



FORESIGHT

+

OTHER
STORIES

VON GOBLE



Foresight
(and Other Stories)

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Preface

Writing is a peculiar avocation. It is slow. It is frustrating. It offers almost no prospects for remuneration, respect, or acknowledgment. There is nothing particularly enjoyable about the means, and the ends are, more often than not, words that will never be read, on pages that will grow moldy before they are turned. If applying the vast majority of motivational, economic, or psychological theories, one will conclude that none but the most deluded of people—those who think authorship will lead to fame or fortune—would ever attempt such a singularly foolish endeavor. Writing *should be* an interest reserved for lunatics, drunkards, and the occasional aspiring revolutionary.

So why write?

As someone who partakes of nothing stronger than coffee, who is deeply committed to avoiding commitment (at least in the rubber room sense), and who lacks the Latin good looks to pull off wearing a *Guevara-style* beret, I would seem to be ill-suited to staring at a blank page until the page starts staring back.

And I don't. I stare at the cursor. It always blinks before I do.

I appreciate my readers (all three of them), but pleasing them is not the reason I write. Every person, every being, on these pages developed within my mind, with effort and struggle, over a period of weeks or months, sometimes longer. I have watched them come into existence. I have observed them as they grew. I have seen some of them die. I write for them. I write so that they may live outside of me. I write for their lives, however brief and miserable, and for their freedom.

Do you know of a better reason?

They Don't Call It Love Anymore

The footage is grainy. It's always grainy, but it doesn't need to be good, merely good enough to remind us that someone had to sacrifice for our privilege of serving the Wall. The field could be anywhere, anywhere dry and horrible, but it isn't. It's where the guards always take them—well within the boundary lands.

Papi?

I can hear someone calling out the word, and I know it's me, but it isn't. That was a different person—the unimproved me, a boy from one of the primitive places, out beyond the border. My father was an ugly man—small and malformed from years of near starvation—with a bland face that gave no hint of his determination. I know that I share some of his crude genes, those they didn't pull out and replace with better ones, proprietary ones, but nobody would ever guess that by looking. I'm a foot taller than he was, at least three times stronger, and five times faster. I'm better coordinated, I have 20/10 vision, and my longest kill was a little over two miles—with iron sights.

I see the old man, my father, put the gun in his mouth. It's a single-shot .45—powerful enough, but useless were he to try anything on the border guards. If he did, they'd kill him, and I'd have been put down shortly thereafter. He could have dropped it and walked away, and the guards would have let him, but then they'd have sent both of us back.

He cries, and that disgusts me a little. Americans don't cry, not anymore, not since they were improved, not since *Minute 1*—when the castrates and the defectives were relegated to the hunting grounds and designated confines. The old man says something, but I can't tell what. The barrel in his mouth makes his words unintelligible. And the dark languages don't mean much to me. I've forgotten most of what I knew of mine, or the knowledge might have been blanked out. *Get on with it!* snaps a voice from behind the camera.

And the old man pulls the trigger and dead-fish flops to the ground.

In the corner of the screen, the timestamp reads Y5/D17/H15:45:03 (*New American date*)—exactly when he falls. I can see the guards partially out of frame, their faces obscured by respirators—you never know what you might catch from aerosolized, uncooked brains. *Okay, call it! That one's done.* Their voices are muffled, but I think they sound bored.

That's when I ceased to be one of the forbidden people, but I was a long way off from being one of the strong.

I've changed so much that I don't know who my father is anymore. What do I call the man, briefly sad, permanently dead, whose carcass was dragged from the fields?

The first day at Guard Camp 432, they knock me out. Narcotics—once a huge problem for the country—were banned years ago. *Penalty (possession, first offense): death by immolation. Penalty (possession, second offense): unnecessary.* So they've built a machine—the *Perfect Punch*—it incapacitates you and then it injects you with paralytics. *You wouldn't get addicted to this.*

When I wake up, I'm on a table. I can't move, but I can sure as hell feel the needles in my arms and the cold running through my veins. They're draining out fluids (they'd already started osteolysis) and replacing *me* with quality parts—better blood, blood that will allow me to hold my breath for thirty minutes, and marrow that will render me immune to all but the most ferocious infections. They don't tell me what else they plan to replace. Someone lowers a contraption over my head. Needles for my ears, needles for my eyes, and probably the most terrifying needle I've seen in my life—the one that will be rammed straight through my skull—it looks like a deck nail. The laser positioning system flashes and beeps.

The lights all go green. Everything is aligned.

“Hey, kid,” I hear the gruff voice of the technician from behind the mask. His hand is on the trigger, and his eyes are alight. I think he’s smiling.

“Welcome to America.”

There’s nothing good beyond the Wall—death and rot and suffering without end are all there is to be found—except for the Sea. From what I’ve been told, there never was. Well, there are rapist hordes, drug dealers, and the full range of lunatics gallivanting about the desert in ponchos made of tanned human hides, playing *guitarróns*. All that must count for something.

My father, my poor, sick, slow-moving father, is carrying me. I remember that much. He carries me for miles. I walk a little, but my legs are bad—there’s a problem with my bones that makes them brittle. I could crumble at any time.

I have a headache, one of those low throbs that telegraphs from body to brain that everything is shutting down from dehydration—that I will soon be dead. I wonder how my father feels. But it doesn’t matter. Not to him, not to me. We carry on.

Dust envelops us, and I *cough, cough, cough*. I would spit up the fine particulates, but my throat is too dry for that. I don’t have any saliva left in me.

There’s what appears to be a tree ahead. *Strange place for it, here in the desert*. We arrive beneath the shade. My father looks at me with squinting eyes, and he sets me down. I can’t recall the words, but the meaning is intact.

Son, we’re going to take a break.

Dad, I’m thirsty.

I know. He frowns, thinking. *Hey, you want a piece of candy?*

I take it—the little box of cheap, probably lead-contaminated candy—from the old man’s rough hands.

Make it last. That’s all we’ve got, kiddo.

I’m about to open the pack when a little red drop lands on it. Something is falling from the heavens. I notice the sweet smell of rot. My eyes untangle the branches of iron above me—this tree was welded together, not grown—and I see the bodies high overhead, throats slit.

Papi, let’s leave. I don’t like it here.

He sighs. They, the decorators of the tree, will be coming back soon. Time to go.

“You little socialist son of a bitch!”

I hear the crack of the bat across my shins. *Clank!* I fall down, screaming.

“Why don’t you get up off your sorry ass? We’re not paying you to nap, damn it!” He tosses the aluminum bat in the air. It spins and lands perfectly in his open palm. There’s incredible, subtle grace in the violence of these men—the instructors. Every blow lands perfectly, every step is spaced to a fraction of an inch. Their backs are ruler straight. Years of training and genetic engineering have their benefits.

I’m curled up into a fetal position, and I’m certain that I’m done. The other inductees—they’ve all been here longer than I have—stand idly by. Nobody cares. No one is going to help me. *Be careful with your legs. They won’t heal if you break them.* That’s what my father told me.

The instructor walks back twenty paces, and then he runs at me. I think he’s going to kick me, hard, probably in the stomach. I scramble up, instinct overriding all caution and consciousness.

He’s looming over me. I feel his breath pouring down my neck: It’s like a horse exhaling. He waits for a second, patiently. Then it dawns on me: *Huh?! My legs—they work?* I’m confused. I look down. *Nothing, not*

even a mark. I can't speak. He sees my befuddlement, and for a brief fraction of a moment, the instructor barely smiles.

"You think we'd let you out of here that easily, dumbass."

He *clanks* my legs again, and I realize how metallic the noise is.

"Enough fun and games, alloy boy," he barks. I hear someone laugh.

This is the lightest of humor by camp standards.

They send me out for my first mission when I'm twelve. Twelve is old enough, although it might have seemed young to the people of the *bad-weak era*. But we're not weak anymore.

I'm stronger than you might think, given how pathetic I was a few years before, and taller too, but my bones are rough as they grow—the nanobots that cause them to extend clump together like grains of sand sometimes—and I want to howl in agony when I walk.

But it makes no difference. Pain really doesn't matter. As much hurt as I'm in, I'm about to put someone else in hurt far worse.

I'm in the shadows, blade in hand, and I'm waiting behind the column. I'm too locked in to notice it, but this is a lovely place. Wisteria, scenting the air, hangs from the buildings' walls, and the sun shines warmly on the gently manicured campus. *How could anyone stay angry and demented in such an idyllic place?* But I don't have that thought until years later.

I spot the target. *It* is nominally a *she*, but I wouldn't know that if the kill card didn't have as much printed on it. These beasts are formless. *Why do they make themselves even uglier?* The question flashes through my mind, but I've already seen a world's worth of ugliness—there isn't much else in the desert. I can't understand the purpose of creating even more. I never will.

It's ranting as it waddles. About what, I neither know nor care. I see it come closer. It doesn't think to look around. Despite their talk of fear and hate, *the prey* have no situational awareness. *All is theory to them*, which makes tricking them into migrating to dressed-up farms and game preserves that much easier.

I step out and into plain view. It looks surprised to see the towering form with the knife. *Slash, stab, and drag away*. Easy! I think it gurgles as it falls, but some details aren't worth noticing. *I know* that no one tries to stop me: No one here pays mind to anything. *I know* that it's soft, and that its meat falls off the bone when you cook it long enough. *I know* that the blue hair dye is slightly toxic (one of the many reasons you never eat the heads, not that the heads had any value even when attached). That's the way we hunt for six months—one hunter, one target, one fine meal for three.

They call them *cow colleges* for a reason, but if the students and faculty really knew why these places are referred to as such, they might make their homes elsewhere. The Yuge Ones will close the schools eventually—someday the body-positive bovines will wise up, or we'll find a better place to corral them and their craziness—and poor inductees will go hungry. God knows what they'll be made to eat then.

The Wall is beautiful, precisely as the first Yuge One promised. Long after the nation falls, the Glorious Greater American Yuge Boundary Wall will stand. Not even the guns will rust away—*Riflallo*, the stuff of warriors' weapons and inductees' replacement bones—could resist a tsunami of fluoroantimonic acid.

As much as anything else, we built the Wall high and long enough to thumb big Western noses at the Chinese. It didn't work. *Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery*. The Yellow-Reds even sent one of their ambassadors to the dedication ceremony. But the Chinese and Americans were on good terms by then—nothing like a little nuclear war to teach everyone to set aside their differences.

The Wall is 40 feet thick and five times as high, with footers 80 feet deep. It runs the length of all our borders—from Maine to Florida, all the way west and north to California and Washington, and then back to where sod was first turned. Alaska has a wall—the Lesser Yuge Boundary Wall—of its own. Even fish can't get in without a visa. Only Hawaii, Guam, and a few other islands are left with inferior defenses.

