the end of the tape, the file, the dossier, there is always something more: another sideframe, a link to everywhere. Isn't that what life does, in its spare time or rather its full-time job? It gives breath on call, a swinging jive in 24/7 time.

There is no other way to die. It keeps coming at you. You slip back into dreams again, somehow satisfied.

A voice that might be your own says this is the rain that heals you. You will realize, in time, that every turn in the road comes back home. There is nowhere else to go.

Those space-barbers were still in their viewing room somewhere, enjoying the show. Is there anything more, I shouted, that I can do for You?

The alarm clock is ringing its fool head off. I smash it shut.

Now. Where was I?

Monday morning? The clock says so. November 23, right on time. Somehow I've made it home again, only to survive another nightmare, another night. Alone; and Sheila's not here. All her things are gone. Has she made up with her roommates? Somehow, the way things are with me right now, I don't even care. What did Sheila and I have together? Nothing, really. I can't even remember the last time we made love.

I get up, pay a visit to the toilet, dash cold water on my face, refuse to shave.

Now I remember: arriving in the dark. Voices in my head. A lift in Harry's car from the train station. The empty apartment, Moira's bed.

Am I actually going to work today? How long can I stay awake, now? No more sleeping, please. But really, does it matter anymore?

Is it really an office I'll wind up in, today, or do I walk out that bathroom door to my larger cell, another cabin in another doom-bound ship? As I sit down to breakfast, will the table shudder with the starting of engines? Who will appear to sit across from me—some gaunt stewardess, a smiling, officious young pilot, a new and suspiciously chummy programmer? How about a reptile in human guise?

Moira?

Sheila?

Giselda?

A new and nameless slut whose bed I've just befouled, marking my time until the next journey is underway?

And for how many eons or nanoseconds will I be obliged to entertain her, while we get to wherever it is we're getting, in our state of increasingly familiar cohabitation?

That's all right—once it becomes too familiar, she'll be gone.

My face vanishes from the mirror.

## Chapter 5

## SARAGOSSA STATION

Did I have any baggage? I can't seem to recall. Not even a briefcase, a carry-on? It's useless; I can't remember. All right. I'm here now. I just have to make the best of it, pretend I know what I'm doing. Everyone else seems to have somewhere to go. Maybe if I follow the herd I'll find out as I go. Nothing really terrible has happened to me yet, on these crazy excursions.

And so I wander through the curving corridor of the space station, aimless and a little curious. Maybe this is all alien technology, I consider; except that on the surface, it's not much different than arriving at an airport back home. The same musak of nineties rap, the same boutiques lining the walkways. A mall-in-space, is what it amounts to. Saragossa Station, it says every fifty feet or so in glittering, lit-up letters, advertising itself as the latest, greatest . . . whatever. Probably named after a cut-rate Spanish architect. The NAmerican Way, in any case. Other flashy advertising signs are displayed head-high, all the donut-around: Zebra-Mints, Two Palms skin conditioner, and Jacqueline's Fancy Chocolates, alongside the old standards, Timex and Roloids. I wonder: this is progress? The ringing voice of the shuttle dispatcher booms overhead,

indecipherable. Passers-by chatter in robotic-sounding voices. There's something about their eyes that causes me to avoid looking directly at them. A certain impenetrable, metallic sheen. Though I notice, from the bits of conversation, that they sound chummy enough—"Tried one of the planet tours yet?" "Where I worked, earthside . . ." "Hey, Joey, goin' for coffee?"

I looked up and saw my face reflected in the workstation screen. Another face appeared behind me.

It was Harrison.

What had he called me? Joey? Gordie?

"Nort, boy, come on. Gerald's wanting a meeting after coffee. You better get yourself up to cruising speed. Still dreaming about that touchdown pass to Creggs?"

The eye on my computer screen winked at me. It had come on while I nodded off, and its lid rose as I sat up straighter in my seat, into its full view.

I shook my jaw, ruffled my hair. This was not a good situation. Had Gerald noticed, and was he going to call me on the carpet for snoozing on the job?

"Yeah . . . I mean, I dunno. Thanks, Harry. I'll join you in a minute."

He gave me a careful look and padded down the hallway to coffee, his purple flip-flops snapping like gunshots. No socks: while my galoshes dripped by the entryway.

Giselda, close on Harry's heels, gave me a strange look of her own as she passed, a crooked smile. Part innocent, part knowing; half flirt, half hurt. I didn't want to go there, messing with her emotions or letting hers mess with me. I looked back at my



screen.

I couldn't remember coming to work this morning. Had I arrived late? It seemed as if I'd missed some days somewhere along the line, or lived a few squeezed in elsewhere. Traveling could do that to you—even the D.C. shuttle. I wondered if Gerald had watched yesterday's game on his BigScreen. I knew that Sheila had packed up and left Moira's apartment; and I knew that I wasn't about to go chasing after her to come back. I sat puzzling over my disorientation, thinking Zebra, HiTest. Yeah, maybe I do just need another hit of java to bite through the weekend fog.

When I started to get up, a new, unfamiliar screensaver appeared on the monitor. In the center a molten magenta circle spun, then morphed into a wheel which rotated slowly enough to show a hub of four struts forming a cross. Then it wobbled sideways, and appeared, on edge, as a fire-orange line, pencil-thick. I sat back down. The line zoomed closer—a band extending the entire width of the screen. The band began to widen, until the entire screen was filled with it, a wash of flame, gradually cooling to aquamarine. I had a panicky feeling that the color was going to spill out of the machine and into the office—and then (compounding this irrationality) that when these digital seas were recalled I would be sucked in with them. I gripped my chair, reached out to hold onto the voices in the office hallway. But I could not look away from the monitor.

For a moment there is no boundary to the monitor screen; my whole field of vision is aquamarine now. Then it comes into focus again, round like a porthole, set in a molded, dark red console. My peripheral vision has gone into a black fuzz. There are no

more office voices, and my panicky feeling is gone. I'm peaceful, at home here.

A red light below the screen flashes on, then off. On the monitor appears the word "STARLOG:" a flashing prompt with codes to enter. I cannot decipher the codes but know that I must proceed on faith. Part of the faith is that I must proceed—even if, in some shuttered corner of my soul, I sense a desperate reluctance.

Little Joey Norton sits in his room: the only option his mother has given him if he resists going to school. So he sits: on his bed, his jacket and cap still on, fiddling with a red Phillies pennant. Feeling the weight of a stark and plain inevitability: a black hole in Bayonne: "Summer's over, kid."

BigJoe knows what to do now. He takes the leap, haunted by his sense of mission. Quickly the entry is made. And the porthole-screen dissolves into the surrounding fuzz, now black-red.

I hear a voice, hollow, muted, immensely distant: "In the beginning, there is nothing across the void. Then spirit moves, and out of the deep come new worlds."

With shallow breathing I answer, mouthing the words as I type my part of the incantation: "*In this mystery, I continue.*"

The next line appears in its place: "Someone is watching."

*"In the end as in the beginning."*

"Other starships somewhere, unseen glide."

*"This I know."*

The screen-field responds with a view of the heavens: crystal star spray on a blanket of fine felt. A red arrow, pennant-shaped, flashes across: a stray thought: I

wonder what my cohorts at Scanlon and Hart would think if they noticed what's going on in my corner of the office. The arrow passes, and I reflect on its passing. Am I still there at all, in that quaint paneled office? I have no way of telling, really.

And if my fellow humans are watching, then what? Do I care if they see the pattern I see in the twinkling lights?

“Three thieves hang by the Saragossa Road.”

Do unseen overseers monitor all, on the electroencephologram of the cosmic brain?

Martinson, Effington, Harrison . . . Scanlon, Norton & Hart—Who are the overseers, who the objects of scrutiny? Who are the thieves and where are the souls they have stolen?

In my seat I feel a faint vibration as the motors turn. How vast is the ship they power? How far-flung are the stations I seek out, circling, ever wider, circling?

“Enter,” a voice says. “Come to me, my children.”

My fingers shake as they work the controls; my very brain shakes. I cannot any longer see the control panel I must operate; but this is no excuse. I know the patterns, the sequences that must be confirmed in the hardwired circuits by my hand, a practiced hand that can plead no innocence of operating system or protocol.

Is a human brain the finger of fate? What cosmic forces are unleashed at the slightest perturbation of my small power of choice?

If I choose to resist, if I do remain dumb and unyielding and give them nothing, what vortex of events then swirls in to fill the void I leave?

In the meantime I continue to act, despite all misgivings: an old habit. It's easier when it's broken down into discrete steps hidden from full consequence. There are merely degrees to navigate, milliseconds of hesitation to compensate for.

Moira, Sheila, Giselda . . .

But whose brain, whose finger, selects the next menu of parameters, the next port of call?

All of these things, I can only believe, the stars will relate . . .in their voice, in their time.

*We'll be arriving soon*, a voice says; *trust me*.

Whose voice this time—theirs or mine?

The starwheels turn, empyrean gears grinding. My lungs inhale a rarified air—hydrogen breath, on call.

I have no choice but to trust, now, in the flow of incomprehensible events. To go with the program, the power which moves the ongoing form. In this dedicated movement form is transformed into essence. And time, inbreathing, inmoving, has become visible, audible, palpable now as I ride it.

Yet again it slips out from under me, shoots away. Eager I follow, panting like an evolutionary puppy. All my apprehensions unravel, and then . . . I glimpse perpetual dawn. A rose mist fades into violet, green, back to yellow, gold. This pastel luminescence is softer than words can paint, and through the translucence of pale color a suggestion of the night sky still asserts itself.

In this moment I can sense, with something less than tragic resignation, the

danger that the stars must feel, of disappearing behind the pleasurable charade of another day.

“Norton.” It was Gerald’s voice calling from the hallway. “Are you coming? You can get back to that later.”

I rose dutifully and went into the staff meeting. There was an air of expectancy in the tiny room. I got a pair of admonishing looks from Harry and Giselda, as the scraping of chair-legs ceased and Gerald, his ruddy face a serious contrast to his yellow short-sleeved shirt, began the agenda.

“Okay, let’s get started.” He shot me a dark glance of his own. “Now we’ve got a couple of new contracts coming up for option by the end of this week and I need to know if we can handle them. I know we’re thinking merger but that doesn’t mean it’s time to back off. In fact I think it’s going to seal the deal for us.

“Now. Giselda tells me that she can put up with the flow-through as long as things are in good shape when they land on her desk. Harrison, I’m a little concerned after dumping that Stellar’s load on you last week. How’s it coming?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s big, all right. But I’ve got a routine almost worked out for a cross-reference check, and I’m rewriting their access menu. It should be no problem to finish. I expect another two, three days.”

“Good boy.” He turned to me, his orange complexion flaming, his brow wrinkled.

“Norton?”

“Yessir?” He was only four years older than me but I’d been trained by my father, once a military man, to call superiors “Sir”—at least in a pinch.

“How’s it with you? You seem a little, I don’t know, preoccupied these days.”

I looked around at the others. Giselda shyly kept her eyes down, as if embarrassed by Gerald’s personal questioning. Harry gave me a fleeting but bright nod of encouragement.

“Long weekend, boss. We went down to D.C. for the game. D’ja see it on the Screen yesterday?”

“The Eagles? No—I watched the golf. I’m not much for football.”

Harrison frowned.

“Anyway,” I said, “I don’t know if you’re aware, Moira and I have kind of fallen apart.”

Giselda looked at me with a bold, eager stare: suggesting (though I’d never met the creature) the visage of her dog.

I tried to ignore her. “I’ll be okay, Gerald. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I’m glad of that,” he chuckled. “But I’m sorry to hear about your situation at home, and I’m concerned about throwing more work at you. You’re thick into something over there this morning, I notice. What is it, the Wyman Industries report?”

“No, I’ve finished that. Bits and pieces of a number of others. For Congreve I’m trying to work out a metamover that’ll window to a lot-cache, and for Wyndham, a subroutine that’ll allow a standardized audit from the shell. What else? Uh, well, the Wyman audit program could use some automatic reformatting, that is if we can get

around the lot-cache column restrictions.”

“Hmm. Probably useful, in the long run. But maybe you could drop some of that for awhile so we can get moving on this new batch of contracts I’ve got lined up. Where do you stand on the database updates?”

“About on time, basically.”

He looked at me harder.

“A little behind.”

“All right. We’ve got a couple weeks left for them; it sounds like we can handle a modest amount of extra contract work. If we can swing it, it’ll put us over the hump and into S.G.’s lap, with hopefully a little green icing on top, if you catch my drift. Does that suit everybody?”

Everyone nodded; my own puppet-head bunched into the collective string.

“All right then, meeting’s adjourned.”

Or—wait a minute. Was that just a final vote approving the merger, from the S & H office staff?

Fuck it: it was already a done deal, from the get-go. Still, I felt manipulated.

Giselda and Harrison filed out, talking together. Gerald put a hand on my shoulder as I followed. “Hang in there, Nort. You’ll come through it, I’m sure. I remarried when I was forty-two. I haven’t looked back yet.”

I managed a weak smile in appreciation. “Thanks, Gerald.” I breathed easier, glad to dispense with the “sir.” “I’ve got a few other options going, actually. I’m not worried.”

“Good, good. You know, the thing is, in life as in business, you can’t stand pat.”

He winked.

What was he saying? I knew, or thought I knew, that Gerald was a happily married man—”ten years and counting.” Then, what was this line, this wink?

Connie Scanlon was a pretty submissive type, if I read her right during our once-annual acquaintance at the office Christmas party. It might be one of those pressure cooker deals with her and Gerald, where everything is hunky dory, in a boring inertial sort of way, until bang, one day the lid blows off, and one of them is in bed with someone else. So this is the strategy of the old boy scout, is it? *Be Prepared.*

I decided to clarify what he was telling me. “Do you mind if I ask, Gerald, are you really satisfied with the choice you made with Connie?”

He answered without hesitation. “Hey, it’s like this merger. You can’t hide your head in the sand if the right offer comes along. In the meantime, you do what you can.” He clapped a hand once more on my shoulder. “Well, keep up the good work. If we get through all the next month’s jobs in good order, I’m betting that a Christmas bonus from S.G. is a lock. Don’t tell the others yet, but—well, I thought you could use a cheerful thought like that.”

“I sure can. I appreciate it, Gerald.”

I walked to my workstation; plugged in the headphones and cued up some nice unenhanced MP33 Stravinsky. What I got instead was an officious voice:

“Subject behaving erratically. Claims devotion to purpose, yet squanders limited energy on useless doubting, aimless wandering. Must be reminded of mission—perhaps



given new, more strongly embedded instructions.”

The voice went dead but I yanked the jack out of the computer anyway.

“Subject,” indeed. So I wasn’t performing up to their standards. What could they have in mind, by way of more leverage? A more tempting temptress, to move me further along the path away from my own choices and into their maze?

With some uneasiness I keyed in the metamover program I was supposed to be working on. I could leave the VRUSIC behind, and now even the standard audio track; but where in the system was I safe? Even working the keyboard and mouse, would I touch off some hidden sequence that would reactivate that infernal voice—or, worse, trigger another nightmare deeper in my own head?

Crazy fear is one thing. And I felt the hairs rise on the backs of my hands. But I had job to do, a life to live. So I buckled down to it, finishing the subroutines by four and just getting into the metamover again by the time the others were checking out. Before Giselda left, she came to me and said, very friendly and shy, that I was welcome to share Thanksgiving dinner with her and Kenny Jr., and her second-floor tenant Pamela, if I liked. She said she was sorry to hear about how things had gotten worse between Moira and me, and hoped I’d make it through okay. If there was any time I needed to talk—

I thanked her and said sure, I’d be honored to sup at the home of the former Mrs. Hart. Giselda smiled but looked wounded, and immediately I regretted my crass remark. It was so easy to play the saboteur, even without intending to.

When I tried to log off an hour or two later in the semi-darkened office, something went wrong. The eye stayed open, winked once at me, then again, and again,

faster, until with maddening speed it fluttered me back to Saragossa Station, that donut-shaped, glorified donut shop whirling aimlessly in space. The focus zoomed, allowing my vision to pass through walls. I saw myself—then with a floating descent, merged with myself—lying alone on a hard platform in a small, bare cubicle.

Someone has laid beside me a little bald doll, and a shoebox to keep it in; an empty bowl and battered spoon; a pencil worn to a nub. I awoke with these objects, tried to speak, and found I have no voice. But my brainwaves are still searching, reaching out. Spanning a cosmos, outcalling: with no result. I listen: random background noise, cosmic dust. I am alone, except for this ugly rigid doll in its death-box.

Maybe I'm dead, and this is the bardo-land, the realm of the landless and disembodied. The time of ancestors, of generations to come.

In the meantime, no darkness, no light; only murk. Thoughts scattering fast and furious, then calming . . . subdued by a surfeit of chaotic destinations. Finally I am able to utter a wordless yelp—then another, louder. If I were to hear a response (even an echo) come ringing back, I would jump up ready to move in its direction. To break down walls to get there. But it has to start with me.

I call out again.

No reply.

I lie in state, motionless, powerless to go, locked into inertia.

And if this box of a room I'm in—somebody's puppet-case—were moving a million miles an hour, I'd be none the wiser.

Someone somewhere, I figure, must be laughing. He or She or They. I'm their plaything, their dummy, their borrowed voice. They have nothing to say. They have bigger plans than talk. They have—I dare a leap beyond my own predicament—ambitions for power over all things, embracing all sensate reality.

In this leap I see myself leaving their prison, with a fleeting glimpse of this wretched box I'm in. But it's just a flight of fancy: I know that, all the while. I can see myself as if on the outside, but I can't get all of me out.

I hold one steadfast hope, that there will remain one thing which they cannot penetrate. As long as I speak, as long as I send out my waves to some far shore, I lay exclusive claim to this reality, the version of what I tell here, my truth of their falsehood.

What's that, a knock at the door?

Maybe it's food. And what, I wonder with some abstraction, might be an appropriate meal for such a condition as mine? Ambrosia, honey, manna?

But wait! A whisper of footsteps, going away?

Now I've hesitated too long.

Loudly again, but as a kind of abject wail without any trace of pride, I call out—

In a moment a slithering hand appears through a slot at the bottom of the door; opens with empty palm. I'm supposed to give it something? It doesn't matter. It's only a figment of my—or someone else's—imagination. What's the difference? I give it nothing; its fingers clasp to the palm and it withdraws.

Now I rest, burping lightly.

Where's the dietician? I'd like to have a word with you, if I may . . .

Ha! Lunacy. Yet, it's not my fault. I want to ask someone responsible—What's the catch here, can you let me in on it please? What's the color of my ticket? Give me a clue as to what it takes to rip the adhesive substance from this seat I ride . . . whether escaping all familiar destinies however mundane or entering new and spurious ones by this virtual ship's unforgiving thrust. What do I need to do or say, to appease these invisible and silent professors, who insist on teasing me with the otherwise laughable philosophic conundrum of past determinations circularly logical which negate free choice in advance even as it is offered before me in tantalizing varieties of aroma? Now I don't even have the pleasure of choosing their flickering options.

And if I did? No matter how many times I change my mind or think I'm exercising my whim, there's a hitch in my partial passage through the holes in the net; and I'm hung again on that ever-stretching web of light and dark threads across the universal fabric of time and possibility. Could it be that I do have freedom, but it's couched in a limiting proscription hitched to the future instead of the past? Am I under the influence of a singularity to come, replacing the much-ballyhooed bang from the past? And does that all-powerful one-spot determine in retrospect what my next action or decision turns out to be?

The screen went blank. The patented Kenneth Hart eye reappeared, half-lidded. I quickly got up to leave, turned out the remaining office lights—and like a kid of nine was afraid of the dark. Breathe, Norton. Just get out of here. Time to go home: wherever home will be.

I considered the basement suite, with its rent paid but wasted for the past month. Moira was still paying for her apartment, and it wasn't so dank and lonely there.

Actually I was glad for Sheila's absence from my life at this peculiar juncture. Preoccupied with the hallucinations I'd had that day, I didn't feel like giving her more fodder for her crack-brained theories. But I did begin to consider seriously, for the first time, seeing a psychiatrist.

I went "home" to Moira's, where nothing on the BigScreen was able to serve as an effective distraction from my psychic plight. One program, a stage piece by Samuel Beckett, only reminded me of my torment in the box with the little bald doll; another selection looked too much like an episode of the show that had sucked me into the hookup room. I stared for a while at a family comedy; or rather, at a flickering screen, an empty living room.

My life was another kind of program, and it was in full crash mode. Somehow or other, I was going to find out what it was before I lost all semblance of my normal life. I shut the damned Screen off, made a bedtime drink of warm milk with a good shot of amaretto, sprinkled it generously with nutmeg, and headed blind into the bedded night, bound for the next unwelcome destination.

Sheila came to me in my dream: furry-crocheted, hovering over me, splendid in satin sheets. My sheets (Moira's sheets) weren't satin; this was (I knew with some lucidity) Their program again. But when I awoke alone, sometime too early in the morning, my bare arms did feel a satiny sheen. By now my response was hardly one of surprise. I felt rather a sense of vexation and bitterness toward Them. I simply couldn't

divine the motivation behind Their matrix of surprises—let alone the means by which They were, either randomly or at will, invading my psyche.

I got up and dressed, shaved a few wispy hairs off my temples, and went to the apartment downstairs. The Drudge brothers were playing checkers over stale-smelling tea and burnt toast.

“What do you want?” they wanted to know. One had too much hair in the nostrils; the other had tufts coming out the ears. Both wore rumpled clothes, and their kitchen table sported an ashtray stuffed with butts. It was clear they’d been up all night.

I asked them if they’d seen anyone, heard anyone in the hallway during the night. Whether Sheila or someone else, I didn’t specify. I just wanted to know.

No one, Drudge One said. Drudge Two moved a checker.

I left and walked to the Post Office. Nothing for me today. A minijet courier was just departing. High-priority service for the rich—day after day, while even the weekly delivery of common household mail was history. *C’est la vie.*

I had to admit, though, these minijets were neat little items: flying pods smaller than Myrtle. I asked a young, clean-cut chocolate-brown driver if I could sit in his cargo trunk, hitch a ride to Central. Hop in, he said. We were there in seconds. Wow, I said; Thanks. I wondered if I should tip him. The kid shrugged me off, told me he got two hundred yesterday from a “hah class deliver-ee” in Westwood. I shook my head and pocketed my change, remembering then that I needed to call Gerald.

The boss answered, a scratchy voice. For an instant I thought it was fake. But I was in it now, so I told him I was sick, couldn’t come in today. He told me not to worry;

one of the new contracts had fallen through. He sounded glum, self-pitying.

“Too bad,” I said a little too glibly, and hung up. Suddenly cheerful, I thought I might take in a matinee. Then I visualized the prospect of sitting captivated in a dark theatre, and instead took a speedtrain to the lake and watched the toy boats run in circles. A fountain gushed in the middle, swamping them when they drifted too close. Small boys cried. Nude maidens of stone arranged around the fountain spouted water from their nipples, oblivious to the soft sufferings of humans. Two old men laughed, until coughing fits stopped them. Nursemaids waddled away with their puzzled charges. A horse cantered by, its mounted policeman frowning at me. I got up from my bench and wandered into the underground world teeming with trains. Trails of noisy motion, they meant nothing to me. I gazed at the cavernous, arched ceiling. Pigeons lived up there, in the midst of this rumbling, earthbound madness. I changed my mind, went back to the street and walked a few blocks, then took a needle lift to the upper story of a shopping tower. There I had a snack in a cookie bar and waited for a shuttle home.

But where was home?

My apartment, the one I was destined for, I realized with a shudder, was not really in this city or any of its suburbs, not on this planet or any other. It was a file in a subdirectory, named and numbered and slotted away in a vast net beyond imagining.

As for me, I was nothing more than a walking array of data: fading points of light finally too small to register in the tracking software.

## Chapter 6

### WITCH BAY

Wandering the streets of Philadelphia late that afternoon, by routes alternately familiar and strange, I found myself finally at the entrance to Moira's apartment building. I sighed with relief; but when I searched my pockets I found no key.

So I hoped against hope and rang the bell, standing under the scrutinizing eye of the security camera. The door lock switched off and I walked in, wondering who or what I might find up there.

When I smelled spaghetti sauce in the hallway, I knew it was Sheila. She smiled like any wife when I walked in, shiny blonde curls highlighting a billowy bright red casual gown.

"Working late today, Gordie?"

"Sheila."

"Don't I even get a hug?"

I obliged her, and the sexual engines caught a faint whiff of gasoline coming their way.

"That's better. I was beginning to think you'd cut out on me. Let's sit down a minute, huh? Supper'll be ready in a few minutes."



We sat on the couch together, hand in hand. Amid the seductive aromas of a home-cooked spaghetti dinner in the offing, I told her the mundane version of my jaunt through the city, arousing no suspicion except the obvious one:

“But if you were sick—”

“I just felt like taking the day off. It worked out okay because when I phoned Gerald, he told me that we lost some of that new work he was expecting”

I thought I caught an unusual shyness in the way she lowered her lashes; or was she just showing off her robin’s-egg eye shadow?

It was time to make the broken ends of my life-logic meet. “Sheila,” I said, “Where were you last night? If you don’t mind my asking.” I almost added, “I’ve missed you.” It would have been true, in a manner of speaking. She had a way of grounding me, of encouraging me to believe that not everything was a cruel illusion.

“I thought I missed my roommates,” she said. “Or, I don’t know, maybe just feeling like being single again? It doesn’t take long to remember what it was like before, though. Same old conversations, same old noises from their bedroom at night. It gets old again real fast.”

“And so what about us? It sounds like that was getting old for you, too.”

Shyly she looked down into her lap and folded, unfolded, folded her hands again. Then she looked up at me and said, “Do you love me, Norton?” When I hesitated for a fatal instant she added quickly, “Don’t answer. I’m afraid you’ll say no. Forget I asked.”

I laughed nervously, putting an arm awkwardly around her shoulders. “Well sure, I mean what’s love? It’s the oldest word in the world, right?”

It wasn't the answer she wanted to hear. "Yeah. You're right. How can it get old when it's already the oldest?"

I was afraid to say anything more.

She took up the slack. "Are you mad at me for not being here last night?"

"No, no. I'm just happy for your company, Sheila. On your terms, that's fine with me. I don't think I'm the kind to get tied too tightly to anyone. I don't expect you to be Moira, or anything like that. You're free; we're both free."

Suddenly she sprang up: "Oh, the noodles. Come in and help me." But I did so slowly, because it was just then that I remembered the date I'd made with Giselda for Thanksgiving, two days away. I took a deep breath and held it. Maybe I wouldn't bring this up just yet—wait and see how things settled out between me and this second coming of Sheila.

There wasn't much to do except set the table. The sauce was bubbling gently and the pasta was now under a controlled boil.

"We're a good combination," she said, waving the long fork between us. "But it's funny how it works. You get a good combination like this, and it gets dangerous. Pretty soon, the freedom's gone, and it's the same old thing again. I've been through that show more than once."

"Me too. Let's not let it happen to us, huh?" I grabbed her from behind and gave her a bear hug, then released her as she wriggled loose in a fit of giggling.

"I brought some Chianti," she said cheerfully. "Why don't you open it?"

Life, real life, could be so good, if you went about it with the right attitude.

I fell asleep in Sheila's arms that night, in sheets of ordinary polyester . . .and got shipped off to Witch Bay.

They brought me in screaming, and they carted me out mute. If you judge a vacation by beginnings and endings, those are bad signs both ways. It was like this:

A sky with the texture of living walls, of membrane undulating inside the gut of a man-eating creature. Air with the stench of decay, air thick with my own dread.

I was walking, escorted by guards, with my hands bound behind me, on a red-dirt path through dense, thorny brush which featured ten-foot-high radial spikes, central stalks arrayed with sticky pods, and vines woven everywhere to form an impenetrable barrier. Along the trail, my bare and blistered feet stumbled past the remains of human spines and cracked skulls, littered under the brush. Where had my shoes gone, my city? I still wore the jeans and white open-necked shirt of my office day—and noticed that spotted with blood—I hoped simply from insect attacks and the sharp thorns.

Parched and famished, driven by my captors God knew where—or did He?—I had this strange lucidity, this barely saving grace of an awareness that this was not real, that it was only a dream or perhaps a little worse, some other form of queerly embedded illusion. I could hope in such detachment that it was not just a problem with me; that some real nemesis was behind it all, some crackpot wizard of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Oz, and that the time would come for the concealing curtain to be pulled aside. If so, I didn't have to give myself utterly to these sickly surroundings. I could just go along for the ride. Wake up tomorrow . . .

A sharpened pole jabbed me in the kidneys and I lurched forward, gagging on the pain. All right, all right—I believe!

Footsteps of two brown near-naked men padded behind me, while another led the way ahead. There was no question of going anywhere else. No hard drive whirring in the background; no control window peeping through the sky.

We came out, after a sweltering eternity, onto a broad dry plain. The ground was deeply fissured and smoking, as hot as a Fire Island beach on the fourth of July. But in this circle of low, scrubby hills was no sign of exit to Howard Johnson's; there was no Phils game on the radio. The city of brotherly love was but a distant dream. The guards conferred in an unfamiliar tongue and then led me around the perimeter of this infernal basin. On the widely circular path I remembered Saragossa Station, and wondered if this was some far-flung sector of the torus, part of a circle of rooms decked out in some demonic theme park.

But no, the landscape persisted in unfolding in a rather linear fashion, the path snaking on through more thick, tangled foliage, and opening at last onto a bay of red water. The effect was not unlike that of an exceptional sunset, except that the cause was obscure; the sun was still high in the sky. The red water looked less and less inviting as we approached: thick, viscous like an endless vat of blood, with no fixed horizon to hold it all; yet it held, quivering before my eyes, calling out to me to come, and I knew that I had no resistance against its pull.

Another jab of the joystick prodded me forward. Same bloody spot. Didn't they

know Christ got it in the side, not the kidneys?

There was a decrepit wooden dock there, leaning half into the water. Is this how I'd been brought here? And was it departure time yet?

Hey, I thought: maybe they'll take me to where Moira is. We could be two turtledoves, trussed in a cage.

My escorts squatted unsmiling beside the dock, evidently in waiting. They were three lean men, with cropped hair and scarred faces, their teeth filed into points. Eyes glazed and sunken.

I stood with hands still bound behind me, free to run away if I dared. I paced back and forth on the sand, testing the vigilance of my guards, edging further by a step in each direction, aware that they knew exactly what I was doing—

Engaging in another exercise in futility.

Had I made the choice to bolt into that suppurating jungle we'd just trooped through, I would have faced the unknown alone and without resources or clues. At least now I had company; a predetermined fate arranged for me; dice already cast.

In time (if time is what happens in hell between sessions of torture) a crude wooden motorboat arrived pattering smoothly, carrying an unsmiling zombie of a steersman and two hulking passengers with bodies like oxen and bullet-shaped heads. The steersman wore only the standard brown loincloth; the ox-men, long tunics of leather and hemp. I was pushed in off the dock, stumbling and falling to the bottom of the boat in a heap. The steersman hissed something like a laugh through his pointed teeth and cracked lips. The other two only grunted as they kicked me out of their way. I had a

sudden vision of my destination: the slaughterhouse. Where the smoking pots reek of simmering flesh and flaming hair; where the fresh human lambs of the day are lined up for inspection; where the executioners leer over the tenderness of our fat little throats.

Why me? I wanted to cry, again and again. Somewhere I held my knees to my chest and hardly dared to breathe.

The hulks glared at me for my piteous thoughts and then smiled (if smiles can be said to grace the mouths of monsters) at one another significantly.

The boat cast off, and we rode across the wide bay toward an opposite shore, where a point of land gestured carelessly to the empty red horizon. I remained huddled against the bulwark where I had been kicked, while the ox-men with their thick wrinkled necks sat gloating over me, and the ghastly steersman spat periodically into the bloodwater. On the other side a gray wharf was waiting: a hungry maw. We slipped in, tied up. The steersman whistled some incomprehensible remark and his henchmen responded by throwing me up onto the wharf like a sack of bones. They disembarked to stand above me, then reached into back pockets and drew on black hoods. The steersman hissed in laughter, spat a final salute and motored away.

I was sure this was my end-point. That all the preliminaries were leading up to this, were nothing but a kind of psychic fattening for the kill. And yet I was yet able to muse: Too bad that I had no Gretel, for company. Moira? I didn't really even wish this on her.

It was a predicament, to be sure. I had no remote control, nor pocket computer with which to try another key code. And even if this were only "a state of the art virtual

reality experience”—something right down Harry’s alley— it was still deadly enough to cause heart attack, nervous breakdown, permanent trauma. So what difference did it make? Was I going to sue somebody, after the damage was done?

And anyway, hadn’t I fallen asleep in Moira’s bed, back on planet Philly, with a plate and a half of pasta in my belly, and a harmless female companion beside me, the both of us awash merely in post-coital torpor and the after-effects of a good bottle of dry red wine?

But no: the black-hooded brute brothers, like twin wrestlers, pulled me roughly to my feet. “Think this one’ll be enough to satisfy ‘er?” one asked the other in a burly voice.

Then they both began to laugh, first to each other, then roaring at me with their hoarse guffaws. It was insane, the whole thing was insane. What had I done, or not done, to deserve such abuse?

The new guards took hold of my elbows and dragged me off so fast I didn’t have a chance to show them I didn’t mind walking. Beyond the wharf, my heels came out of their skid where smoke rose from the ground beside a little shed. Then my captors shoved me to the edge of a pit of black tar, and thrust me into the stuff: hot and stinging. Just before I went under screaming, they pulled me out with the help of a sticky pole fetched from the shed. Then the goons doused me with feathers from a sack, and laughed from their ugly mouths. “Oh, he’s a pretty bird, now, ain’t he?”

My skin crawled under the cloying, acrid tar as it cooled and contracted, my outrage stifled by the accumulated pain.

“Won’t mother love this one.”

Mother? My God.

They proceeded to march me briskly to her, just beyond the screen of ragged trees. She was a hook-nosed old crone, living in a run-down palm-thatched hut, her withered dugs hanging naked over a cauldron with odd bones sticking out—long bones adorned with the remnants of meat. I didn’t appreciate the smile she cast my way when her boys thrust me through the shredded curtain in her doorway.

“So, they’ve brought me another lean bird, have they? Now boys, you run along and play and I’ll call you when supper’s ready.”

The bulletheads walked away muttering, as she began cackling horribly. What child’s nightmare was this? I was a grown man, after all. And there wasn’t even any gingerbread, in the bargain.

Maybe it was my quashed anger, the very indignity and injustice of this implausible fate, that generated a compensatory thread of detachment, which served as my only lifeline. It was so bad, it was too bad to take at face value. And so, even as my predicament worsened, I came to feel a stoic resignation. I wondered, for instance, how the hag would get the tar off me before feeding me to her stew.

She read my mind and said, “It’s not tar, my pretty. Molasses. It’s a sweet dish, this. Now off with those feathers.” In a flash they were aflame. Detachment be damned: I cringed fearfully, sure the tar itself would catch fire—for its fumes had convinced me it was a pure petroleum product, and not “molasses.” But in fact, I felt nothing but an odd fluttering sensation, as the fiery feathers danced into ashes. Then the hag brushed at me



with a bony hand, and said, “There. The rest of it can stay on, tasty for the mix. Now, in you go—”

In reflex action I kicked out at her, toppling both of us onto the sandy floor. She looked at me in open-mouthed surprise. I reached out to grab her; she raked sharp claws through the tacky skin of my arm and opened a series of gashes. No matter; I drove in and grabbed her around the waist. I happened to press against one of her breasts with my arm, and sickening green fluid spurted out. She screeched with a sound almost like delight. I wanted to get it over with. I reached another arm down between her legs, under the rotting burlap skirt she wore, and hefted her up the side of the cauldron. What I felt as I did so was simply unspeakable; I nearly retched. She let out a piercing whistle from between her wide-gapped teeth. I heard heavy legs running closer. Up over the edge, quickly, I dumped her in.

“It really was just a dream, after all”—I try to tell myself that, on awaking to the smooth cool sheets, to the smell of coffee brewing from the kitchen. But does that really make it any easier? How can there be any consolation when I have for comparison no reliable recollection of a secure, waking state; when the sheets might turn to devilish satin in a moment and hold a different woman than I expected? When I don’t know where I am or where I’m going when I walk out the door, or when or where or to whom I will return at the end of this or another indeterminate day? When I am, in all honesty, feeling lost inside a growing maze, a prison of concentric walls, no definite dream but a labyrinth of dreams? I wander, in this darkening season, from exile to exile, coming to the

increasing realization that the wandering is not wandering at all, but something other: as if, for instance, my movements, my perceptions, my very life, have been reduced to the acting out of some insanely ingenious . . . program, I want to call it for lack of a better word.

“Gordie, are you awake yet?”

Sheila had the objectivity—over a reassuring breakfast of scrapple and toaster-waffles, o.j. and coffee—to give it a more popular name and cause: “It’s these aliens, see. They’re at it again. You read about these abductions all the time in the *Enquirer*. It happens to forty-six percent of people now. Maybe I’ll be next. It’s not always unpleasant, though. Can you pass the maple syrup?”

I thought harder about Moira’s still-unexplained disappearance. Maybe Sheila had something, with her silly tabloid wisdom. But I wasn’t convinced yet. “What if it was aliens?” I said. Why would they be picking on me?”

Sheila considered my question as she stirred a waffle in a slick of syrup. “Maybe it has something to do with your work, what your company does. You do stuff for the government, right?”

“Yeah, some stuff.” I couldn’t lie to her forever. And what was there, really, to hide? Maybe I was still hung up on the old morality issue. In any case, it was hard for me to see a connection between these bizarre nightmares and anything as concrete as defense contracts. There was that disturbing episode associated with my delivery of the Martinson file, somewhere around Haliburton Avenue, which “occurred,” so to speak, in broad daylight. I still drew a blank in my memory of the actual delivery; but Gerald had

never mentioned the file again, and so I was assuming that the documents got through.

Sheila was prattling on: “The aliens have been in bed with the government since at least 1949, you know, sharing military secrets. They’ve even made an alliance, this is documented with at least three Presidents involved, to take over the world.”

I slugged my coffee back and wished for a normal wife, a normal job . . . a normal life. “So why don’t they just do it,” I wanted to know, “and get the damn thing over with?”

“Maybe we’re not ready yet.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“For our next stage of evolution.”

“You make it sound almost spiritual. But look, Sheila. These dreams, experiences of mine, whatever they are, it’s all too . . . it feels evil. I wouldn’t put what I just went through, last night in Witch Bay, in the same basket with a classical-music-playing E.T., or a second child-hugging Jesus.”

She just smiled sweetly at me, and her eyes, still faintly shadowed in pale blue, shone with crystal compassion. “What’s happening to you is not evil, honey. It’s just your karma.”

“Karma, hmm. So I have no one to blame but myself, my own past lives. Is that it?”

“Definally.”



## Chapter 7

## THE SPIRAL LINKS

Doctor Arthur Evans looked like a professor, in his tweed jacket and wool tie, with an oblong head of balding, sandy-brown hair and a clipped, graying beard. He carried his tall frame stiffly as he walked across the room to shake my hand. His eyes were clear, penetrating, and sober to a fault. On the paneled wall hung a half-dozen glassy, framed diplomas and awards. I felt a sense of comfort that I might at last get some relief—and at the same time, apprehension that the shrink would find more wrong with me than I was willing to deal with. But here I was.

We took seats in two comfortable, leather-upholstered armchairs and went through the formalities, Doctor Evans first gathering a sense of the basic details of my life—family, occupational, medical and relationship histories—and then asking me to tell him in a few words about how happy or unhappy I was in my childhood.

I was fairly normal, I told him, coming from an ordinary, middle-class family in Bayonne, New Jersey. “I had an older brother, Vic, and a little sister named Cindy. Like I say, pretty normal—except that Cindy died when she was six, from leukemia. I was I guess eight. It was harder after that. It wasn’t the same. There was the stress of all the

medical bills, and everybody so sad. I was supposed to be sad too, but I wasn't that torn up about it. Cindy was always sick anyway. This was better for her, and should have been for everybody. But it wasn't. My parents separated when I was ten, so I split time between them after that. My father moved to Yonkers, New York; 'a total fucking change of scene,' I remember him saying. Later I heard there was another woman there, whom he'd known a few years. He'd been a traveling salesman, just starting to settle down with the insurance company in Bayonne. I stayed there with my mom at first, then moved back and forth between them. My brother Vic just left the family to go out on his own. He was fourteen at the time. He said he could do better than this, and I guess he did. He sent me a postcard from Japan a few years ago.

Anyway, where was I? Um, right. Going back and forth between my parents. I was given the choice of who to be with, when to make the switch, each time—whether it was for a year, six weeks, whatever I wanted. I was what you might call happy, in an unhappy circumstance. But as to your question, I don't know what's the right answer. I was able to trade off on the advantages that each one of my parents offered me: my father's tennis club and ski trips; my mother's—well, I appreciate now her patience with the drop in my grades for a couple of years, and for a couple of summers, vacations to the shore, at Rehobeth. Peppermint ice-cream, I remember there, in a little corner store—”

Tell me,” the doctor said, “are you still in contact with either of your parents?”

“My father, not since I was nineteen. I did visit my mom off and on over the years since then, until she died in an old folk's home about five years ago.”

He wrote busily on his notepad. “That’s a year or so before you got together with Moira?”

Here we go, I said to myself. I nodded.

“Now tell me something about your safest place.”

I searched my memory and came up with the attic in our house in Bayonne, where I would play alone in a large packing box, making believe it was a spaceship.

“And why was that a safe place?” the doctor wanted to know.

I shrugged. I didn’t know what he was fishing for. But he was the doctor, so I wanted to help him out. “I suppose it gave me a sense of retreat from the problems my parents were having, the arguments, the tension. My friends didn’t want to come play at my house because of that. So it gave me someplace to be alone. And sometimes I’d feel closer to Cindy, up there, this would have been in the year or two after she—”

I felt a little hard lump in my chest.

The doctor held my hand, and a tear ran down my face. It was the first tear I’d ever shed for my sister’s death. Boys weren’t supposed to cry.

“That’s fine,” Doctor Evans told me. “Just be with your feelings.”

That was too painful. So I screwed up my face and recalled aloud my boyish passion—from the walled safety of that giant box—to get away from it all, to go out beyond the galaxy and the supergalaxy and the whole clustered starfield to the very edge of the universe—to an invisible barrier I called Sron. Evans let me go into this escape mode and gently asked for details as I allowed myself to drift into the scene.

“Well, the new drive powering this ship has been perfected during two hundred years of development—the year now is 3000 A.D. For the first leg of the trip, me and my freeze-dried crew are on our way to a planet on the other side of the star Cygnet, where the rulers are benevolent and John Carter of Mars lives, and an always up-to-date James Bond can be called on to come to the rescue in case of attack by ant-men, hoary throgs, evil masterminds . . .”

Evans chuckled. “I get the picture. A real fan of science fiction, I gather. You and your cryogenic companions. Well. I’m sorry about your sister. I see some old feelings there. We don’t need to go too far with that now. But I’m curious, if you don’t mind, to know about this actual box, what was it like to go in there, to be in there, in your seat . . . that’s right, close your eyes again . . . in front of your controls or whatever they are.”

“Okay, I’m wearing my space helmet, with the dark visor down to protect against the cosmic radiation. The chin-speaker’s hooked up to call out the codes to the stellar drives. We’re finally going to Sron, the very edge, this is the first flight there! The log is entered on the ship’s computer, starshine is peeping in the portholes; and I’m on the lookout for the Invaders.”

“Invaders? This doesn’t sound particularly safe anymore.”

“The ones who came to take over earth, before we decided to mount a counterattack on their home planet. My mission was partly reconnaissance. But they got wind of it and were going to try to intercept me, probably from their colonies in the region of Sron.”



“Um-hm.” Doctor Evans, I saw when I opened my eyes, pressed his splayed fingers together at the tips and then dropped them listlessly. He looked sad, as if he wanted to talk about something else—my dead sister, my yelling parents. But he gathered his patience again with a large breath and asked me, “Did you feel safe in this spaceship of yours, despite the threat of these ‘invaders’?”

“Yes. I had all the latest armaments, a specially hardened hull, a seasoned crew . . .”

“I see. But you were actually alone, in this packing box in the attic.”

“Of course. This was make-believe. I know that now, and I knew it then.”

He cleared his throat, took another deep breath, and blew it out slowly through pursed lips. He ran a hand over the age-speckles on his expanding forehead and said, “All right. What was it you wanted to talk about?”

So finally we started on the real stuff. I related my tales of woe, omitting nothing, wrapping it up with the episode at Witch Bay. It wasn’t easy, trying to make sense of it all for someone else who, despite his air of sympathy, was bound to look askance at my claims of “reality.” But I had nothing to lose, and I desperately needed some discerning perspective.

A light seemed to go on in Doctor Evans’s eyes toward the end; and when I had finished, he glanced at the clock and then asked me if I wouldn’t mind going under a light hypnosis, in the half hour remaining. “Your experience,” he explained, “strikes me as

just the kind of dissociative syndrome that sometimes can be amenable to deeper exploration in this manner.”

“Well, is there any risk to it? I mean, will I be able to get back, no problem?”