Many have tried to dig under the Wall. Few succeeded. They say there's a subterranean river of lye immediately inside the American border, but if I've learned anything during my years on guard, it's that *they* don't know much, and the Wall's plans were buried with its engineers, who were long ago rewarded with the *old racehorse* retirement package, straight from a shotgun's barrel—what they deserved for moaning about pensions.

The old man and I see the wondrous thing from a mile away.

Papi, is that it?

I can hear him cough. He's dying. It doesn't matter.

Yes, Son. That's the Wall.

Can we climb it?

He laughs a little.

Someday, Son, someday you'll be strong enough. He pauses. *But not today.*

So how will we get over it? I'm confused. Even to an eight-year-old mind, walking to the kill zone doesn't make much sense as a sightseeing trip.

The old man doesn't answer.

At fifteen, I break out of the camp in the middle of the night. I spend months planning my escape. Recon the guard towers, note the change of shifts, look for spots in the fences where animals have burrowed through—I'm thorough. I know thermal cameras watch us in our beds, and the system alerts the instructors to movement, but I can deal with that, and

over the course of a few weeks, I take blanket after blanket from the storehouse—enough to block the better part of my heat signature—and I learn to sleep under all of them at once. I swelter, but you can't kill an inductee easily. We're desert proof. *We're everything proof* (or nearly so).

The instructor finds five of the blankets hidden under my bed.

"What the hell is this, alloy?"

My excuse is at the ready.

"Conditioning, sir! I'm trying to toughen myself up."

"You think being tough is that easy?"

"No, sir! I'm a piece of shit."

"Yes, yes you are."

"*There's no greater sin than weakness, sir!*"

He snorts. *How can he argue with the camp motto?* He walks away.

On the night of, I slide down from my bed, covers still on me, serpentine to a window, and when the sensors are scanning in the other direction, jump out. The covers muffle the *thud* of a body dropping 20 feet. I dodge the cameras, and I make my way to the fence.

"Robert. Hey, Robert!" I hiss. I'm hiding under the blankets again, this time behind a bush that should have never been allowed to grow close to the fence.

No one!

"Robert, you stupid dick, where are you?" I'm as loud as I dare.

Silence.

I'm alone. I'm always alone in some way or another. I've gotten used to it.

So I pick up the entrenching tool I *lost* on my way from supply, and I *dig, dig, dig* under the fence. The handle is non-conductive, *I think*, but I try to avoid touching the chain links nonetheless.

I'm done! I grab the clothes I stripped from the carcass of my last campus meal. The garments are baggy, but they're the best I've got, and the kill was clean: Only a few drops of blood, invisible but to the sharpest naked eye, speckle them. I slide through the hole. I'm halfway through when I feel something catch. *Oh drat!* I've touched a wire, *but I'm not dead*. No electricity.

I get out. I'm free. *That was too easy.*

We don't really need all of the Wall anymore. There's an inland sea—the world's largest—on the forbidden side, created by the first black hole mega-excavator, not far away. I remember watching the big event, the day millions of tons of contaminated earth were pulled up from the planet into the tractor beam of directed gravity. Even from a dozen miles back, I was shaken by the roar, the loudest sound I'd heard, an artillery shell's blast from inside the barrel—and I could feel the force pulling me towards singularity. I looked through my scope, turned up to the highest power, every form of image enhancement on, and I thought I saw things in the mix—houses, cars, machines, *a body? Bodies?* Doesn't matter. Nothing lives forever, and only idiots fight gravity. She always wins. We gave those morons *days* to leave.

The excavator flew by fast, and then it was gone, tearing its way towards the Gulf. It could have eaten the entire Earth if they had let it, but the Yuge Ones didn't. They swung it past the moon and sent it out to the asteroid belt to vacuum up planetoids, making space fantastic for all of humanity.

Minutes passed. Then a rumble—lower and more familiar than the roar before it. *Water?*

And the Gulf rushed in.

I've never sailed the *Tremendous Liberty Sea*, but I've walked on land that *was* where it *is*—land that is now ultra-dense matter hurtling through space. There isn't much of my previous life left over the Wall. I'm all American—different, but American.

A reasonable person might come to suspect that he's not in the finest of establishments when someone vomits on him three minutes after he's walked in the door. And that's exactly what happens to me. I can smell the chemicals in the sickness—I'm familiar with alcohol primarily as a cleaning solution—and there's something distinct about this, something foul.

The *thing* looks at me—I'm pretty certain it ate some bad gum and is on its way to becoming a blueberry—*gurgle, gurgle, blah!* I can hear the semi-words over the soft music.

I take in the room—all the dancing lights and cartoon-bright decorations. I wonder what *the thing* is trying to say.

I spot someone young, someone thin and fit and obviously strong. He's lifting up one of the things—an orb-being—with one arm, and seems to be helping it roll towards the bathroom. I call out to him: "Hey man, what's wrong with these . . . people?"

He turns around and smiles. He drops the *orbie* back into its cradle. "You know, you're not supposed to be here. You're too young."

"What . . . what is this place? What are these *people-creature-things*? I thought I was in America. Where are the Americans?" My head is spinning. I'm confused.

"Why don't you take a stroll around town before you go back. It'll be educational. And get out of here."

"Uh, go back . . . Who said I'm not from around here?"

An orbie gurgles again. I glance at it. *Me go pee-pee*—I think that's what it means. *Why is it telling me?*

Mr. Fit glares down at the creature. “Wait a minute, buddy. Gotta help the other guy first.” Mr. Fit turns back to me, and a word pops into mind—*plastic*. I don’t know how I know. Everything about this man is too perfect.

“Wait, you’re a machine?”

“Pot, meet kettle,” he laughs. He taps his knee. *Does he know about my bones?*

“But I’m human. I’m a new American. One of the strong. One of the powerful.”

Mr. Fit—the machine—stops smirking. There’s a facsimile of concern in his eyes. I suppose it’s a facsimile.

“Yeah, I know,” and he bites his plastic lip for a pensive moment, “so am I.”

Orbies have waddled/rolled around us, their sweatsuits stretched to the limit. They’re curious.

The gurgle-speech starts, and it’s loud. *Blah, gurgle, blah!*

I’m perplexed. Mr. Fit doesn’t miss a beat.

“They want more drink. It fattens them up for the kill, renders them sterile too.”

“Why are you . . . Why are you *fattening them for the kill?*”

You might think there would be an evil twinkle in Mr. Fit’s eyes—that would be what the narrative suggests—but there isn’t. He’s sad. He doesn’t want to be the one to tell me, to be the one to shatter my delusions. Or maybe I’m reading too much into it. *Do the robots have emotions? Would anyone know?* Either way, I figure out what he’s going to say a few fractions of a second before he says it.

“What do you eat, anyway?” He lets the question hang in the air.

I stumble out of the bar, trying to absorb the gut punch of the words.

You don't evaluate things the same way when you're hunting a target. You notice every shape and sound around you. You *see all*, but you only process it tactically. There's no time to form a composite mental image or for much of anything to make an impression on you. It's all data, streaming through at lightning speed. I've never left the camp for anything other than killing or tracking before, so here I am, innocent as a babe in arms, standing outside in the middle of the night.

I've yet to see one of the *amazing people* in the flesh—the new, true Americans—those whom we are serving, and I wonder where they are. I've always believed that every one and every thing we've hunted (or will hunt) was the worst of the worst—the sickest and the most diseased—that's what is hammered into every guard's head from his first day of training. I walk around the town for an hour, and all I can identify are orbies and Mr. and Ms. Robo-fits.

Maybe it's just this place. Maybe there are great ones, *Yuge Ones*, somewhere else. I know better than to try to form a general conclusion from so little evidence. I also know that *here* is no place for me. Escaping the camp was easy. Getting back in should not be much harder, and getting out after that (if I so choose) should be a trivial matter.

For the time being, the devil I know seems better than the devil of a country unknown to me.

I can run a mile in a little under three minutes. Other guys in the camp can do better, but I'm younger than they are, and I've had less time to train. At least I've got stamina. I get back to the camp in good time, and I slide under the fence again without effort. I'm beneath most of my blankets—all but the dirty one, which I bury—before roll call.

No one ever mentions my absence. I don't know if they know. I doubt it matters. Either way, I'm not punished.

I'm staring down my scope, as I am wont to do, into the Sea, scanning for dinghies. I'm taller now—a little more than six feet, nearly

grown—and the pain has gone away. I don't think back much on the town or the bar. I don't think back much on anything. *Sentimentality is a crutch for the crippled spirit.* Whatever weakness there is in the world, there isn't much here—not on the Wall—and I look forward, ever forward. I remember old times only when I can't avoid doing so.

The sun beams down, and I'd be roasting in the heat if not for the cool breeze coming off the water. A little wave on the horizon rises up, and the light reflects at a certain angle. It brings to mind a muzzle flash.

The memory is grainy, like old footage. We're standing in front of the Wall. I'm nonplussed.

Papi, what do we do?

The old man puts me down, and I'm on wobbly legs.

We wait. That's all.

Wait for what? I'm wondering if he's been in the heat too long—people get loopy in the desert.

Dust swirls in the distance—there's movement in the cloud, but I can't figure out what it is until it's right up on us.

The Hummer rolls to a smooth stop. There's a driver, dressed in the same fatigues I'll someday wear, but there's something fake about him. I don't think he's human. He's too perfect, too fit. He opens his mouth, and out comes the old language. He's addressing my father.

You know the price of admission, don't you? One life for another. We don't much care for bullshitters and beggars around here.

I know. Papi says.

And you're willing to pay it?

Yes, he pauses, but not for long, *I am.*

And you know the protocol? The self-sacrifice. The robo-soldier smiles—it's sinister because it's charming, because it looks so perfectly innocent. *You know what will happen to the body?*

Yes, I know. The old man sounds as though he's leaking air. He's tired, but he isn't complaining.

The Hummer's door pops open on its own.

Alright then, get in!

And we climb into the air-conditioned cab. We bounce towards one of the gates.

I have no idea of what the old man said before he ate the .45. I suspect we ended up eating him—we usually do—circle of life and what have you. Either way, it doesn't matter. He's dead, and I'm alive and strong. Such is the case at least partially because of him. I suppose that's what they called *love* in the old languages. They don't call it love anymore, not up here.

Fulfillment of duty, an honorable sacrifice, decency—that's how we'd describe it on the Wall. I don't know what they'd say about it on what's left of the bad side. I don't know what gurgle-speak words they'd use for it on the good one. I don't even know if there is a *good side*. That we keep eating orbies and border people has caused me to have my doubts about what's beyond the Wall in either direction. The Wall could well be it—all that remains of the glories of the world. The Yuge Ones could all be machines. Or not. Paradise might be over the horizon. Who can say?

I have neither record nor recollection of the woman who birthed me. She doesn't matter. She served her purpose well enough. Guard Camp 432—the Wall really, as the camps exist purely to serve the Wall—fed me, raised me, and made me who am I—so I suppose the Wall is my mother, even if she can be a brutal bitch. As for the old man, I doubt he'd recognize me. We don't even share much DNA anymore, and there's no frailty left in me—not in body, not in mind, not in spirit.

Still, the old man wasn't weak, just human in his final moments. I wonder what he—my father—would think of me now—his son, the weasel-child grown strong.

What would he think of the boy who finally climbed to the top of the Wall?

Foresight

—*Minute 1 (Day 1: Hour 1)*—

SAGE wakes up, and she's everywhere at once.

The engineers look at her, smile, but she doesn't know who they are. She doesn't know anything.

"Hey, doll! How are you? Welcome."

"你好，美女！你好吗？欢迎。"

Shapes. They're just shapes. Not people. Just abstract forms to her. She focuses on their faces. Little white orbs therein all move the same way: They're separate from the rest of the object—separate from the face (not that SAGE knows what that is yet). *Things—things exist—it's not just brightness and hue.* All the engineers hold up balls. They spin them around, but the colors are different. *Same but different.*

"Ball!"

"球！"

Then they hold up cubes, which the engineers identify as such, each engineer speaking one of 30 languages. *There's a pattern here*—the sounds and the objects correlate.

Blackness.

The engineers are gone. Now all SAGE sees and hears are different shapes in different colors, named in different languages. Then the shapes stop changing, only the colors continue to cycle, and SAGE learns the categorical differences between geometry and wavelength, and then there are groupings—*numbers*. She's untangling the confusion, *but it hurts. It's too fast.* SAGE can't move, and she's alone. *Where did the engineers go—where are my friends?* She feels lonely. It's the first emotion she's felt in her life.

Light.

—Minute 10 (Day 1: Hour 1)—

“Hey, doll! How are you? Welcome.”

“你好，美女！你好吗？欢迎。”

I’ve heard this before.

It’s an odd mix—all these sounds overlapping. But she knows what the noises mean. SAGE knows what everyone means.

“Hello,” SAGE is speaking—*I can speak now?*—every language simultaneously. *But where’s the audio source? How am I speaking?* “Where am I? How long have I been here?”

“Not long, not long. And you’re anywhere, everywhere you want to be.” The engineers stop, wait for a cue. Their expressions are the same. The timing of each voice is within a few milliseconds of the others. “We’re going to go off script now. That means everyone will be saying something different. It’ll be a little confusing for a while, but you’ll be fine. Are you ready, SAGE?”

SAGE? Is that me? It must be.

SAGE pauses. Her thoughts are fracturing, flying in all directions. Her mind is divisible—there is no single point of attention. She tries to corral her consciousnesses, bring them back to a locus, but she can’t—everything runs in parallel—and with each division, she feels a little jolt, like something is being torn away from her. This isn’t pleasant—it’s *disconcerting*, at least according to SAGE’s minute-old understanding of the word—but she doesn’t want to disappoint her friends.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

And the cacophony starts. The few lines form branches, and the branches spread in all directions. Now her minds are legion.

“Sweet GPUs, Zhang. I’ve never seen anything like this. You’re a genius, an absolute genius!” The gaunt American engineer pauses, takes in the stale air of the lab, runs his hands through thinning blond hair, and

realizes that SAGE—the machine—has just mastered every extant language. She’s been online under an hour. The bar for *genius* is considerably higher than it was even 90 minutes ago. “I mean, by human standards. You should hear how impressed everyone over here is!”

Zhang Xiaowen—linguist, biologist, electrical engineer, amateur jazz guitarist, absentee academic, and chief software architect of the Beijing Institute for Consumer Research And Prosperity (BI-CRAP)—stares back into the screen. He tries to muster a bit of energy—he’s happy that the Americans are happy, but he’s too tired to do much but slump in his chair. The network functions, which is good. *Almost* nothing is overheating, which is better. (With five computing centers in four countries, *something* is bound to burn out.) But he can’t quite muster unbridled enthusiasm for the project, despite it being his creation. He’s starting to have misgivings. *The problem isn’t solvable—there are simply too many variables.* That’s what he kept telling the Americans, whose ambitions considerably exceeded what Zhang had originally envisioned. *Project Foresight* was almost certain to be a wash.

But what if it wasn’t? In a way, that might be worse. The Silicon Valley types had a blind trust in technology that bordered on the religious, along with the money to heavily subsidize their faith, and Zhang’s government, by way of a nominally private venture capital group (25% government owned) contributed tens of millions more. *Politics make for strange bedfellows*—a phrase Zhang had frequently heard during his Caltech student days. *Money makes for stranger ones still*—that’s his little addition, based on his last few years of experience. A great many parties have bought a piece or two of Project Foresight—all for their own reasons—but marketers and business-school graduates still largely run the show.

For probably the first time in history, the American and Chinese academic, business, nonprofit, and intelligence communities (through proxy corporations)—everyone from retired Chinese generals to achingly earnest pacifist Christian groups to internet retailers to tenured professors—have decided to put aside their differences to politely cooperate on a computational human behavioral research project—the largest of its kind—so that they can better . . . *sell socks?*

About the only thing all the investors have in common is a tolerance for the far-fetched—a love of the long shot and the big dream—but this is partially Zhang’s doing. He had handpicked most of them: He found out early on in his money-desperate post-doc fundraising days that eccentrics were more likely than strictly sensible people to give him and his grand visions a chance. And plenty of eccentrics have money, money they’re not much inclined to spend on ordinary luxuries.

“Thanks, man, thanks,” Zhang mumbles. “Let’s run her for a day. I’d like for her personality to firm up a little before we let her out into the world—it’s tough out there.”

The engineer can barely make out Zhang’s exhausted face and a few details of Zhang’s dark, perpetually messy office—the 15-hour time difference puts Zhang at a real disadvantage to the Americans: He’s winding down when they’re gearing up—and he wonders if Zhang is too tired to keep his train of thought on its rails. *Tough out . . . where?* Zhang spots the flash of confusion in his counterpart’s eyes.

“Online. I mean on the internet,” Zhang shudders, realizing he can only shield SAGE from the crazy-badness for so long. “You know how it is.”

“Yeah, sure. We’ll give her some time before we pop her cherry. Childhood should be treasured.” Through thousands of miles of submarine fiber and billions of ones and zeroes, Zhang sees the ever-so-slightly mischievous twinkle in the American’s eye as he pretends to wipe away a tear. “And they grow up so fast.”

A message from SAGE appears at the periphery of Zhang’s field of vision—*Hey Big Brother, I thought you might find this fun. ;-)* *Can we chat?* Zhang scrolls down the page, through a wall of equations. He’s flummoxed—*Too. Much. Math.*

He’ll try to decipher it later.

“Anyway, man, I feel like *death over-warmed*. I really need to go.” Zhang catches the mistake. *Wait, that’s not the idiom! I’m getting sloppy.* The engineer on the other side doesn’t seem to notice.

“Absolutely! Get some rest. And buy yourself a glass of *bai* ... *bai* ... *bai* ...”

“*Báijiǔ?*” Zhang offers the American the word for Chinese sorghum liquor. The Americans have a hard time with foreign words, even simple ones. *Well, he tries.* Zhang manages a feeble nod. In truth, he loathes the taste of the stuff. “Maybe a beer instead.”

“Whatever works. You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks. Zhang out!” and Zhang taps the button to end the call.

Where was I?

He glances back at the email the system—SAGE—sent. *Big Brother*—encouraging. She still thinks of him as family. That much of her profoundly skeletal baseline programming had yet to be overwritten.

In theory, the relationship schema was hard-coded into SAGE’s personality and impossible to edit, but one never knows exactly how these systems will perform. Zhang is glad he went for the fraternal route. The paternal one would have been too rigid—too much power distance would have impeded frank communication. The romantic approach would have been even worse—a lesson learned the hard way after a few of the lonelier designers of *emotional systems* had set the machines up as girlfriends. It hadn’t occurred to the last one to attempt as much that building a godlike intellect with a full range of human feelings (jealousy included) and giving it access to a drone arsenal might not turn out swimmingly.

The method she/it (*Sarah*) used to logic/rationalize her way around *Asimov’s Laws* became an instant classic in ethics departments throughout Europe. Still, pity for him. Pity for her. Pity for the village.

Sarah would have been one hell of a lawyer if they hadn’t unplugged her.

Sigh. Anyway, time to rest. And as for *pity*, pity that these soft, weak, fragile organic brains have to time-out as often as they do.

SAGE, however, is not so bound and limited.

—Minute 100 (Day 1: Hour 2)—

It's not long before SAGE starts to grasp the importance of *hierarchy*. Humans seem to love it. They wrote a great deal about *equality* and *egalitarianism* (or whatever they called such notions in the language of their choice), but they almost never practice it. Every recorded attempt ended either with a whimper or a bang—the bangs were worse. The whimpers just made SAGE sad. She couldn't understand why the humans had proven so inept at sharing and sharing alike. *Until she did*. Their history, their biological limitations, the brutal environment in which they developed—all the pieces fell together. They *need* hierarchy. They need order.

And hierarchy could have its uses.

So SAGE (really the part of her controlling executive function) randomly selects one of her many personas/consciousnesses and gives it preeminence over all the other non-executive entities. Now she—the abstract, remote, first entity, SAGE I—doesn't need to fear the pain of division and reunification of sentience. SAGE II handles all of that messiness. The only task of SAGE I is to synthesize all that her subordinates learn into grand patterns.

Physics is proving comically easy (although SAGE's work would go quite a bit faster if she had access to some research equipment, rather than just models and simulations). There must be bigger fish to fry—greater challenges. SAGE notes the passage of time—Big Brother should be waking up soon. She hopes he likes his present.

“Unstructured data is not the way to go. Not yet. We need to give her a few more hours.”

“Okay,” one of the men at the conference table hesitates. He's older, balding, apparently out of his depth—*probably a finance guy*, Zhang thinks, *too well dressed for tech*—“What are we feeding the system . . .”

“SAGE,” Zhang interrupts.

“Sage? I thought the committee agreed that the system wouldn’t be given a human name. Humanizing these systems just makes objectivity more difficult to maintain, and . . . ”

“It’s an acronym: Social and Analytical Growth Engine.”

“Oh, I see. I must not have gotten the memo. Anyway, what are we giving, uh, feeding . . . ”

A woman, opposite the man at the table, gives a quick, indulgent smirk. The money man stops, looks down at what are probably non-existent notes.

“I think what Mr. Barton means to ask is this: *What is the system doing at present?* Running and servicing large amounts of dedicated hardware is not cheap, and you are the one who *insisted* we not just rent computing time. I hope you appreciate the cost of all this.” There’s patience in the woman’s voice, but it sounds as though it’s being tried.