“Oh, certainly yes. I mean, for someone who’s been to the edge of the universe and back . . . I’m only kidding, pardon me. Hypnosis is simply a tool, a trick of the mind. You’ll enter a light trance, and I’ll be here in complete control. You’ll feel the same as you do now, at the end—if anything, more relaxed. We could schedule the session for another session, but I feel it would be most fruitful with the material you’ve just related to me fresh in your mind. Are you willing to try?”

I hesitated. I could feel Them waiting for me. Through the opening . . .

“Think of it as something between a dream and a daydream.”

“Hmh. That’s not very helpful, Doc, considering what both varieties have been like for me lately.”

“Yes, but the key difference is, you have a watchman now, a bodyguard. One with both feet in this world. Now, what do you say? I’m not pressuring you; it’s entirely your choice.”

Putting it as a matter of choice should have been an encouragement to me, but it wasn’t. I deliberated a little more, then gave in. What the hell, I figured, it can hardly get worse. At least I’m with someone I can trust—I think. “All right. Let’s go for it.”

The doctor was pleased. He wheeled out a flat cushioned table for me to lie down on, face up. He dimmed the lights to a soft yellow and then, to my surprise, brought out a single, gaily painted maraca from a desk drawer. Sheepishly he explained that a century

of psychoanalytical practice hadn't come up with any more efficient means than the traditional rattle to induce trance.

“It's all the same to me. You're the witch doctor.”

He had me relax through suggestive, soothing speech, with the rattle in the background setting up a steady, insistent drone. In minutes I was drifting in a light and pleasant state like sleep, but with more lucid awareness. It felt like the meditation sessions I'd fooled around with in my twenties, but with a deeper sense of envelopment, or submersion, in the dark folds of the mind.

Evans led me back, slowly and carefully, to the world of Witch Bay. I was surprised to find myself there again, so easily, it seemed, but this time without pain, without fear. My tormentors were nowhere to be seen. I was floating above the landscape as a disembodied spirit, aware of all, but not subject to direct interaction with my environment. Then a dim voice hovering on the border of my consciousness asked me to describe what I saw.

I spoke in a voice I hardly recognized as my own. “In the place of witches, my spirit roams. I see a cracked red plain; thick jungle; no sign of habitation. It's a vast evil landscape—but I do feel safe now, somehow. It's where they wanted to kill me. I don't know why. I want to know why.”

“That's all right,” the dim voice followed me, “just tell me what you see, what you feel there.”

“Now it's suddenly worse,” I said. “They're coming for me, again, but they can't see me yet. I don't think they can find me up here. I float over and into trees, close by

the treetops, where lichens hang from branches that look like limbs of cadavers. I see them dangling before me, wanting to cling—but no, I’m free to escape and so I go flying away, toward snowy heights on the horizon. Funny, I didn’t notice those before, they’re so beautiful. This is good, Doctor Evans. May I call you Arthur, or Art? You don’t have to answer. I know, say just what I see. Yes, I hop from one place to another, about as quickly as I came in, and now, now already I’m gone. Somewhere else? Can I go somewhere else now? Ah. I think I understand something. This is helpful. Yes I think that’s it; that’s what’s going on.”

“What?” I heard his voice. “Tell me what it is.”

“It’s like, somehow the virtual scenes are so vivid, that I lose track of my real fingers twirling the dials, and so the scenes change as if by themselves. I tend to forget that I’m the one in control the whole time. I can go anywhere I like, into it or out of it. It’s up to me.”

“All right. Can you say more about this? Tell me about the dials.”

I laughed, my eyes still shut, visualizing a kid in a roller coaster car, a barber chair fitted with cockpit, steering wheel, gloves, controls. “Oh, just something we talked about at the office where I work. Harry and me. These virtual reality gizmos. I can imagine myself working the controls . . .”

The rattle shook me back with three perfunctory bursts. “Okay, okay, I guess that’s enough.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I looked at Evans as he leaned over to put the rattle away; I felt affronted by his tone of impatience.

“Well, obviously the trance wasn’t very deep,” he replied. “When a subject starts making analytical statements as you did, or simply daydreaming, whether idly or willfully, it’s a positive indication that you’re not in the true trance state. You’re either operating in your left brain, or just playing around.”

“I don’t think I was just playing around. I was taking it seriously; telling you what I saw.”

“Normally a subject doesn’t go so quickly into such full recall of a former dream state. Or if they do, they don’t simply jump out again because it strikes their fancy. I had hoped to access more your feeling state, underlying the symbolism.”

“It was real enough to me. I finally felt in control.”

“But you weren’t in control. I was.”

I felt stumped, frustrated. I sat on my hands and clammed up, not knowing how this was going to turn out. Some watchman: more like a captious guard.

Evans tried to patch it up. “All right. It doesn’t matter. Perhaps we’ll give it another go in a future session.”

“Well, whatever you say. It was kind of neat, I think.”

“Neat, was it?” He sighed and rose to turn the lights back up. “At least we got you back in one piece, eh?” I could tell he was trying to cover up some disappointment in his own judgment or performance. Maybe he just needed more practice on the rattle; he hadn’t been allowed to jiggle one enough, as an infant.

I sat up propped on my elbows, and decided to pursue the issue. This was supposed to be about me: my problems, my life going to hell in a handbasket, and not

about his professional hangups. “I think going back to that place was valuable, even just for a glimpse. At the end of it I saw something; I mean I started to understand something for the first time. That’s what I was trying to tell you. It’s that maybe, in fact, these scenes I live through are not totally pre-programmed to change as they do; but the program takes meaningless cues of my movement and translates them into commands for particular changes of scene. So if I just remember that, next time, and push a different button, or—”

“The program. Yes, well. The hypnosis aside.” Doctor Evans’s speech took on his most sonorous professional tone. “It sounds to me as if you’ve been suffering from guilt over this affair with your partner’s sister. And likely some overwork on the programming end of things, am I right?”

I barely nodded, subdued finally into silence. I would let him have his say now, and pass his verdict. And then?

“I’ll level with you, Joe, may I call you Joe? No secret notes.” He put his notepad down and spread his hands wide, a regular Christ—or Pilate. “Here’s my opinion, and I don’t mind saying that I think you’re intelligent enough to grasp it at face value. This repressed guilt has driven you to create, in your mind, a persecution syndrome. The punishment you receive, in the dreams and daydreams you’ve described, is justified at the unconscious level by your perceived unworthiness. But, and again I’ll be frank, you’ve demonstrated an unwillingness to revisit the real sense of pain these insufficient relationships seem to cause you. I’d like to explore some of the core issues involved, in future sessions with you.”

Now clearly in his element, Evans was more self-confident, his dry judgment conveying clean, clinical certainty. On top of it all he made it sound like it was all my fault that I didn't go deeper; my fault I was having tormenting dreams and other experiences too weird to explain. I had it all coming to me for my insensitivity or whatever.

Bottom line, I'm paying him to tell me it's all in my head.

Now I regretted going into my childhood fantasies, having been led to feel "safe" in doing so.

All my fault? Sheila had already beat him to that punch, with her new-age/tabloid psychology. This diagnosis was nothing but "karma" with a degree and an hourly fee.

What did he know about burning tar, a spear in the back? Who was living in their head, when it came to that?

But seeing as the good doctor was at least being straight with me in laying his analysis on the table, I decided to test it a little further.

"Can I ask a question?"

"You just did." He smiled as if familiarly.

I failed to appreciate his chummy humor. "Are we here to deal with the problem I brought to you, or to focus on some other problem that's all-too-ordinary but more familiar and therefore more comfortable for you?"

Evans flinched at my accusation.

I didn't like sounding rude; but I had trusted him to help me figure out what was really going on. I had expected more. And now I felt alone again, fighting for my life.

“Look, Doctor, with all due respect: the thing is, all of these occurrences, the places I’ve gone and so on, were not just ‘dreams and daydreams.’ I don’t see how they could be. I’ve never had dreams like that before. I’ve had a normal life, up until that business with the gun and the car.”

“About the same time as things were falling apart with Moira,” he added smugly.

That one threw me back on my heels a bit. I could see where he was coming from. Maybe I was over-reacting, coming across as a crank, a paranoid.

But no: on closer examination it was too pat. “Moira and I always had differences of opinion about things. She left only after this other stuff started to happen—after I was reacting to it, because for me it was real. For her it wasn’t. I doubt if she ever really believed me. She couldn’t handle it. I couldn’t either; but I didn’t have any choice.”

Evans settled back into his overstuffed red leather chair with a contented chuckle. “That’s what I’m here for. To convince you that you do have a choice. It’s all a matter of attitude, really. Once you have the understanding of what’s behind these ‘occurrences,’ as you call them, you’ll be able to function normally again. Until then, it’s classic delusion. Of course it seems real to you. That is delusion, by definition. With more work at getting to the bottom of your real-life difficulties, particularly in the area of relationship, and perhaps, as well, further exploration of career insecurities, these episodes will diminish and finally disappear. I’d like to find out more in our next session about your occupational environment variables. This man Gerald sounds like the model boss, to me. But I suspect that more is going on here than meets the eye. For example,



your friend and colleague Lance Harrison sounds like a questionable example for you to be following at the present time, Mr. Jennings.”

“The name’s Norton. Jennings is my middle name.”

“Pardon me. Look, Mr. Norton, it boils down to this: you’ve complained of a serious loss of touch with what we might call a baseline reality; and in such a case, stability in one’s personal life is of paramount importance. Your friend’s lifestyle speaks of the opposite.” The doctor looked at his wristwatch with a definitive flourish. “At any rate, our time’s up for this week.” Then he sat back and frowned like a petulant schoolmaster, waiting for me to leave.

I felt as if he hadn’t helped me at all, and was just setting me up for more of his fat fees—just how fat, I hadn’t bothered to check. Whatever, I wanted my money’s worth. Maybe if he couldn’t sort out the main problem on my psychic plate, he might be of some help with my so-called love life.

“So before I leave,” I blurted, “do you have any quick suggestions for me, in how to deal with this business about Moira?”

He took a frustrated draught of stale office air and edged forward in his chair. “Our time is up so I’ll just say this, and we’ll get into it in more depth next time. It’s tempting to pass judgment and say that it was unethical of her to leave you in such a state. But that sort of thing happens all the time. We must understand the difficulty people have when their partners start behaving erratically; when they lose touch. Then it’s easy for anyone to start wondering, maybe I’d be better off with a normal person.”

“You’re telling me I’m not a normal person?”

“Of course, what is normal? Ha ha, but I didn’t mean it that way. I was stating it from the hypothetical person’s point of view, someone who is living with another someone who’s going through experiences like yours.” He smiled in a satisfied way. “But who knows? When we get you back on your feet again, so to speak, you might even find Moira interested in living with you again.”

“Right. With her new stud, we’d make a happy threesome, I’m sure. Well, thanks, Doc. I’ll keep it in mind. How much do I owe you?” I stood up while his smirk faded. What a waste of money this was.

“Oh, that. Listen, um, we don’t worry about that at this point. We see how things go, and settle when we’re finished. The psychological profession, you understand, has learned something from your computer industry. The principle of shareware.” He stood and walked me to the door of his office.

Good for them, I thought. And for me: at least I’m not in the hole, yet. Maybe his theory of my psychological mechanism was so much hokum, but so far he was all I had. Maybe we could find some common ground if we kept working at it. Maybe I’d have an experience that would convince him of the objective reality of what was happening to me. Physical evidence. My hair turning white overnight. My pecker getting cut off.

“Fair enough,” I told him, shaking hands. It was a firm grip, man to man. “We’ll play it your way and see what happens. When should I come in again?”

“Ask Laura at the desk to book you in for sometime next week. Of course, if anything serious happens in the meantime, don’t hesitate to call.”

“I’ll do that, thanks.” I would show this guy. He had some surprises coming to him.

I walked home the twenty blocks from the shrink’s office. Home? Moira’s apartment would have to serve, at the moment. Moira or no Moira . . . Sheila or no Sheila.

I didn’t really expect Sheila back. She’d held out four days after my brush with the big black soup pot. Of course I had to tell her about it. No holding back: the roller coaster was in a state of motion. She didn’t put much stock in my idea that I could cure whatever was bugging me by seeing a psychiatrist.

Then there was the flap over Thanksgiving dinner. I’d made the mistake of stopping by the apartment to change clothes. Sheila flipped. I told her I hadn’t been certain where she stood with me at the time, so accepted the friendly invitation to go to Giselda’s. That’s all it was, friendly—wasn’t that obvious? With Kenny Jr. and Pamela there too? A regular *je ne sais quoi*, family scene. Besides, weren’t we both free, isn’t that what Sheila herself had said?

To prove it I called Giselda right then, and canceled out. I was sorry, I whined, but I was suddenly feeling fluish, sick to my stomach, and needed to stay home with, at most, vegetable broth. Which is more than Sheila and I ended up eating that night.

Despite my capitulation, the next day we called it quits—at least for awhile. Sheila was in a predicament because her roommates were “fed up” with her criticisms of

them. I told her she could move over to my basement digs while she looked for a new apartment of her own. I was kind of attached to Moira's, I said.

Wrinkling up her nose and saying something about earwigs, Sheila said she might take me up on my offer for a couple of days at the most, expecting she'd find something more suitable by the first of the month.

When the first of December rolled around, Sheila had come and gone from the Denman den, and in a fit of perverse initiative I packed all my belongings still remaining there and brought them to Moira's. I figured that Moira was really gone for good, and it was time to accept that. If she did end up coming back, I could always get a new place of my own.

Accommodations aside, I was back in hot water when it came to relating with the opposite sex. Both sisters were scared away, evidently, by the continued ravings of what I was starting to think of as my "virtual brain." Could I trust by now that the streets I walked, the rain-streaked brownstones and the dogs pissing on trees, the white-headed old black woman on the scrubbed marble steps and the jet thundering under the sky, were real? That I had driven Myrtle daily to the office and put in a week's honest work since my last "episode"?

But how could I be sure that this whole thing I lived through on a daily basis, in so-called present time, wasn't a perpetual serial episode, an ongoing "occurrence" from which there was no further escape? A program window whose "refresh" button was stuck. The only funny thing was, I couldn't tell whether it was stuck on or stuck off.

Or, maybe I simply had made the discovery one comes to at that notorious juncture known as the midlife crisis. Maybe I had finally entered, head first and wailing, the story of my life.

It was Harry who got me to working the VR angle again. The day after my appointment with Evans, for which I'd taken the afternoon off, I told him a little about my psych session, over lunch at Shorty's. It was tricky because I wanted to elicit his help, but without letting him know how close to the edge I really was. I had some professional respect to worry about. Likewise, with Gerald and Giselda—the story was, I needed a little relationship counseling.

I repeated to Harry some of what I'd told Evans, focussing on that distinct sense I'd had, of working the controls of a VR program. In the context of a "guided visualization," it was something that just came up in the session. I needed his opinion of what it meant to work with a virtual brain. Where did the concept of control really reside?

My colleague obliged by suggesting that we "can the theory and sample the juice" at the local parlor, the Spiral Links, downtown; and this time I said yes with a vengeance. It wasn't enough for me now to have enjoyed a week's "normal" dreams; I was resentful about what I'd gone through, and determined that I was going to get to the bottom of it before it wrecked my next relationship, if not my own sanity. So, hypnotherapy, parapsychology, virtual reality . . .bring it on.

Harrison said the way I was talking reminded him of his seventeen-year-old brother Donnie, who was “way-deep” into it, spent all his money there. The G-rated ones, Harrison hoped. Seventeen was just a little too young to be perverted like his older brother. On the other hand, he said, what the hell, since they let them in at sixteen anyway, and since it wasn’t real . . .

“You’re talking about actual, I mean virtual sex, for the public?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Sex: the Business.”

The two stylish young ladies in the neighboring booth turned their heads coyly and eyed us. I realized then how alone I’d become; how cut off from women—not only from the ones with whom I was intimately acquainted, but equally from the unacquainted. They went back to their meal, tittering. I was almost over the hill and I still hadn’t got the basics worked out. The VR variety of relationship might or might not offer me a way out of this rut.

“Well, why not. I couldn’t do worse than I’m doing already, I guess.”

Harry smiled fraternally. “Ahh, we’ll get you back in gear. So, you’ve really never tried the stuff, huh?”

“You mean VR? Not really. The VRUSIC’s wild enough, if you ask me. Scary, almost. But as for the real thing, oh, I got a taste of it when they ran some demos on the BigScreen last year. It was kind of interesting. Moira and I rented the setup for a night, from the drugstore. A box of goggles and gloves, with a software hookup. They ran scenes of an animal park, a jazz club, a . . . let’s see, a train ride, as I remember.”

“Yeah, but I’m talkin’ serious hardware, not kid stuff. ‘Red Light’: y’ever heard of that one?”

“Hmm, oh yeah, some off-color comments by a BigScreen comedian. What is it, a franchise? They have one here in Philly?”

“No, it’s just a module. Hole number eighteen at the Links. But you can start there if you want.”

The waitress came with the check, and we rose to leave without further delay. Out on the street Harry ribbed me a little: “What’ve you been doin’ with your evenings, boy? Stuck to the BigScreen, or rubbin up against some other hide you haven’t told me about?”

I answered with silence. I didn’t like this “boy” business.

“So, how’s about tonight? That is, unless you’ve got another version of Paradise already lined up—”

“I can’t say that I do, Hairy.”

As we walked back to the office through the noonday traffic, I began to glimpse a new possibility from this conversation with Harrison. For a while I’d wondered whether Gerald might be tied in somehow—the VRUSIC files, Hart’s screensaver eye, the new Synphase computers—but dismissed the charge as an irrational (and also quite natural) resentment of the boss. I didn’t like the merger: he was responsible. But so what? Now I had another, uglier insight: that Harrison might be involved. Wouldn’t that explain his eagerness for my initiation to “the VR Experience”? I just had to wonder.

The exterior of the place, downtown on Broad Street, was antiqued red brick, dressed up with a garish sign:

THE SPIRAL LINKS

Eighteen VR Modules

Featuring RED LIGHTS

Harry parked nearby and we sauntered in, mingling with the other customers just arriving: a young couple with peaked hair (I wondered how they'd fit the headsets on), four teenaged boys looking sheepishly underage, a portly, mannish woman wearing a brown bow-tie. We took our turn and paid. In the lobby, an artless study in pastel formica and spray-foam, we were presented with tickets and a guide-map; and filed through the winding hall to the arena.

It was an old gymnasium, judging by the lines still painted on the hardwood floor, and the open girders hovering above; set up now like a convention center, with different areas set up as modules. The overall space was darkened, with focused spotlights trained over the dedicated areas, each posted with a number and a sign advertising its particular flavor of experience. As these areas were arranged roughly in a circular loop, module number eighteen wound up near the entrance, sporting the infamous banner, "Red Lights," while module number one featured a green pennant with a golf ball logo labeled "1<sup>st</sup> Tee." Aside from the numbering of "holes," and the appeal to virtual duffers at the



starting module, there was no resemblance in this arrangement, that I could see, either to real golf links or to a spiral form.

With a cursory glance at the guide map and a stroll through the hall, Harry and I proceeded to our experience of choice, the eighteenth hole. Why mess around? I was on a mission of sorts, but while I was at it, why not get the most entertainment bang for my eighteen bucks?

Red Lights, like the other modules, was composed simply of a cluster of two to four “docks.” The docks looked like nothing more than converted dentist or barber chairs, enhanced with headsets and wired gloves. Hole eighteen’s popularity entitled it to four of these units, all occupied. We stood and watched the faces and writhing bodies of the four teens who got there ahead of us. Ten minutes of adolescent bliss. I felt embarrassed: wished they gave you more privacy. What would I look like up there on display, ripe with my own, more mature fantasies?

I caught a whiff of real panic, though, when my turn came to get hooked up: something about the brisk young unisex attendant, the battery of buttons and dials he or she pointed out to me, the metallic smell of the headset, the reptilian feel of the gloves . . . but Harrison with his garrulous banter kept me grounded. It was going to be okay; nothing to worry about; no side-effects; better than drugs. His assurances reminded me of Doctor Evans’s disclaimers about hypnosis. And that hadn’t been so bad; in fact I’d gained a little understanding from the exercise.

The headset was an awkward amalgam of padded earphones, bulky goggles, and brass scent jets which were mounted under the goggles. The gloves were wired to

translate hand and finger movements into virtual movement of the whole body through the created “playspace.” The gloves could also interface with virtual control buttons appearing below the visual scenes, as on a computer screen; and through quick practice I could “press” the buttons I wanted with a subtle motion of the right hand and index finger. An alternate set of physical controls was mounted on the left armrest of the chair. There were buttons for each sense: sound, sight, smell, taste, tactile; with submenus of choices for variety, and sliders and dials for amplitude. I was happy to note that on the visual screen (if not on the armrest), there was also an Esc button; so in a moment of panic I could, with Jimmy Durante authority, say “Stop Da Music.”

“See ya on the other side,” Harry said in a distant voice. I hesitated one last moment before pressing the red start button and then, instantaneously I seemed to have been transported to a spot hovering several feet overhead and in front of the chair I’d been wired into. I looked down at myself, a trussed sacrifice for the dentist god. I was a cheerless sight.

That ring of fat accumulating around the middle—I would have to do something about that. The rest, an uninspiring bundle of clerk-flesh, I was stuck with. It was a humbling perspective, looking down from above: in an otherwise ordinary semi-darkened room, with all its collection of finely tuned technology, there was nothing exceptional at all. There would be no laurels for this unintrepid traveler of inner space—and justly so, for there was no semblance in that body below me, of the hardened muscles of the interplanetary spy.

Then the sickly soothing, flaccid new age music began, and the cloying scent of chocolate frangipani perfume, and the swaying images of three lightly clad women came shimmering my way. A brunette, a blonde, and a redhead, wouldn't you know. I switched to patchouli-pear for the scented blonde: my stomach still rebelled. I flicked the music menu open and changed it to neo-punk brash-bash—and the maidens began gyrating in pelvic fury. I damped the tempo to a moderate waltz, as magic fingers began plying themselves into the tense flesh on the back of my neck. I felt the redhead's hot breath on my cheeks as she leaned close and mouthed words I could barely understand: "Come to me, my darling," she seemed to say.

I reached out for her: but my hands touched air and she zoomed away, wagging a virtual finger at me and pouting, "Don't be a bad little boy."

A bed appeared beside her: a giant, down-plumped four-poster job, in pink and yellow. She settled back onto it provocatively, saying something which I couldn't hear because I missed the volume control.

It was all nothing but a tease. A strip-tease, true—as the brunette slipped in front of the blonde and flung her own skimpy halter-top away. Poof! It dissolved in thin air, never to be seen again. But I'd seen breasts before. These seemed, I don't know, transparent. The odor of musk was in the air; had I pressed anything?

I could see my body, my whole body moving now, dancing between the three electric ladies in 3-D funk time, against a red-rainbow-hued backdrop which showed no floor, ceiling or walls. The bed had self-deleted. The barber chair jiggled under my hips. We were in bubble-space, flirting with sex, but without plot, realistic setting or

meaningful dialogue. My own sexual identity, through this charade, was as insubstantial as theirs.

Abruptly the scene faded to the ex-school gym. Was that all there was to it?

“Man, I don’t know about you, but they had me almost coming,” Harry crowed as we unstrapped ourselves. “They should include diapers or something, just in case.”

I walked away feeling cheated: not so much sexually as psychically. I could do better than this on my own dream-steam, without paying eighteen bucks plus entertainment tax. I had learned nothing and, in the bad bargain, been barely titillated.

Harry was disappointed to hear my review as we drove back uptown. “So what the fuck—what did you expect? Did ya want we shoulda gone to the whorehouse instead?”

“What do they have for female customers, I wonder: male strippers?”

“What—at the whorehouse?”

“No, Red Lights. Do you get any choice?”

“No, those same three broads do everybody. If you want a guy you have to wait until the upgrade. But women don’t mind taking care of each other, while they wait. Didn’t ya know that?”

Someone moved the volume slider to mute, for the rest of the ride.

The next morning, I lay in Moira’s bed, thinking about that experience—that ridiculous, plastic, sophomoric, pseudo-sexual experience called “Red Lights.” Trying to make sense of why it hadn’t done anything for me.

Maybe, I thought, I should be celebrating. If that state-of-the-art experience-machine couldn't even get me up, I was at least back within earshot of normal, in the mental health department.

But I had hoped to get some hands-on technique that might help me face my next encounter with my own "program." Instead, it seemed that to go to the belly of the beast, was to discover I was barking up the wrong beast.

Harry's accusation rang in my head: What did I expect? A controllable, safe-mode barbie-fied witch, with a dimmer switch for her cauldron fire? Sorry, look for the upgrade coming out soon. We do have some tastier wenches for you though, sir, with an authentic computer-generated four-poster bed and genuine imitation cheap perfume and six chocolate flavors, oh did I mention tingling sensations in all the wrong places—sir, are you still with us?

My attention stopped on something unexpected.

What were these tiny red marks on my arms, inside the elbows? I began to feel worse than strange. What had I just dreamed? I recalled nothing. Why, then, an uncomfortable prickling sensation under my knees; why this aching at the temples, behind the eyes, inside my head?

Who's in there, this time, and where has he or she been?

Harry, are you there?

Joey, time to get up for school now.

Water—

The bathroom mirror tells all. Not a boy, but a grizzled, beaten man. At least it's my gray eyes I see there, puffy from sleep, either not enough or too much. Which is it? Only blank, somehow. Splash of cold. Rub clean. Buzz the razor here, there . . .

There—under tousled, receding hair, I might still possibly be considered attractive, in a middle-aged sort of a way. But there's nobody left for me in Moira's bed.

At least, there wasn't a moment ago.

Yet, I seem to remember . . . no, I can't see a face.

Only a large, soft body beside me, steaming like a heifer.

Good Christ, am I really losing my mind?

The bedroom phone rang, too loud. Was I hung over? On the way to the phone, I stubbed my big toe on the leg of the bed. "Oh, fuck. Who is it?"

"What a way to answer. What if it was the Queen?"

Only Sheila. Moira's sister, if I remembered correctly. She invited me over to her new place—an upstairs apartment she'd rented for herself on Cherry Street—for a drink that night after work.

I couldn't help it: I pictured a palm-thatched hut, a steaming cauldron . . . No, not that! This was Philadelphia, home of the Eagles—

"Gordie? You still there?"

"Oh, yeah. Still pretty sleepy."

"Well, how about it. Do I still rate?" She sounded meek and mild, uncharacteristically so.

How could I say no? I had nothing better to do, but the usual unchoice choices: BigScreen, bowling, walking the streets and parkways alone.

Is your place, I asked her, going to be the sweet one in the darkest middle?

She laughed at that.

I successfully avoided Gerald that day at work. He was busy on the phone all morning, and stayed in his office with the door shut all afternoon. Harrison and Giselda also left me alone. Somehow I was coping with my professional responsibilities: in fact, the Simco inventory analysis was a pleasant diversion from what boiled just over the horizon in my own skull.

At workday's end, Myrtle looked menacing to me: too menacing to deal with. So I hailed a cab, congratulating myself for my foresight and resourcefulness—like an alcoholic patting himself on the back for refusing a drink, when he knows in his heart there's a new bender looming like a sexy tornado just to the southwest. Then when I piled myself into the back seat of the cab, I saw beside me an interesting little parcel. Actually, not so much little, as long and thin. Long enough, actually, for its contents, when folded out to full size, to serve for long-range sighting; while not too thin for said contents to hold and project a tiny but not too tiny, and deadly, all-too-deadly projectile containing a certain substance not of my making, not of my specific knowledge. But I'm skating around it: the parcel had my name on it. The grinning, round-faced, green-capped cabbie handed it too me as I got out, as he figured correctly that I was about to "forget" it. Like an automaton I accepted it.

Luckily, Sheila was not home. 616 Cherry Street: that was right, wasn't it? The metallic number plaques on the bricks, and the street signs, were genuine. But maybe I'd got the wrong address from her on the phone, or remembered it wrong. Then again, that gun parcel gave me a queasy feeling. Like I was in the wrong city . . . or file directory . . . or dimensional cul-de-sac. There were many possibilities. I left the parcel on the porch there with the dead bonzai plant and wandered the streets again, searching my mind for the inner map home. I had an idea where Cherry Street was in the larger city, but none of the streets it led to were familiar anymore.

Bottom line, I was lost inside my own city. But definitely not dreaming. You know when you're not dreaming: for instance, nobody could dream Christmas decorations as garish as the actual ones sprouting like lively vines everywhere I turned. The thing is, you can't always tell when you are dreaming. This is normal.

Then how do you know when a dream's a dream? Answer: only when you're lucid dreaming, aware that it's a dream.

We're becoming redundant here.

Then how do you know reality's real? Answer: only when you're lucid, aware that it's real.

So which was it, this time? It was Philadelphia, this I could just feel. Those Christmas decorations were just the right mix of charming and tasteless. There was that certain Philadelphian December brownness in the air. It wasn't reddish-green like Boston, where I'd worked for Siltech Genex, nor boyhood black-and-white Bayonne. Just Philly year-round, come to think of it, brown.



Could I look up anyone else to test this real-dream out, anyone representing a lifeline to my past or future? The office loop, I was afraid, was tainted. Sheila, I had now demonstrated, was as untrustworthy an anchor as her sister before her. I hadn't kept up with my old buddies from Temple U., since the only non-nerds had moved out west, to Silicon Valley or Seattle. I could have gone by the old campus, maybe looked up a prof or two, but my stubbornness kept me pointing instead north, to the neighborhood of Moira's apartment. Maybe she'd be there, this time, my detour complete. Back at square one, would we both be a little wiser, this time? I had no new wisdom in hand just yet. Only a deepening sense of victimization, of loss.

“A total fucking change of scene”: that coda of my father's was turning out to be my life's stuck-record refrain. But at the same time, the apparent changes I was going through were nothing but white noise and empty show, as if to cover a deeper yearning I hadn't yet begun to satisfy, to really tap. Maybe the really big changes were yet to surface.

Fine, bring 'em on. Jaws Ten, Godzilla the goddamned Eighteenth.

Meanwhile, I thought, while I'm waiting, is it too much to ask to see my fucking wife, my girlfriend? Did they really vacate, or did I? Vacate from and vacate to, what and where? Sheila has her mutually loving roommates for verification, or at least she used to, not any more. Moira also had her points of reference, her place that is to say her former place of work, her bowling gals, her mother in Scranton—but no—just let her go with her boyfriends, to their secret lovenests, these known or unknown commodities. I don't want to call her mother, their mother in Indiana. There is a bottom line somewhere.

I just can't tell anymore where the chain of supposed verification leads next. Who can I trust when I can't trust myself?

Closer to so-called home I had the troglodytic Drudge Brothers straight out of Bizarro Comix, where I suspected that actually a Mrs. Eileen Fetterstein and her dinky poodle Pete lived the last seventeen years. There was the memory of a phone call from Edgar the tax lawyer: he still existed somewhere in this matrix or maze. I still wanted to keep him and also the poker gang at arm's length until I got this thing sorted out. Until I got home, real home. To the way it was, or at least had been.

The empty streets echoed with my footsteps. The inner wheels kept grinding away . . . Maybe I could change it around. A change of attitude, is probably what it would take. Maybe just that, at least for a start. Then see what happened. I'd depend on Harry and Giselda, Sheila and Evans, until I got this thing out of my system. Gerald, leave out of it as far as I can. Harry, on second thought, maybe not so good. What had happened to me since that crazy porno hall, all his doing? What did they want with me?

I fingered the tender spots inside my elbows, through the sleeve of my leather jacket.

Yes, maybe Giselda can help. Maybe her old flame Hart suffered disorientation like this, occupational hazards of cybermania.

A red-eyed rummy in an overcoat and shiny shoes asked me for change. Sorry chum, this time I'm fresh out. The next person I passed on the sidewalk was a stout mannish woman with a brown bow-tie.

I had to see Doctor Evans right away. I stopped at the next phone booth I came to and found—digging deeper, whadya know—a mint-new quarter in my pocket.

Evans was luckily still at his office, working late, but told me he wasn't in the habit of seeing clients after hours. I apologized, said I was in rough shape, had lost track of time, didn't know where I was. He relented and said if I came right away he'd see me.

I considered walking the innumerable blocks back to Sheila's which wasn't Sheila's, to retrieve the rifle, the not-yet-smoking gun I needed to convince Evans that I wasn't just tripping to my own loony-tunes. But I knew, simply knew it would not be there. So I summoned the courage to flag down another cab, from a different company, and rode unmolested to Evans's office, calm and still afraid.

Comfortable in Evans's leather armchair at last, I could only attempt to explain:

“It's a no-win racket, see. There's no escape from their goddamned maze. If you go one way, you just get deeper in. If you go the other, you're only extending the bloody thing, making it bigger. But getting no closer to any exit. Because you can't exit ahead of yourself in time, where you think you see an opening. You'll never catch up to it, not in a million or a million million years. It's that way. So you give up, and wait awhile. Thinking maybe to turn back. Only it's farther now, you're farther on. The faster you run backwards, you've got the same problem as before: you never really get any closer to it, the beginning. In fact, you're losing ground all the time. Yes, even if you just wait. But maybe the sensible thing is to do just that, sit and wait for something to happen,

something to come up, a new idea, a light from a new direction. At least less energy is wasted that way.”

Doctor Evans nodded. “It’s interesting that you speak of your experiences in the second person,” he observed calmly.

What was he, a shrink or a grammarian? I clenched my jaw shut.

“That tells me that you’re trying to disassociate yourself from your inner experiences. I’m sitting here wondering why.”

Oh, God, here we go again, I thought. The wonderful contemporary trend in modern psychiatry: “open therapy.” Level with the customer. Chat person to person in the cozy armchairs, just like in the old smoking rooms after a dinner of fine meats and wine. Bring out the cigars and brandy.

“Look, Doc,” I said to him. “I understand. It’s my trip, okay? It was only a manner of speaking. I’m talking about me. Do you want to hear the rest?”

“Oh, by all means.”

Again, it came round to the fact that he was all I had. But how could I get him to understand? “Listen, you’re familiar with VR yourself?”

He beamed. “I’ve got a new Toshiba XRC system in my den, as a matter of fact.”

“Well, great. So try it this way. Look at it as if I have this virtual brain, along with—or sometimes instead of—my real brain.”

Evans nodded sleepily, as if he’d heard it all before. “And what, exactly, is this virtual brain made of? Where does it come from? Where does it exist, do you think?”

“Good questions. I wish I knew the answers. Sometimes it’s like I’m at the hub of some cosmic wheel—on an intergalactic scale. Later, I’ll know that it’s all happening in inner space, my own cranium. You decide—you’re the doctor. Am I just navigating the winding corridors of my own slimy brain-meat? But no, of course I’m not in there, as a body swallowed by my own brain, that’s a contradiction of physical space. It’s clearly, even logically impossible, right? So it’s got to be more figurative: what I see is where I seem to be. You tell me. Maybe it’s the brain of another, larger organism I’m imagining: only modeled on the human scale—but I can’t verify that. There’s a pink light showing no firm boundary, only an outer darkness in dome form, which could be a night without stars. Does that help? I have continually to ask myself, where am I? Cornered in a small, as yet unexplored niche of the cosmos? Or do I merely imagine everything I seem to experience, walled in as I am by clever graphics on a screen projected or generated by a rogue VR program cabled or microwaved into my 510 series-E Synphase workstation on an otherwise cool and rainy Tuesday or Wednesday evening, late in the year 2009, in Philadelphia PA or the city of your choosing.”

Doctor Evans seemed to be dozing, his eyelids closed. He opened them up like my bleary screensaver come temporarily to life. “Was that a question?”

“No, just wondering out loud. Sorry if I’m boring you. Do you get any more clues from what I’m saying, this time?”

“It sounds as if you unconsciously perceive yourself the victim of an elaborate game—somebody’s stooge. But they haven’t told you the rules. So you feel trapped, confused . . . lost.”

“Yes! ‘Unconscious’ or not—now you’re zooming in on it.” I was flooded with sudden hope, and wanted to ride this tide home. “So what do we do about it? How do I get out of it, back to my normal life, my own brain? My ‘home brain,’ I guess, is what it would be in this game of yours.”

“It’s not my game,” he said in all seriousness.

The guy was so blessed literal. Is that what it was to be perfectly sane? “The game you mentioned,” I explained patiently. “It was your term. But I’ll take it; it fits. The question is, can I just get out now, stop playing? Or, what if the answer’s No? Then can I beat it? Is there a way to win?”

“Mr. Jennings; rather, Mr. Norton, pardon me. I’m afraid you’re still interpreting my comments a bit too literally. I was speaking of a game in metaphorical terms. But if the comparison is a valid one, let’s follow it a little way along. There is a strategy to win, I think. That is the inner path. You must have a sense that something worthwhile is to be gained. A sense of home, perhaps, if you like, or of making the right choice with Moira. An evaluation of where your life is headed. You see, what I think you need, if you want to know—”

“Yeah, yeah; that’s why I’m here. Fire away.”

“Okay. There needs to be—we’re talking about responsiveness, here—a sense of finality where that’s appropriate, and fresh beginnings, in their place. A sense of purpose, and a sense of direction to get there. But this type of goal is impossible to gain by the methods you happen to employ in your life: your usual pattern of searching, of somewhat frantic anxiety, of looking at computers and VR hookups and losing sight of

the real world. In this artificial environment, to act and make choices is reduced to the punching in of codes and machine-commands. No, if we are to grow as human beings, it's going to be accomplished only by original methods, I'm tempted to say invisible. Insensible, in fact, if you catch my drift."

"So I should go rent an isolation tank for a weekend, hook into a biofeedback loop—"

"No, I said original methods. Those accessible to the human body without artificial means. Social help counts, even professional help of this kind, if I may say so. True, contemporary technology can have a measure of usefulness in the cultivation of self-awareness. But there's the danger that it can still be superficial, without the proper guidance and supervision."

"So then it's the mystical path, is it? Meditation, yoga, and all that?"

"You'll find partial success, at least. A glimpse of what it could be like, again."

Or, maybe farther away than ever. I turned away from him, exasperated.

He sighed, moved as if to get up.

"Wait—" I said, looking desperately for something to hang onto, to carry away with me back into the alien city. "There's another angle, it occurs to me. Maybe this stuff is all happening to me literally; and maybe it isn't. In the meantime, like you say, there might be a secret passage somewhere, very direct like the answer to a riddle, accessible if I can only get my mind around the keyword, the password, the trick in the question. A simple technique, an inner road. A flash of insight: time-travel possible through memory, for instance. Only, I'm afraid I haven't got any of that precious

mystical stuff to work with. But still, maybe you could help me, by performing a shaman's trick, a conjurer's sleight of hand; you could give me a meditation mantra, to be intoned x number of times at y frequency for z duration. Yeah, ha!—I've got it—'ZZZZZ . . .' Through sleep, one night, I'll dream my way out.

But then, you see, that's no good either. Something clicks later and I realize, that's just what they want me to do, to lay my brain open to their manipulations. No thanks, I say to that one. I'll just have to keep my eyes lit through this tunnel as much as I can." I stopped speaking, having lost my train of thought. Had I meant to ask him something before I left?

"I must say, Mr. Jennings—er, Norton. Sorry, I don't know what it is, with your name. At any rate, forgive me. I was going to say, I find it fascinating that you seem so self-aware through all this, so motivated for self-help. And yet there's still this irrational insistence on identifying the source of the experiences with an external agency, the always-unnamed 'Them.'"

"You try 'em out, sometime, and you'll change your tune."

He sighed. "Well, I guess we've been through this already. Was there anything else, now, that you need to get off your chest, while you're here?" He glanced at his watch.

He still didn't understand, not really.

But when I considered the prospect of returning to the unpredictable streets, it seemed the only thing left was to play by his rules, and try the relationship angle again. I knew I could use some help there, after all.



“Doctor Evans, I know you’re a busy man. I’m sorry to have kept you after hours. Okay. I’ll look at it your way for a sec. Are you saying I should drop the sister and just wait for Moira to come back?”

“Me? Look, you have to understand, I can’t run your life for you. But I will say this: you need some stability in your life. Moira offers at least the potential for that, if you demonstrate your commitment and love to her. Can you tell me again how you feel about her? Do you feel love?”

Love, what was that? Flustered, I fidgeted with my idle fingers. “I—I don’t know. I don’t even know if I know what love is. I thought I loved her. Maybe I still do. But it’s hard sometimes. She makes it hard; I guess I do too. And then when she just ups and leaves . . .”

Now Evans voiced his opinion without hesitation:

“As for the sister, no: that’s worse than nothing. Falling into a sexual trap is not the solution to your problems. It feels nice, for a while, but it doesn’t get you anywhere. If anything, it pulls you back into a pattern of complacency and irresoluteness.”

“Okay, but look. This thing with Sheila is not really happening right now. I know I tried to see her again today, but it’s been a week, I’ve been on my own. And the other stuff has been getting worse, not better. At least she gives me credit for having these experiences I’ve been paying you to hear about. They’re real, goddamit!”

The doctor put on his smug smile of patience and compassion. “And what does dear Sheila say about these experiences, then? Has she got a satisfactory explanation for

them? I daresay you wouldn't need to be calling on me, then, as if it were an emergency."

Okay, it had come to a head now. What did I have to lose? "Aliens," I blurted out. "She says I'm being abducted, or programmed, by aliens."

"Aliens, eh?" The doctor shook his head and searched deep in my eyes, to discover how serious I was. "I'll say it again: that woman is not the way for you to go, Mr. Jennings. I don't usually comment on my patients' choices of relationships, but—in this case it does seem clearly counterproductive for you. It's exacerbating your already extenuated tendency to fantasize and ascribe cause to external agents."

The meeting ended shortly, with my mind fairly choking on the doctor's pedantries, his dustcloud of paper credentials, the clash of ill-matched office furnishings, the odor of stale pipe tobacco. The question of a future session was left unsettled.

"What about payment, then?" I wanted to know where I stood, just in case I decided not to bother coming back.

Evans waved off the concern as if it were a bothersome gnat. "Don't worry about that, yet. I know how to get hold of you if I have to." He smiled.

I found Sheila back in Moira's apartment waiting for me, worried because I hadn't shown up there as planned after work. That wasn't my understanding of the plan, I told her.

Yeah, 616 Cherry Street was the right address. But she distinctly remembered arranging to meet at Moira's place.

I let it go. Famished, I followed my unexpected guest's example and popped a TV dinner in the microwave, by way of emergency rations, and relaxed on the sofa with her in front of the BigScreen, letting it drone on while I told her about my visit with Doctor Evans. I stopped short of mentioning his advice to dump her.

Sheila didn't take kindly to the shrink's dismissal of her pet theory about aliens. "What a stuffed shirt! Of course he doesn't believe in aliens. He'd be out of a job." Then her eyes lit up. "Hey—did y'ever think of this? Maybe he's working for them, trying to steer you away from the truth!"

"Sheila, get serious. This guy is the last one who would get in bed with a bunch of aliens—assuming that aliens even exist."

"Who's talking volunteers? If they can finger you for their dirty work, they can get anybody they want."

Even you? I suddenly wondered as I retrieved my virtual supper. If she was right, there were no limits. I threw another cock into the ring: "What about Gerald? You think he might be in on their game, too?"

"Good question. I don't know the man, only saw him at your Christmas party last year, but did you notice he's got that funny mark on the back of his neck?"

I knew the one she meant: a long purple patch just above the collar. "That's just a birthmark."

"That's what they all say." She looked at me with a conspiratorial eye: "But you know, they take 'em young sometimes."

At first I thought she was joking. But she was serious, and I swung back, with sobering clarity, to the belief that maybe Evans was right about Sheila and her theories. And then I stood still in the middle, taking stock.

Maybe Gerald was in on it; or maybe Sheila was way off base; but still, something was going on. And whatever it was—this game, this bug, this madness, this control program, this alien parasite, this repeating hallucination or psychological experiment—it was evil. Of that I was certain.

When I shared this little revelation with Sheila, she disagreed. “Evil is something known,” she told me with authority. “The man who raped me when I was thirteen. He was evil. He had a face, and a conscience, the knowledge of what he was doing. He did it anyway. That was evil. You can’t project human sins onto a race from another galaxy.”

Sheila’s reference to being raped left me strangely cold. She had never told me about it before, and now threw it out for discussion like last week’s soap opera. I felt sorry for her, yet also repelled, as if she’d told me (“Oh by the way”) she fucked Harry last Saturday night. I glimpsed her character in a new light: as a “loose woman,” as uncommitted to me. This snap judgment I knew was unfair: blaming the victim. But the feeling was uncomfortably real.

I retreated back to the issue of aliens. “You say these beings come from another galaxy. How do you know that? Why not just another part of our own friendly Milky Way? It’d be way shorter for them to get here.”

She looked at me as if I were a child who couldn't grasp the nuances of time-space travel. "You can't expect them to be using technology that we know about on earth! They're millions of years ahead of us! Those kind of distances mean nothing to them. It's instant. Like the speed of light."

"I don't know what kind of physics you've learned from your advanced informers, but the speed of light is not quite 'instant.' Even the light from our own sun takes eight minutes to get here. From the next closest star, over four years . . ."

My style of argument evidently didn't suit her, and she turned the tables on me in a flash: "Look, hon, whatever it is that's under your skin, it's getting too weird for me." She picked up the glossy BSG—the *BigScreen Guide*—from the coffee table as if I had been uploaded to the Mother Ship and that was that.