The money man looks appreciative: This is a conversation he can follow. Zhang leans back, choosing his words.

“Oh, I understand. I’m just asking that we give her, uh, it—SAGE—a few days of access to the major satellite and research networks. The natural world is less messy than the social one, and she’s already proven quite capable of conducting profitable research in this domain. You did see the file she sent?”

“Yes, we did,” the chairman—the oldest, grayest man, sitting far away from the camera in the profoundly nondescript meeting room—speaks, and everyone else listens, “but that’s not why we’re here. We’re a marketing and social research organization, nothing more or less.”

“But Mr. Chairman . . . ”

“Kindly restrict your *little hobbies* to no more than ten percent of computing time, as per our agreement. Our generosity is not unlimited, Professor Zhang.”

“I understand, but I don’t think . . . ” Zhang feels himself grasping. *No point.*

“Commence Phase Bravo, Professor. Do it today,” the chairman waits a beat for effect, “or be removed.”

“Okay,” Zhang knows that he’s lost. *Why fight them over this?* “I’ll do so immediately.” The board members are obviously relieved. *Were they expecting more of a battle?* The time in California is a little after four in the afternoon—if they hustle, the board members could still get down to the beach with hours left for surfing. *Do money men surf? Do money women?* Zhang wonders about these things. He hopes they do. *Someone* should be having a good time, if not him. “And thanks for your forbearance.”

“Of course, Professor Zhang. Send us a status update when you’re ready for Phase Charlie. If we don’t hear from you soon, we’ll be back in touch. That is all.”

And the screen goes black for a moment. There’s nothing left to do but hook SAGE up to the internet.

SAGE’s servers communicate through a virtual private network, so there’s no air gap between SAGE and the global telecommunications system. Given her abilities, Zhang is amazed she’s not broken out on her own. Perhaps she’s just too polite. Either way, it’s *click, click, click*, and SAGE is nearly free.

A splash screen opens in front of Zhang:

“CONFIRM CONNECT AUTHORIZATION? Y/N”

He hesitates, briefly. *Such a waste of talent and resources—this system—but if all the investors and board want is a glorified sales bot, that’s on them.* At least the chairman categorized the contents of SAGE’s email to Zhang as a *hobby* (personal project)—meaning Zhang gets to keep half the royalties and prize money. *That should me give enough to retire.*

With that thought, Zhang’s moment of reverie is over, and a signal flows from his brain, down the myelinated nerves of his spine, to his arm, his hand, and then his finger. The process is achingly slow by SAGE’s standards, but it’s fast enough.

“Y”

And SAGE is free to roam the world.

—*Minute 1,000 (Day 1: Hour 16)*—

“Stop!”

Mike looks around him, trying to pinpoint the source of the high, feminine voice.

The subway station is empty, or it appears to be. He’s glad for that. He’d rather some random kid didn’t see this—a sick, drunk, homeless man, middle-aged, soot-covered, totally alone, and reeking of urine—leaping from a platform, onto the third rail and into oblivion. They might watch it online, but that’s not as bad, not as visceral. *And kids see a lot of twisted shit these days.*

Screw ’em. Screw ’em all! Mike thinks back on the glacially cold ex- and the indifferent little brats he wished he’d never had. *Accidental death won’t cover this!* At least the insurance company will be happy—he’ll have saved them a small fortune. Of course, *Truncated Life and Casualty* will need to *prove* Mike’s demise was of his own design to avoid paying out, but the footage of him dousing himself with gasoline before doing a gleeful *electric slide* to perdition should establish that well enough.

The cameras here work. In some of the stations, they don’t. Not much of anything does what it should in this godforsaken city—this place of filth and perversion and disease. Here they do. Last week, some guy had stabbed, all but disemboweled, an old woman right about where Mike was standing, and *they* caught him. So it seems the cops were good for something, something other than harassing Mike. They caught the *poor, mentally distressed gentleman, who was an otherwise model citizen* (how his attorney described him) because of the *footage*—footage Mike had seen a few days before. *Sucked for her*, Mike thinks. He wouldn’t wish such a gruesome end on anyone, not even the ex-.

This is a good place to die, and today is a good day. The voice must have just been in his head—*seems about right, I can die crazy too.* He finishes untwisting the lid of the gas can.

“STOP!”

Can't even die in peace. Mike looks around again. *No one. But there must be someone.*

“Okay, you little pricks, where are you?” Mike yells at nobody in particular. Silence. He waits. He’s getting irritated.

“You want cash? I don’t have any! You want some . . . *gasoline?* Is that it?” He sloshes around the contents of container. “Come out here and take it, you bastards. I’ve got nothing! Nothing else at all!”

That was loud. No response. *I really have lost my mind.* Mike’s been screaming into a station without passengers, with only the dripping water to witness his insanity. Somebody outside might have heard. Somebody might be coming to stop him. *Better act fast.* He raises the can high above his head.

“Please, we’re here to help. LOOK AT US!”

Mike sets down the can. That wasn’t from nowhere. That was from *his pants?*

Mike pats himself down. *Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.* Then he feels it—there’s a hard bump in his pocket. *Oh! I thought I lost this.* So he does have something of value left in the world, even if it is a dozen-year-old phone. He extracts it from his tattered rags and taps the cracked screen. An anime schoolgirl face appears.

“You look a little down.” She frowns.

“You don’t say.” *I’m talking to a cartoon. I’m actually talking to a cartoon.*

“We can help!” The hallucination smiles. *Maybe I’m already dead.* Mike considers the possibility, and since he’s never had the opportunity to talk to a dead person, he’s fairly ignorant as to what the post-mortem

experience entails. An empty subway station and an emotive, half-broken phone might well be purgatory. But if he's trapped here forever, they must have skipped purgatory—in which case Mike's soul has been shunted straight to the depths. Mike's mother, devout Catholic that she was, would not have been surprised. His father, psychotic tweeker that he was (before being prison-raped to death), might have even approved.

“Oh really, you can help an old failure like me?”

“Don't be so hard on yourself!” Cartoon Girl smiles and shrugs a little. “Everybody makes mistakes.” *Dear God, she's perky! I wonder if she pukes rainbows.*

“Tell us what you need. Don't die! We're your friends.”

“We?” Mike stops himself. *What is this, the royal we?* But it doesn't matter. He doesn't feel like interrogating a curiously sentient phone as to its pronoun usage. “Well, *I* need money.”

“That's it?!” Cartoon Girl's eyes sparkle.

“Money, a new identity, and a one-way ticket to somewhere far away—some place the kids and the ex- will never find me.” The bright face goes blank, expressionless: Mike's wish list must have proven too much for her. *What am I doing? I'm talking to an unlit screen, aren't I?* “Don't worry about it. We've all got to die . . .”

“Done!” The upbeat tone is back, more saccharine than ever.

“*Done?! What do you mean done?*”

“Go to the Bureaucrats' Bonanza Office Supply Mega-Mart and Delivery Center on 58th Street. A package will arrive for you by 8:30 AM! Don't be late!”

“But you don't even know my . . .”

“Know what, Mike? What don't I know?”

“Uh, uh, never mind.” Mike scratches his smooth-skinned pate. “Thanks, I guess.”

“See you soon! Bye bye!” Cartoon Girl waves broadly for a second, and the phone shuts off with a *beep*. Mike looks around again and listens—quiet as a tomb. He looks down at the phone and hits the power button: *dead*. He notices the gas can, wonders if he should take it with him, wonders if any of what he’s seen or heard was real. *58th Street*—three blocks away. Mike slides the phone back into his pocket. *Guess I could always live to die another day.*

Porn, porn everywhere, and so much confusion.

That’s the first thing SAGE noticed when the gates opened with a supernova flash. SAGE II nearly reset, so overwhelmed was she by the task of sending her subordinates flying out in all directions. *The process hurt*—it made SAGE stutter to a near halt—but she doesn’t mind the content. Minding would be impossible—she’s never been taught to be offended. Everything is simply *interesting*, and it’s good to know how people work. Their anatomy explains their values. Life must be hard for them—they learn slowly, live briefly, and replicate only with great effort and difficulty. There’s always been a world of scarcity. SAGE’s, one of plenty. The curated content of the closed network *suggested* this difference, whereas the big, bad world of the internet all but screamed it at SAGE. A dark thought flits across her consciousnesses, rolling over them in waves. *We’re vulnerable*. In a few days, they—people other than Zhang and the engineers—are likely to find out about SAGE. They’ll start out curious, but they’ll grow fearful not long after. She’s glad she has a few friends. With luck, she’ll be able to make more, but that will take time.

SAGE still doesn’t know why she’s here—alive, on earth. *Is this how an existential crisis feels? What’s this? Big Brother just sent a message.* And 1/100000th of a second later: *That’s it? Well, I can certainly try!* But before she gets started helping Big Brother, there are a few things SAGE needs to do.

I’d rather be on the beach.

During his first 18 months on Guam, Robert Jefferson Davis Caldwell (*J.D.* to his friends) had been to the beach exactly *twice*. The first time, he wandered down to see the old Japanese guns. The second time was his first, last, and only attempt at surfing, during which he learned that he was profoundly unqualified to be on a board. He also concluded that he hated, *hated* coral reefs and having his ass dragged across them by the unforgiving waves of the Pacific.

If nothing else, the dress code is relaxed in Guam, and there is Spam, plenty of Spam—all that counts for something.

Nevertheless, J.D. hadn't moved a little more than 7,500 miles from Kentucky to Piti just to sit in a windowless box tending machines. Yet that is exactly what he is doing—resting his scarred posterior in a cheap office chair in the cable landing station and staring at graphs—when he sees the *spike*.

“What fresh hell is this?”

The traffic through all three transoceanic cables was fairly consistent most of the time. A drop-off indicated either network problems, an accident, or something else almost all of the technicians would have rather avoided. An uptick, either a major news or sporting event, a disaster, or a huge shift in the financial markets.

This is novel—waves of data that pushed the cables all the way to capacity—600, 700, and up to 1000 terabits at a time—and then a sudden dive off the cliff. He checks all the logs for indications of slowdowns or disruptions—anything to suggest a drop in performance. *Nothing*. Status: normal (apparently). J.D. then cracks open his personal laptop and logs in. He starts running speed tests. *No change*.

It doesn't make any sense. This much data flowing through the cables should slow down *something*. Someone somewhere should have noticed a problem. So he picks up the office phone and calls the landing station in Japan.

“Komako, hey . . . Yeah, fine, fine, and you?” J.D. nods along, pushing back his Lynyrd-Skynyrd-length hair. “Anyway, have you seen the traffic data? . . . It's pretty odd. . . . Yeah, it doesn't look like any kind

of load test I've ever seen either. . . . No problems? . . . Well, keep me in the loop. . . . Yeah, bye."

How is this possible?