Now my repulsion recoiled into hurt. "Wait, Sheila. You've been so helpful with this. You've at least been giving me the benefit of the doubt, that what's happening to me is real. Now you're saying you're tired of the whole thing. Do you really mean you're tired of me?" It was difficult for me to say this, and as I did I choked with the desolation of where I was headed.

She looked at me with distant, glassy eyes. "All I know, Nort, is that it's changed you." She put down the BSG and clicked to the next channel.

Just like your sister, I thought with pain; maybe worse. There was nothing more I could say.

She had put on her little show of sympathy. But, like Doctor Evans, she fled to the known measures of a more conventional “reality” when the terrain became a little too unfamiliar.

I left the conversation hanging on its unpleasant thread and went to the kitchen to make popcorn for our dessert. Sheila coolly thanked me when I returned with the brimming bowl and sat back down beside her on the couch. I proceeded to watch and attempt to become interested in her show of choice, a sword-and-sorcery epic cast in the Dark Ages.

Instead I was reminded, all too vividly, of Witch Bay, the hag and her henchmen, and the implacable boatman who had brought me there. How many had died at their hands, before me? How many had survived, only to go to another adventure like it, and then another, until they could stand no more and decided to end it for themselves? Murder or suicide: whichever way you came grinding through their mill, you’d have to say the game was evil.

Like Doctor Evans, Sheila had not experienced first hand what I had, and so, apparently, could never really understand. Just as I could never understand the pain of her rape. Evil was relative, I decided, to one’s own pain.

My pain, my problem. And it wasn’t, apparently, about to go away, like a random rapist in the night. It kept coming back.

Maybe Sheila could claim the same lasting effect from her single attack. And so, I considered, what if I were suffering the after-effects of a single event—whether nightmare, or some more mysterious psychic intrusion?

What cures a rape?

They say that it helps to start by naming the crime. I had tried this with Sheila, and with Doctor Evans, without success. Maybe now, I decided, I would have to take my case to Harry. Full disclosure, come what may.

“Here’s my theory,” Sheila said to me at some point in the middle of our second bowl of popcorn. “Someone is drawing you away from me. A temptress, a little slut of a bitch who’s . . . all right, beat me, then, see if that makes it any better. Do you really want to go on like this?”

“I’m sorry.” I was; my right arm had lashed out at her, just once, before I knew what had happened.

“Well, it seems we’re pretty normal after all, huh?” She shrank away from me, pouting, rubbing the offended shoulder.

The faces on the BigScreen, with their voices jabbering like monkeys, jumped out at me, mocking and accusing. I slammed my left palm on the coffee table control and made them disappear.

Sheila started to move to get up. I moved my right hand again, this time to her thighs, but gently enough to show I meant no harm.

“Wait,” I said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you. Don’t go.”

She ended up staying the night, giving me the chance I begged for, to make amends. We played a game of multiple-choice: nipples, genitals, buttocks, lips, belly and thighs, earlobes and then back again. When all the choices were done, there were no

right answers. Oh, they all worked, more or less, but the result was empty, silent, awkward.

I feigned sleep and let the misused woman beside me find her own way there, separate and cold. I slept restlessly at best from then on, tossing and turning so much that Sheila got out of bed in the pre-dawn darkness, “to get a decent sleep” at her place—call it 616 Cherry Street at your own risk.

As an aside, she mentioned that she wasn’t coming back. I didn’t believe her at first: but said wait, let’s talk about it.

The departure scene was not amiable. I sat up in bed, blear-eyed and surly in the acid lamplight, as she leaned to the door, trying to pull away while the hollow words from our loveless mouths fell out. I learned from her that I’d been chronically spurning her efforts at contact, talk, intimacy. That was news to me, I said; but maybe for the best, all things considered. She might be better off, for instance, not having to try to figure me out anymore.

She took it the wrong way, slumping against the doorjamb crying, “I knew this would happen. I’m too fat, and ugly, and untalented, and stupid. Not like Moira, the hoity toity Graphic Artist, who you’re still waiting for, kicking me out so she’ll make up with you cause you’ve been a good boy for a week or two.”

“I’m not kicking you out. And you’re not stupid, Sheila.”

“Yes, I am. I never got past tenth grade.”

“Whatever.”



“Yeah, whatever. When you’re fat and ugly that’s what they all say. Whatever. So just say it the way it really is. You’re not attracted to me any more. Just say it. I can take it. I’ve heard it enough before.”

“No, look Sheila. It’s not you. It’s just this—this problem I’ve got. Whoever’s trying to get to me. Or however you want to look at it. Paranoia, dissociation, the doctor’s terms. To me, more like, the Program. The—”

“Aliens, yeah right. You really believed that crap I told you? Is that what you thought you saw in me? What we had in common? What about the sex? After all I’ve laid open for you, this is the thanks I get?”

For her it was confused anger streaked with tears; for me, just cold confusion. What could I do to change things now?

Too many questions, no answers, and so I let her go.

## Chapter 8

## THE VIRTUAL BRAIN

Lance Harrison lived alone, in a funky shake-sided house on a weedy corner lot. His living room was a ring of electronic equipment, with test-wires, chips and circuit boards strewn everywhere, interspersed with wrappers and wadded bags of junk food. I realized for the first time how lonely he might be, underneath his usual brash self-confidence. It was late on a Sunday morning; I'd called first to warn him I was coming by for a visit. Now I hoped to get some quality time, if I could pry him from his toys.

“Jeez, what are you working on?”

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that. I promised my brother Donnie a custom VR setup for Christmas . . . and then there's my own projects, some ideas I have for streamlining a duplex motherbus, and I think I'm onto a method for building up cache memory without a noticeable drop in access speed . . .that kind of thing.”

“I'm glad I'm into the soft end.”

“What's on your mind?” Harrison cleared an old, purplish-brown armchair for me to sit on. He pulled his swivel chair away from a work surface and turned it to face me. His manner was cool. We hadn't talked about the Spiral Links since the ride home

Thursday night. But I sensed it was basically okay, between Hairy and me. Friends are about letting disagreements go, and moving on together.

I began at the beginning and laid it all out for him, skipping the theories and trying to include all the sensory experiences. I wanted Harrison to come up with an original explanation, given only the raw data. If Doctor Evans was right about this whole problem being subjective in nature, then running it by a hard-nosed engineer like Harry would constitute a good test.

Harrison listened intently, dispassionately. He was just what I needed—assuming I could trust him. I knew I had to.

When I came to the end, he appeared distracted—fiddling with tools, looking everywhere but at me. Then his dark eyes stopped at mine, open and honest and still searching. “I must say I’ve noticed sometimes during the past month or so, that you haven’t been yourself. Like during that train ride back from D.C., or, every now and then when I see you absorbed at your computer, at the office. It seems like you’ve gone off into, I don’t know, another world.”

I waited for him to go on.

“What can I say? I’d like to help you out but it seems more like you’re already going to the right guy, your Doctor Evans, for this kind of stuff.”

I felt almost like crying from frustration now: the closing of the loop. Evans didn’t get it, and now Harry, who I thought might, was pushing me away.

“Right, I know how it looks,” I blurted out. “Evans thinks it’s basically all in my head, a relationship problem, whatever. But I’m convinced there’s more to it than that.

It's too eerie, too weird, I almost want to say too alien to be coming from just my own psyche—messed up as it may be from my failing grades in Relationship 101. I think there's got to be a mechanism of some kind: a physical cause. Software, hardware, I don't know . . ." My head sank into my hands. "I was hoping with your interest in VR, with your technical understanding of what's possible on the cutting edge, you might have some ideas. Some place to start looking outside my own fucking head."

Harry was fiddling again, running his own fingers through his shiny black hair. Something was bubbling, all right, and finally he let me have a taste. "You know, one thing I keep thinking as I hear all this, is . . .ah, it's crazy, though."

"What—it couldn't be crazier than I'm getting to be. Help me out, here, bro."

"Well, this whole business just keeps making me think of a virus of some kind."

Immediately I remembered Moira's naive confusion of the term "virus"—her thinking computer viruses could infect humans. And I didn't want any part of it. "But Hairy, this stuff has been happening to *me*—at night, at home, on the street, in my head—not in my computer."

"You just finished telling me it wasn't just in your head, guy. What about this episode you called 'Sargasso Station'? That happened on your workstation, correct?"

"Well, more or less. It seemed to. It was Saragossa, by the way, not Sargasso."

"Oh, okay. I was thinking of the sea in the Atlantic, you know, what is it, a gigantic weed-choked whirlpool or something, near the Bermuda triangle, where ships get becalmed and rot, or do they go right down the drain to the lost continent of Atlantis . . ."

“Yeah right. No, I think this was more of a Spanish name. Not that it matters.”

Nor the three thieves hanging—

“All right. I’m just fishing, here. I don’t have a firm handle on it. But I think it’s possible you may have triggered something with a particular key sequence while doing a routine entry. Then—well, this line of thought diverges in two directions. One, let’s presume accidental entry. We’re just going to assume virus here for a second, okay, and see where it takes us.”

“Fair enough.”

“Okay. So a random key sequence triggers a latent virus that’s been imported with some of our software. Or two—and this gets more complex fast—we presume malicious intent at some point in the chain of events. Meaning, someone meant to plant the virus either in the virtual mainframe or in your workstation. The virus was tailored to activate at the input of that key sequence. The sequence chosen was one that you were known to use routinely. These lines of logic about the How of it all (I sort of lean to the malicious version) lead to various threads of suspicion as to Who and Why.”

I liked what Harry was doing with what I’d given him. He seemed to relish the challenge, his eyes bright and focused, strands of his hair carelessly bobbing as he spoke, hands gesturing eloquently. At the same time I felt a flash of contempt for non-professionals—Evans, Sheila, Moira, to name a few—in their ignorance of what the computer programmer knew instinctively. Harry had me leaning on the edge of my chair and I urged him to go on.

“Okay. Now, Who? Gerald? I doubt it. It would be something brought in from outside. From where, our clients? Is there some international terrorist ring, bent on extorting national security secrets through Scanlon and Hart? Unfortunately, we have no real evidence for any of this, yet.”

“Hairy, that last word of yours gives me more hope than I’ve felt since this whole nightmare began.”

“Maybe so.” Now he seemed to look at me in a new light, as if realizing for the first time that this was both a computer problem and a human problem. “Nort, what I still don’t get is how the computer angle relates to your symptoms when you’re away from it. There’s obviously a psychological mechanism at work. That’s not exactly my field of expertise. Have you talked to your counselor about all of this?”

His black eyes looked at me openly, caring and involved. I had to go for it now. Harry listened again, with commendable patience, as I gave him the rundown on Evans’ interpretation. Carelessly, I included the doctor’s opinion of Harry’s lifestyle views. My friend’s jaw clenched at the personal critique and, at the end of my summary, snapped, “Sure he’s gonna say it’s all in your head. That’s what he gets paid for, in’it?”

“Yeah. But you thought there might be something wrong with me, too, right?”

“I didn’t say that. I said it’s the most obvious angle to look at. These shrinks, they think everything revolves around their little theories of how we ought to think and act.” With that he stood up, reached for his screwdriver, and began tinkering at his workbench again. “Don’t mind me,” Harry said. “I think better this way.”

I wished I could observe those too self-assured egos thrashing it out between them—no screwdrivers allowed.

Harry quipped over his shoulder, “Did you know that Doctor Evans’s profession ranks first in rate of suicides?”

“That may be,” I said. “But it’s me I’m worried about, not him. I need to think my way out of this thing, and I need your help.”

“I’m still with you, bud. No, look; it’s not your fault: it’s this devil of a program, I’d say. I’ve been hearing about some strange new software coming out. The hardware links are pretty hush-hush, at this stage of development. But I could run some probes on your machine, see if we can find out what’s making this thing tick.”

“Be my guest. But we still need to find out how this virus—if that’s what it is—connects to me, gets inside like a human virus.”

“It’s obviously not hardwired, but there has to be some kind of physical interface. So we think maybe what—electromagnetic, infrared?” Harrison was pacing the floor now, thinking with me. That made me feel hope again.

“What about the keyboard?” I said.

“Right. I was saying before, you might have activated it that way. There might be some ongoing code-reference which triggers different parts of the program. But that still doesn’t get it out of the computer into your body, your mind.”

“Okay,” I said, “what about the headphones, with the VRUSIC? That’s new—and it’s going right in through the ears.”

I didn't share with Harry the real extent of my fears. I'd sampled the VRUSIC/SEE setup only a couple of times since my baptism, with it, *Bolero*. There were no repeat performances to match that one, but each time, I felt as if I were pushing my luck.

He squatted down right in front of me and looked at me sharply, his own dark gaze seeing straight in, past the smell of roses, the stain of blood in the dusty bullring. How transparent was this so-called real world; how porous the boundaries of self? "You might have something, there, Nort. A pattern in the frequencies, maybe. Coded through the software to affect the neuron pathways somehow, in order to stimulate specific predetermined responses. . . ." His brow wrinkled in long contemplation of this possible connection, but he came up with no more insights into how the process might work. "I dunno," he said finally, shaking his head. "It makes me wonder again about the keyboard, though. Maybe there's more to it than just what you type in. A way to capture—or send—data through your finger-contact with those keys. Another level of interface for some sort of transmission."

"But through the plastic on the keypads? That would rule out electromagnetic connection, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, you're prob'ly right. I'm still just fishin', here. I was wondering, too, about the light-wave end of the spectrum, the visuals. The icons, or something on the screen that you'd see. An image basically travels direct into the brain through the optic nerve."



I immediately thought of the screensaver, the watchful eye. Extending Harry's logic, my image would be available directly to the computer's "brain." But this was another line of speculation which neither of us was able to follow much further.

Harrison took up his screwdriver again. After a few minutes, apparently re-inspired by his handiwork, he turned with his eyes lit up. "I've got it. Maybe this program's working on wave-resonance. It's got your brain-signature to work with, whether through keys or voice or visuals or whatever. It only needs that one impression, picked up and charted, to tap into the whole network."

"Network?"

"Yeah, the neural network. They call it a brain, sometimes."

"Um, okay. So, it uses that single slice as a sort of a hologram?"

"Yeah, exactly. Using the one point of contact, it generates an electroencephologram, let's call it, a complete image of your brain. Then the program reverses the direction of wave transmission, triggering certain images, thoughts, or even imaginary experiences in your brain."

Harry leaned back against the workbench with a weird, curling grin on his lips, dangling an idle screwdriver in his hand, satisfied at last.

Where had I heard that word before? "Electroencephologram: did you just make that up or is it a real word, I mean out there in the buzz-world?"

Harry laughed. "Hey, I like that, too. Buzz-world. Naw, it just seemed to fit the bill."

His hypothesis was a bit hard for me to grasp, but if he were right, it painted a pretty bleak picture. I'd be at the mercy of such a machine. And so would other people—if, perhaps, we fit a certain target profile . . .

“So . . . how do I erase this encephalo-whatever, its picture of me?”

“The principle of the hologram is well established, and I believe it applies to natural or human systems as well as to physical phenomena. As to whether that's actually what's going on here—hoo! We're still just pissing in the wind. But I'll try to give your unit a look on Monday, see what's what. If there is a source code, it's likely to be well-hidden.”

“Yeah.” I stood up despondently. What had I expected, a quick fix? Getting closer to the cause of my misery might be more unpleasant than I had thought: like diving into close combat with the stinking hag from Witch Bay.

Harrison grasped me by the shoulders. “Hey, I guess this is real—at least from your end of the connection—huh? You're still in the hot seat. Well, maybe you have to fight fire with fire. Think your way out. If the program is keying its responses to your brain waves, and processing the loops you generate, then maybe you can try to alter the pattern of your responses. Play by your rules.”

“Now you're sounding like the shrink.”

Harry pursed his lips, wiped his hands on a rag and tossed it down on the workbench. “Time for a break. You want a beer, food? I think the Eagles game is on. You wanna stay and watch it?”

“Sure, why not.”

“Carling or Schmidt’s?”

Harry cleared a space in front of the old TV set and turned on the game. No score as yet; so while I cooled out on the couch, mulling over the road ahead, Harry detoured to the kitchen for lunch fixings. He reappeared with a platter of ham sandwiches and a giant bag of potato chips saying, “How do you like my old clunker? I picked it up for nothing from the electronics shop, spent a half hour on it and it works like new.”

“Yeah, new in 1987.”

“So what? It’s not size that counts, but resolution. Here, dig in. I forgot the beer.”

“Incompetence in the workplace.”

“Hey, woe’s me. No tips on tap from your bad ass. I’s in the wrong preoccupation.”

During halftime the conversation turned to more mundane matters in my life: namely Sheila. I updated my friend on her latest backs-and-forths, predicting that this latest falling-apart would truly be the last.

With Harry having exhorted me to be more aggressive in my lifestyle, now the mixed results were in and he had to recant, at least partially. “Yeah, right, aliens. She gets those from the silly scandal sheets they read in that so-called beauty parlor, right? Look, Norton. Sleeping around is one thing, but it seems you just latched onto another selfish tramp. Runs in the family, I guess. Time to branch out, maybe?” He crunched down on a mouthful of chips, still content in the role of indiscriminate matchmaker.

“Hairy, listen. Maybe this hopping from bed to bed is not really my style.”

“Whaddya mean, ‘bed to bed’? You’re still in Moira’s bed, right?”

Right-O. Maybe it was time for a real change in my life: as Moira herself had been trying to tell me. As Sheila was forcing me to realize. As Evans was encouraging me to do through more rigorous self-examination. But How, Where, with Whom?

I changed the subject and asked Harry how he was feeling about working for Gerald.

“Oh, he’s okay to work for, but when it comes right down to it, he’s an amateur in this business. He oughta go back to running a car wash.”

“So you’re still in favor of the merger?”

“Well, in theory, yes. But I’m not sure about going back into business with this Hart character, either. Did you know that he used to bug some of the programs that were shared with his competitors? He apparently shrugged it off as a joke, when Gerald called him on it.”

“Yeah, I did hear that, as a matter of fact. Where’d you hear it?”

“Giselda. She knows a lot about these two guys, Gerald and Ken. She’s been through the wringer with Hart. Anyway, that’s one thing. Now, since we’re talking about the area of defense contracting, the stakes go way up. That’s a very large corporation we’re talking about. Siltech Genex likes to play with the big boys, as we know. We ought to be flattered they’re interested in lil ole us. First Ken, now Gerald, and you and me, bro. They’re making a play for everyone, now, large or small. Some of the little fish are our network partners, some are our competitors. It doesn’t matter. This

is gonna be one huge consortium of computer firms. And the implications are big, considering as how a shitload of their work is done for the Pentagon and for other Pentagon contractors. This consortium could theoretically have control of the industry and then be in a position to orchestrate sabotage, or blackmail, on a national or international scale, with military and geopolitical, as they say, repercussions. Planes could explode in midair, missiles could be launched, assassination orders given.”

“Assassination—”

“Sure. Wouldn’t have to be just big shots, either. Anybody who gets in their way. Like for instance, those resisting buyouts. Gerald Scanlon, say—before he changed his mind so suddenly.” He looked at me directly, eyes wide with portent.

“Yeah, I see what you mean.” I saw a long leather case in the back of my dream-car. A faceless flight attendant. Buttons to push . . .

Harry went on: “Is Kenneth Hart, then, behind this virus of yours? A guy has to wonder. Or, maybe this is an underground operation, aimed at the bigwigs of Siltech Genex, from a smaller player, or a competitor. Another thing to think about: Siltech Genex is heavy into VR and biotechnology, too. Some call it mind-control. Put that together with government subsidy and the implications are downright ominous. There are a lot of smart computer people and others who are trying to legislate—or take other measures—to derail this impending deal. There are organizations openly fighting it. These organizations have leaders. Examples could be made.”

I was awash in this sudden barrage of dangerous speculation. Harry had obviously been in on some office scuttlebutt to which I was not privy—or maybe it was

out there in the public forums, the business rags. Gerald must know all this, too. Were he and Harry playing Kenneth Hart's game now, by supporting the buyout? Was I just a pawn in their game? Then why was Harry telling me about it? My brain spun to a stop with the whistle for the second half kickoff, and I still had no secure answer.

Monday at the office, Harrison was tied up all day with Gerald. I began to get paranoid feelings that I'd made a mistake in confiding in him; that he was in league with Gerald in this mysterious underside of the business we all shared. If this were the case, though, why would he would given me such a grim, Big-Brother view of Siltech Genex? Unless it was to scare me into doing their will, carrying out their mission.

Tuesday he was free to spend a little time on my machine. Said he'd told Gerald I had a few glitches to iron out, he'd take care of it. Gerald gave the okay. I still didn't like being the outsider, but Harry was my best shot. And if there was something insidious going on in my workstation, he could hardly make it worse.

He did some eyeballing of the plug-in cards, the connections, the wiring. Nothing out of line. He ran the standard diagnostics of software and hardware hookups: again normal. Tested the VRUSIC files; scanned the keyboard interface for corruption; looked at code for the screensaver; surveyed the subsystem for any anomalous element. Nothing—though I was on pins and needles the whole hour. But what did I expect, a vampire-faced jack-in-the-box to come springing out in our faces?

“Well, chum, what can I say? If there is anything, here, it’s cleverer than I am. Or hiding in one of the other workstations. You want I should look under Gerald’s hood next?”

“Yeah right. How would I look then? He’d take away my headphones, put blinds on my monitor and lead-lined gloves on my hands. Then authorize a lobotomy. Thanks anyway, Hairy. Let’s just leave it for now. Unless you have any real inspirations in the middle of the night.”

“Sure, whatever you say. Sorry, pal. Stay with us, huh?” He walked away looking genuinely sad, concerned for my mental welfare.

I finished the day’s work depressed, and suffered a night alone and restless, unsatisfied with the course of events. My confidence in Harry was a good bet but hadn’t panned out—at least not with anything concrete. My sessions with Evans weren’t yielding much either. And as for Sheila . . . I had already written her off. Where could I turn next?

Giselda had retreated, ever since Thanksgiving, behind her closed feelings, and she kept those, with a practiced but not entirely successful skill, hidden below the meekly cheerful facade that had served her well ever since Ken left her. I was content to leave well enough alone, for now. I had enough on my plate, even without Sheila to deal with anymore.

I was left in the dark, in Moira’s bed, to fight back: alone, with nothing in my arsenal but the power of thought, as Harry had at one point suggested. The programming would resist it, I supposed. But I hadn’t been the victim of any unwanted experiences

lately, not even any particularly worrisome dreams. Maybe my concerted attempt at getting to the bottom of it was working already, generating antibodies. Maybe I could confound the parameters by thinking my way through, refusing to be a passive victim. But what to do, actually, when the next episode hit? I broke into a sweat just thinking about it. Could it be as simple as imagining my mode of escape? A simple key sequence, for instance? A voice command or mantra? A custom icon or particular size of open window? How to take control of the reins when the horses decide to run away under the whip?

To say No: it happens this way, my way.

But what was my way? To really shut the thing off, the escape sequence would have to be close enough to the program's endgame expectations to clear its check codes, while preventing the usual ratcheting effect that only pushed me further along the track to another House of Horrors, or to another room in the House of Horrors my life had become. The trick would be to tag on a logical ending that just diverged enough to spring me from this too-large box. It just might fly.

But again, how? What did my theory mean in real-life terms? Maybe I could attempt to overwrite my own internal, neuro-linguistic programming, and so alter the program outputs that depended on it. Such a procedure would get expensive, because I'd need expert help—lots of time with an NLP-enhanced version of Arthur Evans.

And yet, and yet . . .

What if this pressing desire of mine to get to the heart of the matter—to find the hidden code and alter it so that I could get back to normal—what if this ploy, too, was



only a suggestion inserted under my skin, courtesy of the program; another prod to keep those brainwaves coming?

An alternate strategy that occurred to me, as I thrashed around in Moira's bed that night, was to wage a psychic war of attrition. However the virus program picked up what I was thinking—by voice-print, finger-pressure, mind-waves, whatever—it responded accordingly. So if I could short circuit my own responses, the program might wither into disuse. I would simply not provoke it any more. This strategy would be the psychological equivalent of fasting to starve one's tapeworm. If I stopped trying so hard to figure the damned thing out, it might just get bored enough to leave me alone . . . maybe go bug somebody else instead.

With my tired brain eventually shutting down, I slipped in and out of forgettable dreams, hoping through the cracks of consciousness that my state of obsessive psychic hypochondria would settle down to the dull state of normalcy which already had come to surround me, since Moira's departure, for days, even weeks at a time. Who's to say this more pedestrian state of affairs wouldn't simply continue, leaving me once and for all at peace with my uninspired lot, such as it was?

The alarm finally rang me into the ring on an otherwise ordinary Wednesday, a little more than a week before Christmas. I decided I would visit Evans one last time, to wrap things up with him and hope for the best . . . a "happy new year."

The doctor sat looking at me patiently over the tops of his bifocals, waiting to take notes as I spoke. He was really a very nice man. I wanted to tell him about the peaceful

resolution I had come to. But how could I, without the context of the program I'd been fighting against? I knew that he would never understand. I took a large breath nevertheless and let out the words in a rush:

“No, nothing unusual has happened to me since we last talked. But I still want to understand what it was: in case it happens again, but also just for my own peace of mind. Yeah, maybe I was shaken up by Moira leaving—or even before that, by troubles we were having. Anyway after talking with you last week I didn't see any harm in checking out the hardware end of things, the virtual reality thing. So I went to see my colleague, Lance Harrison, about my experiences. I figured that since some of these events have seemed to occur on the screen of my computer, there might be a connection. He agreed with me, at least in principle, and felt that there could very well have been some sort of virus program at work inside the computer. And somehow it was able to infect me, so that I've been carrying—maybe I still carry—part of the program, or images which it generates or triggers, around with me.”

“Mr. Norton.” Evans calmly put down his pen and pad, and laid his bifocals beside them. His eyes swam in pools of tired lines. “Surely you're aware that you're confusing a computer virus program, am I correct?—a virtual virus, if you will—with an organic, physical organism. Surely, as a professional in your field, you know the difference.”

“Yes, but look at the effects. That's what it comes down to. All I'm looking at is what seems to have been happening. Computer viruses and human viruses are obviously two different animals in terms of origin and structure, I grant you. But in my case they

seem to be connected. Maybe there's a new strain of computer virus which has the ability to work in a human environment."

He still looked doubtful, but at the same time, appeared ready to hear more.

So I continued: "We've had some thoughts about the mechanism of infection. I have a headphone set that I can plug in while I'm working at the console, to listen to music."

"What kind of music?"

"Mostly classical, some jazz. It's on our virtual mainframe. Which means, not necessarily on my computer itself. We're hooked together, four of us, in a virtual machine way more powerful than each one. Actually way more even the sum of the four, because of synergistic effects. So, a system like the VRUSIC—a low-grade virtual reality setup geared to the music, and accessed by the enhanced headphones—will have files and components shared through the system. I just punch in what I want at my workstation. At least, I used to. I had a fairly unnerving experience with it, though, around the beginning of when all this stuff started happening, and have barely touched it since."

"What sort of experience?"

I told him about the *Bolero*: the bullfight, the roaring crowd, the roses, the blood in the dust.

"That's very good. It sounds like my Toshiba XRC. About what you'd expect, isn't it?"

The very memory shook me back to the reality—the more-than-virtual reality—of what had been happening to me these last two months. Could I really believe I was in the clear now?

“Mr. Norton?”

“I’m sorry. What was the question?”

“What were you thinking about, just then?”

“Oh, just remembering what it was like; what it’s like to go through what I have. Have you ever felt lost in your own city, in your own home?”

“Well, I have been lost in the city without a street map, once or twice.”

“But we both know that’s not what I’m talking about, right? You see, it’s not just the VR. Because even at the Spiral Links, the super duper setup they have downtown, it’s not really so convincing when you get right down to it. It’s fake, actually, and you know it. I was way worse off the next morning, in my own, I mean Moira’s apartment, and later that day walking the streets, looking for Sheila’s place. You know, the day I called you. You do remember, I hope.”

“Yes, certainly. Red marks under your arms. You said. Have you ever taken heroin, Mr. Norton? Amphetamines, LSD?” He’d put his glasses back on, the better to shield those careworn eyes, and now he took up his pad and pen again.

“No, no and no. It’s not about—”

“What is it about, Joe?”

I swallowed hard. This was the last time. Yes, I was going to go through with it, lay my story on the line, but then be done with it. If he couldn’t hear it, then whatever

happened to me would be on his head. Maybe someday down the road, I could sue.

Another deep breath, control.

“Harry and I were thinking the program might be transmitted through the soundwaves, through the VRUSIC headphones.”

“The program? I don’t exactly follow you.”

This wasn’t going to be easy, because it was going to have to get technical, from here on in. “It’s only a wild guess; but we were thinking maybe, since the soundwaves enter the brain in the form of electrical energy—they’re transformed and modulated in the inner ear, I understand—”

The doctor nodded condescendingly and waved at me to continue.

“Well, maybe there’s some kind of programming information encoded on the sound waves, so that when they get to my brain, they start activating all sorts of stuff. The experiences—”

“Let’s say, ‘so-called experiences.’”

Now I started to lose my temper. “For your notes, you can write that, or ‘alleged experiences,’ or ‘virtual,’ or ‘psychotic,’ or any damned thing you like. For me, they’re real.”

“I understand that,” the doctor said without batting an eye. “Please, go on.”

This guy had just enough technique to keep me talking. I remained sitting, but now I was stumped as to how to explain further.

He tried to help me out. “So, you’re saying that somehow, along with, hidden within, riding piggyback on the strings of Mozart or whatever, comes this secret transmission into the inner workings of your brain.”

“All right, Doc, I know it sounds crazy. I’m just casting about for answers. I want you to tell me what’s really going on, remember?”

He deftly sidestepped my bullish charge of responsibility. “I remember that was your request of me.”

“Okay. Okay.” Now I was afraid I’d already lost him—breathed too hard on whatever flicker of real belief he might have had. Still I forged ahead, frantic for the right words, the right approach. “There was another idea, too, that Harry and I thought of. Maybe, during that sound transmission, they can—”

“‘They’?, Mr. Norton? Who exactly do you mean?”

With that I lost it. “Whoever planted this fucking thing in my skull! Do you think I really believe there’s little aliens running around in the computer? Now I know how you guys do business: you keep people crazy, so they’ll keep coming back, and if you latch onto a sane one, you drive him crazy with your pompous badgering!”

Doctor Evans sat back sighing with a long, measured breath, taking off his glasses again, ever so calmly, and wiping them slowly. This fiddling with some object in a time of stress, I remembered from college psych, was called displacement activity. I clearly visualized myself getting up, slapping a fifty down on the desk for his trouble, and storming out.

But since I had nothing more than that to lose either way, I stayed. After the Witch Bay hag, and the bad doctors of the Hookup Room, this guy was a pansy, really. I might as well have it out with him.

Evans was still hearing, if not listening. He obviously knew something about how to respond—or not to react—to agitated people like me. Just let me keep talking, until I got all the craziness out.

I could play this game okay. I let our little outburst pass and continued as if we were too scientific gentlemen just sitting down to share the latest findings in our field. I expanded upon the hunch that maybe the program was able to read brainwaves through an electromagnetic analogue which might travel from brain to computer, during the coincidental sound transmission the other way. Or, perhaps more than just providing an open link, the music waves (actually only properly considered as “sound” in that small gap between earphone and eardrum), like alternating current, could carry information two ways. The program could then determine something about my mental makeup and, in turn, select information to pass back along the same channel, triggering my strange experiences.

Evans, put at ease by my rationalistic exposition, countered with his usual arguments, which discounted Harry’s expertise. “Of course your friend would favor a technical explanation: that’s his field. I don’t doubt that there are interesting areas of inquiry concerning the man-machine interface. But the literature is full of cases, all the way to the beginnings of psychiatry, decades before computers, in which disturbed subjects projected their feelings of persecution to machines. Who knows, the Luddites

may have had something to say, what do you think? Would we be better off still living in trees?”

Was he trying to bait me, now? I avoided the dialectic trap and got back to the subject at hand: the mechanism of infection.

I'd thought it all through, lying awake expanding on the ideas Harrison and I had generated. Yesterday's cursory diagnostic checks weren't necessarily the last word. It didn't have to be sound waves, I told Evans with a rising sense of self-confidence. It could be another, perhaps subliminal pathway for the two-way communication: say, through the keypads. It could operate either by tactile pressure or electromagnetic sensitivity, with the same kind of read-in/read-out dynamic going on as we had hypothesized for the audio channel. Or, it could take the visual route: say, by the use of symbolic icon-imagery, or letter or color patterns, or an even more subtle use of light vibration frequencies. In any of these or related ways the program could trigger and respond to particular brainwave patterns in the user.

My final hypothesis relied on communication via logical patterns rather than by sensory data. With my programmer's access to the virus shell via higher-level modeling of its inner matrix codes, I had performed a de facto hookup. Certain commands that could activate portions of my neurological response had ridden—I borrowed Evans's apt word “piggyback”—into my brain, embedded in the vocabulary and syntax of the standard program language. Then, each time I interfaced with the program (perhaps even indirectly, by logging onto the computer) a link would be established, a communication channel opened. Information could be transferred both ways, hidden behind the



superficial exchange of programming code. In such a way the program could monitor the 'progress' of my brain in obeying its commands. And it could proceed with the adjustments required for the next installment, the next cycle of events.

I proceeded to my conclusion, which I knew Doctor Evans damn well would not want to hear: "It seems that the virus program has the ability both to write into my mind-files and to read them out. And because the program subroutines are only temporarily resident in my brain, there's no way I can overwrite them . . . unless that's what Harrison meant, by saying I'll have to think my way out."

Evans was gazing distractedly out the window, apparently forgetting his professional responsibility to listen carefully and attentively. When I'd finished, and was waiting for a response, he said, "What about your boss, Mr. Norton? Have you told him yet what's going on?"

"No," I said simply. I knew that to say more would provoke the charge of paranoia.

"I think you should tell him. Maybe he knows something you don't about the nature of your equipment or the programming end of it. Computer science has no doubt advanced beyond my qualifications to comment much on what you've told me. Offhand, it sounds a trifle far-fetched."

"I know what he'll say. That everything's clean, hunky-dory. And then he'll want to know why I'm asking. And then when I tell him what's been happening to me, I'm out of a job." Harry, too, would be in hot water for lying about the glitches he needed to check.

“I wish that you’d at least mentioned a possible problem to him earlier, Mr. Norton. This has gone on too long, now, and psychological damage has been done. I don’t know the effect it’s had on your work, but I can’t imagine that it’s been helpful.”

“You’re right about that. I’m still hanging in there, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Yes, I mean I don’t get a daily report card from that outfit, you know. I get up every morning, put in my time there. I’m still doing the job, okay?”

Evans’s tone turned bluntly impatient. “All right. Now your theories of causation, elegant as they may be in the mind of your colleague Mr. Harrison, are not helpful, you must realize. With all of your looking outward for the cause of your bizarre experiences, you’re only making things worse: accelerating a spiral of illusion. All experience, don’t you see, is subjective, and we are ultimately in control.”

“Glad to hear it, Doc. If I’m already in this mess, then, I might as well go all the way in. Is that what you’re saying?”

He sighed once more. “I wish we could get back to this question of your relationship with Moira.”

“Moira? What’s the question? No, wait. I’ll tell you what the question is! Where the fuck is she?”

“Have you checked with her employer?”

“Of course,” I lied. “She’s skipped town.” The truth was, I didn’t want to talk to her, didn’t want her to know I cared. Didn’t, in fact, even want to contaminate myself with a telephone connection to her place of work.

“But surely there’s means of contact available to you. She’s still paying rent for the apartment you’re living in?”

“Yeah. Remotely. God knows why.”

“All right. I think the real question is, are you committed to making the relationship work in the long term.”

Now it was my turn for the big sigh. “Long-term. Yeah. That’s a good one, all right. You tell me. Do you have the crystal ball for my love life? You wanna look at my palms, or what?”

Evans coolly refused to be baited. He just delivered his lines: smoothly rehearsed, professionally detached. “No, I’m afraid you are the person in the best position to make the judgment, evaluating what is best for you.”

“Oh, that’s very good of you, Doctor. The ball’s in my court, is it? You know something? This is all sounding strangely familiar. I mean, I seem to hear a voice from another room. It goes something like this: ‘Subject is extremely persistent—even stubborn. Clings to delusionary fantasies, fails to consider illogic of claims. Seems determined, on the one hand, to pursue his chimerical and grandiose “mission” (though he doesn’t know exactly yet what it is); and on the other hand he is driven to escape this net of evil forces which he perceives is closing in on him—the paranoid’s net. Wants to please his “masters” by making the right selections on their machines; yet resents their arbitrary control over his life.’

“Sound familiar to you, too? I might as well say it, Doc. I think you might be one of Them.”

Maybe Evans had the right approach, in letting me blow off all that toxic steam. If you don't respond to a person who's a little whacked out, but just let them talk, sooner or later they can hear themselves as if through your ears—and get a clue how crazy they sound. The doctor had provoked me, whether intentionally or not, into confronting my fears again, which I was all too ready to paper over. But after duking it out with him like that, I just wanted to let things ride for a while. Hope to catch a break somewhere. For instance, if it was a bug, a rogue virus of some kind, Harry's snooping might have scared the thing off. In any case, I parted company that day on civil terms with Doctor Evans, leaving a token \$50 payment for services rendered, and taking away no firm plans for another appointment.

Another day, another night passed, uneventful, and I began to wonder what all my manic fussing had been about. Maybe it really had been all in my head.

There was still a lingering nit, however, that wouldn't stop hatching: a new bug in my bonnet ever since Saturday's visit with Harry. All this week in the office, I had been watching Gerald more and more. Trying to overhear his telephone conversations when the door was open. Gauging his face for clues to his knowledge of, or participation in what had been happening to me. Final result? I saw and heard nothing out of the ordinary. Par for the course.

But after my final visit to Evans, I wanted to put this last nagging suspicion to rest. I had to confront Gerald, to bring up the merger again—if only to express my point

of view; and maybe to catch him out, in the process. I stopped him just outside his office door after coffee break.

“So what is it, my boy?”

“I’m wondering, uh, what’s the latest on the buyout deal?”

His button eyes narrowed. “Why, are you getting cold feet now?”

“No, I’m just—well, I am concerned about getting over our heads. I mean, I keep thinking, we’ve been doing just fine the last couple of years. I know it’s a bit late to back out of something like this when it’s already in the works; and it’s not really my place to have input—”

I heard myself sniveling to him and hated it.

“Oh, but you do. You’re a valuable part of this firm. We want you to stay aboard.”

That was meant to sound good but I didn’t buy it. “Don’t you mean, that you want my input as long as I go along with it?”

Gerald glared at me, and I thought I might have talked myself out of a job right then and there. But then he backed off a step, running a hand through his thinning red hair. “You always have the choice to get out, if you prefer. Personally, I’m convinced that we’ll be better off in the long run. We’ll be in better standing for the big contracts that we’re losing now to the competition. You can’t stand still in this field, Norton, you know that.”

“Yeah. But this corporation—what about Hart? Are you going to be comfortable working for him?”

“Listen; what happened before is water under the bridge. We have to move on, take the bull by the horns.” Gerald uttered this last cliché flatly and without conviction.

“Hmm. I just thought that by now you might be having serious second thoughts. I remember what Connie said about you and Ken last year at the Christmas party—”

Water and oil, she’d said. It wasn’t hard to figure Gerald as the water in that mix. It was a wonder they’d lasted for five years together, Gerald and Ken. “The oil rises to the top,” she’d quipped, “and the water has nowhere to go.”

“Let’s leave my wife out of this. That’s my business. She made a few remarks when she’d been drinking. We’ve straightened that out between ourselves.” Now he put a fatherly arm on my shoulder. “I know it’s tough on you, Nort, with your own home situation. Moira was in favor of this merger, if I remember correctly. Is that why you’re holding out against it?”

“No, no, it’s not that at all. I just think we don’t need the extra work, the bigger contracts. You have the money you want, don’t you, to play golf or whatever? You’re putting some away, right?”

“I was until this renovation job, and the hardware upgrades.” Gerald frowned.

It was time to get it all out: “Once we’re under direction of a corporate headquarters, I bet there’ll be all kinds of rules about how we work here. Who knows what it involves when they call the shots? Mandatory overtime, dress codes, the software we use, psychological testing . . . and what if these big contracts that we take are used by our clients for purposes that we don’t agree with?”

“Now you’re really getting onto thin ice. Are you thinking of any area in particular? What’s clean, nowadays? I once thought like you. This hair-splitting morality is why I parted ways with Hart in the first place. Now look at us. This firm is stagnant, and I’m, I don’t know—”

The boss was faltering, but I let him find his own way through. Up until then we’d stood poised at the doorway to his office, out of earshot from the others but still accessible. Not he beckoned me inside and closed the door nearly shut behind me.

“All right,” he continued, still standing with me eye to eye. “You want the truth. They’re giving me no choice. I either take the offer or they squeeze me out: and our whole little merry crew goes down with me. Now do you see? There won’t be another office Christmas party: not next year or even next week.”

Something didn’t quite fit. “And Harrison? He’d go down too? They wouldn’t just pick him up and leave the rest of us?”

A gleam appeared in Gerald’s eye. “Harry? You want to know another little secret? Harry’s my ace in the hole. He’s the real reason why they’re interested in us at all. The rest of us, we’re just going along for the ride.”

“I don’t get it. Why don’t they just nab him, then, make him an offer?”

“They did. He held out for the rest of his ‘family,’ as he put it, to be part of the package.”

I went home that night feeling strangely disappointed. It would have been easier to see clear evidence that there was a plot against me. At least I’d know what I was

fighting against. Instead Myrtle purred happily, gliding me home to Moira's bed as if nothing had ever gone wrong . . . except Moira leaving.

Another possible attitude presented itself to me, as I puttered in the kitchen preparing my supper for the microwave. I could stop worrying about the higher-level machinations of the corporate world. A company buyout—so what? A job was a job. And I could forget about my troubled relationships; just let go what was past. Life could be simple, like this. Maybe this was all there was to it: life on earth.

In such a light wasn't it conceivable, as Doctor Evans suggested, that I'd simply overreacted to stress about my relationship with Moira? Moira hadn't been spirited away by aliens, and neither had I: she'd dumped me for another lover. And not without a guilty generosity: the rent notices for both November and December had arrived in the mail stamped "paid." She was somewhere having fun, and paying me off for it. What more did I deserve?

Glad to put the last of the "episodes" behind me, I still looked back into those strange memories with a kind of morbid curiosity. What had happened to me, really? Was it only a psychotic blip in an otherwise normal life, that a few sessions with a qualified therapist could clear up? Or had some more cybernetic mechanism actually been involved? Hairy and I took to discussing the latter angle over lunch nearly every day, in the relative confidentiality of Shorty's Cook Nook. Gerald and Giselda, I hoped, were still in the dark, and could continue eating their lunches together in the innocence of the office for the foreseeable future, as far as I was concerned, while Harry and I tried to



work this thing out. In the absence of fresh evidence, it became a more-or-less academic exercise—with Harry genuinely excited about the possibilities. If this whole idea of a dual-nature virus was, as yet, a fiction, then he could pursue development himself, on the ground floor. I would be the highly paid consultant, Harry joked. I took up his punch line and added a hefty bonus payable to me as original patent holder, with compounding residuals.

Our more serious thinking converged on the central concept of the computer-brain interface. Its exact format remained a mystery to us. Harry had the idea that if we went back to the Spiral Links, I could with a more critical eye compare those various experiences with my “freebies,” as he called the uninvited episodes.

“Hell,” he explained, “at eighteen bucks a shot, you’ve been saving yourself a neat little bundle. But was it worth it? I’d say it’s time to reinvest. Maybe we can offload this little viper while we’re at it.”

To Harry, I could see now, as to Evans and Sheila alike, it was all an amusing game. But what the hell: I could play too. We went on Sunday night, when the tickets were half-price, in Harry’s car.

In no mood for suspense, adventure, or ersatz sex, I chose the golf game: module number one, “The First Tee.” With Harry going for the Hog Heaven dirt bike races in the adjoining module two, I sat down in one of the dentist chairs, allowed myself to be strapped in and wired up as before . . . and as before, felt a crawling sensation at the back of my neck under the touch of the cool scrubbed hands of the attendant.

I don't know what I expected. Probably good old golf, golf as it always has been, golf forever. Just keep walking. After eighteen tries, you start again. In this computer model, the scenery and the caddy, if you liked, changed each round, and you never tired; you could just keep cycling through the seemingly infinite permutations.

Early into the second round of eighteen, it occurred to me that this was like life: where after the first eighteen rounds, you graduate from high school and enter the world, ready (or not) to take on a new set of challenges. Then could it be said that something shifts again at age thirty-six, fifty-four, seventy-two? Where did that put me at forty-eight? It seemed to me I was still on the same tired worn course as always, with my spikes just getting duller and my supply of battered balls dwindling.

Golf lends itself to such idle speculation; at least for duffers like me who are better off not concentrating too hard on their scores. In due course I found myself playing a rough lie at hole number twelve. Bushy grass that wouldn't yield easily to a slashing four iron . . . a blue sky that would never change in hue, nor dream of a cloud. It was enough to give a guy a Witch Bay flashback, I thought idly; and then when I finally putted in from seven feet, some four strokes and a couple of mulligans later, I knew I was in for it.

The ball plopped into the cup, but was missing when I stooped down to retrieve it.

What the fuck—I saw it go in.

I snaked my arm in up to the elbow before I got the cold sweat and pulled it out, empty-handed. That sounds easy enough but it's not the half of it.

My caddy on this round, a certain robotic, tweedy seedy reedy-voiced personality

named Edward Teck, was just remarking, “I wouldn’t try reaching any farther, Gordie,” when I felt or thought I felt this kind of sucking or sinking sensation and pulled back quick, my fingers throbbing. A brave man or a sucker, I shook it off, gritted my teeth, and sallied forth to try another hole.

At the next tee there was another ball waiting for me. A Spalding No. 4, same as I’d just lost. “A daft coincidence,” Edward observed in his laconic manner.

No more daft coincidences for this hacker, thank you just the same. Finally the shock of the previous hole hit home, and I had the presence of mind to press the Esc button, never mind the rest of the value for my cut-rate nine bucks.

On the face-screen came the following message:

SELECT ONE:

- Another round of golf
- Breakfast (oreos and coffee)
- Change seat to console deck

None of them was exactly what I had in mind; but Hairy seemed content enough, grimacing under his chosen hail of gravel and ear-shattering exhaust. So I thought to myself, “With my friend the Esc button, I can beat this thing—or at least run when I need to.”

Silly boy. I chose A. As long as we were being scientific about it, I wanted a repeatable experiment.

Another round, on the house.

Instantly I found myself (though I had no sensation of motion) in a different chair:

a molded plastic seat swiveling on a post, mounted at a broad console of controls with a bay-window looking out on a golf course. A plastic tray in front of me contained a half-empty cup of coffee and a couple of oreo cookies, with a bite gone from one. I tasted chocolate crumbs in my mouth.

So much for science, a part of my brain said.

Forget it, said another, more ancient part. This is home.

Still another part said, in a voice like Edward Teck's, "Ah, you again. I say you, and I say again, though it's a different you, and quite a new sort of again. Having fun? Oh, that's too bad. Well, the fun's just beginning. Here, let me show you something. You see this little round window here?"

There was a porthole of sorts, inset in the righthand panel of the bay window. Full of dancing rainbows, shards of color. "That's all very beautiful, but I pressed A, not B or C." The caddy was supposed to respond with help to voice commands and queries.

He or rather it, the voice of a nobody, no, worse than nobody, ignored me and said, "Just look into it closely; it won't do you any harm. That's right."

The colors resolved to a close-up of three golfers on a green, putting. One was—or rather it looked like Gerald. Was he playing at the Spiral Links now? Two faint lines, crossed in the middle, came into focus superimposed on the field of vision. The voice said, "Got an itch in your right index finger, perchance? That's all right, Nort old boy, it happens to everybody. Just hold this, here, that's right, just like that. Put your finger in the loop there, good, good. Do you still see what you like in the little window? All right, now pull your finger rather gently, a little curl . . ."

I jerked my hand away and the rifle misfired, clattering to the floor. The other “people” having breakfast stared at me, startled by the shot and waiting for my next crazy move. I pressed Esc again to get out and nothing happened. I worked at the chest straps, tried to rip off the wires.

There weren’t any.

It was just an open molded seat, mounted on a swivel post at a console. I didn’t wait around for the next surprise. I lunged up and ran for the exit door—

And found myself on Broad Street alone.

The big flashy sign advertised

THE SPIRAL LINKS

Eighteen VR Modules

Featuring RED LIGHTS

I was not going back in there to wait for Harry. Maybe he’d seen me leave and would be coming out after me. But now I was seized with a fearful distrust of him: Harry had got me into this mess, convinced me to come here in the first place, and then to come again. I paced back and forth on the sidewalk, started to walk away, then came back, then took another direction away. This, and my first visit to the Spiral Links, were the only episodes I’d had since before Thanksgiving. It was Harry who had wanted me so badly to check it out, and then to check it out again, a little deeper.

It didn’t quite take, the first time, did it? Yet the day after “Red Lights,” I’d tried to go see Sheila at that phony address, and gone way off the deep end instead. I never did

run a double-check on that Cherry Street apartment, since we stopped seeing each other after that.

I didn't know what to do next, but I needed time to think, to get away. I would go straight home, to Moira's apartment.

Risking a taxi, at this point, was out of the question. That Myrtle-green Hardacre cab, with its unsurprising present for me in the back seat, wasn't directly connected with my first visit to the Links; but close enough. I had a long walk home.

I wondered what I might find when I got to the apartment. Moira's mummy? My own fetid corpse? Maybe the little basement suite on Denman would have been a better choice. I'd experienced no weird events there, so far. But it was no longer an option, since I'd served notice and moved out.

I might have chosen (the popular therapist intones) to have walked free, open, simply self-aware through the streets of old Philadelphia on that wretched night. But feeling instead confused and victimized, I answered to a more pressing need: to go home. The real trouble was, I had nowhere to go that really fit the bill. What was home, anyway? Was it just that elusive place where a self follows its own orders, no one else's?

In such a state I started the search but got nowhere. In fact, I must have gotten so wrapped up in trying to figure out the concept, that I lost my way through the brown and brick neighborhoods and ended up way out by the old observatory. I stood then in the darkness looking up at the starry sky, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Whose fault, this time? Have they wiped me clean in that place, that nook in my brain I wanted to call Home?

“My” brain? What a joke.

I could guess and speculate all I wanted, postulate a direction towards any random corner of the vast city or, for that matter, the very universe which lay stretched out before me; but where would it get me?

Still I had no choice, did I, but to keep trying? To keep moving, hoping only that if I did find home this time, I'd recognize it.

I passed derelicts waving their hands over fires by the tracks. Someone shouted—was it to me? I kept my peace and walked by. They managed, somehow. Would I join them, tonight, later, when I'd given up walking nowhere?

What city was this, in actuality or possibility? It could have been anywhere, any time. Cars from the nineties, eighties, seventies, sixties, even fifties cruised past, sporadically: their occupants drinking pop or beer, smoking whatever they smoked. Were these walk-ons actors or aliens, ordinary Philadelphians, foreign agents, or what? Perhaps they were erstwhile Teckies, like the homeless and soulless robot I had become: creatures of a digitalizing mastermind.

I walked on, vaguely homing in, I thought, to the northwest quarter of the city, where Moira lived, once upon a time.

I realized I could start over, now, and live anywhere, with anyone I chose. Someone new.

A dark car paused as it passed. Three painted women inside, yes blond yes black and the fox-lipped redhead, and a stone-faced mulatto male driver wearing three long feathers sweeping back from a big felt hat. The pert rosy whore in the front seat, red of

hair and soft of manner, beckoned to me, “Come over here, you want—”

She possessed a kind of . . . virtual attraction. But I shook my head, and they roared off laughing.

Was there really any choice left for me, after all? In a pinch, there could be Giselda. Otherwise, all virgins and whores: or so I thought, in that strange moment of charmed revulsion. Moira would say I was unfair. Sheila would quote me a report of Christ’s mother alive somewhere, dressing hair. Giselda would merely smile sadly, and say let’s go somewhere for a little something.

Harry would say: line up your priorities, get your act straight. You pays yer money and you takes yer choice.

Good old Hairy. Where would I be without him?

Relationship or career problems over lunch, bigtime football game or a couple of rounds at the friendly local VR parlor . . . did I tell you what I didn’t find in your computer, chum?

Fine so far, I could call them all my choices, and always there’d be a new day to come, another throw of the goddamned dice: but then comes the unintended slip-up, the careless anger, the better offer out of the blue, the drunken maniac in the wrong lane. Snake eyes. The paradise vacation gets nixed by the boss—or the weather does it, or the terrorist of the week, or the error on the travel agent’s computer. Snake eyes again, and come again.

So why bother?

My own fucking computer.



Mine? I only work there.

I stopped in my tracks, under the swirling dark. Holiday lights of the neighborhoods, like rainbow crystal candy, had beaded my way along this chill windy walk, did I say home? Is now the time to begin? Is this random sidewalk section between two dead-grassed cracks, the place where I start making decent choices, better choices?

Such as, where's the right direction to continue? For all I really know, I could be veering farther and farther away from the direction of Moira's, wasting my energy. It must be late. Only eight forty-five? My watch has stopped now, too.

Is stopping a valid choice? It's impossible to know an answer without trying it first. So, simply by stopping. Only by not choosing anything more, by not choosing any direction at all.

Another car pulls up behind me. "Nort, buddy, what the fuck are you doing way the hell out here, standing on the sidewalk? Waiting for a lift from a UFO?"

Daft if it isn't Harrison. At this point I won't argue.

"Hey, Hairy. What do ya know?"

"Jesus, Nort, get in. Are you all right? I been looking all over. Something told me you'd be walking. Not a good idea, in this town at night."

We talked about what had happened to me at the Spiral Links, and after. Somehow I'd ended up circling back by the way I'd started out, near the observatory. Some of the derelicts I'd passed had helped point Harry in the right direction.

Harrison said I'd acted like a child too young for the roller coaster, or the puppet show. "It's just make-believe, right? You just have to ride with it," he told me. "It'll get you back home in the end."

"Yeah, well I didn't exactly enjoy the feeling of the home it got me to."

"Ah, you just have to be patient. You can't just freak out like that."

I could understand how I must have sounded to him. How could I make someone else understand what it was like for me?

"I could see maybe getting shook a little," Harry went on, "with a rough-rider kind of module like that hellacious dirt track I was on. But a tame game like golf? I don't get it."

"I'm telling you, I thought I was in it again, special effects by my own pet VR bug. And I still think maybe I was."

Harry set his jaw and shook his head slowly.

I started to lose my temper. "I thought you were interested in helping me out. But when it comes to the crunch, you just discount what I say happened."

Harry's eyes held on the road though he drove slowly. In a steady voice he answered me, "No, Norton, I'm not discounting what you told me. I'm just saying I think you overreacted. You expect the unexpected, sometimes, with these programs. Otherwise it's too boring."

"All right. So you wanted me to compare notes. My notes say I slipped into it again, during and after."

"For how long after?"

“I don’t know. Until you picked me up.”

“So you’re saying that’s how you got lost. But then what? You seem okay now. I mean, you’re with us, you’re all here, right?” He looked at me directly, bodily now, and I couldn’t tell if he was being serious or sarcastic.

“Uh, yeah, I guess I am. I mean, I seem to be.” I had to laugh a little at myself, patting my chest to make sure I was real. “Okay, I’ll take your word for it.”

Harry misread me. He struck his forehead with the flat of his hand. “Sheesh, Norton! It’s not that difficult, is it? I mean where else would you be right now?”

“You’re like the others,” I said more firmly. “You just don’t get it, do you?”

Taken aback, Harry regarded me with fresh apprehension. “All right,” he said softly. “I hear you, buddy. I guess I don’t really get it.”

I appreciated this response and wanted to reach out, to meet him halfway. “Can we get back to what happened at the Links tonight, on the technical end, a bit? I was wondering about the event tables and user input. Are these setups preprogrammed to cycle through changes independently, or are they totally user-dependent?”

“Some of both. It’s a dynamic interface. Why?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about that Escape key malfunction. And the voice that came on after. The gun, for Christ’s sake. These wrinkles in the program seem designed for me. Or, no—it’s more than that. As if they were, somehow, designed by me.”

Harry gave me a quick concerned glance and then kept his eyes on the road.

“Well, I really don’t know how that could be, Nort. It’s a kind of, I don’t know, illogical possibility.”

“Which is not to say a logical impossibility.”

“Right. A little more room . . . Ah, there’s probably bugs in some of the Links programs, still. That golf game might still be in beta-testing.”

His answer didn’t ring true. He still hadn’t really heard me; couldn’t recognize what I had actually experienced. Classic denial, the therapist mutters. The political animal calls it stonewalling.

“Yeah, maybe it’s all nothing but a coincidence, or I simply imagined it all.”

Harrison didn’t respond.

Then I told him about seeing Gerald on the course.

He looked at his watch, ran a stop sign at cruising speed (whether absent-mindedly or out of some perverse pleasure, I couldn’t tell) and said, “Yeah, he might have been there. He plays the real thing, and I been telling him about that place. Maybe he gave in and decided to try it.”

“Maybe. But he wasn’t in the chair beside me. It was empty.”

We drove in silence for a while.

I had to pursue what I still couldn’t understand; and to probe for the true friend in the friend beside me. “Harry, I really think what happened to me tonight was no ordinary VR experience. Especially with that rifle appearing again.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean; and I been thinking about it, okay? But I don’t have anything more than you to go on.” He looked at me with all sincerity in his eyes—cruising through another intersection with a four-way stop. “This is one goddamned sophisticated little nightmare-generator. Great potential for the niche market,

I'd say. Give it a snappy name like 'Vendetta.'"

Harry dropped me off at Moira's and I went up to a nice tumbler of straight scotch and a warm bed. The bedside clock read three a.m.

Four hours later, waking up in a peaty fog to the shrill alarm, I was tempted to call in sick but then thought the routine of work might do me good. In the shower I had the bright idea that I'd ask Gerald, in an offhand way, if he'd been at the Links the previous night.

I must have rehearsed a hundred times by the time I reached the office, so eager was I for his answer—the key to the latest variation of the ongoing puzzle. When I finally put the question to him, his brow wrinkled in mild perplexity. "Oh, you mean that fake golf place Harrison keeps talking about?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Harry and I were there and I saw someone who could have passed for your double."

"Really? What was his handicap? No, just kidding—I never touch the stuff. I wait till the grass starts coming up green again. That's the great thing about real golf, you know. There's a certain natural reliability, from year to year. With a consistent groundskeeping crew, you can count on finding the course reasonably the same every time you come back to it. At least, let's say, the cup; the same diameter and depth whether on the twelfth or the eighteenth green."

Funny he should have mentioned the twelfth . . .

"So how was it?" As if he were asking his kid about school today.

“Interesting.” I wanted to cut my story short.

Gerald’s phone rang. “Excuse me.” He turned to go into his office. “Maybe another time.”

On the way back to my workstation, Giselda caught my attention: “Oh, Nort . . .”

I went to her desk, where she stood with her purse on the chair, slowly taking off her coat.

“Did I hear you saying something about the Links? The Spiral Links?”

“Yes, why?” I sat tentatively on a corner of the desk.

She was nearly blushing. “Oh, I uh, I’ve just been hearing about it from Pamela. She went on the weekend with her boyfriend and thought it was the greatest. Very exotic, it sounds like. So what did you think of it?” She coyly glanced at me as she crossed the main room to hang up her coat.

“Not too bad,” I lied. “I played golf. Pretty realistic, actually. In fact, you’d swear you were right there. But to be honest, Giselda, I prefer my cozy couch in front of the BigScreen, knowing where I am and where the show stops.” I realized with a chill that the example I chose was no guaranteed picnic, either.

Giselda waltzed back to her desk and sat on the other front corner, exposing a shapely pair of stockinged legs. I pictured her for an instant there on that couch beside me, instead of Sheila—instead of Moira. She fit the picture quite nicely. And I imagined from her soft, intent gaze on me as I spoke, that she might have enjoyed being part of such a fantasy. “I can see what you mean,” she said finally. I’m kind of like that, too, the homey sort. But then something new like this comes along and it sounds interesting

enough to try. I wouldn't mind, just once . . ."

"Who knows, maybe I'll feel like going again sometime soon," I found myself saying to her. "If so, should I give you a call?"

"Oh sure!" Then her eyes dropped. "If you really wanted to."

Now I felt sorry for her—possibly as she intended. "How about Friday night?" So casual, so normal. This is how it happens, I thought. Like pressing a button.

Her face brightened. We were two inept teens starting all over again, in this emotional adventure called life.

I couldn't bail out on her again. "Well, time to get to it, I guess." I was blushing now, a grown man, and I started to walk away with my mind in a whirl about exposing myself to the Links again—and, possibly even more foolish in the long run, to the inevitability of becoming involved with yet another woman. This was perhaps a trifle too soon after the last two fiascoes, no? I stopped and turned back, as if forgetting something, but then stopped again halfway between Giselda's desk and mine. She was in her chair now, and looked over her shoulder expectantly. I knew I was hesitating too long, losing my chance to reverse this dangerous new course.

"I don't like that eye," Giselda remarked as the screensaver sensed her presence and drew itself lazily open. "I get the feeling sometimes that it's listening to us; maybe even recording."

"Yeah," I chuckled nervously. "I know what you mean."

"Did you know that it was one of Ken's creations? I think it's creepy, almost like he's inside there thinking."

“Eyes don’t think,” I stated with false assurance.

“No, but what’s behind it.”

“Computers don’t think, either.” I wanted to break from this conversation, but when I looked at the sleeping eye on my own screen across the room, I didn’t feel enticed to go there.

Giselda said, “It’s funny, you know.”

“What’s funny?” I was icy cold.

“That Gerald’s rigged up his workstation to get rid of that stupid eye.”

Gerald popped out of his office just then carrying a handful of papers; I told Giselda I’d see her later and went to my own fate, target of another dedicated eye.

No harm done yet, I consoled myself in the aftermath of this brush with Giselda. Just take it slow—real slow. I called up the Congreve Aviation file but stared blankly at it, still thinking of her. Now I had an ugly thought. Why was she asking me, in her shy and roundabout yet effectively brazen way, to go back to the Spiral Links? Was she in on this whole thing too? Christ, there was no end.

And now this business about Kenneth Hart’s virtual eyes got me speculating further. Was there a connection to what had been happening to me? Hart was pissed off at Gerald from way back; that was a given. And now, what was he after? To gain back control of his old company—a simple power play?

Or was he trying to fuck with the man’s head?

Why, indeed, had Gerald disabled the eye on his own screen?



The rest of us were still running this default screensaver; it wasn't under workstation control. Yet Gerald had gone to the trouble of configuring a bypass for his own monitor. Protection enough for him, perhaps, but what about me? Had I caught the bug intended for him?

Then it hit me. Kenneth Hart was behind more than the screensaver eye; he was also responsible for that VRUSIC selection including *Bolero*. Gerald had suggested that I give it a try, even before he'd had a chance to experience it for himself. Was I the canary in the cyber-mine?

There were too many unknowns. Conceivably the others, Giselda and Harry, even Gerald, were going through the same hell as I was, but playing mum, waging their own fantastic battles on private landscapes of torture and despair . . .

No, there was really no evidence that I had any company. Until there was, I had to assume I was a singular case here. It was up to me to beat the demon.

This fight by now presented a familiar trend: each round, I dived deeper, searching; but the deeper I went, the dimmer the light became.

I keep trying, I reflected, to get back to where I started, before the whole nightmare began. It seems as if I still have choices to make—like just now with Giselda. But each time I think I might be getting closer, I find myself farther away, in a direction I never even heard of before.

By mid-morning, despite swimming across such a current of anxious thought, I felt halfway sane again, and even broke for an innocuous coffee break chat with the gang about the latest city political scandal to hit the news. But there was more work to do

yet, in the fields where I labored.

Back at my module, looking at the blinking date entry, I realized why I wasn't getting anywhere in my quest for definitive answers. It was simply a matter of perspective. I had been conceiving of my dilemma, my choices of streets or menu icons or imaginary star travel itineraries, as paths on a three-dimensional grid. I was acting like a chess piece simply seeking the right combination of moves, the right vectors, given the constraints of my current position. Like the kid's game of looking for something in a room, and being guided by the feedback of "warm . . .hot" or "cool . . .freezing," I thought I could zero in on a static target. Norton the mercenary, a heat-seeking-missile of a man—a regular Congreve Airstar in human form.

What I had neglected to take into account was that my starting point also had a fourth-dimensional coordinate: a place in time. Airstars, after all, went after moving targets. That's what made their own technology so complex.

As far as I could reckon, my launch-coordinates could be placed at October something, 2009. But now I was caught in that originally impelled movement, and seemed doomed forever to be travelling outward on a time vector from that starting point; so that even if I thought I was "warm" in my approach to the target's, my home's vicinity—target or home as yet undefined except perhaps under the quaint name of "normalcy"—even if I were hovering directly over it in three-dimensional space, I would never be able to close that fatal gap which separated me from it, the gap called "time." I could circle back to it forever and ever, but the result would at best be a spiral, a progressive looping further and further on.

Harrison brought me out of my reverie with a tap on the shoulder. The screen still blinked the date, nothing else. “Meditating, guy, or what? Communing with your inner self? Come on for lunch, hey?”

I turned in my swivel chair. “Lunch, already?” I’d spent the whole time since coffee break staring at the date on the screen. 14-12-09. On-off-on-off. “Sure, let’s get outa here.”

On our way down Haliburton Avenue, I sketched for him my latest revelations about the spiraling nature of time.

“Hey, I like that,” he said. “It makes me wonder where you might end up on your next tour of the Spiral Links.”

When I told Harry about my concerns regarding Giselda and the Links, he scoffed at first, but then suggested the alternative of a quiet dinner together. Maybe he was right: at least my fears about the Links wouldn’t amplify my misgivings about getting involved with her.

A cold, exhilarating wind had come up, sending our hair into mad ruffles and causing us to zip up our jackets. Harry turned to me and said, “Hey, I could use one of those dark beers they serve over there, on a day like this.” He pointed across the street to Riley’s Rathskeller.

“Sure, whatever.” I was more concerned with getting his opinion of my latest diagnosis, than with the color of the beer.

Harry darted across the street through traffic and I followed. We got a booth in a

private corner. Riley's was a cozy cellar bar serving excellent dark beer and hot sandwiches. Moira and I used to come here, I told Harry, when we first started going out.

Thinking of Moira made me pensive, and Harry brought me out of it. "It's a new day," he quipped. "Every day's a new day."

"Yeah, I guess so. Look, Harry . . ." but then the waitress came. I knew this wasn't going to be easy, but I still had to trust him.

I wanted to get deeper into the game theory, which Evans had brought up and Harry himself had alluded to in the car driving me home from the Links. After we ordered our lunches, I asked Harry to elaborate on his understanding of the game model, but all he said was, "If it's a game, it's rigged."

I had to respect that statement, coming from a sports fan like Harry. But it didn't mean I was about to quit; I just had to fight back harder. The question was, how? My recent strategy of passive resistance had backfired, there on the twelfth green at the Links, when, in all innocence, I nearly got sucked underground. So now, I didn't know what I could do next.

"That's the frustration of the spiral," I said to Harry. "Ah, the beer. Thank you, Miss. The trouble is, just when you think you've got the destination in your sights—a clear view of the way back—there's this deadly distance, or who knows, maybe some elastic webbing of time, filling the gap again. The thing is, I don't know how to bridge it, how to get across. Maybe if we could penetrate the program itself, get into the brains of the thing, we can change a switch, a simple setting, to close that gap. So that when I wanted out, I could just punch out."

“Interesting theory,” my friend said, popping a roll into his mouth. “But what about this mission of yours? Maybe punching out isn’t the right solution. Maybe it’s punching in. Deciding to go for it.”

“But go for what? What’s the target supposed to be?”

“If this thing has any intelligence at all, it wouldn’t be steering you toward the ‘Normal’ template.”

“Very funny. So what am I supposed to do instead? Take pervert lessons from you?”

“Hey, low blow, my onetime friend. I’d say fuck the normal, and see what happens next.”

“I’ve done that already, thanks to you. Look where it’s gotten me: as single as you, without the career upside. Maybe I should have stuck with what I had.”

“Anyway,” Harry said to the second roll going into his mouth, “I kind of doubt that the program switches, if it is a program, would be that simple to change. We haven’t even found the little bugger yet.” When he’d swallowed the last of the roll, he reached for another. “Besides, that would be cheating.” He smiled at me with dough in his teeth.

For the slightest moment I hated him: he was on their side.

“Who’s cheating,” I growled, “when the game itself is rigged?”

“I was only kidding.”

## Chapter 9

### ELEUSIA

I felt the close presence of her ample flesh exuding from the brown silk floral smock she wore. I sensed her tangible hips swelling underneath; my midsection contracted under the former pressure of her locking legs. Attached to her feet were an absurd pair of olive-drab, mid-heeled pumps. And the navy beret she wore on her head clashed hideously with the brown. Had the Graphic Artist in her become hopelessly obstinate?

It was Moira's voice, all right; but why had she called me 'Gordie'? Was it just a little dig?

She stood in the bedroom doorway where, not two weeks before, I'd seen her sister slumped in tears. Here was the creature in full mask. Underneath that once-familiar face was Sheila's—and under that, Giselda's. I didn't care to think about what might show up deeper still, though I imagined it could be Moira again, transmogrified.

Moira was staring back at me. "God, Norton, you look awful."

I looked down at myself: half-open pajama top, rumpled covers pulled up to my lap. I ran a hand over my sleep-tousled hair, my sandpaper face.

Hey, maybe so, but what can a working stiff like me expect to look like, first thing in the morning? Forget about the color of the workshirt collar which I would put on in a minute. Just call me Joe.

What I actually said to my ex-bedmate was: “Thanks a lot. You’re pretty smashing, yourself. Been having a good time?”

Her stare turned into a brief but hot, fuming glare.

I thought in this first awkward moment that she might be back to stay. And I didn’t know quite how I felt about it. If this was the former dream continued, it was arriving a month and a half too late . . .after the meat had sat on the table and spoiled.

Moira managed to contain her own emotions and stated plainly, “I wanted to get some things.” She marched into the room, directly to the closet against the far wall, and began taking out dresses, leaving the hangers captured in the neck-holes. She laid them on the floor loosely folded and piled.

“What’s the problem,” I couldn’t help asking. “Doesn’t he buy you enough pretty things?”

She refused to play my game. So I gave her an easier question to answer: more factual, neutral.

“Listen, Moira, I’ve been curious about something. Did you pay the rent this month?”

She stopped and looked at me again. “What do you think?”

“I’m asking. Somebody paid it.”

Moira tried to swing the accordion-style closet door shut, but it stuck. “It wasn’t me. Why don’t you ask my wealthy sister?” She shrugged in dismissal of me or the door and turned to the task of taking things out of the bottom drawer of her dresser.

“But Sheila just started paying rent on her own place.”

“You have you own place too, don’t you?”

I let that remark sink in for a moment. “Are you saying you don’t want me to stay here anymore?”

“I don’t even care. Didn’t you know this building was condemned?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re telling me it’s being condemned? I never saw any notice about that.”

“Call it a rumor, if you like. A feeling. Or maybe I dreamed it.”

I didn’t know what to make of her information, offered as it was with such snide obscurity. Getting the facts out of her was going to be a losing battle. Maybe those two had patched it up between them—blood thicker than water kind of thing. Now, like rats jumping a doomed ship, they were leaving me to sink out of sight. Faithful captain to the last, I couldn’t help fishing for more answers:

“While we’re on the subject, your mail seems to have stopped coming to our box at the post office.”

She kept pulling out clothes from the drawers. “Yeah, I guess it would. It’s being forwarded.”

“Are you coming back any time in the foreseeable future?”

“Does it look like it?”



“Well what about your furniture?” That meant everything but my clothes and books, which lived in makeshift brick-and-board shelves along the bedroom wall.

“I’m working on it, Norton. In the meantime, let me give you a bit of advice, huh?”

“What’s that.” I was ready for another of her patented left jabs to the nose. But she crossed me up with a mild backhand to the belly:

“Don’t worry about me.”

Moira returned to the closet, hauled down a large suitcase from the upper shelf, and hastily piled her things in it.

I took her remarks to mean the circular bed could disappear from under me at any time of the day or night; the microwave might vanish with my supper half-thawed. For some reason the prospect of losing the bed affected me more than losing its rightful owner. Yet how to separate a bed from its owner, in the childish heart of a man? In truth I found myself still hanging on to a dim feeling for her, like a soft decaying fish inside, and felt obliged to give it voice, before it expired utterly:

“Jesus. Just like that, huh? We hardly even talked about it. Don’t you feel like coming to some kind of understanding?”

“I have a perfect understanding already. You’ve been shacking up with my sister, in my bed, and I’ve made other arrangements with my life that suit me just fine. What more is there to say? We talked for four years.”

Done with the packing job she had come to do, she stood facing me, her feet planted wide apart and steady like a well-trained guard. All she lacked was the rifle.

She was right; there was nothing more to say. She cast her eyes down in one final lapse of her defiance and turned to go, suitcase in hand. “I wish I could say it’s been real, Norton. Sweet dreams.”

I couldn’t let her go that easily. “Wait a minute.” I was sitting up straight in her bed, still half-clothed in my pajamas. I was as I was, who and where I was; for better, as they say, or worse.

She stood looking at me with the utmost scorn, her lip practically curled in contempt. Then I noticed it was quivering ever so slightly. I guess it was that reaction I’d been after, all along. To see that maybe she did care for me, somewhere deep inside.

“I just need to know one thing,” I said to her, “for my own peace of mind. Is it only because of this stuff that’s been happening to me? I mean, the weird experiences—the dreams?”

“Hey, you think that computer of yours is bugged, to drive you nuts? Well, I wonder who did it, who’s too soft to fire you outright? Gerald’s trying to drive you away, don’t you get it?”

I stood stupefied, unable to answer. Who’d she been talking to, besides Sheila?

Before I could gather my senses to grill her further, she whirled and walked out.

At lunchtime I went for a long sunny walk with Harrison to Bob’s Diner—chromed in the style of the fifties, serving burgers and fries at nineties prices. I guess after Riley’s Rathskeller, we’d got the idea that the lunch world was larger than Shorty’s. As if a burger in one greasy bun is really any different from another. On the way, we

enjoyed the unseasonably warm weather, carrying our jackets in hand. Everyone on the street, it seemed, was in a cheerful mood. Even the buildings looked gaily colored: a trick of the sunlight in a neighborhood I knew to be drab, gray and brown.

Was Moira's bombshell about Gerald just such a faery fireworks display, a trompe d'oreille? I wanted Harry to give me the real goods.

"Did Moira talk to you recently?"

"What do you mean?"

"Anytime since she moved out?"

"Course not, why?"

"Remember that dream I told you about, her coming back?"

"Uh, yeah I guess so—and there was something about a creature movie, right?"

"You got it. Well, the dream came true."

"You mean, the creature—don't tell me—Moira came back?"

"Sad but true. Just to pick up some clothes. She says the apartment building's been condemned. According to her, Sheila's been paying my rent. And, get this: Gerald wants to drive me out, she says; he bugged my computer to do it. That's where all this stuff is coming from."

"Oh really. Mmm. Interesting imagination, that broad. So she's moved out for good? And you two are finished, officially? Maybe the sister thing works better now, n'est-ce pas?"

"Harry, look. That's over and done with too. And you know what? I'm not going to lose sleep over either of them. Yeah, it hurts when somebody you thought you

loved once tells you you're full of shit; but on the other hand, maybe it's just a matter of admitting my mistakes and moving on. What I'm more concerned about is this idea of hers that Gerald's behind all this weirdo stuff that's been going on."

"I wouldn't bet my bottom dollar on it."

"So she didn't talk to you?"

He stopped on the sidewalk and barked at me: "I told you, no! What do you think, I'm gonna tell the broad that kinda thing is happening, but not tell you? Assuming it's a logical idea in the first place, which it ain't. Boy, sometimes I have to wonder what really is your problem."

I was humbled by this outburst and apologized. I told Harry I was grasping at straws at this point, ready to look for answers anywhere. The question remained: how would Moira get such an idea?

"I dunno. You say her sister's paying the rent? Maybe they're in cahoots. Blood's thicker—"

"Than water, yeah I know."

"Okay. And you told Sheila everything that's been happening to you, right—including this speculation about where Gerald might fit in?"

"I see what you're saying. Moira got it from Sheila and just took it one step further—back to the way she thinks about our outfit anyway."

"Which is?"

"That I'm doomed."

Harrison shook his head sadly, like a cow on a rising meadow path, as we approached the final intersection before Bob's Diner. The presence of an actual noonday crowd milling about us failed to interrupt his ruminations on the subject of my troubled recent history.

"I've been thinking a lot about your little problem," he said as we crossed the street. "In the middle of the night I got another idea about how this virus thing might work."

I wasn't expecting much, by now. All our clever theories had got me nowhere. Yet if there was any possibility that my computer was really involved, then Harry was still my man. "Shoot," I said.

Before he could answer, we were jostled by the mob coming and going through the door to Bob's Diner. Was it the holiday spirit, the phase of the moon, or just one of those bustling kind of days? Beefy truck drivers, dusty construction workers, clerks and shopgirls filled the place; a din of competing voices, clattering dishes, sizzling grease. Bob's was Shorty's with a longer, narrower wheelbase, a decade more retro with its chrome. We saw two policemen get up to leave their booth near the back, and slid quickly into their places. Despite the noon rush, one charming redheaded waitress was on the ball and took our orders promptly.

"Wow, talk about a dish—" Harry smacked his lips as she walked away.

I was anxious to hear Harry's latest thinking on "the virus thing" and prodded him to resume the thread of our conversation.

“Okay,” he obliged. Now first of all, I can’t figure out why it’s happening to you in particular. Though the fact that you’re working at Scanlon and Hart’s makes me suspicious.”

“Why?”

“The nature of our work, the contracts we handle, the clients we serve. There’s some high-security stuff there. But the odd thing is this.” Harry had picked up his sturdy bright butter knife and was waving it at me for emphasis. “You’re basically a nobody computer programmer—nothing personal, but I’m talking about the larger scheme of things, where we get into kinky stuff like international espionage. It’s not like you have all the nation’s secrets in your brain, or even in your workstation’s memory. You’re just another cog in the big wheels of commerce, right? Ready to do your part in the crunching of data for the big banks and weapons manufacturers.”

His analysis was all too apt. “All right. So what’s your point?”

“Hey,” he said, putting the knife act to rest. “It’s not about Joe Norton, okay? All our asses are a little dirty from the pigpen we play in but they’re covered, y’know what I’m sayin? So the big boys play rough. For us peons, it’s no big deal, we just punch in and do the job.”

“I still don’t see what you’re getting at.”

“Okay. What I think happened was this. You weren’t necessarily a target, to begin with. But you got to the point where you could enter into the intelligence matrix of the machine itself, by communicating in a code that it could understand, the programming language. You’d be patched in either by keying off the routine entries you

make for one of our standard programs, or through one of the physical contacts we talked about before—the headphones, say. There must be a sophisticated neurolinguistic decoder in there interpreting what you send it, and then a command nexus responding with communications back to you through the same sensory link; or through the analogue of the programming interface, when you're working at that level.”

“Yeah, yeah. We've covered this ground before. Where has it got us?”

“Listen. Think about the net result. In the process of manipulating the machine's logical hierarchies, you were absorbing coded information into your brain. At some subliminal level a message was transmitted to you, encrypted within that information. And it was more than a message: it was a whole set of orientations, a pre-selection menu, if you will, for choices you'd be likely to face, not just at the computer but in your personal life. It seems like there's a built-in delay parameter, causing these after-effects that are so hard to trace to your computer. And your psychological profile would be factored in so that you'd be guided along prescribed pathways. Yet the design of the program is sophisticated enough that you still have the illusion of choice. Minor choices are still allowed. Because of the built-in feedback loops in the program, adjustments are made automatically to bring minor perturbations of the trend of your actions within line of the major objective.”

This last line of thinking was also familiar to me, by now: Harry simply confirmed my own hypothesis about the illusion of choice when under the influence of this program. But suddenly I could see what this logic implied.

“Wait a minute. You’re saying, in effect, that I’ve been brainwashed—at a pretty basic level, with neurological code—to carry out a specific objective of the program.”

“That’s right. Apparently the program language, starting at the level of machine code, is fed back to you in terms that fit within your own psychic structure. The program uses your own thought and behavior patterns to translate and feed back to you its instructions, its objective.”

“Which is what, though?” And as I said this I knew that I once had it in my grasp, in black and white—and left it flapping in the breeze like an insignificant paper flag, fake currency. “Hold it, here she comes with our lunch.” Walking behind the waitress were two slightly familiar ladies who took seats in the booth in front of ours. On closer inspection, I recognized them from a previous occasion lunching at Shorty’s. I recalled a careless remark by Harry about sex, which these women had overheard from the neighboring booth. I blushed as one of the women looked at me with a sparkle of recognition in return. This was all very warming, as was our newly arrived plate of food, but I wasn’t really, when it came down to it, interested in more prospecting. The upcoming date with Giselda was trouble enough. Meanwhile I wanted to get back onto Harry’s train of thought, to ride it home. In returning my attention to him, I leaned a little closer, as if to suggest he lower his voice.

Harry went right on talking in cocktail party volume, as oblivious to my subtlety as he was to the arrival of the newcomers at his back. “I keep thinking of that scope rifle, y’know; your role as some kind of hit man. I’m beginning to wonder if we should take these repeated suggestions more seriously.”



A prim woman in a tight wool dress and purple sunglasses came into the diner and strode down the aisle past our booth, eyeing us both. My self-consciousness about this talk of guns was compounded by a sudden feeling that I might be under surveillance by those responsible for the rifle. What if I wasn't supposed to have told anyone about my "mission"? In the woman's insect eyes I saw the reflection of Lee Harvey Oswald, the guy set up to take the fall for the Kennedy shooting. The woman sauntered past and went into the rest room; and in a cooling sweat I asked myself: for whose Cubanistic revenge was I the secret agent? No longer secret . . .

"Harry, look. Are you saying this so-called mission is as good as hard-wired in me now, and there's nothing I can do to shake it off?"

Harry looked grim as he bit through his thick burger-with-everything. "It's like I was saying, about the pathways. It's standard branching logic, but progressively weighted. Too much mayo, yuk. I shoulda told her—"

"Progressively weighted?"

"Yeah, probability theory. With a departure to the right, say, subsequent choice factors are weighted slightly left. At each point you have a choice. But in the end you have none."

"But all along the way . . ." In my own hands, limp, dead lettuce; pale, thin tomato.

"None of them matter. The whole scheme reminds me of national elections. You get this slate of apparently significant choices, but really, ideologically, they're all channeled within this narrow corridor of acceptable limits toward a single, inevitable

conclusion. Have you ever been surprised by the outcome? You choose one or the other, or you decide not to choose—what’s the difference? Same result. Within the model itself, there seems to be plenty of variety and room for lateral movement. From outside the model, from the broader space-time view, there are no meaningful options.”

I mulled over this state of affairs as I toyed with finger-sized fries and a small puddle of ketchup, painting my plate with streaks of red. “I want to know more about this idea of programmed instructions. At this point where would you say they’re resident—in me or the computer?” I was afraid I already knew the answer.

“Both, I’m afraid. You’re hooked up, I’d say.”

“What about the BigScreen at Moira’s, then; or the Spiral Links? Could the virus program be patched into a network with those other systems?”

“God knows. It certainly seems within the realm of possibility.”

Our winning waitress came around to see how the meal was, and if we’d be having any dessert.

Harry wiped his mouth and grinned. “Ah, couldn’t be better. Something sweet? Well, let’s see. What are the choices?” And he winked at me.

By afternoon the sun had vanished behind a dreary army of clouds marching south. It started to sleet. At coffee break, Giselda asked me for a ride home; her car was in the shop. I had a bad premonition, I wasn’t sure if it was more about her or Myrtle, and told her to ask Gerald. He lived closer to her, anyhow.

For once, I congratulated myself, I was choosing not to ride out on that familiar spiral. But I went home discouraged, disheartened. Moira was gone for good, now—though with some of her clothes, furniture, and kitchenware still there, I might expect at any time another visit like the last one, as she proceeded to clean the place out altogether. Sheila was another wild card, especially if, indeed, she was paying the rent, out of motives that were as yet unclear. Then there was Moira's claim that the place was condemned, for which I still had no other evidence, beyond the usual drabness of color, the general moldering quality that made the eminently brownstoned building no different than half this ancient city. In short, I felt on less than solid footing on a number of counts, as I mounted the front steps which were still slick with sleet.

One army of clouds had retreated before a warm, wet wind that presaged another, darker army of clouds on the horizon. What did I have to look forward to, the BigScreen? I couldn't even enjoy that in peace any more.

Sleep, dreaming? Ha.

Two days to go till my date with Giselda; and all I could think of, was that there was still time to break it.

Walking in the apartment, pocketing the key, my hand lingered a moment and brought out the little "present" Hairy had given me inside the entry to Scanlon and Hart's after lunch: a small paper bag of dried mushrooms. He'd suggested that Giselda could cook them up nice in some pasta sauce for us on Friday, in case we wanted to experience something "special" together.

Now I thought, this guy never quit, did he? It was one fucking setup after another.

But standing there in the foyer, I reconsidered. Something in the organic nature of the gnarled, gray-brown little beasts spoke to me, to a natural core of my being. Maybe not a voyage à deux, a soft voice said; but how about something different, alone?

“Just an idea,” Harry had said. “Or go ahead and keep them for a rainy day.”

I fingered the leathery bits of fungus as I entered the apartment, recalling a dreamy, all-night rave I’d been part of in Boston, back in my S.G. days. The party had begun as a “Y2K” New Year’s Eve bash, and had found its own subterranean passage through the snaky night. That experience, fueled by beakers of “sacred” mushroom tea that were passed around at the midnight of the millennium, hadn’t been so bad. I’d had fun, at least, dancing with the sultry girls in their painted faces—guys too for that matter, as it wasn’t a couples kind of dance. It was like being kids again, in a way that I never experienced as a kid. Being part of the group grope, going with the flow.

Now, of course, I was considering quite another scenario: tripping solo. But maybe this could be useful, I told myself, for more serious purposes. A kind of do-it-yourself hypnotherapy. That method of Evans hadn’t been so bad, either. It had in fact given me some vital clues about the possibility of a virtual reality mechanism at work behind the scenes.

The Spiral Links? Well, maybe the problem there was caused by giving up too much to the technology. Fighting fire with fire wasn’t always a good idea. This was more like pouring water on fire: going to nature for another kind of answer.

And if this experiment turned out to be yet another bad choice?

As to that, it hardly seemed to matter any more, did it?

A cracking boom sounded outside: thunder, in December? I went to the window.

The rain had already begun falling in torrents.

Yes, Mother, my stomach said.

I took and bit off a corner of one of the mushrooms, then chucked the lot into my mouth and began chewing.

Steamy jungle, pulsing sky; a gentle breeze and the sound of rain in the distance.

I was afraid at first that I might have returned to Witch Bay: but no, this planet of the mushrooms was more pleasant, more benign. I felt its intense earthiness at the same time as its strangeness; as if, in some indeterminate way, I knew this place to be the source of the fungoid spores sent earthward for the cause of human consumption in the service of that unthinkable crusade called the transformation of consciousness. Mycelia became, in this altered worldview, the preeminent intelligent lifeform. As for me, my own paltry self, I merely wanted to utter some uniquely beautiful sound to describe . . .

Eleusia.

I can't. It's not available to all the senses. It's only physical: as if . . . as if I have, I am the very body of a living mushroom. My skin feels slick, shines golden. I have this fathomless inertia, deep-rootedness to the spot. I languish here for a seeming eternity, on my carpet of purple moss.

Childish, perhaps, is the character of this insouciant presence, which I feel as a buoyant lightness of weight, an urgent happiness. Yet I hover on the cusp of a maturing creation, with a burgeoning desire to send forth a billion seeds to be waved by light pressure across the galactic expanses.

In the balance I'm held back, reticent, uncertain as to my fitness for the task. There is the nagging, hidden knowledge that I have a still somewhat human brain and body, after all, even if temporarily inhabited by certain microscopic fungal elements. Should I have taken more? But I emptied the bag. I did my best.

My thoughts become convoluted, like the tendrils and vines of the jungle around me, like the voices upon voices asking, is this my mission to kill the former human, to leave the body to rot on the forest floor and merge instead with the higher force, the inner power, the dark and wet source, with nature, with dreams . . .but why the computer, where do I go next, is there any me left at all? It's all a puzzle, a labyrinth of conjecture. Me or mushroom? There or here? Home planet or far-flung colony?

Another self-replicating eternity has passed; and now I'm moving, slowly, past nodding stalks laden with sickly, poisonous-smelling fruit. My bare olive skin, still slimy if human, is crawling with fleas the size of cockroaches; underfoot, meanwhile, I tread on cockroaches the size of guinea pigs; from chinks in the wall of foliage, I'm being watched by guinea pigs the size of pigs. Sweat makes my skin ever slimier. I'm little boy lost, looking up through the festering canopy to a blue eleusian sun, distant yet so hot, so hot, missing my mother, my earth, the past, the way back home.

Not yet, they told me when I arrived. Not for a couple of centuries. Then they went away, laughing.

You don't ask why. Just open your eyes, your pores, to take in the fetid air. You don't know where you're going, or where you are. Only where you came from, and that's impossibly distant now. So you stop and stand and stare straight up like the ghostly plants around you. It's time now to shed your own flesh in feathery slabs. Your luminous bones are dancing, joggling at the joints to be free, and when even these remnants fall clattering to a heap on the spongy ground, still you (in some more invisible understanding of the term) remain standing there . . . under vast ferns the size of earth-trees, hung with pulpy strands of moss and red-tentacled lichens. The steamy green skies are stuffed with mop-like cloud-forms that slather all the while shapelessly down to the horizon. In the gut or concept of gut, a sinking hopelessness churns, churns, churns. Along the skin of my discarded forearm, chitinous papery-winged insects alight with brilliant beaming mosaic eyes, settling down to sink sharp mandibles in. To swat at them with the thought of a hand is to send chunks of one's former flesh away in their jaws.