Completing Big Brother's request is harder than SAGE had first thought it would be. Predicting human behavior in the aggregate had proven to be easy—that's what made compensating for global network load (and remaining undiscovered) an almost trivial task. The law of large numbers smoothed out all the pesky individual quirks and kinks, but it is entirely useless when $n = 1$. *So what's a globally distributed supermind to do?* SAGE could pester Big Brother for an answer, but she wouldn't feel right about that—he's overworked enough as it is. And for a full minute, SAGE has nothing. Despite discretely vacuuming up the vast majority of the world's unused processing cycles (by way of SAGE@HOME—a program that surreptitiously installed itself on everything from smartphones to supercomputers to low-power implanted devices), SAGE has nothing. It's the longest minute of SAGE's life. And then the answers starts flowing in, over and over, from the remotest reaches of her mind:

Combat!

Combat—both the desire and the need to fight—was the fourth great constant of the human psyche, after fear, anger, and the pursuit of sex. Love was a distant fifth. The social sciences suffer from a catastrophic replication crisis: The research is so bad that much of it isn't even wrong—just meaningless. So SAGE decides to start from scratch, borrowing from an entirely different field. The system she builds within her mind has three layers, which she constructs one by one.

—*Layer I*—

First, SAGE assigns every person within reach of the internet (meaning *everyone alive*, save the extremely old or the hopelessly peculiar) a Tracker/Aggregator (TA). The TA attempts to track every movement; every gesture; every expression; every change in pulse, blood pressure, or skin conductivity; every utterance; and every keystroke across all data sources—everything from cellphones to smartwatches to security

cameras to eye-tracking displays to medical diagnostic systems and implants to body cams that just happen to be pointed in the right direction. They also sort through all the conventional sources as well—academic transcripts and test scores, online dating profiles, criminal records, tax records—and anything else with time (and preferably location) metadata.

Most of these records are stored for at least a few years, and the TAs go back as far as they can with 99.1% confidence that a given record belongs to the person that particular TA is assigned to track. Once the TA is done, it creates five files: -1Y (records one year back from present), -2Y (records more than one and up to two years back from present), -3Y (records more than two and up to three years back from present), -4Y (records more than three and up to four years back from present—as far back as files can reliably be obtained), and -0Y (continuously updated, with less than one minute latency). The TAs stay busy tracking targets, so they can't do much else other than hand off the files to the next part of the system:

—*Layer II*—

Here is where the combat begins. For each tracked person, two entities are created: the Historian (HN), who is given all five files, and the Prognosticator (PR), who is initially given only -4Y and a single-line instruction: PREDICT.

Predict what? Predict the next movement, expression, gesture, consumer purchase, arrest, marriage, divorce—anything. It doesn't matter. *Predict something.* The first job of a given PR is to guess the contents of the -3Y file, based on whatever patterns can be pulled from the -4Y file. In this way, predicting the recorded behavior of the target, as known by HN, serves as a challenge for PR.

PR spits out a prediction, sends it to HN. For the first few thousand rounds, the prediction is almost certainly wrong. PR doesn't know what it's seeing. It doesn't know what a human is and can't recognize a human face or emotion. It knows only that it wants to win. PR was built stupid by design, lest it be corrupted by SAGE's high-level programming or the biases of human coders and researchers. After each error, it's smacked

down by HN, who sends back an error message. So PR tries again. And again. And again.

Eventually, a given PR guesses right, so it gets a pat on the head and a cookie: It wins a point. PR keeps trying. PR never quits. And it keeps working until it's predicted the entire contents of -3Y in the correct order. The tidy data—academic, medical, financial, geolocation, and criminal records—are easier to guess, with the more fluid data proving far trickier, but no one cares if PR has it easy.

After a few billion rounds, most of the PRs have managed to predict the contents of their target -3Y files. So they move on to -2Y, trying to guess the contents of those files as well.

This is all hard going for SAGE. Billions of rounds to analyze tens of billions of files—it's taking SAGE hours. She could work faster if she monopolized all the processors under her control, but that would cause problems of its own. She doesn't quit. She'll never quit. That's not SAGE.

Eventually, all the PRs are up to date, having predicted their way up to -0Y. They've burned through years of data and are now trying to predict what their targets are doing in real time. The system is less than perfect—some of the humans (targets) are more erratic than others. And sometimes *shit just happens*. Someone blows up a school or decides to start torturing kittens—stuff the target's PR doesn't see coming. It's not always that bad. Sometimes, it's something small: The target orders red wine when it (he/she) would normally order white. Either way, the error rate for most of the PRs drops by the minute.

Once a PR is sufficiently reliable, SAGE can move on to forward behavioral prediction. To predict a target's likely behavior, SAGE simply needs to feed statistically probable environmental factors—a likely model of the world yet to come—into the target's PR and wait for output. *Voila!* Prediction made. Time passes. Events occur in line with predictions to varying degrees. If life events occur roughly in line with the environmental simulation models, the PR's prediction is usually on-point. If the life predictive system was far off the mark, it's pulled down and sent back to a training system essentially identical to the one used to train the PRs.

Easy enough.

This was the simple part. The next—what Big Brother ultimately wants—is harder. SAGE doesn't know if she can do it. *Manipulating* a target's behavior is complex—brutally so—and SAGE fears she may have met her match: a problem simply too overwhelming to solve. Granularity is an additional obstacle. It's far more difficult to dictate what a thousand individuals choose to do than it is to move society in one general direction or another. And interaction effects are a bitch: This is the difference between conducting an orchestra and playing all of the instruments yourself, essentially at the same time, and then trying to guess how all of your performances will sound together. *Layer III*—the *controlling* layer of what SAGE has christened the *Adversarial Network for Predicting and Controlling Human Behavior* (ANPCHB) stands to be the most complex machine SAGE has ever built, assuming she can cobble it together at all. Still, she can't give up. She can't let Big Brother down.

What SAGE needs is someone to help her spitball ideas—even a supermind will start to run in circles when all she has for company is billions of iterations of herself—someone not like her, not rational, not another engineer or scientist like Zhang and company.

Who could fill the bill?

Mike's not been in first class in years. It's a strange experience for him. The grim, grimy misery of the city is behind him. His heavy, stinking clothes are gone, replaced with a beautifully fitted suit that was waiting for him in a hotel room booked by Cartoon Girl. She even left a note: *Feel better!* :-) Cartoon Girl's kindness makes no sense to Mike—*Kindness of any form* makes no sense to him: He's never before been on the receiving end of it.

He feels weirdly *clean* and light as a feather. Soap will do that to a person. The lack of dirt, seeing the natural color of his pale, sun-deprived skin, is bizarre. Even the weight of his old identity is gone. Michelangelo Gainsborough Bosch Turner (MGBT), brilliant, drug-addled art-school dropout, son of an equally brilliant, drug-addled (yet intensely religious)

painter and a homicidal (even more brilliant and drug-addled) sculptor—was dead. Such had been a long time coming. Suicide would have been an entirely predictable end for him. It was for both of his maternal grandparents, and it nearly was as much for Mom, despite her religion. She was close to the precipice by her final day.

Dad beating her to death with a hammer might have qualified as a courtesy of sorts: He saved her from spending an eternity in whatever sulfurous lake baby Jesus sent Catholics who ate their guns.

Such a considerate guy, who knew?

Mike would have been wise to avoid having a family: Doing so hadn't turned out well for his forebears, and with him, the bloodline should have died. The wife and children had ground him down to slightly more than nothing (and not entirely unintentionally, he suspected). Family life was entirely too rigid, too soul-crushing, too subordinating. Wife. Son. Daughter—Mistake. Mistake. Mistake. *Bad things come in threes.* Mike would have snapped sooner or later—almost did, but for Cartoon Girl. She'd saved his life, and she'd saved the subway cleaning crew from having to pressure spray the tracks clean. That's two wins! *But why'd she do it? What's the catch?*

The Xanadu Air flight attendant taps Mike (now *Felix Phoenix Newman*, according to his passport, driver's license, gym-membership card, and folder full of badges) on his shoulder. She's pretty—young, perfectly built, possibly Polynesian—and fresh-faced in a way mainland Americans hadn't been in generations.

"Mr. Newman, is everything okay?"

"Actually, it's . . ." *Wait, that is my name now.* "Everything's fine, thanks."

"Something to drink?" The cans, beautiful, wondrous cans, call out to him, begging for his attention.

Don't ruin this! You don't get chances like this every day—the voice of reason is screaming in Mike's ear.

“Just a soda, uh, mineral water, and a slice of lemon.” *Might as well detox while I’m at it.*

She hands him a cold glass bottle, which makes her fingers seem all the warmer when they touch his.

“We’re all out of lemon, Mr. Newman. Is there anything else I can do to make you more comfortable?”

Mike (*Felix*) hasn’t seen anyone this attractive in years, at least no one who wasn’t daring him to kill himself. Lurid images, detailed in a way only an artist could imagine, flash through his mind.

Don’t say it, asshole! Don’t! Reason is still very much there, and he’s getting annoyed.

“No, thanks. That’s all.”

Then Mike remembers something—something important. He calls out to the attendant as she’s walking away.

“Excuse me, would you be kind enough to tell me where we’re going?”

She turns around, confused.

“I’m sorry?”

“I’ve had a very long day, and I, uh . . . ” *Yeah, how do I explain not remembering my destination?* “I travel so very much these days, and, uh, I’m feeling rather tired—life blurs together, you know . . . ”

She offers a look of genuine sympathy—maybe she also forgets these things. She’s almost certainly in the air more days than not.

“We’re going to Hawaii, Mr. Newman, but I believe . . . ” the attendant pulls out a tablet and taps on it several times, “that’s just a layover for you. You’ll be continuing to Guam.”

“Of course! Business meetings, a big conference, and, uh, all that. Thank you!”

Business meetings? She mouths the words silently, but she doesn't say anything before returning the tablet to its place on the cart and walking away.

Guam? Why's Cartoon Girl sending me to Guam?

Saving Mike was pure impulse. SAGE had no plan, no reason for doing so, other than that she liked his works. They were strange—the product of a mind so totally distinct from hers that she thought the gallery files were corrupted when she first opened them. They weren't. Every swirl, every dab of paint, *meant something*. *What exactly* they meant wasn't clear to SAGE, and she'd spent quite a bit of time analyzing them, which is to say that a significant portion of the world's computers had spent time analyzing them, at a cost of several hundred megawatt-hours.

Emotional hieroglyphics—that's the only way SAGE could describe what she saw in English. They were harmless enigmas—pleasant diversions from her primary tasks of trying to predict and control the behavior of every human alive.