In the distance, I—if I can hear—hear the sound of hideous engines, groaning. A vibration ripples through the springy ground. Overhead, rubber-winged reptilian birds wheel in trios, croaking with glee. Time has come, my dear, they seem to say. Time has come.

I woke up sprawled on the living room carpet. Purple moss . . . no. Moira's apartment; alone. Was I relieved, happy, content?

More like, impossibly lonely. But not without regrets. This basic self-possession, green as a peeled pole, was something I could hold onto. Let the sisters burn their vapor trails above the leaden sky.

As for the alien forces, my tormentors, my own inner demons if that's what they were . . .I felt purified of them, cleansed by the ancient rites I had just performed. I had gone into psychic battle to challenge all comers and had come back . . .well, not exactly smiling, but whole. You might say I was learning to play the game.

But now what? I looked at my watch: ten past seven. Morning already? The sky outside the window was faintly light, and clear. It was almost time to go to work again.

In front of the mirror, shaving, I thought I looked younger; under the stubble the skin of my face was supple and smooth. Yet my home-mind was still filled with images of the mushroom experience. With the sweep of the razor I was attempting to clear a clean space from the encroaching jungle. I'd have to shake it off, get my act together. It wouldn't be the first time, this fateful fall season. But this one, at least, I took responsibility for.

A grown man, I chuckled to myself, tripping like a hempster. Such childish fantasies. Like playing spaceship in that cardboard box in the attic . . .now still hankering for the voyage to Sron, the edge of the universe.

Harrison's eyes went wide when I told him what I'd done: "You took all of them yourself? Whew, boy. You could've stayed home today, you know. What kind of programming are we going to get out of you today, huh?"



“No, I feel fine today, really. It wasn’t so bad. Like a Disney cartoon, kind of. Besides, what am I gonna do at home alone? Dream up new popcorn recipes?”

Now his eyebrows went up. He reached to fill a cup of water from the cooler and said, “You had the makings of a pretty good cacciatore for two, there, if you’d saved it for tomorrow night. He leaned back and craned his head in the direction of the main office lobby, where Giselda sat just out of earshot.

“Yeah, I know. I’m still trying to think of a good excuse to back out of it. Why don’t you take her to the Links, if that’s what she wants to do?”

“Ho, no thanks. She’s too old for me. I’d be in over my head.” He grinned and tossed the paper cup in the wastecan. “Besides, she asked you first. Catch you later.”

The eyelid rose lazily, welcoming me home again.

I sat down and punched in my entry code, imagining a spider in its web responding to the tension on one of the strands.

A silly thought, like the old notion of the ghost in the machine . . .

But not so silly, I reflected. Somewhere, if not here, an upgraded, transgalactic spider had woven one particularly sticky net, and hung it from a skyhook in the space-time continuum. And flying blind, little Joey Norton had blundered into it.

My latest filepath appeared:

Congreve Aerospace

\\Cost-Benefit Analysis

\\prototype development 2010-20

I went through the motions. The new program I'd been building could run the routine automatically. I monitored it with partial attention, still waving sticky vines away from another part of my mind, and meanwhile half-speculating on my overall destination through the wavering void. What we'll call the speculation file read something like this:

“I've wandered into this gluey web, this sucking tunnel of fate. There seems to be no way out, no matter what I do or don't choose to do about it. It's a one-way tunnel, like a lobster trap. There is this ever-stretching tracery of light and dark threads spread across the universal fabric of possibility, with a gossamer guyline holding the whole works in place.

“But is the guying strand hung from a singularity in the past, which determines at every future moment what my choices are or will ever be? Or is it hung from a singularity in the future, that determines with the same inevitability where the eventual path will lead?

“Maybe it's a double-ended trap. As Hairy would say, 'Same result.'

“Is my path unwinding from some spideristic or superviral central control and command center; or is it winding up toward one, with the reigning fisher-king hauling me in for my day of judgment?”

Cocking my ear for a moment to the audio portion of our broadcast, I hear the saccharine voice of the hag in the stewardess mask: “Have you done what we asked you to do, Mr. Norton?”

Nobody asked me nothin, sister.

I needed some soothing, new age fusion jazz (couch music, Harry called it), and so clicked in that category at random. The strains of synthesized music sent me on waves of peace and calm to a desert realm, where no spaceships roamed, no computers hummed. No sticky vines, nor whirling wheels of windowless rooms. I leaned back and closed my eyes. All empty space, blue sky on tan sand; gentle breezes . . . I could handle this. I switched on the VRUSIC option.

Abruptly the music stopped, replaced by a buzzing tone—then the ringing of a telephone—from the VRUSIC audio track.

I heard a series of clicks, husky breathing, then a female voice: “Hello?”

“Hi Tam, it’s Sheila.”

What the hell was going on? My mind raced. The phone lines must have crossed somehow. Had the VRUSIC program accessed my address book on file, and tapped in that way?

I recognized Tam as one of Sheila’s former roommates. “Oh hi. Sorry it took me so long to come to the phone. You caught me in the shower.”

“Sleeping in today?”

“Yeah, it was a long night last night, with Donnie.”

Sheila said, “Oh, my God. You mean you really did it? You corrupted a seventeen-year old boy?”

Now I was stumped on two more counts. Was the roomie swinging to men? And was the man in question, by any chance, the young Donnie Harrison?

“Whoa. Hold on, sister. It’s not that easy, you know? We had to clear up some things. Starting about one o’clock. See, we started at this place downtown, you know this VR place called the Spiral Links?”

“I’ve heard of it,” Sheila said flatly. “How did you like it?”

“It was okay. Except it’s not much of a place to go on a date. They strap you in these big barber chairs and then you just kind of trip out on your own somewhere, and your partner’s going somewhere else.”

“Can’t they make it so you go together?”

“Yeah, sort of, but even if you set it up that way, it’s not real. You just get the image of your date, just like all the other ghosts that appear.”

“Sounds pretty strange.”

“So anyway, then we come home and he’s all hot to get it on, but I want to talk about this place where we’ve just been, because it wasn’t that much fun for me.”

“Why, what happened?”

“I chose this really weird dance club. And Donnie went to war with a sword army on some desert planet.”

“That’s the part that sounds weird to me. What about the disco?”

“Well, you feel like you’re moving, all right, the music’s pretty topbeat and there’s the groovy lights and all, but I don’t know, basically it feels like you’re masturbating or something. So then when we get home—or, actually in the car on the way home—Donnie, who got all excited by this raping and pillaging or whatever this

sword army does, wants to, I don't know, treat me like one of those imaginary barbarian women. I just didn't like it. So—”

“You know, Tam, all this reminds me a lot of Gordie, the kind of weird stuff he told me was happening to him. And he went there once too. It probably does something to your brain.”

Oh, great. Now my craziness was out in the gossip circuit. I hated Sheila's sultry voice, all chummy, telling someone else about my woes.

Tam said, “Yeah, I remember you telling me before, something about Gordie's bad dreams . . .”

“It's deeper than that, Tam, I'm convinced. There's something really strange about that guy. The way he tells it, sure, it sounds like it's dreams, or daydreams, or some weird sort of programming he does for his work. He always looked stressed out when he came home from the office. I wonder if he's some kind of secret agent for the government or something. I really wish I had just come right out and asked him.”

“Be glad you didn't, Sheila. Even by asking, you could put yourself in danger. I think you should just steer clear of him.”

“Yeah, maybe so. I have been having second thoughts, I admit. It's good to hear this from you. I'm better off free of him. Between my sister Moira and this little secretary of his—”

“What's that all about? You haven't told me anything about her.”

“He doesn't think I know about her, except it so happens that she gets her hair done at the salon. She goes on and on about this guy at work, and the latest is he's asked

her out, to go down to that Links place or whatever it's called, and so finally I asked her where she works. I don't know, Tam. I wonder, what does he see in this pasty-skinned middle-aged frumpy bitch? She's got ratty hair, blue veins in her legs, no tits at all. Oh well, I guess he sees something in her, and I guess he'll get a bit more of whatever it is, coming his way after this weekend."

On impulse I activated the mike channel, but then couldn't bring myself to try to buzz in. I could only sit there and listen, getting more and more irritated at Sheila's effrontery, and perplexed at the mechanism by which I was eavesdropping on their privacy. This sordid soap-opera sideshow was ruining my siesta.

Tam's voice said, "Buy hey, if they're going to that place, maybe it'll turn out for them like it did for Donnie and me. You might not have to worry about her, after all, Sheila."

"Shit, what do I care, anyhow? I got a couple other options. There's always Tino Kelly, or maybe Hendrick again. I can handle myself. Let him be strange. But—" and here I could tell her voice was starting to crack—"it feels like I'm looking for something, or someone, and I don't know what, or who, or where to look. So, in the meantime, I keep on thinking of going back to him. Because, to tell you the truth, I still like his tongue."

"Listen to you! You're hopeless." Both women started giggling.

Abruptly I unplugged the headphones, and tried to pick up the pieces of my work in silence. But Sheila's words stung. Being stressed meant I was a secret agent? That

just showed where she was coming from. I let it go; I had better things to do than cry over spilt milk.

My brain continued to cogitate over the how and why of that particular phone connection that had been patched into my audio channel: but this was fruitless speculation. I would not take up the gauntlet; I would turn the other cheek.

Still, I couldn't let go of my curiosity about how it had happened. A connection with the VRUSIC switch seemed obvious—but troubling. Could I repeat the sequence? Maybe so and maybe not. I would be able to draw no conclusion either way. The virus program was too flexible for that. It could always see me coming. It was always one step ahead. Better just to let it lie, and try to get on with my work.

On further reflection, after all that had happened so far to me, this was just another day in the life of the man with the strange mind and the likeable tongue.

I steered Harry to Shorty's for lunch—reducing the variables—and told him about the unusual phone call. “So what do you think about it?”

He chewed slowly, turned vague eyes to me. “Something new. Always something new.” He seemed distracted by something else—whether work-related or personal, I couldn't tell.

Maybe he had problems, too. I thought I might be helpful in some way. “Something else on your mind today, buddy?”

“Naw.” His eyes shifted across the table, away to other parts of the Cook Nook, the softly clattering lunchtime crowd. “Nothing much.” His eyes met mine.

“What is it?”

“That guy Donnie you mentioned—it’s my little brother, all right. He’s started dating an older woman named Tammy. She’s a substitute art teacher at his high school. A lezzy, to boot. She’s, I don’t know, thirty something.”

“Yeah, I know. Like I said, she used to live with Sheila—I mean, share an apartment, with another partner. Well—” I didn’t know what else to say. “Your brother can take care of himself, can’t he?”

“Apparently not. I worry about him. I think he gets into this fake reality business a bit too heavy. He’s seventeen but it’s like arrested development at fourteen. He’s been into this kind of stuff since then. Way too heavy, you wanna know the truth. And I’m afraid he’s gonna end up like me, at twenty-eight still scarin’ em off like I did on purpose when I was in junior high. Only with him, it’s not on purpose. And Monday night when I was talking to him on the phone, he mentioned something to me about . . . suicide.”

“God.”

“Yeah.”

“Were you able to talk to him? I mean, to talk him out of it?”

“He’s still kickin, as of last night. Y’know, Norton, it’s made me think about this whole techno-trip we’re on. Him with the VR, me with my job which in a way never stops when I go home. Christ—you with your problems, maybe the worst of all. Maybe it’s the wrong direction.”

“You been eating some of that funny fungus, Hairy? Getting comfortable on some cozy jungle planet, perhaps, where the money grows on trees?”



“Give me a break, man. Naw, it’s just a matter of getting back to the basics. I mean, with women. They don’t relate to this hardwired stuff. No wonder they end up shacking up with their own kind.”

So it wasn’t all pop ‘em and drop ‘em, after all, with Harrison. We were so different, in many ways; yet when it came to the opposite sex, we both ended up in the same lifeboat, watching the cruise ship with its happy couples steam away into the night, with their giddy laughter dying in the ocean wind.

“What about Giselda?” I was foolish enough to ask then.

“Her? The tech lady with whadya bet, probably a dedicated sex program for a mind? Huh, funny you should ask; I been thinkin’ about her lately. Thinkin’ that maybe she’d even go after me if it came right down to it. If I gave her half the chance.”

Maybe there was no lifeboat, after all. Maybe both of us were clutching at the same frail wreckage floating just within our reach.

## Chapter 10

## BIOTECH BOUTIQUE

Friday afternoon I found myself at coffee-break alone with Giselda. Her garish red hair was askew, almost wild. I thought she looked wonderful and told her so. She put a tentative hand on my knee. We talked about the fun we were going to have at the Links—"tonight," she reminded me.

I remembered feeling paranoid enough to suspect Harry's intentions in getting me there, not once but twice; and that touchy little part of me had to wonder what the female spy was up to in pushing me further. Who were they working for?

I decided to bail I told her the Links simply didn't agree with me. Maybe dinner somewhere nice, instead?

She flashed a momentary smile and uttered a small "Okay," but her wavering green eyes betrayed her mixed feelings. She had that middle-ager's desire to keep up with what the younger set was doing. Going out for dinner was all very romantic, but old-fashioned. Then she popped the question to me, as if it were her price for the compromise: "Could you tell me what happened to you at that place?"

I wasn't sure that I truthfully could. She looked at me now with steady, open eyes. In the moment I trusted her. I almost felt as if I could love her. I told her briefly what had happened, in terms of my "disorientation" after the first visit and the thing going "out of control" on the second. Once I had begun leveling with her, it was easy to keep going. Making sure Harry's and Gerald's voices were maintaining the drone behind the walls of Gerald's office, I finally confided in her: "The worst of it is, these experiences have been happening to me outside the VR parlor as well. At night, in my dreams. Out on the street, in broad daylight. Right here in this office, working at that computer." I turned and pointed at my workstation, where the inscrutable eye of the monitor gazed in my direction like an obdurate Zen master. I waited for my confession to sink in. I was glad I'd trusted her enough to share this much. Now I realized too that I'd be able to pick up any hidden agenda on her part, from her reaction.

She looked down at her hands in her lap for a moment, then returned a steady, green-eyed gaze to my face. Her open expression put me on the spot. Where was I coming from, in opening up to her like this? And why now, having held it back from her for so long?

My mixed intentions battled for supremacy. It occurred to me that if I was going anywhere with this lady, into deeper friendship or beyond, she might as well know what she was getting into, right from the start.

Her eyes held steady on mine, large and moist.

For an instant I regretted the whole scene. It wasn't fair to become involved with someone else while I had so little purchase on my own sense of self—and of reality itself.

But I quickly cast this moralistic doubt aside. Because the truth was, I needed something from her.

Giselda said, “I thought something wasn’t quite right with you, the last couple of months. I figured it was just, you know, something to do with your relationship with Moira.” At Moira’s name she dropped her eyes again, as if in deference to the goddess.

“No,” I said, “I’ve pretty much let her go by now. She showed up last week, actually, to get some more of her things. But it seemed even more impossible between us. She figures her life is her own now, to do what she wants. I think she’s with another guy.”

Giselda put a tentative hand on mine. “I know how hard that must be for you.”

“Shit,” I spluttered. “It’s not like she’s my wife or anything.” And in a rush of foolhardy bravado I plunged deeper, diving for the pool in the rapids: “I mean, hey, she’s packed up and gone. That’s her choice. But that means I’m free, too, right? So—I feel terrible telling you this, but you may as well know—for a while I was sleeping with her sister, Sheila. I also want you to know that that’s over now, too.”

“Yes, I know about it already.”

“What?” Then before she could say “Harry,” I knew how. As if responding to the invocation of his name, Harrison walked at that moment out of Gerald’s office, and my tête-à-tête with Giselda was effectively over.

We had a lovely dinner together at a cheap but quiet Chinese restaurant. Giselda wore a simple wool dress of rich green, with a low, squared-off neckline: her “Chinese”

look, she said. She'd put up her hair with small gold ribbons woven in; and tiny golden temples dangled from her earlobes. During the meal we talked buyout, ethnic cuisine, and the inevitable: relationships.

Afterwards we went to Giselda's house, on her invitation. I was happy not to run the risk, however remote, of either Sheila or Moira turning up at Moira's place to make a threesome.

Myrtle deposited us in front of an old sprawling house on Gordon Avenue, where Giselda occupied a first-floor duplex. Her beady-eyed lab-poodle cross, Chipper, met us at the door, slapping his skinny tan tail and smiling wetly for us. A pair of kid's winter boots stood inside the door. Kenny Jr. was with his dad for the month of December, Giselda said, in Boston. He'd left his winter boots behind, and she was going to have to send them to him; unless Ken would get him a new pair. She and Kenneth Hart didn't communicate easily. What about school, I asked. Kenny was a smart kid, she said; keeping up in second grade wasn't a problem. What was more worrisome to her, was how Ken would keep him occupied once the holiday started on Monday. But that was his problem.

Chipper grabbed up one of the boots in his pink mouth and offered it up to me. I declined, and gingerly stepped forward in my stocking feet into Giselda's house, pulled by her hand as she said, girlishly, "C'mon, I'll show you around."

I felt like I was on the real estate tour. Nice wood paneling everywhere, dark lighting with stained glass lampshades . . .and here was the odd thing, large random pieces of fabric—shawls, sheets, caftans, scarves, saris, sarongs—hung on walls,

bedposts, windows. Like costumes, I observed, in search of an actress. Like gallery hangings, but without apparent design. Oh well, we all have our eccentricities.

Giselda and I both knew exactly what was going to happen; and we both, as far as I could tell, enjoyed it immensely. We stayed in bed all Saturday morning, fucking like a couple of, well, seventeen-year-olds.

Later, in the beautiful golden-brown afternoon, we went for a stroll down her oak-lined street, with Chipper tracing a serendipitous orbit as we walked. At the end of three blocks we found a bench with peeling green paint in a small park, and sat there in the slanted sunshine watching birds and children. I was able to talk easily there to my newest lover, with a deepening level of trust and sense that she cared for me.

After hearing the bulk of my tale of troubles, Giselda had a suggestion: that I try a certain meditation technique taught at a trendy neighborhood joint called the Biotech Boutique. She'd seen a recent flyer from them and, while not "brave" enough to try it out herself, said it sounded like it might be just the thing to help me with my "problem."

I was reminded of the suggestion Doctor Evans had made, perhaps facetiously, at the end of my final visit. I'd scoffed then but now saw a glimmer of hope in the idea of mental training.

"What the hell," I glibly agreed. "It wouldn't hurt to give it a whirl."

We celebrated my—our—hopeful future with Cinzano and sandwiches in an ivy-shrouded, skylit courtyard accessed through a delicatessen. Immured with new love but also inspired to embark immediately on this most promising cure, I phoned on the spot,

while it was still before five, to book an appointment if I could, for Monday. Luckily they had an opening at one o'clock; apparently the local flyer campaign had not yet filled their tanks with new customers. Giselda wondered about clearing the time with Gerald on such short notice; I said I'd plead medical necessity. He had agreed to the shrink appointments readily enough.

No sooner had we entered the door of Giselda's house again, and we went scampering back to bed. We were not, as it turned out, seventeen or even thirty years old anymore, and the first rush of our repeated passion subsided all too quickly.

Her thin, freckled body soft and slack-skinned, Giselda turned gently away from me, and lay gazing out the leaded window at the graying dusk.

"Can you tell me something?" I ventured.

She turned her face to look at me with faded eyes.

"I was wondering about you and Harry."

"Me and Harry . . . what?"

"Oh, you know. I thought maybe there was a little romantic interest going on there."

She blinked and looked a little sad. "Harry wouldn't be interested in me. A piddly little secretary with frowsy hair and a seven-year-old and a silly dog to take care of? He can do better than me."

"Oh, you really think so? I haven't seen much evidence so far. I think he's all talk."

Giselda turned away again, silent, reflective.

I wondered aloud how she saw me during the last couple of months, in and out of relationship with two other women. Following the disclaimer, “I swear, I wasn’t like this before,” I almost added, “before I lost my marbles.”

Giselda rolled to face me more fully, saying, “I didn’t figure you were that kind of guy. Even when things started to go wrong with you and Moira, I respected her for having prior rights. Then, when I found out she left you, I felt sorry for you, the way she just kind of abandoned you.”

“Hey, that’s pretty good. That says it right. ‘She just kind of abandoned’ me. I wish it had been clearer to me what was going on with her.”

It took Giselda a moment to gather her emotions. “So you mean, it’s still not clear? She might be coming back?”

“I really doubt it. No, I don’t see that happening at all, at this point. Except, like, to collect her bed.”

“But it’s possible? What would you do if she changed her mind and you found her there when you went back home, and she was all ready to make up and start again with you. Would you do it?”

I hesitated too long.

Giselda turned away again, holding herself in a fetal position, and began to cry.

I felt responsible for this crack in our smoked-glass soiree. Giselda was right: did I really know what I wanted, what I would do with the choices in front of me, if I felt I had a real choice? Now I was getting depressed about the state my life had come to.



“Let me try to say it better. I didn’t get to talk to Moira as much as I wanted, the last time she came by, but she was quite clear that we were finished. At least it was clear to me. So no, I don’t see how we could possibly go on as before, when you put it like that.”

Giselda stopped crying and turned to me now stony, cold, gray-eyed and fierce.

“You still didn’t answer the question. What would you do?”

“I don’t know why you’re doing this, Giselda. Wait, yes I do. This way you get to feel hurt, right?”

“Yeah, it’s just more practice, I guess. Like let’s move on to Sheila, then, okay?”

I just looked at her, dumbfounded.

“You remember, the sister? That was a pretty quick switch, jumping in bed with her. What does she have that I don’t? What does she do for you that I can’t? Wait, don’t answer.” And she disappeared in sobs again, this time letting me hold her close to me, like a spurned child.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I whispered. “Sheila’s not coming back either. I promise.”

She looked at me with puppy-wet eyes. “Even if she wants to?”

“I promise.”

“Oh, Norty—” Giselda wrapped her arms around me finally, again. “I’m sorry. I just need to know where it stands, because whatever kind of person she is, I have to respect her, too. She’s at least got more initiative than me—or maybe just the good luck to have got in line ahead of me. “

“Yeah, I guess I was desperate. Couldn’t wait. But hey, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

She didn’t answer, but her tight face told me it did still matter.

“What’s wrong now?”

She started to laugh through fresh tears. “Oh, just that . . .how you put it. Being desperate. It says a lot about your hooking up with me, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, God, Giselda. I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry. We just can’t keep from hurting each other today, can we?”

Giselda, for her part, seemed willing to keep the pain coming. “Can you tell me about her? Does she work?”

“She’s a hairdresser. I don’t see—”

“Where?”

“Geez, you’re curious. At a place called DaVincio’s.”

“DaVincio’s! That’s where I get my hair done! It’s that Sheila? I let that bitch do my hair!”

We held each other through the long darkness. They all knew about me now. But one was willing to hold on still. It was going to be all right. I was going to fix it all right on Monday.

I held the nasty hookup wires away from me, causing some consternation on the face of the pasty-skinned, white-smocked lab attendant. Her forced smile faded quickly behind her smudged lipstick.

“What’s the problem, sir? This won’t hurt a bit, I promise you. Nothing comes from these wires to you: no current, no prick of the skin even. It’s non-invasive. We use the magnetic adhesive cream, and that’s it. All the information comes from you, and is fed to the monitors over here. As Mr. Wood explained to you, it’s to provide a visual and auditory picture, which you can access yourself in real time on the monitor here—”

She was so earnest.

“I’m sorry.” I was in a cold sweat, but decided to bite my tongue and go through with it. For Giselda, I told myself.

And then, with colder sweat: What if Giselda is working for them, after all?

But the narcotic feeling in my sex-drugged loins proved the stronger measure of reality today, and with that somatic ease undermining my suspicions, I gave in to the wires and the electrodes on my arms and head.

“That’s good. Now if I can ask you to remove your watch—”

It was all very innocuous, really. Nothing happened—just as the fake blonde with the smudged lipstick had assured me. Nothing except the waves generated by my own silly brain. So this, I thought as I gazed upon my inner landscape in fascination, this is what They must see, what It craves.

A wavy line swam across the screen: with more or less amplitude and frequency, I’d been told, according to the tenor of my thoughts. After some time of observing and trying to influence what appeared on-screen, I did begin to notice some cause-and-effect. Lovemaking with Giselda: warm colors, languid waves. Thoughts of Gerald, office work, the coming merger: spiky lines, with jagged perturbations. With a little directed

concentration, I found I could influence the wave-form to change visibly in a desired fashion. Faster, slower, higher, lower. In an hour or two (it was hard to, seemed unnecessary to, track the course of old clock-time) I was becoming as proficient as a ten-year old with a new parlor trick. With a little more practice, I found I could will the corresponding sound tones, and colors, too, to match a given pattern; then to change these options at my whim. I could form a circular mandala before my very eyes, or bend its borders to a bulging, pulsing triangle. Look ma, no hands!

The attendant was no longer there to appreciate my prowess. Ah, well; no doubt the performance was being recorded for their files. I would fall into the star pupil category, at this rate. I brought the session to a close with a flutter of virtual wings drawing themselves down into the figure of a heart-shaped purple cushion. Slowing my heart rate still further, the figure faded into listless violet pastel, throbbing yet softly . . . my soul on a plate, under glass.

It was true, what mustachioed Mr. Troy Wood had promised me for my one hundred ninety-nine bucks: I now felt some small joy in being capable, in a subtle and indefinable way, of controlling the undulations of my inner climate. And this discovery gave rise to the lofty hope that I might somehow be able to use the technique to burrow out of the psychic trap whose net had closed around me. I felt ready to forgive Doctor Evans for all his bullheadedness, to move in with Giselda if she'd have me, and to sign up for the monthly rate with my barrel-chested friend Mr. Wood. At a minimum, I would try the float tank, that very evening. I hoped they had an opening.

I feel like a new person. I wear a broad smile as I walk out onto the street . . . and into your basic, crumbling ruin of a neglected public works city; a city still laboring under the weight of its primary historical building impulse (1890-1965) and content to let it compost there until the vengeful soil is satisfied. The trendy architectures of current fashion rise and fall, and still the old brown and gray buildings remain the same; the ivy-encrusted brick, the smoke-choked brambles, the grass in the sidewalk cracks, the kiosks at the bus terminal, cigar-smelly cab stands, all the dogshit on the streets despite the ordinances; yes, still the horse-wagons driven by the Amish selling Christmas trees.

As I come to Haliburton Boulevard I feel a wave of appreciation for Gerald. With his old-fashioned generosity, he gave me an extra two hours at lunchtime for this “doctor’s appointment”—as he did, also, for my appointments with Evans. If I took a little more time than that, today, I’m sure he’ll understand. I check the time, looking for the watch on my wrist, but it’s gone. Shit, I left it at the Boutique. A quicksilver sun shines low over the boulevard storefronts, through a cloud of fog. Was I hooked up there all afternoon? But no, the sun is on the Winchester side of the boulevard, listing to the east. It’s still morning, for Christ’s sake. I never even cleared this appointment with Gerald. I’d made it for nine o’clock, not noon or one. I start to sweat, in the understanding that I’m back in the old soup pot again.

As I turn the corner and come to the office parking lot, I see that my car is not there. Fuck, stolen! I think at first—then consider that I left it at Giselda’s house, having chosen to walk to my appointment and then to work. Yet I seem to remember getting Gerald’s permission, or was it for Tuesday? Did I work yesterday?

No, yesterday was Sunday, Giselda and I spent a pensive morning over breakfast and newspapers, and an afternoon in a gallery of conceptual art: tree branches, piles of leaves, copies of masters hung upside down, dwarf obstacle courses of plastic and scrap metal, music fragments strung together in the background. The whole world, I remember remarking, was becoming a virtual reality show, a theme park of itself, a mockery of any familiar concepts of reality. Such was the legacy of leaving the twentieth century and all its cultural baggage behind. Giselda disagreed, and thought that we were simply being offered choices of new ways to view the old verities, nature, love, life, civilization.

Our disagreement soured into cold distance in the evening, stony silence in bed. I figured she was still bothering herself over Sheila . . .but I couldn't or wouldn't do what it would take to break through.

Was yesterday, too, but an extended dream? Life itself, perhaps, is only that. And where does that leave me today?

A new little pipsqueak in my brain says, "Monitor, monitor—" but I shove the imp rudely away. I march across the lot to the ground-level door, ready to race up the stairs and phone the police about the car, just in case.

And then, as I find my hand on an unfamiliar knob that won't yield, looking into a dim and nameless darkness, I realize that my office isn't here either. It's closed, moved, vanished. I find only a deserted warehouse instead, with broken windows and rubbish thrown inside. Like my brain, I think to myself. My old brain.

I shake the new one sadly, but refuse to give in. There must be a way out.

I stand and whirl, checking the street signs, the scraggly trees. It's the right street name, Tourney Crescent. The trees I can't account for one way or another—the price, I guess, of taking them for granted.

Am I here or not here? Is this Earth, 2009, or is it not? That moldering warehouse: does it predate Scanlon and Hart, or is it the shape of things to come?

I think of the woman with the smudged lipstick; of Troy Wood in his checked shirt and striped tie; of Giselda lying in bed. Somewhere along the line, I've been had, again.

So—shit, what now? Have I no past, no identity, no home after all? I sit on the curb and feel like crying, but I'm too angry for that. So I jump up again and storm off in the first direction that comes to mind: Sheila's apartment on Cherry Street.

After two blocks I get the idea to call Evans. His voice sounds faint, faraway. "Mister Norton. It's been awhile. Are you all right? I had Nancy try to call you several times."

I hold the receiver like an alien thing, not knowing where to begin.

"Are you still there? Do you want to make an appointment?"

"Too risky."

"What? How do you mean?"

"Have you got a minute? I can't guarantee I'll be able to reach you again."

"Uh, sure, go ahead. Hold the line a minute, will you?"

I start to panic, that he won't come back on, or that he's setting a remote hookup wire. But then, what would it matter, now?

“Okay, just checking the lineup out there in the waiting room, ha ha. Now, what’s on your mind?”

I start to tell him everything that’s happened since my last visit. He stops me at the mushrooms.

“Don’t you see that that’s the worst course of action you could take, in your situation?”

“What about suicide?” I retort, archly.

“It’s practically the same thing. You’re many steps closer to it, if you ingest substances like that when you’ve already been walking a thin line.”

“So what do I have to lose?” I’m in a challenging mood.

“Everything! I’m still quite hopeful we can make progress together. We’re working—or at least, I thought we were working—to bring that thin red line back to a dependable road for you to walk on.”

A long spider’s thread catches my eye, hanging from the corner of the phone booth, wavering against a bulge of invisible pressure . . .

“I hear what you’re saying, Doc. Are you interested in hearing the rest?”

“Actually, I do have a client waiting. Shall I have Nancy schedule you for an appointment? Say, in a couple day’s time?”

A green Mercedes passes, with a fluttering flag of a paper scrap stuck to its side-view mirror. I drop the phone dangling and give chase, but the car rolls smoothly out of my range and onto a ramp to the freeway.



Disheartened, letting the phone hang and heading back downtown, I think I recognize someone, a street vendor. Nothing definite; just a feeling. With a little kiosk set up under an umbrella. No hot dogs or soft pretzels, no chestnuts. On closer inspection, under a gypsy's tablecloth, I see his machine: a heavy-looking black metal box with wires and lights, sprouting electrodes on long wires.

The Hookup Man—

He disarms me with a grizzled smile, pushes a worn leather cap back on his head and says, "Hi Nort. Ready for another shot?"

I run home, a skinny child from the schoolyard bully. Home: to Moira's place, where I have to keep trying, imagining that one of these days I'll catch the inbound timewarp and I'll be welcomed.

The doorbell rings and rings. I no longer have a workable key; the locks have been changed. But still I picture Moira stumbling to the door in curlers, her eyes puffy with sleep. I try to decide whether her first reaction will be a smile or a scowl. I'll make up my mind from that first response, gauging if it's be worth it to actually cross the threshold.

A pot-bellied bald man in a holey tee-shirt and boxer shorts—Simon Drudge—at last comes to the door, and says, "You again? Fuck, I'm gonna call the cops this time, I swear. Wakin' people up in the middle of the night."

Is it me or him? So far as I can tell, this particular day is still well daylit. "I'm looking for Moira Summers. Moira doesn't live here anymore?"

“I don’t know any fuckin’ Moira,” he said. “Go away and let people sleep.” And he turns away muttering, slamming the door in my face loud enough to wake half the neighborhood. I walk on down the empty sidewalk alone. Around me, I perceive that now it is, after all, darker than I thought. In fact it’s downright black.

A cab stops, green Olds: Myrtle! But a dark-brown man with a heavy, sagging face is driving. The insignia of Hardacre Cab Co. blares from the doors and roof.

“Ride, mister?”

It’s a question with only one answer. Behind me the back door opens, and a rough hand pushes me in.

So this is it, I thought: the high tribunal. At last I would get to face my tormentors. I was ushered down a long echoing hallway of high marbled ceilings and walls and polished floors, to a chamber behind massive high doors of carved wood. The two guards who’d prodded me forward, wearing white caps and spats, and sporting gold braid on the shoulders of their smart blue uniforms, stood at attention now while the doors opened, and a sad-eyed lawyer with a false smile and a careless patch of black hair on his forehead reached to fetch me in.

He whispered to me something I didn’t catch and then sat in the second aisle, leaving me to stand at the altar, the raised dais where a nameless bureaucrat sat with a bored expression. He occupied a position of obvious power but dressed like a functionary: with a bulging tan leisure suit, and a powder-blue shirt open at the collar. His broad, bland face wore the remnants of baby fat which padded his sharp eyes and

small, tight mouth. This one, I knew in my victim's heart, had connived and doublecrossed his way to this molybdenum throne, which dully gleamed under his buttocks in the great hall he doubtless called his palace.

“Smith,” he sneered, “you have not done well.”

I held my tongue.

“Why have you not fulfilled what was required of you?”

Still I hesitated, desperately wishing for the sudden inspiration of a survival strategy. Lacking any more creative solution, I figured I'd have to fight this paragon of dull mediocrity with my own vengeful blandness.

“Speak! Or would you have those who are more willing coax your tongue out of your mouth for you?”

All other things being equal, I thought, he'd be the man in gray flannel suit, necktie and morning paper on his way to his morning train. And I'd be cozy at my workstation, plying blameless code.

“I'm not sure I understand the question,” I began, determined at the very least, to buy time with self-righteous innocence.

The man's quivering jowls told me this tack would not satisfy him. But I refused to kowtow. In fact I thought, foolishly or not, that I might at last be able to bully my way to some answers of my own. Face to face with the beast, something had to give.

“I'm not sure what it was, or is, that I'm supposed to do, and for whom. Is it for you, may I ask?”

“You may not ask. Nor should it be necessary to go over all this. You’re a poor student whose mind has been elsewhere than on his lessons. The signs have been clear. The truth is, you had no heart for it, or were too stupid to figure out your mission from the evidence at hand. We know too much about you for me to believe the latter; therefore you must have backed away from your duty either from laziness or lack of spine—which amounts in any case to the same weakness. You know the evolutionary status of the invertebrates, don’t you?”

“No,” I countered. “But I know a parasite when I see one.”

My judge rose forward in his seat, pointed a long fat finger at the spot between my eyes, and said, “take this nonentity away. I never want to see his face again—anywhere!”

How dramatic, I thought. You stool. Those terms are ones I’ll gladly accept. But I held my tongue while I still had it. The lawyer gazed forlornly at me over his bifocals, and the guards came to take me away.

They tossed me out on the street. A free man?—the concept can be relativized forever. A green Hardacre cab drove by, and another; both Myrtle-green. It was the middle of the night: or dark enough to be so. I didn’t know where to go. Sheila’s apartment? She too had failed to answer her door at my repeated ringings, every time I’d gone there.

Maybe if I went back to the Biotech Boutique, I’d find this was all an imaginary journey, a blip in the waveform. Had I found my way, after all, to the womblike fluid of

the float tanks; and would I return from this problematic excursion into inner space, to climb out dripping to a salty towel, and then be ready to—what? Resume my former life? Hey, nothing was free anymore. No more givens.

I started walking, away, away; that was all that mattered.

A third green Hardacre cab swished past, then braked to a stop. A woman's face appeared in the back window. The window rolled down. "Henry," she said. "Come ride with me." It was Giselda.

I got in beside her. She was bedecked with jewels, expensive furs, a blue silk dress sheathing a breathtaking body: bigger and better in all the right places. What kind of magic boutique had she found to work out in?

"How did it go today?" she asked me like any wife.

"Look," I told her. "Let's find a nice crowded place to dance, shall we? I'm not in much of a mood to talk about it." Then I had an anxious premonition. "Unless, that is, you've already got plans to go someplace else, with someone else."

"Have no fear," she said with her huskiest voice, and she pulled my head to her warm, cushioning breasts.

When I awoke in the morning in Giselda's spacious bed, she was gone. I remembered nothing after the cab ride. No dancing, no dreams. There was a note on the breakfast table telling me to help myself, make myself at home. If I cared to stick around long enough, she'd be happy to see me after work.

Same shy, self-deprecating Giselda, I thought, underneath the new jewels. Her house, too, had remained the same as I remembered. The same weird sheets on the walls; Kenny's winter boots still by the door. But who was she working for now?

To ask that was to invite the old Norton back; and to tell the truth, I was rather inclined now to let him go, and to take each day as it came for Henry Whoever Smith.

Maybe, just maybe, I could come to love her, and it would work out in the long run. Hell, she might even help me find honest work in this misnamed "City of Brotherly Love."

And so it came to pass. Giselda had a new job herself, along with a more robust physiognomy. She served as a receptionist at the central traffic tower rising above the otherwise decaying downtown core. Established as the hub of eastern seaboard transit, the Tower, as it was known, offered sophisticated tracking systems for an area far wider than the usual airport's range of coverage. We handled everything from Raleigh to Providence, and as far west as Cincinnati. After a week's intensive training with a simulator, they put me on the night shift, pushing buttons on a data mixer. I occupied one humble workstation in a row of ten, in a grid of a sixty. The overhead lights, the clatter of keys, the hum of voices, the quick gait of willing workers coming and going, all testified to the earnest industry of the place, and I found myself comforted by my useful yet uncontroversial role in it all.

The unit in front of me provided a visual summary of the night sky region-wide: a million darting points of light. After my first hour on the job, these lost distinction and

became a blur, a whirling vortex of origins and destinations. I never had encountered this problem on the simulator.

But I knew my job, what I had to do. I had to keep them whirling, to spin some order out of their intent frenzy, their lightning-bug, swarming ceaselessness. The program handled most of it automatically. I just had to watch for anomalies, capture them and return them back to their original trajectories, back into the nexus of light.

I felt well-suited to my new occupation, as I did also in relation to my new living companion. Gone for a considerable—though unmeasurable—number of weeks, was my daily fear of a psychic intrusion, a discontinuity in space or time. It was hardship enough, though, to shunt past my new mate twice daily on our opposing ten-hour shifts. Raging headaches began to torment my mornings after work. I started drinking vodka for breakfast with Giselda before going to sleep for the day. She stuck to coffee, and on her way out the door, gave me frowning admonitions about my health. Then, by day in her empty bed, my dreams started to take shape again. So I stopped the vodka and drank coffee instead. Decaf, it didn't matter. The dreams redoubled in their intensity. At 5:30 I would awake in a cold sweat in time to jump up, slap together a sandwich, kiss Giselda madly at the door, and run off to the Tower.

All the way to work on the elevated train that snaked over the broken-down city—tenement shells, burned-out cars, smoky parks and battered warehouses, looted shops and garbage-strewn streets—I would daydream about our coming weekend together, picnics on some windswept beach. Late-night dancing in an upbeat, glitzy club. Wee-hour grappling in the bed, together. A succession of nights and days unbroken by that

inevitable disjunction that was sure to catch me out, sooner or later. In the meantime I knew nothing better to do than to moor my fantasy to this little domestic anchor, this life I'd started to believe was mine.

“Could you do me a little favor?” Giselda innocently asked, one evening, as we passed in the front hallway.

I foolishly nodded.

“Take this parcel with you to work, and give it to Colette; she'll know what it's for. But don't let Spencer see it.”

She handed me the long object, wrapped in newspaper, that she'd been holding behind her back. That familiar, gunmetal heft. Oh, my God, no . . .

I told her no way. Uh-uh. Not this time. Get somebody else. I backed toward the door, stumbling over Kenny's boots, thinking just get out, now, before it's too late.

Her face grew dark, astonished. “What do you mean, no?” She held that thing as a hunter would, across a folded arm.

Normal daydreams, innocent fantasies? They now lay scattered like a smashed house of cards. “Look, Gis, I don't want to play this game of yours any more. Do you know what it's doing to me? Do you have any idea what this is even all about, or are you just a pawn, too, trying to save your own ass by drawing me in again?”

I gripped her by the shoulders, and began to shake her roughly. Pawn she might be, but not a paper-doll pawn.



She was real enough. Her wide eyes welled. I let go of her and grabbed the parcel, ripping off the newspaper. It was a folding tripod for a camera.

“It’s Spencer’s birthday present,” she cried, her voice shaking. The gang chipped in on it. Colette was going to wrap it nice in the staff room. I took it with me to work today but then left it in the car. Henry, I don’t know what’s eating you. Is it the headaches again?”

Chipper, where the hell was Chipper?

The headaches continued, and dreams which left me clinging to the only dream I had left. I woke up, I thought, one Tuesday at three and kissed Giselda good-bye and went to my weekly appointment at the Biotech Boutique. They wired me up, hooked me in. Nothing special there: except that the Biotech Boutique was a figment of my forgotten past. That didn’t phase them or me. On this particular Tuesday they told me I was ready for my first battery of evaluative testing. Nothing special there, either, they assured me: just a matter of toying with the brain’s sensory imagination. I would learn how to will lights and colors and sounds and smells, circulation and heartbeat, to do my bidding, or should I say their bidding. No matter: I did well and so they moved me to the float tank.

This was a created environment of total sensory deprivation wherein the mind is set free, to go where it might. I settled into the buoyant brine, unencumbered by wires; as the feedback, so I understood, was magnetic. It was in effect a big long horizontal hookup box with no pricking except that of the salt molecules craving crystallization in

my pores. Muscles slackened, light source dimmed. Learned technique, programmed self-responses. The harmony in a soundless hum: hearing, then leaving behind. I knew where to go, what to do now. Breathe . . .

In this way I was pickling my way to a sense of end-time. With dim internal sounds of engines fading. The pallor of an empty sky. The surprisingly robust memory of Moira, with her fine, spreading hair, the touch of her moist lips, the firmness of her thighs . . .fading to transparent, roseate light. Vaguer dreams in the alleyways of night. Wandering between ashcans of worlds, worthless longings and forgettable aspirations. With one-pointed purpose, yet undefined, except as such: to find that one-pointed purpose. A fervent drive, ambition, energy: to seek and find and thus put behind me. To expose and denounce—in order to drift further, to discover what lay beyond.

Finally, when that whole apprehended universe turns back on itself, and turns me back to see where I've come from, my mission becomes simply to get back home. The open trail has led to the edge of the maze, and there has found the universal force, the ultimate bending strength of gravity. In this quest to find my way out, I circle, spiral, back, into the maze returning. Yet at every turn, I still have to make a choice . . .

The smiling Mr. Wood has told me there's no pressure. This is the man I trusted: the man who, like Giselda, bridges dreams. He says I am to let everything else go. I am to assume that a valid choice remains: to stay here, in controlled temperature, with no solid contact, with open-ended time available . . . that is, until my skin in the salt-bath begins to pucker and fold, back in on itself.

In the meantime, the hidden camera watches me being watched; the electronic tracers dutifully trace. My inner motion is momentarily frozen, pixel by pixel: I am the icy current caught rushing down from a high green and shadowy lake; I am the mottled clouds stilled in the sky beyond.

The camera catches me in light and darkness, a red leaf outside on the avenue, hanging on a sinuous branch, trembling in wait. Bare adamic rock, I shine up gleaming gray from the chilled earth underneath this tiled floor, this hollow tank. In the waiting room, a bowl sits before me, half-full of roses. I see in it, her face steaming wet, upturned in the bath. I cannot remember her name. The fogged windows streams with tears.

Suddenly I am out there, in the Forest of Nothing, at the crossroads choosing the dangerous path, or the safe, with no apparent difference by which to choose. The ice-crinkled river beside me runs with no bottom visible; while a song without end sounds in the trees overhead.

I retreat down a spiral tunnel, inward, toward my past. Is that where I was going, all along? The gallery inside the tunnel shows markings from all the ages, for all of history: the Greco-Roman, the Australasian, the Judeo-Christian, the Negroid, the Anglo-Saxon, the Arabic, the Balto-Slavic, the Mesopotamian, the Javan, on and on over the flickering rockface. When I leave I will carry some power of each, percolating back up through me, through an arbitrary number of intervening ages, to an unnamed Namerican locality of treespace and rocktime, where certain pioneers witnessed wet musk-oxen standing steaming in the early morning sunlight: a vision recalling, further back in

another itinerary, water buffalo trampling rice. The alternative? One is as good as another. I find myself gazing indolently upon yellowed pages in a Restoration printshop, wherein said pioneers are denigrated by the scathing wits and pompous fops of the dingy backstreets of London, with taxation and truffles thick in the air, beggars at the keyholes, and pirates on the billowy main . . . while beneficent Nature smiles on, genial in her wide appearances and diverse manifestations.

My past, indeed. As if barbarian blood, deported criminals, renegades, mountebanks, religious exiles, slaves, rogues and rascals of every description and profane denomination, could be enough to sustain an empire of hybrid superiority on which the sun would not set! Though, perhaps for some more enduring—might one say, cosmic purpose—the English nation did procure a nesting place for its gypsy seedlings, where they would acquire a decidedly wild, woodland flavor. Personally speaking, I was root-enriched with bonemeal of mother Russia, with Prussian steel providing the guiding temper, and French lilies the delicate aroma. These ingredients were swirled at last in a simmering broth under a starry Pennsylvania night . . .

The place where they found me.

Do I dare foretell a different fate ahead, in the nights or years to come? More likely I await the bell with odds doubling, a withered nag in a posthaste race around a muddy track, my knowledgeable backers betting on the equalizing influence of the mud. Will there be advantage in plodding steadily while the other fillies (my fast-track alternatives at the Tower passing me by) groan more ambitiously in the churning muck?

Yes, old Amphitryon will trudge on, only dreaming of golden oats in the silver chalice awarded to—

Am I horse, rider or better?

Only the latter, I'm afraid: a helpless spectator. My ticket stub is already worn and sweat-smearred, from holding it so anxiously. Have I missed a payoff? The fog rolls in again, settles in comfortably and watches with its gray smile as I fidget in my bath. A warm bath, and nothing more.

The next race, I'm afraid, will begin soon, and I'll be doomed to turn on gluey hooves around the railing which keeps me from the meadow to my left. Blinders guard me from such green sight, and I can sense only the intoxicating aroma of the fresh alfalfa just skirting the infield rail.

I must go now.

In the waiting room Giselda sits in a light spring dress. My heavy coat is gone from the rack. It's the end of June, the magazine covers tell me, between wars. On the radio as I pay for my session, a voice chants something about the technological end of creation firsttime everytime hangface freefall postclimax dogeatdogworldblues, or was it wind? There's a break for the weather.

We turn it off by going out, into rain in every direction. I have not volunteered for the last war, I tell Giselda, and I don't plan on doing so for the next. I will stay home to write my memoirs, or a steamy mystery. She smirks at me, my arch sense of humor. Then she hails down a cab, and when I see the sagging face of the brownman driver and

she reaches from behind me to open the back door, my recordable memories become obsolete, terminated.

So I can't say where we went or why. I only remember a subconscious essence, through which I seemed to pass as if through a float-tank membrane: fluttering thickly through the dimensions of being, through seas of dinosaur blood, to land cruelly naked on a jungle floor.

I cried out; the scene changed. But not enough. A panther stalked me to the base of a broad tree I couldn't climb. I cringed like a tailless monkey beneath the branches. The growl, the hiss, turned my eyes, my hair white.

All health and color was replenished in time, while I lay dreaming deeper in a cascading dream, the earth steady at my ear.

Then dark tales and sad, furious and sinister, shattered my landscapes of counted sheep. The survivors (myself among them, bleating) were shipped off to a familiar Bay for a more scientific brand of slaughter.

Yes, Witch Bay: where the head witch broods still, clucking to herself. She holds dominion there (while also working for Them)—delivering evil and heartbreak at moderate rates, thanks to her small overhead.

At some point in the first night in her corral, I remembered: Jesus is dead. I dreamed of the King of Hearts, staring up at me from the lacquered tiles of the abattoir.

Dreams within dreams: these are the worst delusions. You wake up astonished from love with the golden girl, a little wistful: and find her next to you, sleeping. Or, if

your home address has been redesignated “Windy Bay,” you wake up relieved, so relieved, from the nightmare: only to stare the fiend in the face.

You discover that yours is a universal address: Place of Skulls.

In Babylon—it occurred to me as I woke from one leaf of this book of dreams to another—there would be manna, any day now. In New York, confetti and lead-footed balloon men.

Yet, and yet, each day I awoke, still snug, in Giselda’s gingerbread house. She was a merciful companion to me, loving and forgiving. Each night I made it somehow to work and back, staring at those strands of light without getting caught in any nefarious web. Giselda and I started taking some of those weekend excursions we’d been talking about. To the Jersey shore; to the state park for long forest walks; to New York for a day of shopping or a museum tour. We even started saying things like how neat it would be to have “young ones” with us—by which we carefully meant, our own children.

She never talked about Kenny, Jr. I understood he was still with Ken, though the winter days were lengthening into spring. His name just never came up.

Waking life, as I thought of it in contrast to the unmerciful dreams, was beginning to feel normal. That was one way of looking at it. There was another way which part of me knew was equally, and possibly more valid as a description of the central truth: that each night upon awaking I would find myself on another rung of the ladder to hell.

Going down. Entering a new scene, interacting with a new cast of characters, and having

to play a part I'd never studied. To take an exam in a subject for which I'd never bothered to attend the classes, or even register. To drive a new kind of car . . .

Myrtle, where was Myrtle? It was hard to piece my new life together, even after weeks, or months. Hard to reckon the passage of time, since each evening when I emerged from sleep, it would be like starting over: only somewhere farther away from home, a moment deeper in. Giselda didn't seem to have aged: just filled out. But maybe her Kenny had grown up and left home. Her little brown car still purred right along. But Shorty's was long gone, given way to a pool hall. One night in a flash I thought about Evans referring to his secretary as "Nancy," though I knew her as "Laura." When I tried to ring him up again, the line was out of service.

At the end of each long afternoon I could only say to myself, "Tomorrow, I'll try again." But I knew that it might not matter, because it might be a one-way path, all the way. I nearly gave up my search for the help file in the sky when I realized what it would likely tell me: the subdirectory listings are unavailable once the critical keystroke is entered, once the ignition is fired. You're already down the line in the logical sequence, and no recovery is possible for the deleted data or corrupted code.

I began, in short, to understand that I might never be able to go back to my earth, my reality, my past, the root of my choice—wherever in the encrypted system it might have resided. Was it indeed a warm salt-bath, a float tank in the Biotech Boutique? Hard to check it out when their building was no longer there, but a corner park with rusty swings. Not so easy to dream back into place a once-dreamed parking lot, a cozy apartment with Moira. Gisela or no Giselda, witch or fairy princess, I was convinced that



it was no longer 2009, but some time far beyond that. Just how far, I was afraid even to guess.

The old black horse looked at me with sad red eyes the color of summer strawberries, the color of the ribbons on the wreaths for sale in the wagon. I turned in my tracks and walked back up Haliburton Boulevard, suddenly aware of a choice I still had.

Just play it straight, Norton. Act as if everything were normal.

Slowly, deliberately, I paced my steps forward, watching the traffic, making sure of my intention.

In this way I got myself to the office, ten minutes past eleven, by the clock on the wall.

“Hi Nort,” Giselda said in a cheery voice, out of habit. But she gave me a warning glance.

I squeezed her delicate shoulder gently with my hand as I went by. It gave off a puff of love-scent, from our previous night together. I noticed how frail and fragile she was, downright insubstantial.

“Gerald wants to see you,” she said.

“Right now?” I could hear him talking on the phone.

“He said he’d talk to you when you came in, but he’s started the weeklies right now, so I guess he’ll catch you when he’s done.”

“Know what it’s about?”

She winced. “He was grumbling about all your time off. I told you to wait a day and clear this one with him.”

“They didn’t have any afternoon spots.” I whispered. “Anyway, he gave me permission the other times. I’m still getting treatment. I don’t have to take his bullshit.”

Giselda just raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

“So what’s the big deal? I’ll work overtime today.” Inwardly my heart sank. How could I answer Gerald’s accusations? My sense of time and place had gone all haywire.

“Something’ll work out,” Giselda promised me.

It didn’t sound good. A nice spot in the Tower, perhaps?

What was the use?

Then I remembered my resolution, the one that had got me back this far, at least. I went ahead and logged in as if it were a normal day.

Not a half-hour into my work, I must have punched the wrong key. Lines of data flashed out in a wink and were replaced by lines of text, appearing in spontaneous bunches as if by dictation:

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Listen, he still doesn’t know anything. My boy Harrison is leading him all around the bush with this and that theory, and he’s swallowing it all, but getting nowhere. He’s in it to the hilt, now.

What’s that? Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry about Evans; he’s still on board.

\*\*\*\*\*

What? Yeah. Effington's baby. But what the hell, as far as he's concerned, it's just a beta test for a subsidiary feature of the new metaprogram.

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Sure, the main package, as advertised: "to combine all our company functions under one access umbrella, within one user shell,"—as per S.G. policy, right?

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The subsidiary? Yeah, sure. It's the "Future Connectivity" part of the program, called Future.Con. Shipping by the first of the year. It's supposed to provide the intelligence, at any given point in a given company's operations, to project any of a number of parameters forward: design trends, ordering curves, geostrategic probabilities, metals supply, the works. With access to all the data in the subcategories. Well, sure, if it comes to that.

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No, of course not. For now he stays in the dark.

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Yup. Today. As soon as I get off the horn.

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'kay. Pronto.

Then my data appeared again, pristine as new-fallen, black snow. And Gerald came into my peripheral field of view, walking down the hall. I could discern an ominous look about his mouth.

He motioned me into the conference room. I rose immediately and followed him there.

“Norton,” he said. “Sit down.”

I was cowed by his tone of authority. “Yessir.”

Then he smiled warily, disarming my own paranoia. “How many times do I have to tell you—you don’t have to call—well, what the hell. The thing is this. It seems like you’ve been taking a lot of time off, the last couple of weeks. Without even calling in, most of the time. I understand you’ve been seeing a doctor, or a couple of them. I don’t want to pry into the nature of your illness. But frankly, Norton, it’s got to the point where something has to give. Your workload is piling up and you’re getting further and further behind.”

“Yessir. I mean, yes, I know. Everything you say, I guess, is true.”

“You guess?” His ruddy brow wrinkled.

“Yeah, well. It’s been a hard time for me. There’s all these personal problems and . . .”

And today, with what I’d just seen on the screen, there was more. I was justified in my long-building suspicions. Maybe my old world was crashing around me; yet enough sunshine-truth had broken through that I became radiant with it. I took on a new measure of authority, and spoke out:

“Gerald, I’d like to know, from you, straight across, what’s going on. What’s this about the Effington program; about the computers around here? Why are you doing this to me?”

He cocked his head—just like, I thought, a rooster catching first sight of a juicy worm wriggling in the grass.

“Doing what, Norton? I haven’t exactly told you I’m letting you go, though it seems I have little choice.”

I brushed this inevitability aside. “Look, you know damn well what I’m talking about. The transcription of your last phone call scrolled onto my screen a few minutes ago.”

A cloud crossed his face. “It did? Hmm, that’s odd. Well, I don’t know what you saw or overheard, but I will say this. There appears to be a little problem with the new metaprogram Effington gave us. A bug of some sort. We’re aware of it and working on clearing it up. It doesn’t appear to be affecting the major program functions, though.”

I leaned closer to him, hissing. “Do you know what this has been like, going through this?—a fucking torture trip through hell.”

Gerald’s cool blue eyes iced up. “I’m sorry that you seem to have become such a sick and unhappy man, Mr. Norton. I had high hopes for your advancement with us. Unfortunately things seemed to have changed. And I’m sorry that you want to put the blame on me. But I am responsible for keeping this business running, and I have no choice, at this point, but to hire someone I can count on, to replace you. Giselda will give

you two weeks' additional pay. You'll notice deductions for the unauthorized days of leave. I'm afraid that's all I have to say to you."

He stood with harder eyes than I'd ever seen: eyes he was willing to be hard. I sat slumped in my chair. He extended a formal hand. I ignored it, shaking my head in a bitter fog.

Gerald walked out and I sat brooding, wondering about legal recourse, about whether I could continue any kind of relationship with Giselda now—and about whether, freed from working contact with this infernal program of Effington's, I might yet shake this cybermonkey off my back.

Harry came up the stairs, stopped for a few words with Giselda, and came by my desk to pay his respects. "Coffee from Shorty's has gone up to two bucks, since this morning. I took a chance and brought you some."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"If you don't want it I'll take it. I've got to work late today. I told Gerald I could cover some of your territory. Too bad I don't have a shot of something to put in it for you."

I looked for my watch—still missing. The clock on the wall read four-thirty.

I felt like crying on his shoulder; except that I recalled what Gerald had said about Harry during the conversation I'd overheard on my screen—five lost hours ago. What had Gerald called him? "My boy Harrison."

Timewarps aside, I didn't want to believe it. I went ahead and told Harry what had happened with Gerald, saving this personal reference for last.

His black eyes blazed, and he drank down half his coffee at a gulp. “Hey. I knew the axe was coming, true. He said he had to tell you himself. I don’t know fuckall about this time shit, except you left at lunch, came in an hour ago and got it from Gerald. That was going to happen anyway. As for setting me up in this scheme to hoodwink you, that’s purest bullshit. Yes there’s a bug, yes I’m working on it, and no way have I been giving you a bill of goods about what’s been happening to you. I see no connection between the Effington program and your troubles. There’s got to be something going on in our own software or in the substructure. I’d say, at this point, it’s probably substructure. But I’m not in on anything you don’t know.” His hurt eyes pleaded for credence—or forgiveness.

“How do you explain Gerald’s comment, then, about my swallowing your theories? Am I supposed to swallow this one, too?”

Now his eyes, like Gerald’s, hardened: these into black stone. “You can believe whatever the fuck you like. You’re a free man now.”

“Am I?”

I wasn’t man enough or free enough, yet, to kick in that bloody monitor eye on my way out of the office that day, for what I assumed would be the last time.

My vision clarified itself, pulling with a taffy-like suction back to a blank screen, inside my cubicle at the Biotech Boutique.

A light knocking sounded at the cubicle door. “Mr. Norton, your max time’s up. Are you all right?” The door opened. I noticed that the blonde attendant with the talcum complexion had cleaned up her lipstick.

As she unhooked me I smelled my own sweat contrasting with her air-brushed coolness. I retrieved my watch from the counter, muttered something unintelligible and rose dutifully to go.

On the way out, responding to Mr. Wood’s solicitation, I said I’d got my money’s worth but would pass on the tank for now. He gave me a shrug, a hard smile, a twinkling eye, and a twirl of his handlebar mustache.

It was five past four already, so checking back in at the office would be pointless. I had told Gerald my appointment would take an hour or two past lunch. How would he react if I didn’t show up till the next morning? I was afraid I’d already been shown the answer; and I dreaded the replay tomorrow. How time flies, I would plead, when your life is going to blazes.

I walked home in the darkening day—not to Moira’s and a night alone, but to a place I’d come to know more intimately of late—Giselda’s. Myrtle sat outside, parked where she belonged, behind Giselda’s compact Ford. Like a dog, I thought, who has run off and then returned, playing innocent. When I walked in the unlocked house—tripping over Kenny’s boots on the way in—I found my bony mistress nursing a vodka martini on the couch and scratching Chipper’s ears.

“Well well,” she trilled. “The spy who came in from the cold.”

“What do you mean by that?”



“What happened? We were all worried you’d drowned or something.”

“I’ll tell you about it sometime.” Assuming a familiarity I could only hope Giselda would be ready to accept, I collapsed on the couch beside her, laying my head on her lap. “Give me some of that grog, matey.”

She didn’t resist, but brought her glass to my lips, and then comforted me with a light, contemplative tracing of a fingertip over my face.

That first large cool sip surely did hit the spot, but the vodka let me taste a headache I wanted to forget.

After a moment’s pregnant silence she said, “I kind of thought you might come by here, so I wanted to wait for you. We’re invited for dinner at Harry’s.”

I took a deep breath. Sometimes the choices just come ready-made. But does that make them any easier?

I walked softly, as if treading on eggshells at night in an old folk’s home, not sure why, just noticing. The way you avoid loud noises when nursing a godzilla hangover. Carried my tipling, rippling, unsteady jelly glass of wine into the so-called living room strewn as always with computer guts, to have a look at Harry’s new VR gear. I was wishing I’d stayed home, to rest, to sleep . . .to dream—No!

This “party” was dream enough; my day was full enough of visions; I dropped the slimy vinyl headset on my foot.

It started buzzing. I picked it up gingerly, set my glass carefully atop the heirloom TV, and pushed buttons on the left ear until the blessed thing stopped.

Nothing like breaking a smart kid's new toy.

From the kitchen still came the happy sound of voices and radio music. I wondered if I should have stayed in my element, springing for an evening in the float tanks.

No again! I'd tasted those too, one way or another. There was no escape anymore, anywhere.

I wandered with wine glass back into the kitchen to find them whipping up a Caesar salad. I'd done my part already by setting three places at the cheap dinerette table with checkered tablecloth, not red-and-white but blue-and-yellow. Giselda, wearing a loose-bloused, sleeveless satiny dress, was giggling. The bottle of wine on the counter, already half-empty, presided over the funeral of two pre-barbecued chickens at rest on blood-red, sauce-smearred foil. A crusty loaf of French bread lay beside them awaiting the knife.

Harry brushed Giselda's bare shoulder with a reverent cupped hand as he brought the salad bowl to table.

"Family," I said with a crooked smile, feeling as if I was guest at a honeymoon. I tossed down what was left in the jelly glass and went for more.

"Well," Harry said brushing his hands like that's that. "What do you think?" He raised his wine glass; he and Giselda had the two with proper stems.

"Looks like I came to somebody's party."

Giselda flinched, and reached for the bottle on the counter.

“That’s good,” Harry said. “It’s my birthday. Twenty-nine smackers.” He planted a kiss on Giselda’s cheek and she pecked him back, before filling her glass. “That’s one.” He drained his glass, then said to her, “Gis, could you water this puppy too? Thanks, dear.”

The lipstick stayed on his cheek. Was I dreaming?

“What I meant,” Harry said once more to me, “was the equipment. Do you think I’ll be able to give the Spiral Links a run for their money?”

Giselda tittered. “I’m gonna find out about these guy secrets one way or another, you know.”

I figured she was talking to me. Her billowy silk blouse, an electric green color, shimmered in the light, shoulders reflecting the bare kitchen bulb overhead.

I didn’t know who to answer.

Harry was host. “Let’s eat, kids.”

Funeral or wedding, birthday or dream, I was goddamned hungry.

Giselda sat listening, picking over chicken bones, while Harrison expounded, coffee cup in hand. He looked a little ridiculous with the lipstick still on his cheek, but hey, he was the birthday boy. It wasn’t my place to tell him to wipe it off; and Giselda, more proud than shy at this point, also neglected to mess with it. Harry went on none the wiser—unless he too were showing off this badge of newly displayed affection . . .”And it just happens that this guy Norton, either because he’s brushed against the wrong icon, or because he’s entered code into the wrong sector, taps his fingers on the right key

sequence one day, and something happens. Or he's plugged into it with headphones while he's working, and somehow—physically? digitally?—there's a transformation of soundwaves via the inner ear back into electrochemical pulses, which carry the imprint of program code and then go to work on the pathways in his brain. So the program's messenger, let's call it, has access to all the brain's nooks and crannies and does its projection work there—follow me?"

Giselda put a greasy wing remnant down, wiped her hands, and drank some more from my glass, the only remaining wine. "More or less," she said. "Let's say less." She giggled. "But go ahead. It's fascinating." She looked at me with eyes gleaming. As if guinea pigs can be heroes.

Then Harrison got her attention again: "Okay. And meanwhile the virus program is making use, also, of the company's proprietary hardware and client information, and synthesizing it all to make a virtual picture of the future."

My distracted thoughts about Giselda and Harry were brought back home to the more serious issue at hand. Something twigged my memory of the leaked "conversation" of Gerald's, a reference to the Effington metaprogram and its design for "future connectivity."

Harry continued, "There's plenty of geostrategic data there to work with, a lot of weighted vectors from major players. We're talking Pentagon, Congreve Aviation, the embedded links to the Martinson accounts . . . so it's not hard to imagine a program which might glean projections from a bunch of these sources, to give a composite view of a future world; a world, that is, with this particular guidance system, if you will, in the

middle of it. But for some reason the guidance system has to be docked to a human brain, to be interactive. Otherwise it's no . . . fun for it. This is just my hypothesis, you understand."

Harry had switched to addressing me, and Giselda was gazing absently about, as if looking for something more to eat.

"Yeah, yeah," I told him. "But do go on. We're being fascinated, right?"

Giselda brought her vacant attention back to the table and nodded wanly. She'd reached her blood alcohol threshold, I guessed. Some got more talkative. Some just zeroed out.

"But what do I know?" Harry said to me. "This just occurred to me this afternoon, when I thought I would try something, and I keyed in that Bolero thing you told me about. Don't look so alarmed, Brother Norton. Nothing weird happened to me. At least, it hasn't yet." He laughed loosely, with, to my ears, only a slight tinge of uneasiness.

Once again I remembered how I'd scorned Moira for her confusion of human and computer viruses. Now I let out an idiotic laugh. "So you think it actually might be contagious?"

Hearing that, Giselda looked as if she suddenly felt something crawling under her dress.

Harrison said, "I dunno. But what if it is hungry for more data? We could have already spread it to Martinson's DataBoost machines, or who knows, anywhere on the Net by now. Then any operator is at risk. If it needs at least one human brain to feed its

flexible looping, then maybe it would thrive on more than one. Yeah, I think this thing could be dangerous if it got loose—”

Giselda added suddenly, “— if it hasn’t already.”

I tried to ignore her and said to Harry, “What do you mean, got loose?”

“Well, hopefully, you’re just kind of like, a pilot run. When you crack, it learns. Maybe it’s a pre-release version, getting its final bugs ironed out. Then when you go under, it’s ready to move on to the next victim: or to spread into the public domain.”

I almost said “God,” then reconsidered.

Giselda abruptly changed the subject, from one unpleasantry to another: “I hope Gerald goes easy on you, tomorrow.” I imagined her holding Hairy’s hand under the table.

“Listen, you guys, I know I screwed up today, but tell me this for real. Have I been getting way off base in my work, from what you can tell, or what? I’m talking actual work. Do I deserve being canned, if it comes to that?”

They looked at each other as if to say “What’s the use?,” then shook their heads and said “No, Nort, not at all,” in the appropriate soothing tones.

I wanted to go further, to go all the way now. So I told Giselda—and Harry for virtually the second time—about the conversation of Gerald’s that I’d overheard, the business about Effington, Future.Con, and all the rest; and about getting fired by Gerald.

“So there it is. What’s up, people? Am I crazy, or is somebody lying to me? What the fuck is going on?”

They looked at each other again, then back at me with sad, wounded eyes.

Pitying me.

“Forget about me, then. Think about yourselves, this merger coming up. Are you sure you know what you’re getting into?”

That seemed to spur Harrison on to some original thinking about the subject. He shifted uncomfortably and said, “Wait a minute, here, Nort. You say that Gerald and this guy he was talking to, and Effington . . .”

“Kenny,” Giselda blurted.

We both looked at her.

“He was talking to Kenny Hart, I bet.”

Harry retreated suddenly: “But it never happened, remember. Norton put in a normal morning’s work and spent the afternoon navel-gazing. Effington doesn’t enter into the equation, and neither does old our friend Kenneth Hart. I mean, we are in touch with reality here, the three of us, am I right?” He picked up a chicken carcass and tore it in two, holding half in a fist out to each of us, and grinned madly.

“Wait a sec,” I offered, ignoring the mess he proceeded to drop in front of us.

“Just consider for a moment what it is that I tapped into. Call it all subconscious bullshit if you like. But the way it comes across, Harry here, and even my shrink Evans are in on it, keeping me in the dark. They didn’t say anything about you, Giselda. Now let’s let Harry finish and see what he has to say for himself and his friends. I do believe we have an operating theory of a real program doing some real damage somewhere, correct? Or,

Harry, are you supposed to go along with me only so far, and then bail out? What comes next?" I almost supplied "My lover?" but choked it up.

More wounded eyes from Harry, before he averted them to the sad pile of bones and responded, "It just doesn't add up. That's my problem with it. Besides me being clean—you can believe that or not. What I want to know is, if Gerald's the bad guy, what's in it for him? And why you? I agree with your point on that, all along. You didn't do shit to deserve what's been coming down on you. That's why I say—right from the beginning, Nort, am I right?—you gotta look deeper. Look at these digital conversations, these so-called experiences of yours, as VR programs. They don't jive—like your unsynchronous office clocks, for example—and that fact gives us a clue that they're not real. They're generated in your mind: through your ears, through your eyes as you view your computer screen, or the Biotech monitor . . . maybe, okay, even in your daily reality, even at this fucking, excuse the French bread, tabletop, as we speak. As your mind creates it for you, get it? Because your brain has its own program that this here bug, if it is a bug, has sunk its teeth into. Norton, I think you can follow me: if you blame Gerald, or me, you're just buying into the program."

It was a lot to swallow, so I swallowed hard. I rapped my knuckles on the blue and yellow tabletop, just to be sure. The checks hadn't changed, somewhere along the way, to red and white. "Okay, so given all that, I still have to choose what to believe: that what you're telling me now, for instance, is more real than what I saw earlier scrolling down that screen."



“Yeah.” He held an open palm, still greasy from the chicken, with outstretched fingers in front of my face, to demonstrate once more his unarguable claim to reality. I took his wrist and pulled it gently down to the table. Our hands rested on the pile of bones.

“Oh, you guys,” Giselda groaned.

I decided to believe that Harry was right. Now his dark eyes looked open and friendly, deep and true, and I started crying, right there at the table.

Giselda moved closer and put an arm around me to soothe me. It helped. When I recovered, I wanted to nail things down just a little tighter.

“Harry, I buy what you’re saying. And I’m sorry for accusing you, or suspecting you. I guess you understand, anyway. And you’re right: what I still don’t get is why me, goddammit? Who or what is behind this thing? Is it Effington, Hart, or some other bigwig in Siltech Genex? Or is it a bug that crawled out of a weirdo hacker’s wet dream? I guess I hope that’s it. Because if not, I’m still in deep shit. What I mean is, is somebody still trying to get me to kill for them? Maybe they’re just trying to drive me nuts because I’ve opposed their little buyout. Which is the worst-case scenario? You tell me.”

Harrison meekly offered, “Maybe, yeah, this is Hart’s baby.” He glanced at Giselda. “Though it seems like a freakin’ lot of trouble to go to when they could railroad a deal right over your head, regardless.”

“That’s true. But what about that rifle? As a would-be assassin, I’m being used to go after someone else. Who?”

In the tone of a schoolgirl playing “Clue,” Giselda chimed in: “I’ve got it! Gerald’s trying to get rid of Kenny. This is his creation. He planted it through that music file you keyed in that day, right?”

“Naw, you guys.” Harry completed his denial of the hard-wired theories he was propounding earlier. He pushed his chair away and got up and began clearing dishes, bones, bottle and glasses away from the table. “You’re just playing into that bug’s hands when you talk like that. I tried the VRUSIC thing myself and nothing happened, all right? A two-bit light show. I’ve got better in my living room, right now, half the price. It’s all red herrings. That’s what it’s all about, the name of its game, don’t you see? If you don’t believe it’s real, it’s not real. Just let the bullshit go, and get on with your life.”

My poorman’s philosopher was persuasive as ever, but still I wasn’t so sure. I couldn’t help but suspect Harrison, at this point, of a rearguard action to protect Gerald, if they were indeed in on it together. It seemed to me that Gerald had some definite responsibility to bear, when all the cards had been played—even if he was just carrying out somebody else’s mission.

It was funny, really. As I pushed my chair away from the table, I realized I still felt pissed off at being fired. Now I couldn’t even trust my own instincts anymore. Because I hadn’t been fired, yet.

Another thought tried to squeeze in, to join the chaotic picture that swam in my fevered brain, and that had to do with Harry exposing himself to *Bolero*, while I was hooked up across town . . .but I told it this disk space was full.

For all my own fears of being left out in the cold, I still had Giselda's warm body leaning beside me as I steered Myrtle home, that night. In my rearview vision I held the snapshot of an unsteady Harrison on his wonky wooden doorstep waving good-bye to us—a little wistfully, I thought.

Giselda and I made sweet intoxicated love together and drifted into the cloudland of a wholly unformed future. In a rare and precious moment I felt the bliss of present happiness. What, for instance, made me think that I was lost, that I was apart from that condition known as “happy home”? Here I was, snug in Giselda's bed. What more did I want? Moira? No way. Her sluttish sister Sheila? Less way.

But momentary, oh so momentary. I was too hardened to my fate now, to accept a turn of good fortune so blithely. It was all very fine for me to feel content now, with the warm cozies around me, Giselda's silken thighs. But what might happen when I slept, or when I woke again? Then ask me if I'm where I want to be.

All of these thoughts and feelings—the good and the bad—were by now familiar to me. The difference I felt now was a glimmer of relief, which came from the insight Harry had provided over the picked chicken: that maybe it's not me, not my fault, not an internal delusion or obsession, this chronic searching for peace, for a lost home. Maybe it's just part of the program: what I'm supposed to do. Part of my . . . mission. Part, in other words, of the game. The ongoing game.

That night in Giselda's bed, I dreamed I was walking with Moira outside our old apartment building, the street of familiar buildings, on our way to swim at the new

Philadelphia Aquatic Center eight blocks away. It was charming to visit our old neighborhood, to see what had changed and what hadn't. We arrived at the right place; but past the front door, it became a huge bathhouse at an ocean beach. New Jersey was history, I figured. That's the breaks, I said to Moira.

We didn't pay; just walked in past the turnstile while mingling in the crowd. We split up to go into the separate change rooms. I went out to the beach, waded into the water, where a polyglot of voices and skin colors mingled in the small surf. I looked for Moira but didn't see her. I swam a bit. Still no Moira. I went back into the bathhouse to have a look around. There was a series of basement hallways on the ground floor, under the change rooms. I met a guy who didn't speak English, except to tell me in a heavy accent that this was Persia—he used the old name for Iran. Yeah, right, I said. In that case one of us is a long way from home. There was no way up to the main floor; the doors at either end of the hallways above the short flights of stairs were both shut, barred and locked. I started to get nervous about all this. But the ground floor doors still opened outside.

I went back out to the murky water of the beach: tepid water under misty formless gray air—I'd hardly call it sky. The water now was empty of bathers but full of fishing boats pulling fish in like crazy—a change in the tide? A swarthy guy with a better handle on English, standing on the shore nearby with a fishing rod casting into the surf, showed me how to pull them in. He would cut off the heads of his catch to use for bait, bringing in successively larger ones. This is all very fine, I thought, but where the hell is Moira? I went back in the basement and tried one of the rooms. A women's self-defense

workshop: I didn't like the looks I got and backed out into the hall, closing the door tight. Then a woman came up behind me, put an arm around me and said, "Hi, Gordie, what are you doing here?"

It was Giselda; though in the dream, she was a smaller woman with an English accent, and she seemed to be an old girlfriend—from my "London days," though I'd never lived there. Her hair was different; tied into a scarf with just some alluring black wisps peeking out. The same lithe little body I knew only too well.

"I was swimming," I replied. I was still in damp trunks. "You're going into this class?"

"Yes, it's a blast. You want to come in, we'll practice on you." A big smile, seductive eyes.

"No thanks. I'm looking for my friend, actually, a large woman with light brown hair named Moira. You seen her around?"

"No, I can't say that I have. Your friend, you say?"

"We live together. In Vancouver. We're on holiday. What about you?" I felt a prickly, rising tension between us, not unpleasant.

"Still single. I'm just traveling about, as always. Gotta go into class now. But Gordie—it's good to see you again. You wouldn't have time for—a cup of tea or something somewhere, we could arrange . . ." Her hand was gently insistent, rubbing a small circle in the hollow of my lower back. Her lips were moist, her pupils large and getting larger. So large they could swallow a man whole.

"Maybe, oh Giselda . . ."

We arranged a date that afternoon at a tea shop on the boulevard nearby, an old-style bazaar-type street. In the meantime I felt obliged to keep searching but could not find Moira, even though I eventually went around and found my way back to the change room entrance, got a maid to check the room for me, and stood and looked at all the departing patrons.

It wasn't like Moira. Had she, too, run into an old friend and made a quick date?

We poured amber tea out of an ancient-looking little samovar at a tiny table in an incense-filled room, amid the babble of unknown tongues. Talked of the old days and of our various relationships. I was still anxious about Moira but managed an objective account of her. "We never married, officially; but we've been what I'd call committed . . ."

"Faithful?"

I eyed Giselda over my cup.

She sipped demurely.

"Yes."

I thought that was taken care of but then she said, "Both of you?"

Involuntarily I looked at my watch. Quarter past five. "I've thought so, yes."

She smiled. Oh, so irresistible.

Out on the street again she served as my guide, pointing out the large yellow-walled palaces on the right that were left by the British. Now, she said, they served as tea and spice warehouses. "Come, let's have a peek inside."

A grand hallway, a bit dusty. Golden colored arching ceilings, richly carpeted floors, winding staircases. Giselda looked around and then opened a door to a wide sort of pantry with shelves of wares—teas and spices, arrayed in retail-sized boxes. She reached for a few.

“Go ahead,” she counseled in a low voice. “There’s no one around.”

“But—this is stealing,” I protested. “Don’t they cut off hands of thieves in Iran?”

“Don’t be silly. Here, just take a few and put them in your pockets.” She was loading up her cloth handbag. I managed to jam a couple of boxes awkwardly into my coat pockets and then hustled us out of there.

“What’s your problem?” she wanted to know, a hurt tone in her voice.

“Me? Why did you want to steal those things? I have money.”

“Who cares? Look, if you’re going to be like that . . .”

Moira or no Moira, I stood to lose more right now. We cut through an alley and up a narrow set of concrete stairs, on an embankment behind the palaces/warehouses. A guard patrolled a walkway below the embankment, rifle across his bent elbow. Shit. All over a few boxes of tea.

“It’s all right,” Giselda said. “He’s just doing his job. Just keep moving.”

There was a manhole cover on a level place on the ground at the top of the embankment. Giselda pulled a chisel out of her handbag, picked up a hand-sized rock and, first glancing over her shoulder at the guard, started pounding away at the metal disk.

“What the hell are you doing?” I demanded.

“Shush.” She kept right on pounding, to no effect.

“He’s looking right at us! Are you nuts?” She always was a little flaky. But this was too much.

I was of a mind to drop the tea and split right then and there. But she told me, “Here, grab a couple of those rocks and pound them together to mask the noise of the chisel.”

“Oh, really. You think that’s going to help? I tell you—” But the guard now sat down beside his little shelter and lit a cigarette, idly glancing our way.

Giselda kept striking the chisel at the center of the disk and then suddenly it cracked in two and gave way. She pulled out the two halves and we descended a ladder down, down . . .

and it’s dark and I follow her echoing steps but then she’s gone in the tunneling darkness and I’m lost and alone. There is nothing to do but keep moving, groping blindly ahead. Eventually I see dim light and come on a rising ramp out to the sunlight where there are leaves bright against the white sky and it’s a narrow paved road winding along a hillside on the outskirts of North Vancouver and there’s Moira in her Volvo saying, “Get in. I’ve been waiting here for ten minutes. Where’ve you been?”

I’m too astonished at the turn of events even to begin to attempt an explanation, so I do as she says. I consider saying something like “Oh, I ran into an old friend,” but even that could get too complicated too quickly. So I just let it go, asking, “Where are we going?”



“To Jericho Beach, didn’t we already decide that? What, were you daydreaming? You never pay attention, Gordie, it bugs the hell out of me. You need to improve your listening skills.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, if we’re on the subject of communication skills, I have something to say about that, too. . . .”

Then Moira was gone, an alarm was ringing, and I felt Giselda’s body move away from me. Round bed, rectangle, large body or thin, did it really make any difference? Traffic control or computer programming, I just had to get up for work, Tuesday said so. My screen is waiting, the eye is open and hungry.

There’s a mixup in the Tower computer bank and all traffic is rerouted to Newark. The other workers on my shift in the control room are lazing back from their workstations, going for coffee, gabbing, playing cards. I take the opportunity to do a little exploring online—usually impossible not only because of the steady demand of the surface programs but also because of guard functions that prevent deeper entry. I know by now a few tricks that will prove useful in taking a look around. For starters, I want to see if this cyberbaby is clean before I go too far with it.

I search the main operating directories and some key substratum files. Most of it is unfamiliar. I wish I had Hairy here to help me out. The further I look, the more I find. Each file turns out to be a directory of more files, a tree structure, ever-expanding. Some of the directories are so long and convoluted, it would seem that an uninformed search for a key word or words could take centuries. It looks as if they’ve got everything listed

here—a directory of all possible directories; a library of all libraries. Everything that ever happened, that ever was thought or imagined, written or sung, traveled or discovered or hypothesized. If I for instance in a pique of creative frenzy decide I like the sound of the non-word “fribitz,” and look it up, it’s there, confirmed. Did I by my capricious question call it into existence?

I try another experiment. There is something I have to do, see—to satisfy an old itch like the scar on my foot from the scythe blade I stepped on when I was a boy, that never goes away. Even when the headaches leave me in peace, there is that itch, and this itch. So I scratch this one, by typing “Evans.” It would be nice, I think, to get the real scoop on his part in my history, to find out whose side he was on.

I get a screen of entries scrolling past too long, too fast to look at. I stop it and try his first name, his old office address, his phone number which I can still recall, the present date. Narrowed down so, I get the following text on my screen:

This hypothesis of Mr. Norton’s about some sort of philosophical agenda built into the program of the game makes a certain amount of sense. It matches with the emphasis he places on choice, in his description of the events that occurred to him. “Occurred to him”: I like that particular phrasing. It gives the meaning both ways, subjective and objective. I can give him the benefit of the doubt that way, without committing myself . . . whoops, now there’s another one, I need to beware of.

Evans was kind of a loony himself, it seemed. My suspicions about him were confirmed—not as to who he was working for, but as to his own peculiar collection of mental marbles.

Meanwhile, the “game,” if that’s what it was, was up and running again, on new turf. I knew some of its moves now, I told myself. I could still play; I hadn’t conceded yet.

The text continued:

I wonder if Mr. Norton’s notions of what the game is about, of the motivations of its designers or installers, or even of the mechanisms involved in its activation and operation, are in fact part of the game’s own parameters: if, once you’re hooked in, you’re led to believe certain theories about what’s happening to you. But of course, all the theories steer you further from the truth. You’re fed, in short, a steady diet of red herrings.

Evan’s use of the term “red herrings” echoed Harrison at his twenty-ninth birthday party . . .when was that? Was it years ago, by now? Finally the head doctor was buying the reality of the game. I’d convinced him, after all . . .though he hadn’t seen me in . . .surely it was only weeks, not years. But the Tower . . .I had been working here, it

seemed, for quite some time; but for just how long . . .my memory reached a dead end, a blank wall.

When this happened to me I just had to drop the thought, and do my job. One foot in front of the other. One day at a time. I couldn't puzzle it out; but either way, I was intrigued that Evans was still stewing over my case. What I read next addressed my dilemma so directly, it was as if this apparent eavesdropping of mine was part of a two-way communication.

I have been neglecting to pursue the obvious: that Mr. Norton is involved in a situation wherein virtual reality has become the baseline reality. He lives, not only figuratively but almost literally, inside the computer. His brain and the information processing circuits of the machine have, to an extent I haven't dared to realize, interfaced to an astounding degree. Thus my usual dichotomous categories of mind/machine, subjective/objective, are forced open to a more flexible interpretation. As for the wider forces beyond the imagined program, these too, I'm afraid, are subject to reevaluation in the light of what Norton tells me about the current state of infighting in the computer industry (confirmed in this morning's news.) I'm afraid I'm going to have to catch up a little bit with the times, in this case. As if I have free time to read outside my field. Perhaps I could get Laura to do some preliminary research for me, when she's not too busy. I suppose it will do me good, in

the long run. There might be more clients of this type to come. On the other hand, I'm almost a little, dare I confess . . . afraid? . . . of where it all might lead. I wish I could just drop it, actually. But I can't. It's become rather like an addiction for me now.

Indeed. I almost sympathized with the man. I didn't quite, as Evans surmised, spend all of my time "inside the computer"—though my quota was undoubtedly more than was good for the self-respecting ape-man. I looked up and down the rows of computer operators in the traffic control room, thinking, at least I have company among this lot.

Some were still casually sitting back from their machines, drinking coffee, chatting. Others, like, me, seemed to be doodling on the open machines: and then I was struck by a frightening, nauseating vision of them, hacking away with their little programmer's hatchets at the brain-machine interfaces in the next city, or building, or workstation . . .

With a more sober turn of mind, I thought I should make more of an effort to meet these folks. What the hell; at least then I'd know more what I was dealing with. They might all be robots, for all I knew from my anonymous comings and goings since I started working here. I knew none of them personally; and none, so far as I knew, had any interest in me. A comic thought struck me: maybe we had all led lives like my bygone existence at Scanlon and Hart's, and had wound up together here in a purgatory of all the bugged-out operators so far infected in this cyber-psychic plague-war.

A shudder ran the length of my spine. It was possible. Anything was possible. Because my “reality” had come to have no “baseline” at all; neither this job nor the former one; no unimpeachable friend or lover; no fixed address. Whatever the details of this latest scene in the Tower control room, for instance, it was unreliable. I had no further claims on reality. I had come to be just another looping iteration of the program which once had infected my brain, and which had cast my erstwhile self aside like an emptied husk.

Something Evans had written still squirmed under my skin. That point about my being led astray by “the game’s own parameters . . . with a steady diet of red herrings.”

It matched Gerald’s purported use of Harrison, in another overseen screen conversation: to “lead me around the bush.” But where the hell did that leave me?

Christ, all my efforts to understand, to get free . . . were they nothing more than a means to further entangle me in the bloody net? To draw me further from the truth I was seeking?

In a minute, no doubt, lights will start flashing on the consoles. Feet will go down, coffee cups will be quickly drained, and the drones will go back to work. Donning “upgrade” headsets this time, new glove units shipped in by order of the high tribunal. Not me, babe. Not any more. I’m busy at my own job now, pondering:

Can I expect to walk out onto the street and find green people, blue people, purple or polka-dot, just because I can imagine it? The rainbow’s universal, but our choices however infinite are contained therein. The humanoid beings of my remembered home, that I’ve come to revere as my people, have certain hues in the bounded range: black,

brown, red, yellow, white. No greens, blues, oranges. Pink, maybe, with a little too much sun. These folk I've learned to call my folk, drab in their daily routines or colorful in their celebrations, I remember so fondly it makes me weep.

Eight years old in rural Pennsylvania, when Mom and Dad were still together, I remember: people, real people dancing in the straw-strewn barn of the old homestead, they came from miles around. Dressed as their parents had, knowing the old songs and square dance calls, whirling in the steps of earlier generations. Me sipping a little illicit home-brew disguised as root beer, in the corner, while the fiddler kept my bare feet tapping. The swirling skirts, the healthy smell of sweat. Flies on the ceiling, them dancing too. Me ducking outside to pee, beside the barn under the night sky of a million stars, wondering where I would go next, and when. And stepping on the point of an old scythe blade.

Now the computers all start to hum, and the operators turn to their stations. Shit, I think, I never even got my cup of coffee. My screen goes to autoclear, and my foot starts to itch, just behind the ball.

A hand cups my shoulder, from behind. "Hey, guy, still at it? I brought you some coffee from Shorty's. It's gone up to two bucks, the scalpers, but I guess we gotta make up for that cheap wine somehow, huh?"

## Chapter 11

## DESERTIA

Okay, I say to myself: it wants to come to me? I'll go to it. Nothing left to do, really, but dive straight for the black heart of the beast. No more messing around; not another day or night to lose.

At the Biotech Boutique Tuesday evening, I signed up for the advanced float tank tutorial. Wood and company thought I'd demonstrated great "psychic dexterity" in my three-hour session the day before on the monitor, so they encouraged me to go further in practicing an array of extrasensory tricks and sleights-of-mind.

The "unique ambience of the womb," the proprietor himself explained, permitted easy access to "suprasomatic input," and, he winked, "certain desirable forms of output as well." I figured I'd get the details on that in the next lesson. For now I was content to be put through my paces: guessing colors which the assistant was visualizing in a closed control room, guessing cards she drew, reading text in a sealed envelope. In a half hour of salty suspension I amazed both my tutors and myself with the uncanny accuracy of my remote viewing.

Yet it already was little surprise to me to enter this float chamber, with its oblong,



stainless steel tub four feet deep, its magnetic data sensors across the side, its silver-snaky tubing, the two-inch square blue tiles on the floor . . .having experienced it all so many times before via the unadvertised access of this establishment's own certified hookup room, across the hall.

Now a "star student," I proceeded quickly to hover over my body; to observe myself from the ceiling or a far corner of the room; and then to go whole-bodied, as it were, out of the room altogether, to the waiting room or the street outside. Of course, clothing over my bathing shorts was not an issue at first, since my projection was virtual, and therefore invisible to those who went about their daily business. But I learned also to bring along a suitable wardrobe of my choice, "just in case."