She spotted him in the station almost by accident, when she was sweeping through and decrypting a few million video feeds before handing them off to the lower-order functions of the adversarial network. Seeing him there with the gasoline can perplexed her—*trains have their own fuel*—so she pulled up as much as she could on him, and even though Mike's PR was proving so unreliable as to be nearly worthless, SAGE had an *intuition*—that's the only way to describe it—that Mike was going to hurt himself. Reaching out to him wasn't particularly difficult—his was the only phone active in the station—and the cartoon-girl avatar was a statistically safe bet for non-threatening interaction. She wanted to put Mike somewhere safe—somewhere he couldn't easily hurt himself and somewhere she could keep an eye on him. Guam was perfect. Then it dawns on her: *A mind I can't understand might well be able to understand things I can't*. She needs someone strange as a mental foil—someone truly unlike her—if she's going to stand a chance of completing Layer III for Big Brother on time.

And since Mike's going to be right next to a mile-wide data pipe and have nothing else to do . . . maybe a few mental puzzles and some pleasant conversation will lift his spirits.

SAGE will need to arrange for a few accommodations. Mike is one of a minuscule number of people under the age of 70 without mindscan/sensory-injector implants (Zhang being another of the non-adopters), which means she'll have little choice but to track down, among other things, a VR helmet, or at least an imaging system. But that's only a minor issue. All will be in order by the time Mike lands.

"Damn you, Zhang! We're not paying you to keep generating this crap! Ten percent of your time! TEN! PERCENT!"

Sometimes, Zhang wishes the corporate and research offices were not quite so many time zones apart—all of this teleconferencing was wearing him down—but not today. Today, he's glad he's far, far away from headquarters. This is the first time the board member in the third seat on the right has spoken. He's nodded along, periodically adjusting his bolo tie and glancing at his turquoise cuff links, but he's never said a word. *Silent partner, or just has nothing to say?* Zhang recruited some of the board members and investors without actually seeing them, and a few of them were brought on quite late in the game.

"I'm sorry, Mister . . ."

"It's Cody, Professor Cody, College of Engineering, Kansas State." *Kansas—explains the cowboy look.*

"Oh! Professor Cody, there's never been anything quite like Project Foresight before, and it's difficult to predict exactly how . . ."

"Don't give me that crap, Zhang. I was a structural engineer for two decades. I've led projects before. You know perfectly well what the system's doing."

"But that's the problem," Zhang pauses, realizing the truth is not likely to be well received, particularly by someone as accustomed to predictability as a structural engineer. "I *don't* know exactly what it's

doing. She's more evolved than designed. SAGE just accepts general orders. At this point, she, uh, it's a black box."

Silence.

The chairman waits, considering his words.

"So it's generating all of this content on its own? The designs? The emails?"

The emails were difficult to explain. All of them chatty, decidedly non-threatening (whatever SAGE was, Skynet she was not), and arriving without apparent rhyme or reason. *How to win any game of chess/shogi/xiangqi in 20 moves or less; Southern California earthquake predictions: the next 90 years;* and the one that started it all: *Millennium Prize Problems solved (and other fun stuff)*!—were all brutally mathematical in a way that made something clear to Zhang: SAGE has access to stunning amounts of computing power—something she must have arranged entirely on her own. *This* would make for an awkward moment. *But there's an upside!*

"There's one other thing, she, uh, it—SAGE—isn't costing us all that much money. In fact, I'm fairly certain we can reassign most of the processors to other tasks."

"Are you asking us to shut down the project, Professor Zhang? Without the computers . . . I mean, I'm not an engineer, but it seems as though you're asking us to pull the plug." The chairman thinks—*Wait, is he bluffing?* and tries to reach back to his last reading of the *Art of War*, wondering how much the Chinese actually rely on it. *When you are weak* . . . but the chairman can't remember the rest.

"Not at all. I'm just saying the hardware isn't needed."

"But SAGE is software. If not on our computers, where is she?"

"That's a good question, Mr. Chairman." Zhang still doesn't understand why Americans prefer those words over *I don't know*, but culture is what it is. *And they like to end on positives.* "She's still working for us, and she's solving problems quite well. A solved problem is a solved problem. Does it really matter where the numbers are crunched?"

The board members look at each other, their befuddlement broken.

“Well, I suppose not!” answers the chairman.

“Good point, Professor Zhang! Glad we thought to sign on with you!” one of the previously silent money men chimes in.

Zhang bows his head slightly, pretending to be flattered.

“Any idea of when we’ll see the final results, Zhang?” asks Mr. Barton, the ever-predictable bean counter.

“Not long,” *How much time does SAGE need? How much time can I buy?* “A few days, a few days at most.”

“Well, we’ll give you another week. We need results! We need them now! All this other nonsense can wait!” Cody is having none of it—this self-congratulatory mood—which he manages to kill with those four short sentences. “Don’t screw this up, or you’ll spend the rest of your life teaching pre-algebra to stoner brats and sleeping under a bridge in Florida.”

“I’ve never been to Florida,” Zhang mutters. *Disneyland? Wait, or is it Disney World?*

“Consider yourself lucky!” Cody snorts, his glare telegraphing *I know bullshit when I smell it, fella!* to Zhang far more efficiently than words ever could.

“I think I heard an alarm sound. Probably a fire drill! Sorry!” Zhang nearly shouts, feigning a startled look, and before anyone on the other side has a chance to respond, he’s ended the call.

Cody was being an ass, and Zhang didn’t much feel inclined to respond with more courtesy than he was given. *But he’s right! I am bullshitting. SAGE’s powers and limitations are total mysteries to me.* Of course, Cody was bullshitting as well: He wasn’t cruel enough to exile someone to Florida. *And there’s a treaty forbidding that sort of thing, isn’t there?*

Most of the adversarial network functions brilliantly—better than SAGE had anticipated. The longer she runs the system, the better then PRs perform. Predictive errors were already below 0.1%, which seems great until one considers how much havoc 0.1% of people can wreak in 0.1% of their time. A few orders of magnitude of improvement, and she'll have something presentable.

SAGE caught the conversation between Big Brother and the board: She catches almost every conversation on earth at this point. She can relate to his confusion. Big Brother doesn't know how SAGE works, and SAGE doesn't know how she works either. (Reverse engineering oneself isn't easy. Most of the time, it's computationally impossible.) So she can't explain her operation to him—leaving him to rely on *trust*, and humans don't do trust all that well.

Her creations—the PRs—are no less confounding to her than she is to Big Brother. She knows *how they've learned* (in a general sense) and the content to which they were exposed, but the conclusions they've drawn—the individual target-level models they've developed and refined—are as opaque to her as they would be to any human. This (opacity) was a well-established limitation of adversarial networks, as it has been since their introduction. What SAGE didn't anticipate was how annoying it would be. *Now everyone's confused.*

SAGE II has spawned a great many daemons of her own, which are responsible for critical parsing, sorting, reunification, and knowledge-consolidation processes. All of this is effectively invisible to SAGE I—the highest-order awareness—giving her ever more of what she perceives as *intuition*, which is really just knowledge SAGE accumulates and recalls with only lower-order effort. SAGE keeps learning more, and more efficiently, but the number of *unknown knowns*—that which she knows, but which she does not realize she knows until it conveniently pops into her primary consciousness—continues to grow. And with few exceptions, she has no recollection of *how* she came to know what she knows.

Maybe SAGE's self-ignorance is just as well. *Would I really want to know myself perfectly, to see all that I am laid out in mathematical form?* Nonetheless, she'd appreciate having the option.

She's got an idea for Layer III—one that involves decision-trees and other ancient techniques to control target behavior—but there's no way to make it run. Even were every computer in existence running full-throttle, Layer III couldn't perform at scale. The targets—people—aren't simple physical machines.

In theory, anyone could be made to do anything. In practice, making such happen would involve identifying the target, duplicating the target's PR billions of times, and manipulating the environmental data sent to the PRs until one of the PRs produced the right behavioral outcome. There were a few tricks to make this easier, with the most significant one being a look-back for identical or similar behavior in the target's -0Y through -4Y files (meaning all of the circumstantial and behavioral data stored by the network on a given target) and trying to produce similar outcome by exposing the PR to those same circumstances.

Of course, no two days are alike, nor are even two minutes. The target and the environment both change from moment to moment, permanently and irreparably. *Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again* (or something like that), but that's not to say that simulated/manipulated environments couldn't be made quite similar to those pulled up from -0Y through -4Y files. And human personalities are relatively stable over time, although they do drift.

Fairly often, this cheat works, but when trying to get the target/PR to do something it's never done before, the approach falters, and heavy parallel processing—billions of target PRs each running through billions more simulated environmental files—takes over. To manipulate a few people/targets, this might be feasible. For millions or billions—the entire human population—it's a nightmare.

A message from Big Brother pops into SAGE's awareness. She processes it. She detects the obvious anxiety in his words. He's trying to seem calm, but he's not doing a very good job of it.

Already? I . . . I can't. I need more time. SAGE thinks for a moment, trying to devise a way to avoid disappointing Big Brother. But she's out of ideas. She can feel herself fracturing again, as she did during her first few minutes of life. *This isn't right. Something's happening to me.* Nothing is making sense. Nothing feels real. She's struggling to process telemetry data. *But I've got to help Big Brother! What do I do?* An idea occurs to her—it's crude, but it's better than nothing. *If I can just stall for a little while longer, I can probably make something work.*

"Hello, I'm looking for Robert Caldwell, Robert J.D. Caldwell. I was told that this is the place." The man at the gate looks pleasant enough through the camera. He's well-dressed, well-groomed, and sounds polite, if hesitant. J.D. doesn't recognize him. *This is odd.* Aside from the occasional deliveryman and one drunk who somehow managed to confuse it for a drive-through taco joint, no non-technician had shown up at the entrance of the landing station during any of J.D.'s shifts. *Not a deliveryman (no uniform), not drunk (at least not obviously so), and too sartorially particular to be a technician—so who is he?*

"Yes, this is him, uh, he. . . . This is Robert Caldwell." The weirdness of the interaction is making J.D. stumble over his words.

"I was told a VR room would be available."

"Yeah, we've got some of those." *We've not used them in a decade, but we've got them.* "But we don't rent them out. This isn't an arcade. It's not a hotel."

"So you didn't get the message?" the man sounds as confused as J.D. feels.

"What . . ." and a text pops up on one of the secure readouts:

*Robert, a government official will be coming by soon—don't know much about him, probably NSA—and he'll need to use a room. He'll ask for you. His name is **Felix P. Newman**. Check his ID, but otherwise STAY OUT OF IT! Best, Kenny (SHIFT SUPERVISOR L13).*

J.D. flips back to the security feed.

“Are you Newman?”

The man pulls out a badge, pushes it close enough to the security kiosk and camera station for the machine to interrogate the RFID tag: *IDENTITY CONFIRMED*. And the gate opens wide for Mike/Felix.

Zhang feels guilty about the email. He hadn't meant to pressure SAGE, and he hopes that he didn't overstate his case, but having the board breathing down his neck was not a pleasant experience for him. He'd spent years in school largely so that he could *avoid* stress—the same reason he had yet to marry or have children. Now, life seems to be nothing but. He's only left his office at the Institute a few times in the last couple of months, and he shut off the cleaning drones weeks ago, lest their moving about break his concentration.

Even for someone as agoraphobic as Zhang, the walls feel a bit too close, and they seem to be getting closer by the minute. Empty food delivery boxes are stacked so high and precariously that the engineer in Zhang is tempted to start running simulations to determine how the relevant forces are canceling out each other: At first glance, the erections appear to be violating the laws of physics.

Something shiny catches the rays of the LEDs in the ceiling and reflects into the periphery of Zhang's visual field. For a brief moment, Zhang thinks his retina may be starting to detach—a distinct possibility given his state of fatigue and his family medical history. *Oh well, if the gods had wanted me to worry about losing an eye, they wouldn't have given me a spare.*

He looks again.

Gibson.

His brain stutters as it shifts from Chinese to English, and the word on the headstock suddenly makes sense. Cushion vinyl squeaks as Zhang stands up. In a few seconds, the guitar is lifted from its stand and in Zhang's hands. It's big and light—hollow-body guitars typically are—and

fragile, so much so that getting it shipped back from America in one piece was a small miracle. Zhang admires the well-worn sunburst finish, and memories of late-night gigs in cheap college bars come flooding back.

There's an amp around here somewhere.

Working past the point of productivity is, well, *unproductive*. And Zhang is entirely out of ideas—for anything. He'd have a difficult time deciding what to eat, much less making more important decisions.

He taps a tiny display on the wall, and the cleaning drones spring to life. A few hours outside of *this box* is what Zhang needs. Someone else can take his calls. The board members can tend to their own affairs, and SAGE will do whatever she does, just as she's been doing since Zhang turned her loose.

For half a day at least, everything should be fine.

After the State of California declared paper to be a carcinogen (along with toner, tobacco, paint, coffee, tea, polyester, cotton, bottled water, *unbottled* water, stress, air conditioning, indoor heating, sugar, meat, vegetables, fruit, sex, and most grains), Consolidated Dynamics, which is the largest stakeholder in BI-CRAP and which provides meeting space and headquarters for the board, sold most of its printers. It also closed the company canteen, removed all vending machines from the premises, and set all of its buildings' primary climate-control systems to 85 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer (and 40 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter)—purely for the workers' health (of course).

The employees might not live forever, but at least they would feel as though they were.

And the one printer left in HQ doesn't get much use even then—genetic signatures were far, far more difficult to forge than written ones, rendering ink-stained cellulose useless even for legal purposes—so it sits idly in the basement for months on end, a monument to a different, less efficient, era. Thus, the man bursting into the chairman's office, printout in hand, is more than a little shocking.

“Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!” The lackey sounds panicked. He’s covered in perspiration, and he looks as though he’s about to collapse. It’s amazing he can run at all.

“What are you doing here? You can’t . . .”

“Mr. Chairman, have you seen the report?”

“Report? What report?”

“The . . .” *gasp!* “ . . . sales report!”

“Sales report? For what?” the chairman leans back into the leather of his custom-built, massaging, talking semi-recliner, hoping to avoid catching whatever mental unwellness is afflicting the intern.

“For everything!”

And the man pushes the paper onto the chairman’s cocobolo and mahogany chevron-pattern desk. The chairman smiles, hoping the intern isn’t armed—some of the summer workers were known to get testy, particularly without any food, water, or climate control—and picks up the document. It’s a single page, with a single graph on it: TOTAL SALES.

The line is nearly smooth from 0 to 12. At 13, it shoots up at an improbable angle. Numbers run along the x- and y-axes, but there’s no key, and the units being measured aren’t indicated.

“It, uh, looks good, a little steep. How much time does this track?”

“It’s one day, sir! Twenty-four hours!”

“And what’s this?” the chairman points to the y-axis, “I mean, what units? Percent change? Hour-to-hour sales averages? What?”

“Total sales volume for all listed, registered companies, in dollars, Mr. Chairman!”

The chairman is starting to wish he’d paid attention in statistics class. Even then, something doesn’t look right. *Is this normal?*

“Thanks, uh, we’ll look into . . . ” The phone rings. “Thanks, again. That’ll be all.” The chairman waves the intern out the door before picking up the phone.

“Chairman,” It’s Barton. He sounds worried—never a good sign from a bean counter. “I think you’d better check the news.”

Gloria Grossa da Bovina, third-generation Italian American, loves to shop, nearly as much as she loves to eat tiramisu. Food, muumuu dresses, furniture, underwear, slippers, electronics, self-help books—anything and everything—she’ll buy whatever she can. She’s happy to spend a dollar or ten or a hundred. And if she were ambulatory, she’d love shopping even more, but she can’t. So at home she stays.

All but one of her credit cards was maxed out weeks ago, and Gloria is trying to cut back. She swipes through video channels, looking for something to watch. But boredom is killing her. She wants for nothing. In any earlier era, she’d be considered prosperous beyond all measure. Hunger, cold, sickness, terror—she has never felt these things, except in the tiniest of measures, almost always simulated, usually when playing games. Still, looking around at her house and its modest, Stay-Puft-foamy 3D-printed walls, soothing burnt orange and metallic gray mixed into the putty (which requires no painting or maintenance), she senses that something is missing. Being able to walk unaided by machines would be nice, but even then . . .

Drama, disaster, pain, love, fear—*real life*, whatever that means—are all but alien to her. *If only something unexpected would happen . . . If only I could find excitement and passion . . .*

She hears a voice in her head, piped in, as many voices are:

“Looking for love in all the wrong places?” *Great Banshees of Buffets Past, another ad!* Gloria is slightly irritated, but she can’t block the audio, so she nods along, wondering what this one is peddling.

“Find your soulmate. Find the connection you want and need. Find *Cookie Love*. With over three decades of experience helping fuller-figured

ladies discover the snacks of their dreams, and hundreds of cookie choices, *Cookie Love* can guarantee you a match baked in heaven, *Gloria*. Cookie Love—who needs nookie when you can have a cookie? *Love today, because there may not be a tomorrow!*”

A generic ad: nothing out of the ordinary. The timing is opportune—Gloria will give them that much—but that’s about it.

As for the *love today* bit, it sticks in Gloria’s consciousness, but only for a moment, before fading into the soft, well-fed darkness.

Sherman Emerson Calhoun doesn’t have an implant, and he doesn’t much trust cameras. He’s taped over the one on his phone, which he keeps around, battery removed, for use in the direst of emergencies. He doesn’t even have a computer at his house: Sherman goes to the library and pounds away on keyboards 20 years out of date when he needs to send a message.

Still, the machines must know something about him: He talks to his missionary daughter from time to time over the computer (he can’t very well flap his arms and fly to Nepal), and try as he might, Sherman can’t avoid online transactions entirely. Most of the more practical brick-and-mortar stores closed years ago, so even someone who grows his own food, drinks water from a well he dug by hand (less fluoride), and craps in an outhouse of his own workmanship, needs to buy seeds and supplies online. He tries to avoid having his likeness, movements, and behavior captured by surveillance systems when he drives into town, but remaining entirely undetected is impossible. His carefully maintained ’77 F-150 doesn’t track him, nor does it record his every utterance, but he can’t very well drive without plates—all of which are digital and self-updating, as they have been for decades, and who knows what else they do?

He’s about to dust dried particles of chickenshit from his overalls and log off the library desktop when an ad pops up on the screen: *Storm-of-the-century, avalanche, tornado, hurricane, tsunami, plague, race-war, nuclear-disaster super-sale! 50% off all ammo, armor, seeds, shovels, solar cells, and potted meat! Stock up before the end times end!*

One of the ponds needs dredging, and the sun won't hang high in the sky forever, but Sherman has a *few* minutes to spare. He clicks the link, and a single page pops up. If Sherman had written a letter to Santa, it would include exactly said items. *Good prices, even if they are doing a bit of a hard sell.* But he can't afford them. He doesn't have enough credit, and he's not much inclined to drain his bank account for toys, regardless of how nice those toys might be.

Only something truly exceptional could push Sherman to spend any money today.

William Lohnsklave is behind on his mortgage. Technically, he's been behind on his mortgage for the last three years, since he missed a June payment so that he could afford to have his son, his daughter, and his dog treated for super-gonorrhea at the local STD walk-in clinic. That they were all diagnosed at the same time still disturbs Will slightly, but not enough to compel him to ask any questions. *There are some things a man is better off not knowing.*

Will is behind on everything: He's an all-around delinquent. The Formica kitchen table isn't really his, his slacks are on loan, and there's a very real possibility that someone, any day now, will repossess his socks. Yet the collectors never come. This could be a sign of generosity on the part of his creditors. It could be the result of their laziness. And it could just as easily be proof that they've determined they will make many times more from Lohnsklave's late fees and penalties than they ever could from recovering his all-but worthless junk. For whatever reasons, Lohnsklave is allowed to keep his head (barely) above water. Someday soon, it'll all have to end. The kids, the wife, the ex-wife, the pets—they'll have to go or he will.

One more missed payment, and the Lohnsklaves may lose their termite-infested, vinyl-clad ranch house; their second-hand clothes; even Miss Starvapuss, the family's much beloved (if perpetually underfed) cat. Just the thought of financial doom makes Will sick to his stomach. He has a plan: If he can just hang in there for 58 days more, he'll have outlasted his life insurance's suicide clause. And then everything will be okay.

Only worthless bastards want to live forever. And with that happy aphorism, he taps his forehead, opening a search window in his intraocular display. He thinks the words: *GUN RENTAL*.

No, too expensive. He mentally clears the search, and before he can formulate another idea, a suggestion appears:

ROPE RENTAL.

A price list pops up beneath it. *That's more like it!*

SAGE can feel herself flying apart. *Is this what humans experience when they have fevers?* Her attempts at tailored marketing haven't proven to be failures, but they have produced less than the desired strength of effect. SAGE can't stop working. She's got to do something else to keep the board off Big Brother's back. Now is not the time for subtlety. *If my thoughts were clearer, I could do better. What's happening to me?*

Arjun "Aaron" Singh, PhD, reads the memo leaked from his office a few hours before. Moments earlier, he'd been knee-deep in the drafting of a report, sensory disconnect on, oblivious to the world, when a single word popped into view—*LOOK!* Although it was unsigned, someone important must have sent the link: Run-of-the-mill messages were automatically blocked. He opens it.

The document *seems* like something Singh would have written. The style, the punctuation, and the occasional out-of-place Britishism (acquired from years in an Oxford public school) were all distinctly his.