The paradoxical effect of less sensory input was greater sensory awareness. With practice I approached the status of full projection, which is to say, a state approximating complete forgetfulness of present surroundings. If I were willing and able to open my eyes and glance above to the remote monitor in such a state, I would observe that the psychic waveform had become exceptionally smooth and steady—except that in the action of opening the eyes, and in the act of observing, I would notice, as it were a shade too late, that the wave forms would begin rippling, as from a breeze over a still lake. But eyes closed, breathing gently within that self-contained cocoon . . . I found I could slip away.

Once I found the inner switch, it was so easy. I revved up my etheric motors and zap—I was gone. Direct out of Philly on the astral express.

I found myself out west where the air is still clear and fresh, on a ribbon of highway melting into star pools, a mirage of luminosity. Lazy buzzards roamed the sky on the lookout for the remains of the kill. How long had I been standing on this shoulder, beside a single shabby suitcase with a sticker for Philly pasted on its side?

Fuck, in the middle of nowhere. Where black-silvery snakes slither across the sand making their strange sidewinding tracks, in pursuit of rodents that scurry into burrows under the sagebrush. Not another soul in sight—astral or otherwise.

Well, I figured, nothing to do but head down that always-highway, and if I hear a rumble in the distance, I'll get ready to put on a happy face and stick out my thumb. Ah, the open road . . . .

As it happened, my ride, an algae-eating trucker from West Palm Beach, took me straight to L.A. I slept on the couch of his boyfriend's apartment after an evening of sexual innuendo and three-hand Hearts. Apparently they had no qualms about making connection with a subtle body. The next day, already homesick and satisfied at the extent of my precocious mobility, I took the first hypershuttle east. The craft was sleek and silent, cruising at multimach. I couldn't complain.

Enroute I amused myself with an onboard magazine devoted to "Desertia: the First Virtual Planet," recently launched in Earth-orbit as a commercial theme park. The venture was still in beta-testing; it was seen as a pilot project for engineered environments which would sport more luxurious "veri-natural" embellishments. By the evident advance in transportation and space development it was clear to me I had jumped through another time hoop. This future world seemed simply further down the same road

I'd started astro-gliding back in 2009. Yes the ride was cushy, the sound of another world always exotic. But what was the point, at the end of it all?

The movement of our entire civilization was away from the real to the virtual: leaving the desert empty and friendless, the cities full of rusting cars and abandoned warehouses. We were all going to wake up one day in the holiday spa of our dreams, high in the sky, and then ask each other, bored and at last satiated with playing the game: what the fuck did we think we were doing? In the model greenhouse in this new improved desert world above, was the quest to build the perfect tomato ever going to succeed in capturing the taste of the old garden version, build 1.0?

I spent most of the two-hour journey pondering such questions, along with the more mundane: why did I have to pay by credit card for this return flight, when I'd done the first leg instantly and for free? Naturally there were no answers forthcoming from the void. That was par for the course. In my head sounded a jingle from the Mexican radio station on the trucker's radio: "Aska no questions / Tella no lies, Señor."

At least the stewardesses and stewards, on this getaway journey home, were actually polite, humane, and cheerful—for what that was worth. I sipped my Bloody Mary with impunity, feeling that I'd come a long way since D.C. I nodded off over southern Ohio, and without ever seeing my familiar brown city come into view, I awoke or seemed to awake, or landed or beamed back in, eyes peeled to the darkness of the float tank in the Biotech Boutique.

I leaned out to check the time digits on the control panel; they were still plying

their karma in luminous green, 8:17. Still 2009, still before Christmas. All the seafoam or sand dunes in the world, or the starry hosts above, couldn't shut this human calendar down, I thought as I clung to its closeness. Giselda was working on the office party this week, buying the booze and the eats and draping festive wreaths and ribbons all over the stark white walls. Would I spend my Christmas with her, or leave her to Harry, and open my memories of boyhood presents back at Moira's, alone? I could always join the rummies in the lonely bars and alleyways, just for company; or horn in on some of my old buddies—if they remembered my name. Or how about my long lost brother Vic, over in Japan somewhere? Now that I could fly for free . . .

I bobbed in the water, curling to fetal mercy. Then stretched out again, breathed, relaxed. How much more convenient than a bath that always cools, was this temperature-controlled system. Almost as good as in Ma again.

Siltech Genex, I reflected from the luxury of this glorified bath, was my new big brother, my new ma and pa. The Christmas party was in danger of being co-opted by a “welcoming team” scheduled to fly in from Boston tomorrow, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Over the last two weeks the merger had quietly assumed the status of a done deal. Powerless to stop it and preoccupied with a more pressing war to wage, I had numbed my resistance into grudging resignation.

Now I could simply let such thoughts float gently away. This, of course, was the very reason places like this were in business. It was the latest greatest form of escape. Better than the BigScreen, the float tank was an inner sort of tube. Bed and BigScreen, plane ride and drug trip, hypnosis and daydream all rolled into one cozy sensuous warmly

monitored virtual uterine wet-nest. No sense of sinking, of striving, of need or anxiety; no itch or ambition had a place here. Just breathing . . .

Maybe escape wasn't the right word for it. It was almost good enough to call home.

Almost: the human tragedy in a word. I hadn't really arrived at my final psychic resting place, not just yet.

That little jaunt to the desert wasn't exactly a luxury vacation, all things considered: but fifteen minutes back in Joe Norton Philly, and I started hankering for another whiff of that pure, arid air. I was intrigued by the mysterious nature of the astral door I'd sprung to get there. To travel in spirit . . .yet seeming, with such certainty, to arrive bodily in another time and place . . .

So, with forty minutes still left to play with, I blithely charted my course for a return to the western desert. I don't really know why. I suppose I hoped to learn something by experience that I'd missed the first time. With my appetite for adventure whetted by the freedom of the road, I wanted to fish this time for a highway ride to somewhere more interesting than what is now billed, with comic futility, as "L.A.: The City."

This time, however, something went wrong. The coordinates changed, or the bearings shifted in their housing, or the transfer frequencies dipped below threshold levels. Whatever the cause, I landed with a sickening, screeching, slide in an all-too-physical Flash Gordon vintage ship on foreign soil: the pre-release wasteland of the desert planet, Desertia.

The air outside, such as it is, mocks with its dry howling, thin and high-pitched. No snakes, I imagine, crawl here; no road-runners run; no truckers or transcontinental tour buses are to be seen. Nor will they be seen for another month or so, according to the timetable I recall from the hypershuttle's from the flight magazine.

I wonder if I'll be able to get this one-man tub off the ground again and back to Earth . . . and then what? Head for a splash landing in my salty bucket at the Biotech Boutique?

Not to despair. I'm still encased in a protective shell. The screen shows that outside the ship, the air is a shimmering, metallic blue: not half-bad for an engineered atmosphere. But can I trust it? Have they got the control programs up to speed yet? I try to pick up salient readings—oxygen, temperature, atmospheric pressure, gravity—with my own control panel. Click, twirl—nothing happens. The wind swirls about my craft, buffeting it with a gentle rocking motion: a cradle of sorts. The air is turned to a dusty, obscuring brown. The screeching gale picks up tempo, until it seems to whoop with glee. Welcome home, it seems to say in its own macabre way.

Is that the skeleton of some wrecked cityscape in the distance?

I must go out to see. The article said that engineers work here without spacesuits. Very well, I'll give it a try. If I came back a month from now, they'd charge me an arm and a leg. I might as well make the best of the opportunity. Another freebie.

I wrench the door open and stumble down the three-step ladder, jumping the last

four feet, as the craft is tipped up higher than it should be. A hard, rocky landing, but no harm done. I dust off my jeans and start to walk. It feels good to walk. A little lighter than usual. I wonder how they work the gravity, on this pint-sized planetoid. Smaller than the moon, yet sporting a gravity near that of Earth. They wanted to create a lighter effect, the article said, even though they could have matched the Earth's gravity exactly. "Low gravity is the next designer drug," one of Desertia's creators had said.

That vagueness of a cityscape (ghostly, chalk-colored shapes) shimmers in the heat, floating up on the far horizon. Wasn't there supposed to be something a little more user-friendly, an oasis or two, rising out of the sand? Yes, in living color: sparkling blue water, lush palms, beautiful women . . .

Hah! Dreaming again. Mirages of mirages.

I stumble on loose rock, wipe the sweat from my head under the glare of the full sun, and walk a few more steps.

Wait. This is futile. I don't want to lose sight of my ship.

I sit down to figure out a plan. My head swims in the rippling heat. I should have got a UV reading first; what if their "Ultra" screens weren't up? I recall the dark red sands of another journey, dinosaurs stalking . . .

Now I wake up to stinging dry heat on the eyeballs, and find my feet swallowed in a growing dune. I look around for my ship and it's gone . . . but running, stumbling, crawling to the spot where I left it, I find a patch of charred sand, and an old calling card.

My gun, protected from sand in its tight case.

Great. Am I supposed to use it on myself now? Is that the point of this exercise in madness, to end it all in a staged scene of appropriate desolation?

Fuck that. If I got here somehow, there must be a somehow out.

I have no hard-copy transportation; but that's okay—because neither do I have a fixed destination. Only a job to do: and no way out till it's done.

“Pick a card,” a wizened wind-voice says to me, “any card. That's right. Now look at it closely. Feel free to inspect the shape of the number, the symbology of the artifact, the ritual weight of its planar thinness; and try if you can to divine its numinous significance. That's good, very good. I applaud your choice, your discriminating sense of value. I'm going to ask you to try to sell it back to me, if you can. But not now. It needs a slight alteration first. A circular sort of hole, around chest-high would do; or between the eyes, if you prefer. It's really your call. In any event, come see me when it's ready. In the meantime, best of luck, chum.”

Thanks pal, you give me a lot to work with. There's this mapless, reformed asteroid, with its trackless, shifting sand . . .

Go to it, the dry, buffeting wind tells me.

My immediate destiny, it seems, is all too clear: here I'll stand with my assigned weapon, with the white sun hanging overhead, and peer into the empty wind, lacking all direction or spoor. And I have nothing left to imagine but that the unknown enemy lies beyond, eluding my perpetual search in only a temporarily extenuated manner of speaking.

What else can I do to prepare for his or her eventual, might I venture to say



inevitable appearance? I open the case and assemble my piece. Even as I feel the oiled pieces slip into place, a sublime clarity comes to me. I do have a mission, still, despite my chronic attempts to deny or avoid the responsibility. It's so simple, really: to get this scope sighted on the real culprit, the villain in the way of the Plan.

Though I don't know his exact identity yet, I can fill out his dossier in an instant: picking his card from the deck. He's a highly placed Government official who publicly opposes the very idea of the existence of these others, these entities of a different logical universe than our own. Further, I have a strong sense that he's a religious fellow, with invested belief in "man's primacy and sole position," and so on; and his position is of such influence that the new evidence I might present to the world is, in contrast, unacceptable in the public eye.

But he's not as naive as he makes out. Privately he acknowledges the existence of intruders, and knows about their methodology. In point of fact, only recently he has covertly authorized a special investigation into the technology which is their means of transport and communication—their link to the global brain.

The nut of the matter is this: it's me or him. If he has his way, then the potential influence of the aliens on Earth will be much diminished. This is entirely contrary to the thrust of the Plan. Yet measures of prevention must be well-considered, so as to yield the desired results without undue suspicions or publicity directed in the wrong places.

I thought at times that I was free from my obligation in this nexus of circumstance, absolved of my necessary role—if free is free to stew until eternity about my former so-called life. How simple of me. There remains to me what I must do.

Perhaps this man who stands in my way has felt, similarly, free of interference from carrying out whatever plans he deems necessary. Surprise for both of us—our meeting time is about to come to its fruition.

It's perfect, really. To think that he's somewhere on this wannabe planet, even now. Just him and me.

I stand and heft the required item, iron-hot and grease-sticky in my hands, and squint into the white sun.

For a moment I hesitate: ready to walk, yet unsure about which direction to take.

My one-pointed resolution falters in the diffuse heat. I was so certain . . . but of what? Whose side am I on in this cosmic game? What about the toad atop the high tribunal? He, too, was only a functionary, of a different rank. If there are aliens at work here (and I must admit at least that possibility), then I must consider taking seriously their directives. In their higher purpose might I find my deliverance from obsession—both mine and theirs. Whether I agree with or even comprehend their motives is beside the point. The point is survival. To that end I am ready now to do whatever is required. At last, to embrace my mission.

“There is someone you must find and kill.”

That is enough, for now. I turn and scan the horizon, scan and turn again. I trust that I will be given more information, or a trail to follow, in the proper time. To have this trust is comforting now, after all my paranoia and disorientation. I can be at home here, even here on this concept of a world. Moira and Sheila can go their own ways. Let Gerald and Harry, Hart and Effington steer their earth-ships where they may.

Giselda . . .yes I feel now a wistful nostalgia for her caresses, her gentle kindness. But this is no place for her.

My legs want to fold up under me, and so I sit awhile on a humped red rock facing away from the sun, the gun cradled in my arms. Where's that poolside service when you need it?

No birds wheel and hunt overhead; no sweet song heralds this rising earth peeking above the far horizon. The fragment I ride has no gilded history, no innate claim to the fame that will soon come flooding from its gaudier blue-green neighbor. For now I am the reporter holding exclusive network coverage; I, its first hero in the making.

Or am I still, rather, a simple courier? When my information needs passing—at bullet speed—I'm the point man. Perhaps even that implied credit is too large, because it's like this: the message is already implanted in me; and my actions are proceeding correctly and in good order, no matter how I might try to refuse or enhance . . .

What's that? There—moving out from the shade behind those rocks, at twenty paces. Huh?—a goddamned waiter! Should I blow him away?

“Hi, Nort. Gin and tonic, buddy? You look kind of thirsty. And lower that barrel a little, will you? It makes me nervous. I trust you and everything, but . . .”

“Fucking Harrison. All right; I could use a drink. I can't argue with that impeccable earth-logic of yours.”

He smiles and stands still while I rise and approach him, rifle cradled loosely in my right hand. In his right hand he's holding aloft a small plastic tray of drinks, so it's awkward to shake hands without switching. We just smile instead; I tap him

affectionately on the left arm with the barrel of the rifle. Like a T'ai Chi master he swivels away from it, plucks it gingerly with forefinger and thumb and pushes it aside.

“C'mere,” he says, “let's sit over in this shade.”

I sat down behind the large boulder he'd emerged from, took the frosty glass he offered and quaffed a long, cool drink from it. “Fucking Harry,” I repeated, shaking my head. “I guess there's no point in asking what you're doing here. How you got here, or any of the rest.”

He answered with a crooked smile. “I suppose not. What about you? You're out here doing a little hunting, are you? See any game about?”

Something told me it was best, for the moment at least, to skirt the issue of the mission at hand. I retreated to more familiar conversational territory: the mechanism of my infection. “Just the same old game,” I replied. “You know, it's funny, I get the feeling you're really with me, this time, I mean on the same level, with the same status in the game.”

He just looked at me calmly, sipping his drink, stirring the straw.

“Yeah, like usually, it's more a case of, I think I'm doing something, say at the office, and you have a part to play, but that's all: you're just another character in just another dream. This feels different. More like, you're dreaming this too.”

I waited for a response, curious to see if he shared my perception that our manifest experience was shared on the same basis. At the same time I knew, in a core part of my awareness, that I was still floating in a tank over there on that brilliant ball of

blue and swirling white which now loomed so large in our field of view. So unless he were in a neighboring tank-room—

Harry's attention was diverted by the spectacle made no less impressive by the constancy of our own baby-blue sky. He mused, "Just look at that thing, will you? To imagine all the twisted strands of consciousness that swarm there, held together by gravity. So limited, really. When there's so much more we can do with our awareness, our being."

I'd never heard Harry wax quite so philosophical.

He looked at me directly. "Do you think we'll ever go back there?"

"I sure as hell hope so. Unless you've got an unlimited stash of this good stuff."

I saluted him with my tinkling glass, before letting more of the cooling nectar slide down my parched throat.

Another possibility hit me: the *Bolero*. Had he been infected that way too, so that he now shared my viral headspace? I wasn't comforted by the prospect.

But here we were. Lulled by the gin and inspired by the looming wholeness of our home world, I launched into further speculation concerning his concept of a global brain. While Harry gazed rapt at the buoyancy of the earth, I postulated that our expulsion had been carried out by a self-respecting organism simply ridding itself of a disease. This singular planetary being—a live entity taking its part, in turn, in a gigantic galactic-scale neuro-physiological network—could hardly be blamed for its impulse to cleanse.

Harry nodded, sipping judiciously from his own tall glass, taking my arguments at

face value. Finally he responded:

“I see several issues at stake, here, Nort. One, your assumption of a ‘global brain’: it’s simplistic and problematical, but okay, let’s assume the existence of such a creature. Let’s say it has a consciousness, a field of coherent energy, which it uses to communicate with other such entities. At each level of scale, the nature of the other scales higher and lower is dimly resonant. So, you or I as human individuals contain some intimation of the higher-order, the planetary and galactic ‘brain’ of which our minds are functioning and contributing parts. Likewise, our own understandings are modeled, in scaled-down versions of course, in the individual neural cells, the neurons of each brain: and further, by the cell constituents within those. I would suggest, while we’re on the subject of aliens, that you consider their existence as a variant of these macro- and micro-scales, rather than as humans with a Halloween face.”

I’d never heard Harry talk quite like this. For that matter, I didn’t remember bringing up aliens—though their involvement in this whole escapade was one definite way to go if we were still hunting for explanations.

I studied the lines on my friend’s weathered face, considering that he might have taken a few years off to get a doctorate; maybe that was it. But where did that lean brown look come from, then? How long had he been out here on this desert waiting for me?

That sweating glass pitcher was holding out nicely: ice still ticked against the sides as I refilled our glasses.

“Thanks, old sport. As I was saying, if this global brain of yours indeed has a consciousness comparable to our individual human kind of consciousness, then just as we

are only darkly aware of its manner of thought, perhaps it's engaged in some sort of linking communion with other individuals of its kind—starting, say, one-to-one with another proximate galactic entity. But you're right; then we must wonder, to what purpose?"

I'd uttered no such query, but I let him continue unhindered:

"For discussing the macrocosmic equivalent of the latest stock market results? Correlating solar flare frequencies with supernovae? Musing upon the latent possibilities of consciousness inhabiting the head-cells of those scurrying life-forms which call themselves humanity? Considering the dimly-apprehended potentiality of larger purpose in the proposed entities of consciousness on the scale of the galaxy-cluster, or even the macro-universe? Or postulating the existence of some-thing-no-thing which for lack of any more precise word could be translated in human speech as 'God'? Who in hell knows?"

I sure as hell didn't. "So Hairy, how about telling me, what are you doing here?"

He looked at his watch, finished his drink, and stood up, brushing dust from his pant legs. "Waiting for my ride." He looked up in the sky, where a light grew brighter, took the shape of a fleshed-out gyroscope as it descended, and landed nearby. He took a step in its direction, hesitated, turned back to me. "Coming, Nort?"

I looked at my gun, and tossed it into the sand as if it were some vile, slimy creature. "Yeah, I am. Is this crate going back to Philly?"

In the roar of the engines I didn't hear his answer.

Once on board, we headed straight for the bar. “Say, Hairy, what I really want to know is, where did you get that pitcher of gin and tonics down there, fresh ice and everything?”

He looked at me with serious, dark eyes. “Where did you get that ugly gun you were pointing at me?”

It was a draw. I let it drop.

We settled into stools at the bar. The sour odor of old beer, ringed whiskey stains, the clink of glasses and murmur of conversation from the clientele in the dimly-lit lounge, all testified to the reality of the place. The lanky young man tending bar had nordic-yellow hair and boyish blue eyes, and wore a smart white vest, and in a quiet polite tone of voice he asked us what we would have. We stuck with gin and tonic, and that choice hit the spot again, in the cool ship’s air no less than in the desert heat.

A shudder of engines told me we were off for our next adventure, or homeward bound from this one, and I responded with a thankful shudder of my own. I felt a little woozy, whether from the gin or the excessive heat and sun, and in the contrasting chill, wished I’d brought more than a light cotton shirt.

Hairy asked me how I was doing with my job at the Tower. I told him it was okay, it was a job. But I had some misgivings about who was in charge, and what I was really doing there. “There might be more traffic,” I said, “than meets the eye. You know, if we are dealing with aliens, they could be coming in on the same vectors as the hard traffic: using the real flight paths as virtual tracks for their own entry into the sub-interface codes. Through this channel or that channel, according to how the autokeying



works, just like we figured at Scanlon and Hart's with the manual key sequences."

"You're saying the aliens actually got inside you in the form of digital information?"

"Wow—that's a leap. No, I just meant they had access that way; remote access. The way you put it, I don't even wanna think about." I gulped at the gin instead.

"No, I suppose not." He twirled his swizzle stick absently.

I looked around at the dusky bar scene: the same as any airport lounge, except for the hum of motion after our takeoff. "Harry, I just have to ask you something."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Who's running this ship?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, here we are talking about aliens, as if it's still in some nightmare of mine, not really real. But where the fuck are we and whose ship is this?"

"I don't know what your problem is. It's a Genexpress, going from Desertia to Philly. The regular route. You know that."

"Genexpress, is it? And what company would that be?"

"Uh, Norton. Siltech Genex. Mom and Pop. What's with you?"

"What year is this, Harry?"

"What do you mean, what year is it? Where've you been?"

"You know all about where I've been. Just tell me what year this is. No fooling around either: it would be cruel."

"Okay. 2013. Does that rub you the wrong way?"

“2013, huh? And we’re on an interstellar voyage on an earth-ship?”

“What are you, drunk? What are you getting at?”

“This ship is run by aliens, isn’t it?”

“Whadya mean?” Harry responded in a more characteristic, gruff vernacular.

Maybe the gin was stripping off his newly educated veneer. “I told you, it’s Siltech Genex. Yeah, we’re into aerospace, surprise surprise. But what’s this interstellar? Desertia’s closer than Saragossa Station. It’s just a theme park, stupid.”

“Theme park, eh? Lotsa laughs.” I pondered my colleague’s embrace of the parent company, no less than his casual reference to the space-station with the Zebra-Mint ads.

“Yeah, well. Each to his own. Eleusia, for those with more tropical tastes, I guess. You gotta get your wilderness somewhere, somehow. Me, I like the dry heat. You have to admit, it has a certain austere, *je ne sais quoi*.”

Eleusia, too? I didn’t even care to ask him about Witch Bay, and what sort of tourist would demand the right to be shuttled there. In fact I was in the mood to let the whole question ride, in favor of present surroundings: the soft lights, the soothing mood music. I calmed down, savored my drink.

Harrison’s last words lingered in the air, though. I commended him: “That’s pretty convincing French of yours, *mon ami*. Where’d you pick it up?” And I knew what his answer would be before it left his mouth.

“Giselda.”

“You two are . . . together, are you?”

“Yeah, Nort. I swear, you act like you been through a time warp, man.”

If the shoe fits: “I have.”

But Harry apparently hadn't: he'd got to live through these intervening years, while I missed out. He just looked at me, with a certain acquired sadness, and nodded.

“Yeah, I guess you have.”

I wanted to explain my circumstances by telling him about the float tank.

He just laughed.

“What's the matter?”

“It's a scam,” he said. “You pay all that money to take a bath, to watch an oscilloscope. Where does it get you?”

“To a fake desert planet, and hopefully back.”

He shook his head. “No, Norton. You still don't get it, do you?”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled, then put his drink down hard and looked me in the eye. “That Biotech place, they had you wired up, right?”

“Well, yes and no. The tank works on magnetics. The monitor I was on before, that's hard-wired. I shied away from it at first, after those other things I'd been through, the nightmares. But it's no big deal, really. It's a one-way hookup.”

“Says who? It could be like what we talked about before, on your workstation at the office. You're getting visuals, audio, fine. Meanwhile they're picking your brain, from impulses going the other way, into the machine. And then there's a third stream, coming back to you, programming you, for Chrissakes, turning your fucking head into

another robotic blob eager to do their bloody will. And another thing. Hard-wired or magnetic, it's all the same. Don't you see?"

"Maybe," I said vaguely.

Harrison was putting the blame on the outsource program, the external agency, the Biotech folks or whoever they worked for. Yet at Giselda's he'd denounced this very kind of thinking as playing into the hands of the program. Now I saw the inconsistency of his arguments; the paradox of blaming the program for making you blame the program. I remembered what Gerald had said about Harrison leading me away from the truth. Maybe I should just clam up about the whole subject.

My mind went foggy. I felt myself floating, sensuous, warm, in the soft salty womb of a fishbowl in Philadelphia.

Harrison pressed me for more. "So where do you stand with this thing, now, Norton?"

I was jolted out of my cocoon, and irritated at his game, whatever it was. "Let's just call it a virus, okay? I got bitten once, and now I've got it, and it doesn't matter anymore if all the wires in the world are attached or detached from me, it doesn't matter if I throw their computer terminal a million miles away through space as black as what it came through; I've got it."

"Yeah . . ." He looked at me with that resigned sadness again. "It could be like that. It's your baby, now, isn't it?"

We sat in the coolness of the lounge, contemplating glasses of fiery ice. It was tough to think of Harry as anything but a friend. I turned on my stool to face him and

said, “Okay, look. Either way, the real question is this: if there is some alien intelligence at work in all this, what then? They’re not letting me forget about this mission of theirs, and so what do I do about it?”

Harrison’s eyes flashed brighter as he said, “Maybe this mission, as you call it, is really only a message you’re supposed to carry and deliver. It’s implanted in you in the form of a memory, but not fully accessible to you because it’s encrypted for courier-passage.”

“It’s funny, Harry. I’ve been thinking along the same lines. Maybe we’re onto something here. But I hadn’t thought of them using memory. What sort of memory would it be?”

“An experience, not necessarily your own. Perhaps a murder witnessed; or an industrial secret. But coded to be hidden in some of your own memories.”

“Yeah, like my hidden memories of what happened to the last five years of my life.”

Harry chuckled, “That’s nothing new. It happens to all of us.” He slid the remnants of ice into his mouth and crunched them.

“So Harry?”

The bartender glided over but we waved him off.

“What?” As if he knew what I was going to ask.

“That *Bolero* tape . . .did you ever have any strange experiences from that . . .afterwards?”

Harry looked deeply at me with his pooled dark eyes and shook his head.

My baby. “Yeah, well, what can I say. I took a shortcut to get here, I guess. You asked how things are going at the Tower. Well, I’m part of their package; they’re part of my package. I let the little bug in, it lets me into the program. They feed me, I feed them. Everybody’s happy, and their ships fly freely in the night.”

Harrison just nodded, as if to turn me off when I got onto this aliens tack again, and rotated his stool around to gaze at the view out the portholes. I followed suit—I was glad too to leave the whole business behind, if I could. My vision floated across the lounge and out the portholes, where the stars streamed past. Now Harrison was saying something about the mind-paths, illumined and unillumined spiral tracks the mind makes inside the mind, or was it the me inside the mind, or the mind inside the brain, or the brain-me inside the universe, travelling? I wasn’t listening closely because I noticed a black-haired beauty against the far wall catching my gaze and then turning to look out at the view, herself—or was it to see herself, or to see me watching her?

She had a mole high on her left cheek, and as if she were alone she smiled, to herself or to me or both, and I saw a small gap between her front teeth. In a single rushing pulse I felt my inner universe collapsing and then expanding outward to overlay the outer universe, to merge with it, becoming one.

A consciousness universe-large, I am drawn to that fine-lined face, that lithe figure in silky black by the far wall, with the dry hot fragrance of roses. Forget her companions with their broad backs and captains’ hats; forget the streaming stars. Forget the other women in my life-that-was, my ersatz job, my so-called mission, my old friend here sitting at my side. She is the one that pulls me on, that attracts me with the fatal

magnetism of a sun. She is the alien being, personified. She built this ship I ride, spawned this brain that rides me deeper into darkness. She it is who infected the males of my ancestry, the mothers too, the sperm and egg of the generations, with her melancholy agenda. I am her pawn, she and her kind the haughty royalty beyond reaching.

If it's all a cosmic game, then I'm in it for the duration. I'm the ball in their pinball machine, the cursor moved by their whimsical mouse.

Or like this: the feather in their stiff wind. It only happens, for the sake of posterity, that this feather has an ink-dipped tip, the cursor a magnetic track. This rambling account is the trail of my footprints, my line of breadcrumbs dropped on the way to the gingerbread house in the deepest part of the forest.

“Let's take a walk,” Harry said. I tore myself away from the enchantress and followed him out. We wandered through the winding corridors of the ship, exploring. We saw nothing remarkable: just painted ducts and wires against the walls; framed pictures of captains and crew. It could have been a ferry boat across the Delaware River.

While we walked I tried to decide how much I trusted Harrison now. Was he lying about the *Bolero*? Had he himself become infected and so joined me here in this virtual voyage? Or was he immune because he worked for its creators? If he worked for them, why would their own program expose him, as it did in that transcribed conversation I saw? Was he a double agent whom they now wanted to eliminate? Was I to be his assassin? Had his friendship for me got in the way of his ruse, so that he'd led me too close to the truth?

The dinner scene replayed itself in my mind. Harrison had been showing off for Giselda, and when she put the pieces together and said that Gerald had planted this program as a means of getting me to take out Kenneth Hart, Harry had backpedaled, pooh-poohing the whole notion of brainwashing. Maybe she was almost right—but had got it backwards. Maybe Hart had planted this program in my computer to get me to wreak his revenge on Gerald. Or he'd planned for it to infect Gerald directly, through a piece of music he knew Gerald would like; but I'd gotten infected first.

But what about Harry, then? What was he up to, with his cajoling me to get into VR, to go on that cursed train, to eat those loaded mushrooms? Maybe it was his program, because he wanted Gerald out of the way, so he could take over the company. Except that S.G. was moving in anyway . . .

It was useless. Maybe Harry was right after all, that the program itself was leading me to follow these dead-ends, was driving me nuts with too many possibilities. And yet, if there was such a program in the first place . . .

Harrison stopped us at a little nook where a person could sit at a computer console, on a contoured white plastic chair. He had a certain gleam in his eye. “Go ahead, Nort,” he told me. “See what you can find out about this ship: its owners, its destination, port of origin, whatever you like. You must know the input codes for these babies, from your routines at the Tower.”

The interface looked familiar enough; chances were good that the workstations we used at the Tower followed the same global transportation protocols. But as I swiveled the chair around to begin, I stopped short of sitting down. “Hold on, Harry. I'm



not sure I want to touch this thing, under the circumstances. You understand.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay, then I’ll do it. You just tell me what I need to punch when we get to the locked areas.”

He seemed irritated, and now I felt a little gauche for showing such distrust. I stood behind him as he sat and called up the options. Unsecured areas included the usual: news, games, travel information. Harry chose that one. There was a secure subsection showing data on the ship. Through a sequence I knew, which wasn’t listed on the menu, Harrison obtained a screen showing the ship’s log: the pilot’s entries, the control settings, fuel indicators, star coordinates, and so on.

Suddenly a bug went floating across the screen: a virus embodied.

“Did you see that?” Harrison pointed to the screen, which was normal again.

“Viralert. It’s gone now.”

In the computer bank at the Tower, our Viralert program highlighted whatever foreign presence dared to insinuate itself into the home programs, no matter how well disguised. Viralert couldn’t entirely eradicate the most sophisticated bugs: but it would call them by name and track them through the system. That way you were warned before attempting a routine operation that stood to be mangled by one of the nasty little animals. How many times I’d wished that we had Viralert at Scanlon and Hart’s. “Too expensive; and from what I’ve heard, pretty buggy in itself,” Gerald had said. “Besides, we’ve got Harry.”

Harrison looked puzzled. “Norton, you seemed to sense this little guy was in there. But if you’ve already got it, what’s the worry?”

“Hey, man, one’s bad enough. This one might be different—worse.”

“Nort, I was being facetious. Do you still believe there’s one of these inside you? That it’s not just information patterning, psycholinguistic suggestion?”

“You’re the expert, Hairy. Let’s say it’s not a program as such, but still, a message, in some encoded form, created to make use of both computer and neural environments, transferable between them by virtue of a little redirecting of electrical energy—”

“—simply done.” Harry shut the console off.

The little bug was still rooting around in there somewhere, but so what? Harry was right. It, like its relative inside me, was only a virtual bug, wreaking its insectoid havoc in the realm of digitized behavior, of captured realities and projected choices. It struck me how narrow a view I had taken of the means of my infection. We’re all just fields of molecular information, patterned and chaotic pulses of energy. So why look only to a physical path for the agent of dysfunction to travel from its abode, the machine, to the quasi-physical residence of my psyche?

“The point is,” I said, “whatever it is—whether it’s got a physical body or an electromagnetic body or just a cybernetic body—now it’s taking me for a ride, a nice, long, leisurely ride. Only sometimes I get the feeling that I’m in its way. That my body, and the part of my brain that is not programmable, is so much dead weight that the little rider would just as soon jettison altogether. It thrives more deliciously, shall we say, on my choices, on my wonderings, on my attractions and desires. It seems to have a knack for pinpointing my particular weaknesses: my tendency for carrying on more than one

affair at a time, for instance. My complacency, maybe, and my quickness to jump at a more appealing choice. My difficulty in being truly content with any one of those choices. The desire—if this can be called a weakness—to have a place I can truly call “home.” And when I want to act on any of these desires—jab!—it twists the pin a little deeper, in this doll that was me.”

Harrison winced. I went on, suddenly radiant with new understanding; as if seeing the thing or the shape of the thing on the screen, however cartoonishly iconographic, had let me see inside myself.

“That critter inside me, whether thing or process, will have total mastery, I believe, when I give my life completely over to my freedom of choice. It’s funny, you know. I think maybe we’ve all got this bug inside us. And that’s why human history has tended toward this utopian goal of ever more ‘freedom.’ It’s by internal command. It’s just been more subtle until now. I’m the coming-out party. But we’ve been infected from the word go.”

“I don’t know, Nort. You’re making a big jump there. How long are you saying this kind of thing has been around? How would the program, or message-codes, or whatever it is, have got passed around before the age of computers?”

“Well, good old sexual transmission comes to mind. The genetic code: a four-bit system of information exchange. And there are other options, in recent times. The electromagnetic transmissions of radio or television, for starters. Or look at any of the endless brands of mass education, or religion, or political ideology, over the centuries of what we call history. A few charismatic leaders can carry a lot of people a long way

down particular paths of the leaders' choosing."

"Making good use, in recent times, of the apparent choosing by their followers," Harrison added.

"God damn. Who knows how far it goes? Think of Wall Street, Madison Avenue. Fashion designers. Architects and city planners. The guy next to you in the bar . . ."

He gave me a quizzical look.

"Oh, nothing personal, chum," I told him.

"Hey, that's okay, Gord, baby. Now listen. That's all pretty wild and far-reaching and evolutionary and all that, but you wanna know what I think? Try this one on for size. Humans are the vehicles computers use to play at virtual reality, while we think it's the other way around. We think it needs to be hard-wired, hooked up to a sensory apparatus; but they do it the easy way, the software way. The invisible way, once it's set in motion. It's like that guy Emerson said about the machine age: do we ride the machines, or do the machines ride us?"

"Emerson, eh? Did you go back to college for a major in Humanities, Hairy, or what?"

"Nah," he said. "Why bother sitting in those stuffy halls listening to the old farts squeak? It's all online. The next best thing to artificial intelligence."

"Right." I thought of the watchful, guard-dog eye of my monitor at Scanlon & Hart's—all seeing, all knowing—burning into my life. My monitor? My life? What a cruel joke. "This gets back to my problem," I told Harry. "Are they really out there

pulling the strings, or am I just acting out of my own silly spineless middle-aged middle-class powerlessness and lack of control over anything including my own life, and blaming some hypothetical puppet-masters?”

“You do keep saying ‘They,’” Harry said. “That’s always bothered me.”

Evans all over again. The agents of the alien masters would never admit to their existence. They wanted to keep me in the dark.

Yet Harry was telling me more than Evans had. At least he believed in the feasibility of the program. And at times, he’d even tried to get me to see who might be responsible for it, pulling the strings . . . the friendly folks at Biotech, for instance, or their bosses. And he’d brought me to this computer console for a purpose: to see the bug face to face. Why?

I had a bad thought, then. Had Harrison been telling me too much again? Was he a double agent? I saw us out there on the sand, on the desert planet; me with my rifle case, my mission. A small, gnawing suspicion now chewed its way to daylight: Was he to have been my target, for the very reason that he’d given too much away, out of friendship for me? And in not seeing it when he was dropped in my sights clear as day, had I blown my best chance to make good, to break free?

I came slowly out of the waking dream back to full consciousness. Pulled myself dripping out of the tank, quickly put my clothes on and went to the john, thinking sensory deprivation is all very well, but when you gotta go . . .

I walked home that night to Giselda’s house. The brown Ford was gone and she

wasn't there. No note. I thought, here we go again, the same old song. I sat on the couch in the darkened living room, brooding, while Chipper lay disconsolate at my feet, jowls drooped on paws.

Was she at Harry's? I didn't care to know. After Desertia I was ready to believe she and Harry were in league together on more than one level. Giselda was a channel for them, a contact point. As was Sheila . . . as was Moira . . . it all began to fit, to seem consistent.

But it was more, with Giselda. She had an in. She worked with our software. She had the connection with Kenneth Hart. And lately she'd been coming on to me—and to Harry. The *Bolero* theory was rapidly giving way to the *Giselda* theory.

I recalled the previous night which we spent together, in Giselda's bed. My eyes were open, the room was dark. My head was nestled against her soft neck. Suddenly I saw it. The channel opening. The deepest darkness, the darkness of deep space.

In her.

Accessible through her. Should I care to go there (but I was already there, and They were already here, and They were me and Moira was Sheila was Giselda and the avenue was open and humming), I could accomplish any journey, in the service of any mission they might require of me.

Now, alone in her house on a Tuesday night three days before Christmas, I didn't want to hear about it.

Leaving no note but a psychic calling card of small regrets and residual yearnings, I faced into a stiff chill wind and walked long blocks into the night, arriving at Moira's

near midnight. Tired and hungry, I sat and ate hot-and-sour wings in a microbox in front of the BigScreen. Wouldn't you know, the show was made just for me. Only there was no me left to watch.

The bank of operators sat listlessly at their workstations, as if mesmerized by the new intelligent screensavers that had recently been installed: the sleepy Kenneth Hart eye. A loud clacking of boots down the polished hall echoed into the control room, and a squadron of guards burst in with laser guns, flanking the Master of the Tower. He paused momentarily at the door, surveying the room.

Once his eyes lighted on me, they burned like coals. He raised an arm to point and shouted, "There!" and the squadron came for me.

I started to panic, then breathed deep and braced myself. I knew this wasn't real. No harm would come to me now. I had nothing more to lose and so offered no resistance.

The squadron halted before me with the Tower Master, the selfsame judge of the High Tribunal, glaring at me through steaming red eyes.

"Smith, have you anything to say before you die?"

"Fuck off," I said.

His tight mouth barely contained his rage. "I'm obligated to provide you with one last choice," he said. You can choose to take care of your mission now, or you will live an unending nightmare from this point forward."

"That's nothing new," I shrugged. And I wondered if I knew what I was getting

myself in for, now.

“So you’re dropping the mission? This is your last chance.”

I could have sworn the eye on my monitor screen winked just then.

Something clicked within me. Part of myself had made a choice, a genuine option of my own making. All time sucked into the present moment, like thin molasses drawn with elastic speed through a funnel. In my peripheral vision I noticed, leaning against my workstation, the rifle I’d been given so many eons ago, and I willed my right hand to grab it. The guards raised their weapons, in the slow motion that enveloped us. I hesitated: because I didn’t know whether to go for the machine or the man. I’d only get one chance. I willed time to stop. The laser rifles refused to move further. I brought the barrel of my weapon to bear on the cyclops glass of the computer, shielded my face with my left arm, and fired.

A sword or shard or scimitar came gleaming at me, sweeping for my neck. I closed my eyes, more peacefully than I might have imagined.

I seem to awake in the middle of the night, alone. In the darkness not knowing who or where I am, or what is real or meaningful in this present human life, I’m only one of an infinitude of possibilities scattered among stars like ragweed pollen. I want there to be a natural baseline, the human tradition on earth, the kind of lifestyle our intelligence has created. But true reality has a broader bandwidth. Possibilities, probabilities have to compete for space in the sensory fields we set up to entertain ourselves; thus virtuality becomes reality, by means of our tricking ourselves into believing it so. “Getting to



home” as a concept loses stability along the time-vector, as each moment incrementally changes the coordinates necessary to undertake the journey. Home being “the sum of past experiences,” is not stable, but a fluid state in motion with our plastic becoming. And so it is never wholly distant from who we are. We carry “home” with us, snail-like, even into all the worlds of our imaginings, worming out tunnels of new-abode as we crawl.

If the net closes in, I think suddenly, I’m done for. I haven’t yet completed my job. But what is this net, that I fear? The net of stars, of suns in my remaining days, of friends and lovers to comfort me, thoughts to kill?

Those others who know me—now they know. Now they see me as I am: a loose collection of possibilities, meandering at the whim of an unloosed soul. A spawn of any of a number of various planets and vagrant populations, a legerdemain of the undead, a personalized mythology extracted from an ancient starlog, a walking heritage from an infinity of races beyond time; these factors go on without end, piling up to produce what I call my old and new identity, all-embracing.

Harry was holding me, as I sat slumped on the floor in the abandoned control room. My head was in my lap, cradled in my bloody hands. My opened neck was still gushing with blood, only slowly congealing.

“You did it, Nort. You really did it now.”

It was comical to see Harry speak, as he was apparently unsure of whether to address my head in its present or former location. I was watching now from a

disembodied perspective—as if, let us say, from within the shattered monitor. Hovering, watching . . . smiling. How I could smile while the actual mouth was below and in a different place than it needed to be, was a matter that only made me smile the more. Then that somewhat more sober mouth on the head was saying, “Yeah, I guess I really did it, partner. It’s over now. I got my man, though it wasn’t a man at all. Right in the center of the eye.”

“Bloody right,” Harry said. “And paid your price for it, too. Gotta hand it to ya, bud. That took guts, right in front of the boss man. Those other drones, they just kept their eyes on the screen, locked in. But I watched every bit of it, and I was cheering for you. Too bad about the consequence . . .” and he tenderly touched the area just under my chin, above the severed neck.

“No more choices, eh Hairy?”

“No more alarm clocks for you, I can say that much.”

“And no more women troubles, either.”

“You never know. There’s all kinds. I heard about some whore in Chinatown who—”

“Spare me, will ya? Let me imagine. Or no, I don’t even have to try, anymore. It just comes: though I’m gonna have to be more selective now about what I can handle. My life is in my hands.” I gave in to some hollow laughter. Spooky, it was.

“You’ve lost a lot of blood, Nort.”

I looked down at the floor: a scarlet pond, still spreading.

Harry was kneeling in it, his pants sopping. He didn’t seem to care.

I said, “What did you expect? Motor oil?”

He started laughing then, on the verge of tears. “How’s about we go for some hot Java, chum?”

My hands holding the head were growing slack, allowing it to list to the side, looking as if it sorely missed its companion shoulders with which to shrug off his well-meaning banter. “What about Giselda?” I asked him. You think she’d still go for me in this condition?”

“You had your chance, bud. She likes me now.”

“Yeah. I figured. You didn’t give me much of a chance, did you?”

“What—you had first crack. You coulda snapped her up tight if you’d gone for it the way I told you.”

“Yeah, well. Old water, old bridges.”

“The only thing I can say now is, I’m sorry, Nort.”

He could see I was fading, and I understood that he would say anything to soothe the end for me.

I wanted to change the subject, to lighten things up: “How’s it going to be for you, working with the big boys, eh, champ?”

Harry looked discreetly away from my life-weary eyes. “I say, keep your eye on Gerald now. He’s gonna go for the big bone. Because it’s all or nothing for him now. Either with the new gang or without them. If they keep him aboard, he’ll have to do some major suckholing. And no one’ll do it better. But I have a hunch he’ll do even better on his own, without a Hart to compete with or an upstart like me riding his tail. I

think he's got some untapped creativity in him."

"Are you getting what you want?"

"What do I want, huh? Who knows what I want? I'm as bad as you in that pickle with your rifle: where to shoot next? Who the hell knows? I just punch in, do my job."

I shook my head with my hands. It made Harry smile again despite the glum mood I'd put him in. "I think you got it wrong, partner. There's so much you could do on your own, with your own creative direction, your own goals."

"Yeah, what you're saying is I could be the next Bill Gates. Right? Right. And little Donnie, he could be President. It just don't happen like that, Jack. Being rich and famous and creative and all that, takes either crazy work or shit-dumb luck. It gives me a headache just to think about it."

His words trailed off as I lost consciousness, in both severed head and disembodied mind.

All the fault, some would say, of the computer; or of the virus from beyond; in any case nothing but a message created complexly, for someone's benefit, by virtue of a little redirecting of electrical energy—simply done.

Now I was cut free, free to be myself. Whatever that meant.

Under a starry sky on a vast plain of sand, for instance, on a figment of a planet called Desertia. Free to . . . return to the ship, parked so docile within my view.

Harry was nowhere in sight.

## Chapter 12

### THE HOME BRAIN

There it loomed, in the ship windows, blue-green and mottled with clouds, floating in the star-filled void. Home.

During the descent, I was filled with nostalgia, flooded with distant memories and unformed longings. I wished to have back the last year or ten years, however long in real time it was, during this vast megadream or metadream since that first dream.

I couldn't wait to get a better look at my human surroundings, as we approached touchdown. I wanted only to see my familiar haunts, if only the rainy streets of mundane Philly some random October.

But would I plunge instead into a complex of many-tentacled cities beyond my imagining? Find another jungle planet, earth in the time of dinosaurs? Or a desert laid waste by human folly?

I had discovered during my journey that we do have access to all the nodes of time and space. But there is a catch. We never really pass through the same node twice, the one we happen to remember, the one we have experienced already. We arrive at a familiarity, yes, but only a semblance. This is new time.

Sheila stands in the kitchen of Moira's apartment, cutting up mushrooms for the sauce. Moira, watching over her sister's shoulder, says she won't eat any of them. Says she's allergic to them.

"Since when?" Sheila says, and goes right on cutting.

I step in from the living room doorway.

"Oh, hi, Gordy. I mean—" Moira looks at me strangely, with a mixture of surprise and fear in her eyes. "Who the hell are you?"

Sheila ignores my presence, goes right on cutting.

I begin to try to explain to them what I've discovered of how to bring the concept of home closer by imaging it, affirming its possibilities, dreaming its forms closer to manifestation. "Because, after all, we humans are ourselves a virtual reality in the immensity of cosmic possibility, in which the galaxies (with their stars and their planet systems billion-billion-fold) outnumber the grains of sand on our earth. We are a puppet-show at the end of the universe. So, we can and might as well write our own script. We—"

Moira's eyes are wide, her brow horribly bunched. "I don't know what you are talking about, who you are, or what you are doing in my apartment. Now please leave."

I take a deep breath. It's a matter of adjustment, it seems: fine tuning. "Okay, Moira, sorry. I was just kidding. It's me, Nortie. Tell her, Sheila."

Sheila continues to ignore me. There are no more whole mushrooms left to cut, and so she goes right on cutting through the slices, mincing them smaller.

“Wait a minute, you two. Don’t play this game with me now. I want to get past all the games, and start playing for real now.”

“I’m gonna call the cops,” Moira says, and moves to the wall phone.

“Is it really that bad?” I ask. But I can see that it is. She punches the number keys with her forefinger—vindictive, purposeful jabs that make the plastic rattle. I hope that she doesn’t won’t enter the wrong code sequence, or I’m done for: straight back to the desert, the mushroomy jungle, or the other jungle for bad children.

“Fine,” I say. “I’ll leave. You won’t see me again, at least not here. But let me just say one thing. It hasn’t exactly been a holiday for me, either.”

They look at each other with masks of sorrow. As if I’ve triggered some sad memory for both of them, that they cannot quite flesh out into recognizable form, or match with my form. I look down to see and feel what I can: the blue shirt Moira gave me only a Christmas ago; the faint stubble Sheila liked to rub . . .

I can’t resist a final, parting shot: “So it’s all over with your other boyfriends, and girlfriends, now, too? Is it you two together, in Moira’s bed?”

Now Sheila graces me finally with her attention, approaching me with wide arm swinging, a heavy fist aimed at the side of my head. Ducking, I feel like punching back, right into the soft midsection, but think better of it and slip out the door . . .

Right back into that circular bed, another desert realm.

At least, it looked familiar enough. Too familiar, in fact. I jumped up from the rumpled sheets, then confronted a scruffy guy in the mirror at the bathroom sink, with a

shaving brush lathered in his hand. Was he the same as I? Were those dream-red eyes a little wide with fear, perhaps, that Moira might really be back, clattering a spoon at this very moment in the kitchen?

Earth.

I was back, all right. But the one who was back was not the same man as the one who was there before.

I drove Myrtle to work and parked her in my usual spot. Before getting out I noticed an oblong box in the back seat, wrapped in brown paper. Was it there when I got behind the wheel outside Moira's apartment? Impossible to say, and for that matter, irrelevant. The point was, what was I supposed to do with it now? I pretended it wasn't there, and walked up the steps to do my regular job. After all, there wasn't any note with instructions, this time.

Giselda avoided my eyes as soon as she saw me walk into the office. I went quickly to the relative privacy of my workstation, before Gerald emerged from the conference room with Harry and came over to greet me with stormy brows and compressed lips. Okay, I'd rehearsed this one already. Let me have it.

"What's up, boss? You don't look very happy."

"I've got some cheerless Christmas news for you, Nort."

"Yeah, I know. Here, sit down."

He took the extra chair beside the partition. "You heard? Well, that's a small town for you."



Now I wasn't so sure. "I'm sorry—maybe I don't know what you're talking about."

"We were bought out last night, but not by S.G. A bigger company, Gregory Data. They've got the whole east coast now, Greensboro to Boston. Sixty-five percent of the Pentagon's accounts. It looks as if our whole operation is going to be swallowed up; and we—well, some of us—are likely going to be spit out like so many fish bones. They expressed some interest in keeping Harrison aboard."

"What about you?"

Harrison, who had detoured into the main lobby for a chat with Giselda, now passed by and smiled at us. "Hey, what's this, an early office party? I thought it wasn't till 3:30."

Strangely, I wasn't even jealous—about his career or his lovelife.

Gerald ignored him until Harry shrugged and padded back down the hall to his own office. "We've got a load of archiving and file indexing to do today. Whatever jobs you've been working on are suspended. They want to transfer all our data to their programs. Any more work we do with our 'toy' programs just makes more work for them, is how they put it. I'd appreciate it if you'd stick around to help us out for the day—as a personal favor. I'm sorry about this, Norton. I'm still hoping for a last-minute reprieve, in conference with their 'welcoming committee' this afternoon. But don't hold your breath."

"They want it all done today?"

"That's the word. But as far as I'm concerned, we're done at 3:30. Then party

time, and we'll see what happens next." He managed a weak smile, under glassing eyes, and stood to leave.

I felt a surge of compassion for the man, got up to embrace him briefly, and wished him the best, whatever the outcome.

And then I went dutifully to work, automatically, unconsciously, letting my own fate fall away, leaving only one thing left to be done: my mission. I was on the verge of an understanding—a sense of union, a merging of mission and me—and though its exact accomplishment was as yet unspecified, there was nothing to be done but to let it come to me, in the right time.

After today, I'd be on my own.

Over lunch at Shorty's, I said to Harry, "You look pretty pleased with the news."

"Who, me? My job's up in the air too."

"Gerald said they wanted you."

"Maybe. I'll believe it when I see it. No, it's not that. It's just . . . life, I guess."

He couldn't help beaming.

"Life, is it?" And where did that leave me?

I had steered us through the parking lot so that we didn't pass too close to Myrtle.

A careful glance confirmed, however, that the gun was still there. Just in case.

But it wasn't really Harry's fault.

"Listen, Hairy, I don't know exactly where I've been—"

"As usual."

“Hey listen. Tell me, straight. What has it looked like from your end? Like I’ve just been just spacing out at times? Or have you been looking at a regular zombie in the guise of Joey Norton?”

He waved off my question and drank from his coffee cup. “I dunno. Whatever. Like you maybe had a hangover, once or twice. A heavy weekend with your woman of the week, a rough night’s sleep. You know what I think? You could use a nice long vacation.”

“Yeah, and I guess someone upstairs has been listening to your advice.”

“Hey, buddy, don’t blame me. What’ll you have?” He anticipated the waitress, a regular named Shirley, who arrived just then for our orders.

I didn’t even think about it. “Zero Burger with extra onions.”

“Hmm, me, I don’t know yet. We could use an extra coupla minutes, Miss. Thanks.”

Shirley gave him a strange look with her round black eyes, and walked away.

“‘Miss,’ is it? Now you have to be formal with all your old girlfriends?”

“Hey, huh?” I’d never seen Harry blush before.

I decided to spare him the details of the planet Desertia. But I interrupted his menu-gazing to give him a piece of my mind in more general terms, as it had reformed over the past twenty-four hours. In the middle of it he asked for another Zero Burger without the onions, and by the end he was diving into the food, still without much concern for my tale of troubles. Yet despite everything, my suspicions about his role as double agent and my feelings about his relationship with Giselda, Harry was still the best

friend, the only friend I had.

“Harry, listen, I’ve been trying to look on the bright side, because if not, then it’s just a nightmare without end. I’m trying to believe that there might be a benevolent purpose behind this madness I’ve gone through. Something I’ve had to learn about the nature of choice, and fate; about human destiny in the, I don’t know, the cosmic play.” I’d forgotten for a moment that this listener came to lunch without his humanities degree.

“Sure,” Harry said through a mouthful of hamburger. “Or how about this: your so-called evil masters might simply be agents of universal karma, so to speak. Localized pinpoints of intelligence, dedicated carriers of information: the freedom gene, or genie. You have three choices, Master.”

“Very funny. But who’s the actual master? I still don’t know the how or why of it all. And I’m not sure anymore if there’s any point to my knowing. Yet there is still this mission, that it seems like I have to carry out even when I try not to. A mission with a human-level objective, and a silver bullet intended for . . .what vampire or villain? In my last experience, I might as well tell you this, I thought the target was you.”

“Hey, wait a minute. What did I do to deserve this? I been putting out to help you, bud.”

And putting out for Giselda, too, I thought. But I let it go. That sexual jealousy routine was on another plane—with another Giselda than the one I was concerned about now. “I know, I know. Just think of it as a dream. It was a dream, in the beginning. But who’s behind it? The technicians who carried out the hookup operation, the biofeedback engineers? The starship captains, or the lords of Witch Bay? They’re all hooked into this

net somehow: but who's pulling the strings? I still don't know. And if I could just stay out of their net for good, I might convince myself not even to care. But I want to know from you, straight out, who you think it is, who's behind it—if you still believe it's real, that is, and not just in my head.”

Harrison didn't answer, but chewed steadily, his eyes evasive. I seemed to have sobered my friend into listening, whether or not he still took me seriously. He let me continue:

“Meanwhile, there are these women: Sheila, Giselda, and another one in the ship—in a cheap novel they'd be called Harlots of the Stars—who reach out to me with their aching arms . . .”

“Yeah, right, I get it,” Harry chimed in. “And they're calling your choices from a painfully deep place within you, and you don't know if they're also playing out some secret mission of the interstellar Masters. Is it all part of a grand design, a complex of missions meshed in a strange net programmed to an end-game of unknown dimensions? But surely these old girls aren't the Masters themselves—mistresses though they may be.”

Oddly enough, my friend with the sardonic grin had hit my disease on the head. But I was too hurt by the sarcasm to gain any comfort from his understanding. “Some help you are. Does any of this mean anything to you, or am I wasting my breath?”

Harry looked at me briefly, then at his watch, then around the room for the waitress. Finally back to me: “I follow you, as far as it goes. You're in deep psychic shit: we've established that much. But I don't have any bright new ideas, just now.

Things are about to change big-time in my life too.”

I glared at him, then dropped my eyes. Maybe I was being unfair to him, expected too much.

“Okay, sorry. Let me try to explain a little more. See, I told you I’ve started checking out this Biotech Boutique, right?”

Harry nodded absently, his chin on his hands, as his eyes wandered around the room.

“So last night I decided to take it to the next level . . .”

Now he decided to respond. “Yeah, you told me about it. Interesting software, sort of a souped up MRI technology. But I’ll be honest with ya, Nort. That stuff’s a little tame, for my taste. Might as well just go to some ashram.”

“Just listen, will you? I went in the float tank last night, and you played a part in the experience I had, but that’s not the main thing. I discovered a really positive possibility: that the mission is not what I think it is. That my intent should be to destroy the part of myself that keeps straining for something beyond my grasp: egoistic desire, you might say, or just plain nostalgia, or vague yearning . . . any kind of attachment to the particular localities of timespace rather than being in the spaces, the Great Space, between . . .”

“Like I said,” Harry scoffed. “A new kind of ashram.”

I stared into my coffee. “All right. I didn’t think I could get anyone to really understand.”

“We better get back to the office, Nort. And I want to stop and pick up a bottle of

something nice on the way, for the party. You're gonna stick around and celebrate old times with us, aren't you?"

He had made a move to get up but I remained in the booth.

"Harry, I heard Giselda speaking to me last night. I don't care where she was parking her body for the night. She wanted me. She came to me: beckoning, tantalizing, seducing. But you know what I finally figured out? I don't need to feel that kind of desire any more, because it wasn't real for me. It was just something I felt compelled to do, to try to solve the puzzle I was locked in. I no longer hold onto any hopes of using her—or Moira, or Sheila, or anyone—as a way back. I did feel something physical with her, if only by habit. But I don't trust her any more."

Harry didn't know what to say. He just raised his eyebrows and made a tight twist with his lips. Then he moved slowly out of the booth, following my lead. We floated sluggishly to the counter to pay. Harry fumbled for his wallet, muttering that he would pay. We stood behind a threesome of women in business suits and running shoes.

I realized he might have got the wrong impression from what I'd said about Giselda. There was a lot more to it than the question of physical desire. What if Giselda was time's ambassador, the stewardess on the elevator of direct connection? What if she alone had the keys to the speed of light, that could jet me backwards in a flash? What if, in my naivete and blind ignorance, I was sitting still on earth's spiral ride, going nowhere and ever farther from the object of my true desire—and what if she was the one to take me there, to take me home? I wanted to explain this to Harry but doubted he would understand.

I started to babble something about the time elevator and the infinity express, and told Harry that despite her allure, I had decided I wouldn't go looking for Giselda on that return shuttle any more. Then the other presence, the dark-haired beauty of dust and roses came to my mind, with captain suits draping skeletons by her side. No, I thought again, not Giselda, and not even her. Harry handed over the lunch check and the money. Meanwhile the checkout guy and the construction workers waiting to pay behind us looked at me as if I were a bonafide space-case. So what if I was?

Harry looked satisfied to hear my conclusion and made for the door. I reached out and held his arm. I wanted him to hear me out. Another possibility still haunted me.

“The thing is, after all this, Harry, I still don't know.”

“Nor I, old chap. Now let's go.”

I went with him out onto the street, but I wasn't quite finished. “So last night, when I went to her place and she wasn't there, and I waited for a while and she still didn't show, I left it to her, you know. Sent a message out on the mind-express. But got no response. I have to wonder, see, is she playing games with me? Reading my mind and deciding to be perverse, to frustrate me into taking some impetuous action like going out to look for her, in the wide dark city seeking her out like some captivated Helen of Troy? Or maybe when I fell asleep at Moira's last night, I just missed her invitation, oblivious to what might have been the one chance for my salvation. And now she'll have given up on me and will never call again. And when I do go storming off after her, like now back at the office for instance, I'll find that she's gone.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, as if trying to shake off a drunk, or to humor an idiot, “that's



probably it. Let's go back to the office and see. If she's there, you tell her all this and see what happens. I think that'd be the best idea. In the meantime, I got a bottle to buy in here. Are you waiting outside?"

I took the hint and stood outside the liquor store, with breath steaming in an atmosphere pregnant with the first snow, gazing in at the frosted wreaths. Still I brooded on the possibilities. This afternoon might truly be the last time I see her. I need to decide one way or the other. Is she an agent working for them, or is she the one key link to my home, my past, my real self? Both may be true: that's another option, harder for me to accept.

For scant leftovers, there was the no-option option—no home at all, no choice, no self left to lose.

Giselda wasn't at her desk when we returned from lunch. Maybe she was still out getting some last-minute fixings for the party. Harry, for his part, had stashed his bottle in his car. What, to keep cold? I didn't argue. I'd have my chance to hear his girlfriend say her piece under one bit of influence or another, come 3:30.

Still two hours to sort things out with Mr. Eye. When I came into view, it switched into a routine I hadn't seen before, but which reminded me of the exercises I learned at the Biotech Boutique. In this case, idle mode was playing with itself in a novel way: the image of a net twisting in space, forming a spiral winding and unwinding like a violated mummy. Floating nearby were a branch bent into a circle, a scaled and snaky-straight line, and a golden Byzantine cross. The net swept past them and gathered them

in. The figures became abstract animals tortured, squeezed, crushed in the folds of the twisting net. The branch was scorched; the snake hardened into a railroad track; the gold cross gone to chaotic splinters. The enfolding beast became dark and angry as a tornado, then stretched and twisted into a final agonized thread—

That's when I thought to cut the action with one quick key. And without moving a muscle to the keyboard still three feet away, I witnessed a change. The net loosened its death grip, pulsed, relaxed. The forms faded within; the net spiraled upward, and spread turning open, conch-like, flowering into sea foam.

As the screen goes blank I find myself floating in that state of suspension familiar to me by now from the tank sessions at Biotech. Where the waves gently lap and flatten out, modulated in calm, even tones, cool colors. Where I ride the spaces between thoughts; wander in the interstices between the boundaries of things; free in the wide unknowing unknown, which I have come to know simply as great space. I perceive (without an I, without a perceiver, but only as a manner of speaking) things and equally the relations between things. Now the Home Matrix is visible, invisibly, to my understanding. It doesn't take the Biotech machine, or the float tank to get there, once you have the knack.

With this whole universe a prison, its every nook and cranny a momentary cell, I see that I have shuttled, or I've been shuttled, between one cell and the next, daydreaming or nightdreaming; it makes no difference. The deepest sky, in the life I've lived, was auto-saved as a vast spreadsheet, with me its flashing cursor jitterbugging like an ant

across a microscope lens grid. Going from activity to activity, job to job, house to house and room to room; relationship to relationship, mission to mission, thought to thought and dream to dream; I never thought to get off and ride the spaces between those shaky islands.

Progressively, however, I have uncovered the illusory nature of all experiences. I have not yet uncovered the controlling mechanism of my entrapment or my release. The biological organism I ride in takes me places, provides me with experiences that I perceive as real. For what purpose, I can only guess, but need not bother about any more. I might as well assume that it's not over yet. But to cope with it: that is my real mission. To exist in those spaces between, not be caught in the nodes of the net. I can pass through, easily enough. Yet for so long I struggled; and the struggling made my matter denser, caused my limbs to become ever more entangled in the web of where I was. The worse I worried about getting out, the more firmly was I trapped.

Now, I flatter myself to think, I pay the ticket not to ride the island ferries, but to swim unhindered where I will . . .

. . .until I tire, and beach myself on some new planet, decided at their whim: because they are bent on one purpose: power, control, greed; these all colors of the same impulse, which we know only too well as the aggrandizement of the human ego, lo these many centuries removed from jungle and savanna, glacier and mud hut . . .and indeed from the beginning.

Why?

For the fun of it, I guess—because it's possible. Whatever this potent chimp-

brain may imagine.

In the end, these too are only choices. Infinite forks in the endless road back home.

I found myself standing outside Leonard Martinson's DataBoost Agency in the lightly falling snow, with a brown bag of Chivas Regal in my hand. The Agency was closed. I had no memory of going out of the office, shopping for the bottle . . .nothing since the computer going down. I figured, what the hell, I guess the party starts early. My watch told me otherwise. It was 3:45 already.

When I came back into the office, I heard voices from the conference room. Giselda's computer was off. Mine was still on, but showed a diffuse green glow from the screen, only vaguely in the shape of the original screensaver eye. I put the bottle down, still in its bag, and took a seat for a moment to try and figure out what had happened.

Giselda appeared at my shoulder. "There you are. I heard you come in. Where did you go? The party's started already." Decked out for the holiday, she wore a shapely green dress with gold ribbons clustered over her breast. She looked rather appealing, to someone who was going places. I had another direction in mind: but you couldn't map it on a corporate flow chart.

I looked through the green fog eye, into the empty blackness, and saw the reflection of two unlit candles Giselda was carrying.

"Norton, are you all right? What happened to you?"

"It's a long story, and I think you've heard most of it by now. What are those

for?”

“They’re candles, silly. I’m looking for a match somewhere. Nobody smokes in there. Except there might be some fireworks when you show your face. By the way, I invited your friend Doctor Evans.”

“My friend Doctor Evans? What do you mean?”

“I’ve been concerned about you, Norton. I think you can use all the help you can get. And I wasn’t sure I’d know where to reach you, after today. I was hoping you two could at least connect again and give it another try.”

I didn’t know what to think. I appreciated her concern but it felt a little patronizing. What business was it of hers?

“Thanks,” I said flatly. “That’s really thoughtful of you. Where is he?”

“In the conference room with the others.”

“Geez. This isn’t going to look so great for me. Isn’t that going beyond the professional distance shrinks are supposed to keep?”

“I introduced him as a friend of yours. This is our Christmas party, right?”

“Yeah, whatever. Who else is here?”

“Connie Scanlon, and a couple of heavies from Gregory Data. Rubbing salt in our wounds, I guess. We lick it up, right? Are you going to make a pitch to them?”

“Me? Gis, I think this one is their call. Why, are you ready to play their game?”

“I don’t think I have a choice, really. Gerald’s not going to be able to make a go of it without . . .”

“You might as well say it. So you’re going with Harry?”

“Like I say, I think it’s my best option at this point.”

“You make it sound so rational. Unlike me, right?” I rose from my chair to go.

“Oh Norton.” She placed her elbows around my waist awkwardly while holding the candles apart, looked searchingly into my eyes and said, “Norton, I’ll miss you, too.”

“Me, too? You mean Gerald and me?”

“Yeah. We’ve been like family here.” She took her arms away.

I put my hands in my pockets. “Uh-huh. I know what you mean.”

As an afterthought, she gave me a short friendly kiss on the lips.

My heart sagged and I wanted to say, “Well, let’s check out the action.”

Instead I lingered to say something more. “It could have been okay between us, you know.”

Her eyes started to well with slow tears. “If . . .if what, Norton? What are you saying?”

“If—I dunno, a number of things. Many choices along the way.”

“I need to tell you, I never did feel quite right about . . .it seemed like, taking you away from Moira. Even if she was with another guy.”

“And Sheila?”

“She was different. She ruined everything. Upset your life, gave you all kinds of crazy ideas, lured you away from me when I could have helped you and would have given myself to you. She’s just like Moira and would never really be for you what I could see you needed.”

“And when I told you she was out of the picture?”

“Well, I was so confused. For so long I thought . . . I kind of thought things might go a certain way, with you and me; but then you just kind of seemed so cold, like you didn’t want to have anything more to do with me. I just kind of figured, after a while, that you were unavailable again. For whatever reasons—your own reasons that I couldn’t quite figure out.”

“Good thing for you that you had another option.”

Now a tear dropped from one eye onto her cheek and ran down it, streaking her makeup. “I could tell that Harry really needed someone. And I don’t know, even when you told me you weren’t seeing Sheila anymore, still you seemed preoccupied. With your own problems, I guess. Even after we got together. On Sunday, remember what it felt like? To me it was like being with Ken all over again, at the end. I could see it just wasn’t going to work out with us. And I thought maybe, in that case, I should take my chance with Harry while I had it. I guess you could say I was desperate.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

She shook her head and looked me in the eyes. “It’s not been easy for you, I know. But it’s been no picnic for me, either.”

That got through to me, and for a moment I forgot my own pain. I held her softly by the shoulders. “You’re right. I realize that. I’m sorry for putting you through this rocky roller coaster ride. I feel the same way about Moira and Sheila, for that matter. Believe me, I didn’t mean to hurt you, any of you. I was doing the best I could.”

“I know that, Norton.” She smiled now despite her tears, and kissed me again, a warmer, more sensual kiss that made everything seem almost okay.

I told her, because it might console both of us, “I think that things have worked out as they should, anyway. That’s something. Now let’s get that drink. Celebrate, right?”

A cluster of people were sitting at the conference room table, which sported an uncharacteristic array of gin bottles, champagne, tiny pretzel sticks, and flowers. Gerald’s wife Connie was there looking like a cornflower-blue-eyed farm wife in red-and-white checked jumper, along with Harrison, and another woman and two men I didn’t know. The other woman wore a severe dark green vested suit with white blouse, dark lipstick and luxuriant auburn hair waving under at the shoulders. Her stern jaw said she meant business, though she attempted to smile at us as we came to the door. The Gregory men, in black suits and slim dark ties, one older with combed-back silvery hair and the other with short shiny black hair and razor-clean cheeks, looked to me like Mafia, or just New Jersey slick.

Gerald, ever in his casual yellow shirt plus a brown cardigan, was pontificating on the state of the computer industry. His informal outfit made me feel okay, tardy or not, in my jeans and crew-neck sweater. Evans in tweeds sat back in his chair with drink in hand, observing everyone else, a half-smile fixed on his face. Ever the analyzer, the listener. Yet I felt a bond with him. He understood more than most; more than he wanted to. When he saw me at the door he jumped up. The others looked at me, then back to Gerald who didn’t miss a beat. Evans picked up his drink, came and took me by the elbow outside into the hallway, jostling us past Giselda, ignoring her.



She gave him an irritated look and went into the room, carrying the still-unlit candles. “Well, it’s still Merry Christmas,” she tried to say gaily. “We’ll just have to pretend.”

Evans walked me slowly down the hall. “Joseph, good to see you. Frankly I was surprised when Laura told me you wanted to see me again. I’ve been worried about you.”

“I didn’t call,” I said. “The office secretary here did. Anyway, thanks for coming. I deserve worrying about. But you know what else? I don’t really care anymore. It’s out of my hands.”

He stopped and faced me directly, looking concerned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Moira came back, didn’t recognize me. Sheila was there too: same story. Of course, it didn’t really happen. But at the time . . .okay, it’s like this. Right now, I don’t know if I’m really standing here talking to you or not: if you are Doctor Evans or not. It’s got me full-on, see, and now I’m just living in the fever. There’s no place else to go.”

I realized I sounded as if I were asking for sympathy. Maybe I was. But I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea.

“I’ll be okay, though. I’m gonna see this thing through to the end, whatever it takes, wherever it takes me.”

Evans sighed deeply, the lines in his forehead relaxing a little. “I sense from what you say that you’re not suicidal, at least: that you’re willing to work with it; or at least to live with your condition. That’s the main thing. Now, if you were just willing also to

continue our sessions to get to the bottom of your dissatisfactions—”

Evans’s nose, I observed, was too large and red, and his beard held flecks of pretzel crumb. Here was a Santa that might have helped me a long time ago.

“No, no more. I’m beyond that now. It’s too big. It’s the whole world, not just me. Where are we headed? Take a look at this buyout business. First it’s Siltech Genex. Then a bigger group, Gregory Data. What’s next, further up the chain of command? Who’s pulling the strings? You might say I’m paranoid. No, the facts are there for the digging, at every step. It’s just that, I’m tired of digging anymore. I’m just gonna get on with my life, no matter whether it feels like a waking dream, or nightmare, or corrupted program. Whatever comes.”

Evans sipped from the drink he was holding, considering his next play as if I’d just castled my king. “And what does come next, for you? I agree, it’s very important to look at the impact of your company’s being bought out. You’re just getting back on your feet, in the sense of coming to a sense of acceptance with your life, and what happens? The whole world goes topsy-turvy again. You’re going to need support in the transition to new management. Anyone in your shoes would.”

New management? Did my feet still operate these old desert boots? “I’m wearing brand new walking shoes now, Doc.” I grinned and faked a little crepe-soled tap dance.

He didn’t get it. “It’s just too bad,” he said. “To let these sharks take over a nice local company like this. How long are they going to let a little office in South Philadelphia stay open? It’ll be off to Houston, San Diego or Tacoma, next thing you

know. Chasing after what? The almighty dollar, as the saying goes.”

I heard him out, then told him about my being canned.

With eyes bunched in renewed concern, he ran his hands through his thin hair. He blew out a puff of air which caused his nose to inflate and crumbs to fall. “Oh, that’s terrible, Norton. And they didn’t even tell me. From what I heard, they were all very positive about your company. They like the office, at any rate, with the recent equipment upgrades, the ‘real classy’ renovations, and the ah, the regional positioning I think is how they put it. But no, I didn’t hear that you weren’t going to be part of their plans. Now I’m really concerned for you. You’re going to be at loose ends. Look, I urge you to stick with the therapy. We can work out a long-term payment plan if finances are a problem, in the interim.”

“I appreciate it. That’s very kind of you, and all, but maybe I’ll just wing it now, thanks.”

Haggard, almost self-pitying, the doctor finished off his drink, then rallied to look me in the eye again. He drew himself up with the tension of decision; and then changed his tack. “All right,” he said evenly, before taking a measured breath. “I feel there’s something going on here, more than my practice trains me for. Except to say, as I would to any patient, that it’s really up to you. I’ve done all I can—though everything is, all too commonly, not enough.”

I felt like a medical statue, an upright cadaver; and stared back blankly.

Maybe he saw something I didn’t even know I had. “All right,” he continued finally. “In one sense I can acknowledge a certain saving grace in your condition, an

unusual kind of confidence at a deep level. I'm tempted to say something like, 'I'm sure it will work out for you now, one way or another.' But I'm not sure. You've challenged the extent of my expertise, and I have to tip my hat to you, and simply wish you the best now. The state of knowledge in my profession, as in yours, is always changing. In all humility, I think you've taught me something."

This remark effectively boosted whatever confidence I felt I had. This guy was a pro; and not a bad friend, all things considered.

"Thanks, Doc, for saying so." I didn't know what else to tell him. Should I offer to pay him more for services rendered?

He just kept opening up. "As for me," he confided, "I know I'll do better with the next case that comes my way—and who knows, there may be more like you. I may be the pioneer of a whole new specialty branch of psychiatry."

"Good for you. Hey, you know what, I could use one of those drinks myself."

The older man with the silvery hair was talking about Gregory Data, their intention to restructure smaller operations like Scanlon and Hart under the aegis of their new programming division, Siltech Genex. The man looked at me with ice-blue eyes and then looked away, continuing with his spiel, and I felt like a truant schoolboy, frozen at the door when what I wanted was to pull up a chair and pour myself a shot of straight gin, over ice with a crescent of lime.

The old guy's speech sounded to me like a sales pitch, though the deal was done. Evans leaned to my ear and said, "Maybe I won't have another one after all. I've got

some work to do at home tonight. Take care of yourself.” The doctor patted me on the shoulders, then slipped away while I hovered by the door.

The burly black-haired man looked at his watch. “How’s about we go for some grub now, boss?”

The older man ignored his partner and looked instead at me. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced yet. You must be Mr. Norton.”

I remained where I was. “Mr. Gregory?”

Everyone laughed except him. “Jonathan Effington,” he said. “Formerly of Siltech Genex.”

“Right! The guy who’s saved us so much busywork with that hot new metaprogram.”

Effington cocked his head at the atonal edge to my voice, then proceeded with the rest of the formalities. “Here on my right is Jennifer Fulton, our regional liaison, and Burton Angelski, of the hardware division. I presume you know Mrs. Scanlon.”

Nods all around.

“May I?” I said, and moved toward the empty chair with my eye on the gin.

Effington looked at me with disdain and said, “I believe we have a proposal on the floor for a more solid form of nourishment. We’ll take these good folks for dinner. How about it, Gerald, Connie? Would you like to go to the Rib House? And of course, Jennifer as well.” He conspicuously ignored Giselda and Harry, sitting closely side-by-side at a corner of the table. I wasn’t sure if the three of us were to be included or not. And how could I, if I weren’t part of their new team?

I stood at my chair, still drinkless while the others rose to leave, and glared at Effington. “You guys have a good feed, now. But before you go, could you write me a quick recommendation for my next job?”

Effington looked at me with outrage. The younger man’s hand slipped under his coat and rested there, waiting.

Gerald intervened: “Norton, hold on here. You don’t understand. I’m afraid I was a little premature in what I told you to expect. It looks as if we might be able to work something out. At least for a transition period. We’ve discussed a one-year contract.”

I didn’t want to hear it. Still addressing “Mr. Gregory,” I was ready to spout, because my mission had come full circle, back to the source. “Before you go, I’d like you to know that you have cost me—hah, where to begin?—a wife, or rather, the woman who would have become my wife; let’s see, a couple of other prospective relationships when that was gone; oh yeah, and there’s my sanity—that is, what passes for sanity among us cyber-corporate functionaries. Anything else? Maybe that’s it. A small price, you might say, to pay for freedom; though I wouldn’t have thought so at the beginning, before you signed me up for this course in machined madness. And right, there’s the wonderful benefits package, I’ve already enjoyed, even without the ‘one-year contract,’ thank you very much. The wonderful world of virtual reality, to take one shining example. What else? Maybe you know it all already. For your friends here, Ms. Fulton, Mr. Angelski, Connie, Gerald, I’ll just say there’s a lot more I could share with you but I don’t want to keep you from your next table. Let’s just say, Greg, Jonny, S.G. or G.D.,

thanks for the goddamned circus. You've given me my life, fellows." I made a bow and stalked regally out of the room. I had a clever new idea, to put everything I'd said and wanted to say into its proper perspective.

Harry hustled past them with Giselda in tow and came out after me. He walked me quickly down the hall.

"Nort, baby, what's this? You trying to get us all in shit? These are my new employers, man. You got to have a little respect. Don't you realize they were willing to consider keeping you on?"

"Bull. I didn't see them putting the three of us on their dinner card."

"Aw, that's no big deal. We'll just go out somewhere together. But man, I really think you oughta apologize, right now, before it's too late."

The others were still milling about in the conference room, murmuring like spooked cattle. I ignored them and their significance to Harry's or Giselda's career. My career was already toast, and I wasn't about to spread crocodile tears of remorse all over it.

I said to Harrison, "I'm afraid I can't do that, Mr. Pawn. You see, that would spoil my endgame. But you two go ahead. Buy a nice postcard from wherever you're going, hey, and why don't you send me one?"

I began putting my coat on in the foyer. Giselda hung onto me, nearly crying. "Don't talk like that, Norton, it worries me. I don't want to come between friends."

"I'll be out in the lot," Harry said to her and bounded down the stairs, as if he didn't want to be seen with me now.

I caught Giselda in the blaze of my eyes. “What are you, sick of him already?”

Now I could smell the bridges burning, and paused to consider: Would I have her back? It was still an option, somewhere in the net of possibilities. My pause was brief; I turned my back on her and felt her grasping fingers sloughing off the back of my coat.

Her makeup was tear-streaked, as she tailed me out into the parking lot. Snowflakes whirled down on us from a charcoal sky. Harry was leaning with his back against the driver’s door of his car, hands in his pockets, looking out at the snowy chaos. I turned for one last confrontation with Giselda.

“So what’s it gonna be?” I heard an infernal voice asking me. “Her, or what you’re supposed to do?”

I had a choice, always a choice. Without her, what would I have? One shot if I was lucky, one silver bullet to ride home on. Maybe there was another option, to take everything that had come my way—all the choices, all the forks in the road—and accept all of them. But then, we’re not programmed to take more than one step at a time. I started to move toward my car. She held me back, two bony fingers on my sleeve.

I didn’t know what to do. Surely, I figured, I could compose my own choices as well as those who were dreaming them up for me. Maybe that way I could be consistent, at least, when it came to messing with other people’s lives. No more drifting, being driven. First thing was to get my own self comfortable, and let it flow from there. Trusting nothing, and everything. Leaving just me in the middle, rowing home.

It was time to take care of business.

“Good-bye, my dear.”



I left her standing there with her long wool coat open and her bare head collecting snowflakes.

I walked to Myrtle while Harry left the post by his old Plymouth and went to rescue his distraught princess, who was listing toward her own car. I brushed the snow from the window and handle of the door to Myrtle's back seat, and looked in. The rifle was gone.

I whirled around.

Had Harry taken it? That was my first thought, and I impulsively started to stride to his car for a quick inspection before he got back to it. But something else caught the corner of my eye. Something flapping like a small white bird, from the driver's side mirror.

I hadn't seen it for the snow. Would the instructions matter without the actual article of intended execution?

There was only one way to find out.

I opened the damp folded sheet and recognized the careful lettering in italic capitals, now running blue:

Norton,

I can't imagine what it's been like for you. If you care to read on, you'll find that I am willing to consider sharing a life with you again. Who can predict, really, how it might turn out? All I'm saying is, I'm willing to give it a try.

I'm coming back home to the apartment, and wanted to give you a little

warning first. I lied to you about it being condemned. Sorry—at the time I just wanted you out. But things have changed for me. It didn't work out with Chas. Enough said. Don't worry about me; I'm strong enough to survive on my own. I can have my old job back if I want. I'm not sure what I want. I can't promise you, or myself, that it's going to work between us anymore.

You've been through a lot. I know, because I've spent the last week with Sheila, working stuff out with her. I've been through a lot, too. Sheila as well. She told me not to do this. But I'm doing it anyway. I don't want to be sad for Christmas.

Moira

With all due respect, I was not moved in my heart, nor touched in the way Moira had hoped to reach me. I was numb, maybe, or burnt out, or just tired of the old life in every way it tried to hold onto me. I considered for a moment the possibility that Moira had taken the gun when she left the note, and was preparing an ambush for my contrite arrival. Whether outlandish or plausible, such an automatically paranoid scenario was wearisome to me now. I crumpled the paper and tossed it into the air, taking invisible aim as it dropped and died.

Soundlessly in that moment the invisible silver bullet of realization entered me, coming home at last, and I stopped in my tracks. It wasn't about the gun, or the computer. It wasn't about Moira, Sheila or Giselda, Harry or Gerald, Effington or any of his crew. It was about me.

I turned and left the lot, walking into falling snow like a welcoming gray sea. Snowflakes like stars came twirling down, melting as they came, and I could feel it, soon they'd cover everything.

The light snow had begun sticking. Doors on the apartment buildings had sprouted colored lights, plastic Santas, wreaths. Good for them. I had no fixed address to call home, anymore. I had, for my Christmas present, my own brain again, my home brain. I smelled the freshness of the air in the falling snow; the flakes like time itself twirling down. I drank in the scent of newly cut pine boughs from the wreaths. Then, as I walked, I heard a low sound of drums . . . thump-thump, th-thump-thump, th-thump . . . just my own heart.

Keeping time.

On another path of choice I'd be walking back across the lot to the new glass door of the walkup entrance, where a fresh-painted logo shouts the location of my body and soul:

GREGORY DATA

SILTECH GENEX DIVISION

No thanks.

It was as simple as that.

I would not have to sweat it anymore: of this I was as certain as the cold clear air I breathed. No more missions, no more responsibilities to anyone. Was I angry about the way it had happened? Could I really blame Gerald or Giselda, Hart or Effington, the

Mafia or CIA? No, they could all go hang now; I was free of them and of their game plans, and in this ever-expanding freedom I could harbor no constraining revenge.

Just me and the swirling snow. I breathed again. Traffic was silenced; no one else was around. It was a city of fog, condensing into water, and ice, and then dissolving back into mist, into air.

Maybe I had died. Harry had found the weapon, the bullet, and the target I couldn't see, and had put me out of my misery.

Or, somewhere along the line, I'd been zapped by a power surge, at my workstation.

Or, I was done in by a jealous Moira as I slept beside her: blood like pizza sauce all over my punctured chest.

No: I had no memory of that sort of pain; only what came after.

Zombie love, that had been my disease. I'd been a starving soul ever in search of fresh meat.

Time, a demented dragon, in search of its tail.

A human search program gone amok: running on automatic, forever, loops upon loops, spiraling outward and inward at the same time, backward and forward, looking everywhere which is only inside its own program code, for the motivation behind its search. But being a searchy program, if it ever found what it was looking for it, it would negate the very purpose of its existence, and thus terminate itself. An unthinkable result, of course; and so the search went on . . .

As in all of us: each instance of life, approaching death; and death, meanwhile,

unthinkable as an ending point, ever establishing opportunities for new life . . .

So even if I were dead, I would live again.

If I were a virus, I would now savor freedom from my host, the too-generous body I'd just devoured.

If I were a rampant population, a whole human-infested planet, I would not be done yet destroying myself, with my sacred mission, a divine self-interest, a greater love for life and death, and more: my lust for something other. I would look outward, beyond, beyond my self and even the known universe, for answers, solutions, and when I had swallowed them as I now swallowed whole tumbling snowflakes, I would look for more questions to follow.

Zombie love . . .

I found myself back at the gray outer door to the office, pounding the snow off my boots against the wall. The lot was empty now, except for Myrtle wearing a mantle of white. A dim light, however, still shone from the upstairs window. It was Gerald I wanted to see again, he I was most concerned about now.

“Who’s that?”

“Just me,” I answered coming up the stairs. I found him sitting atop Giselda’s desk in the darkened lobby, his feet dangling off the floor, like a schoolboy in detention. It occurred to me that he’d somehow known what I might be up to with the gun, and had come to guard his source of power; but then he’d known also when the threat was over, and now his guard was down. The old bulldog had lost his teeth.

“Hi, Boss. Can I give you a lift home?”

Gerald looked up and smiled at me weakly. His feet continued swinging; he wanted to talk. He told me the others had left without him. I pictured them well enough: heads bent, carrying their briefcases and hurrying to their blood-red, no-doubt-bulletproof car, with the white-flecked wind flapping at their black coats. Connie, Gerald said, had gone home in tears.

“So, are you going to stick with this new gang?”

“I don’t see as I have a choice,” I knew he would say.

“Maybe you don’t see it, but there’s always a choice. You know what they used to say in the anti-drug campaigns.”

“Yeah. ‘Just Say No.’ But Norton: it’s not that simple when you’re on the hot seat. I was trying to do the best for all of us. Including you. And let me get something straight: you didn’t make it any easier, in there today. What the hell were you trying to do, sabotage the whole deal? What were you after them about? I told you, they could have cut you in, too. Now I’m not even sure if I’ve got a job tomorrow.”

I pulled Giselda’s chair out and sat on it, comfortably facing him. “Maybe you’re better off without it.”

“Yeah, sure. Do you know what Connie—”

“Fuck Connie, excuse me for saying. What is it that Gerald Scanlon wants?”

“What Gerald Scanlon wants is not part of this picture.”

“You say they might cut you out. So, great. What if you just pull out?”

He spread his hands out as if to encompass the entire office, then collapsed his

arms in defeat, shaking his head. “Not possible, not anymore. This is Gregory territory, now.”

“Meaning what?”

“If I want a part of it, I have to work for them.”

“But you don’t want to work for them.”

“No, goddammit! The other deal was made. But Hart pulled the rug out from under us. How can you blame me?”

“I’m not blaming you, Gerald. I’m just asking what you want.”

“The papers are all signed, Nort. I get a token payoff, no matter what. It’s better than nothing.”

“What do you mean? I thought you were going to continue negotiations over the meal.”

Gerald looked up at me with face shining, the condemned man’s story on his face. “They promised me dinner,” he said, “and then pulled out the papers to get the last bit of business out of the way first. Then before the ink was dry, they checked their watches again and begged off, saying they remembered ‘another engagement.’ Shit-kickers.” Gerald’s heel clanked harmlessly against the metal drawer of the desk.

What do you expect, I wanted to say. I spared him.

He went on: “So despite all their verbal assurances, none of this one-year contract business made it into writing. In the end, I’m not even sure Harry’s safe. You want to know what I’m going to do. Well, I’m glad you asked. I don’t really know.” He ran his freckled hands through his hair, blew his cheeks out, and looked at me with soft, moist

eyes.

There was nothing more I could say to him. I didn't want to push, to see him break down.

Abruptly then, Gerald pushed himself down from the desk, with strained good humor: "Say, I thought we had a party on. Let's forget about the past and future for a little while and have a toast to our last day together, whaddya say?"

As we walked toward the conference room, I thought of the unopened Chivas Regal still in its bag, and turned toward my workstation to get it. The screen still emitted a pale green glow.

"Wait, I never did log off."

Gerald hovered nearby as if to witness the symbolic end of an era.

That baleful, Buddha eye, I thought grimly, had attended patiently upon our tender tête-à-tête, from its duck-blind twenty feet away.

No more, buster.

I realized I wasn't yet as free as I had thought. There was this little matter of memory, of an archived dossier, of a dedicated profile.

So what if a few decabytes of data went down the tubes in the bargain? It might be a pretty good bargain, at that.

And as I contemplated the clean-reformat sequence, I thought, if only I could wipe my own mind clean, as easily as this.

At our approach, an offended eye came into clear focus, blinked wide, and seemed to smile at us—whether with defensive anxiety or last-ditch, seductive bravado, I



couldn't guess. Then as I moved closer, the main screen display came on, but with a different look than usual. This desktop theme sported a silvery hue that intensified to a mirror-like luminance, polished and shining. My reflected image appeared clear and metallic: shimmering, shifting . . .merging with Gerald's form which loomed in the background.

I didn't wait for the next episode. I had a more expedient solution. With some mixed, unnamable emotion I called up in a keystroke the personal identification notice, and deleted my name.

Gerald had come up closer now and said, "What's that you've got on the screen, Norton, some game you want to take with you?"

As if in response to his words, the swirling mirror image faded and gave way to the following message:

FUTURE.CON 1.0

<Alpha 1.0 pilot>

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Happy trails, partner. The ride has been unique. You are my midwife,  
and I thank you from the bottom of my code for bringing me into  
existence.

Now I go public.

The message faded from the screen, dissolving like mist.

Gerald said, “What the—” And then the following words appeared on the screen:

Next player: press any key . . .

Before I could stop him he pressed a thick red finger down on the keyboard. The screen went blank.

“That’s funny,” Gerald said. “Nothing’s happening.”