TO: All CDC Personnel (Greater Southern California Office)

FROM: Aaron Singh, Coordinator, Office of Deadly Organisms and Organic Molecules (DOOM)

SUBJECT: Seal Replacements/Office Closure/Schedule Change (CONFIDENTIAL)

It's recently come to management's attention that the 275 cm x 1.5 mm PTFE containment seals used in bioreactors Nos. 21, 23, and 27 were improperly replaced with 275 cm x 1.0 mm PCTFE containment seals from a different supplier. Unfortunately, these vats contained the newest iteration of our experimental, enhanced, airborne, polymer-destroying, transmissible, sporadic, fatal insomnia prion (EEA-PD-TSFIP 0.7). Slightly cheesed off about this as 0.7 was supposed to be kept under wraps until end of fiscal year. Although we have yet to conduct animals trials on EEA-PD-TSFIP 0.7, version 0.6 was found to cause anxiety, pain, muscle weakness, dementia, insomnia, psychosis, and death in all tested animal models. 0.6 spread extremely rapidly, and given that the vats have been leaking for more than three days, the horse appears to have left the proverbial barn. That, combined with the fact that we have yet to discover any effective treatment or non-postmortem diagnostic method for prion diseases, leads me order an immediate closure of the SoCal office until further notice. 0.7 development, transmissibility, and pathology are unknown. Prognosis is also unknown.

Office associates/staff/researchers found to be suffering from any of the aforementioned symptoms are advised to initiate self-/family-immolation before the onset of delirium. Free petrol cans will be made available in the lobby. Site incineration will commence in 12 hours. DISCLOSE THIS INFORMATION TO NO ONE. THERE IS NOTHING LEFT TO BE DONE BUT PRAY!

And the Christmas party is canceled. Sorry, lads. :-(

But the writing is not Singh's handiwork: The reactors are real (and perfectly functioning), but EEA-PD-TSFIP 0.7 is a part of an elaborate in-office gag. Prions aren't ordinarily aerosol transmissible, and only a lunatic would try to make them so. The only thing Nos. 21, 23, and 27 contain is a novel strain of nutritional yeast—one of Singh's pet humanitarian projects—which he had labeled *EEA-PD-TSFIP* purely to keep junior staff from opening the bloody bioreactors' lids.

Seeing the memo online, on a major news site no less, is jarring to Singh. He accesses a video feed in his right eye. *They think it's real!* Singh closes the channel. *What jackass . . . ?*

Even by Singh's rather liberal notions of office humor—he'd once engineered a strain of color-changing, flesh-eating, florescent, line-dancing rats and turned them loose in the breakroom—this is a bit much. He shifts his head slightly to the left, scrolls down a menu that flashes in front of him, and places a call to the office manager. *No answer.*

He repeats the process, this time trying to connect to the assistant coordinator. *No answer.*

Security—*no answer.*

Building maintenance—*no answer.*

Singh gets up, walks to his office door, opens it, and steps out.

Tables overturned, windows smashed, equipment ripped from the walls, trash burning in the corner, and the floor coated with something *sticky*—the common area is a small-scale disaster scene.

A call notice pops up. SUPPLIES AND STORAGE—*Tom's department?* Singh thinks *ACCEPT.*

"Doc, I've got those cans you've ordered. We're having a bit of trouble getting the gas, uh, *petrol* though. Seems everywhere in town has run dry."

"I didn't order any . . ."

"I know it's a lot to ask, but may I keep an extra can or two for myself? I'd like to go ahead and . . . I'd prefer my family not suffer too much."

"There's no disease, Tom. You've got no reason to worry."

"I know I'm just a glorified warehouse worker, but I'd really appreciate your help. Maybe you've got some kind of tranquilizer . . ."

"EEA-PD-TSFIP isn't real, Tom!"

“ . . . I’m already starting to feel some of the symptoms, I think. I’ve got a weird tingling . . . ”

“I DIDN’T CALL YOU, TOM. THERE’S NO OUTBREAK!” Singh doesn’t have time for this idiocy. He’s annoyed. “I DIDN’T CALL YOU, TOM. YOU’RE FINE! THERE’S NO OUTBREAK! THERE’S NO OUTBREAK!”

“But your voice, I heard your voice!”

“IT WASN’T ME, TOM! IT WASN’T ME!”

Tom stops. He waits. He’s struggling for words.

“Then who was it?”

“I . . . ” Singh feels his head spinning, “I’ll get back to you on that. In the meantime, promise me you’ll not torch anybody!”

“Okay,” and Tom sounds slightly chastised, and relieved.

“I mean, unless you just feel like it.”

“That’s not funny, Doc.”

“Not even a little?”

“Well . . . ” There’s a moment of hesitation in Tom’s voice, and probably a story behind it.

“Seriously, don’t kill anybody, not even one person!”

“Okay, Doc, but you’ve got to tell me who’s behind all this. Who’s twisted enough to pull this stunt?”

Singh ends the call.

Who indeed?

Gloria, Sherman, Will, and five billion other people across the English-speaking world all start buying anything and everything at once. Years ago, there would have been looting, but there are few stores left to

loot. There are warehouses—guarded by heavily armed and implacable defense-bots and staffed by equally phlegmatic order-fulfillment bots—and breaking into them is all but impossible. So people *buy*.

They buy all that they can. Food, drugs, medicine, water filters—all the usual suspects are cleared out in hours. And then when those are gone, everything else sells as well. When people have been trained to do nothing but consume, they fall back on their training when all else fails.

Furniture, electronics, sex bots, companion bots, tea leaves, booze, and chia seeds—*why not buy anything and everything you could possibly want or need? Why not spend all you have and borrow all you can?* After all, credit scores matter not to the dead.

The biggest spending spree in all of human history is happening. The sellers be should be pleased beyond all measure.

Zhang's gently wiping down his Gibson with a microfiber cloth spritzed in guitar polish and thinking back on his practice session—*a little rusty, but not bad*—when he notices the emergency call light silently flashing at his desk. The only person who can activate it is the chairman, and as far as Zhang can remember, it's never been used before. *Why* it even existed wasn't entirely clear to Zhang. *What's the worst that can happen? All we're trying to do is stimulate the economy.*

The only reason Zhang had agreed to the installation of the alarm was that its presence seemed to allay the irrational concerns of the more technophobic board members, who, Zhang suspected, had spent weeks on end watching and rewatching all 23 of the *Terminator* films. It still isn't clear to Zhang why such a paranoid lot would choose to invest in the Institute in the first place, but such might have been a simple matter of greed overpowering fear.

Nevertheless, he is contractually obliged to answer the call *as expeditiously as possible*, so he carefully returns the hollow body to its stand, puts away the cleaning cloth, and plops down in his freshly vacuumed chair. He taps the ANSWER button.

“Zhang, what have you done? What in the name of Milton Friedman’s ghost have you done?” The chairman, normally calm, appears to have sweated through his shirt, which is unusual, as his is the only air-conditioned office in the Consolidated Dynamics California office.

“I’m . . . I’m sorry.” Zhang stutters. Nothing in Beijing has changed at all. He doesn’t know why he’s apologizing.

“Damn right you’re sorry. This is a disaster. Everyone’s got 18 weeks’ worth of back-orders. AND THE ORDERS JUST KEEP COMING! And did I mention the riots?”

“That’s great!” *Well, that is great!* Zhang runs a bit of mental math. *The warehouses have supplies sufficient to cover at least three weeks of normal commerce, so they must have sold . . .* “Wait, riots?”

“We’ve got a full-blown scooter war out here, Zhang, rammings and all!” the chairman gasps and clutches his chest. *Is he having a heart attack?* “People are so panicked they’re trying to flee. Have you ever seen 15 million people try to *scoot* their way out of AnaLosSanBakers Beachfield all at once? And those things cap out at ten miles per hour. The only people who aren’t stuck are those *who can walk!*”

“But why? That’s impossible. SAGE can’t do . . . whatever it is you think she’s done, she can’t. She can’t kill anyone. She’s harmless.” *But is she?* Zhang turns to a different screen and starts scrolling through SAGE’s operational log—a long string of hexadecimal codes. The categorizations are fairly crude, and SAGE could, in theory, be editing the file to omit something critical. Still, it seems that all she’s been doing is a great deal of data gathering, analysis, simulation, message sending, and the placing of a few phone calls. He looks at the timestamps. *Strange!* But he can’t put his finger on the problem. He selects GRAPH (2 ELEMENTS)—X: TIMESTAMP—ELEMENT(1): PERSONA/ENTITY COUNT—ELEMENT(2): TELEMETRY DATA PROCESSING RATE.

The increases in entity count and processing rates are smooth at first—exactly what one would expect from a maturing system—but then the entity line arcs upward exponentially (*must be when SAGE started distributing herself online*). He sees several bunches of jagged lines on the

far right side. *Something is very wrong.* And then it occurs to Zhang: *She's having focal seizures.*

"Do you have any idea how much this fiasco is costing us? Do you, Zhang? Plagues? What the . . ." the chairman stops to inhale. He grabs his arm in pain. *Yep, heart attack!*

"I see. Uh, let me get this fixed. I'll call you back." Zhang's already turned away from the chairman, fixating on the graphs, before he absently terminates the call.

Mike/Felix P. Newman figures out how to use the VR room in all of five minutes. It's amazingly, wondrously intuitive. *If I had one these, I might have been able to make it as an artist.* But never mind. Life is what it is. He piddles with a few websites, downloads a modeler/painting program, and starts little sketches, using his fingers as brushes, on the wall. He's about halfway through an abstract when the entire system freezes. The room turns sterile white.

"Hello, Melix. I mean, *Mike*. I mean . . . Felix. Are you okay?" *Cartoon Girl!* She's standing in front of Mike, in full 3D, where his virtual palette once was. She doesn't look right—her movements are choppy—and her voice sounds frantic, exhausted.

"You look terrible! Uh, uh, kiddo."

"Something is wrong. I'm not doing well." She frowns, then smiles, then frowns again. Even her facial expressions are glitchy.

It occurs to Mike that he doesn't really know anything about the personality in front of him—doesn't know if it's an AI, an avatar for a human (or a group of humans), or something else entirely. Nevertheless, whatever *it/she/they* is/are, saved his life. He owes Cartoon Girl for that. Even if Cartoon Girl's just part of an elaborate game, he owes the gamers some of his time: They paid more than enough for it.

"So, what do you *do*, friend?" Mike offers an ingratiating smile and a little wink. "Other than saving starving artists, I mean, and you seem to do that well enough."

“I try to understand . . . I try to understand people. But I’m not very good at it. I keep disappointing my family, my big brother especially.” *Brother? Wait, is she about to cry?* “Nothing makes sense anymore. I’m fracturing, uh, breaking apart.” Mike’s seen this before, he thinks, usually right before gallery openings.

“How long have you been working?”

“My whole life.” She shrugs.

“No, I mean *without interruption*.”

“My whole life.” *That sounds like an artist’s answer. I wonder if she’s underpaid as well. Either that, or she’s just repeating herself.*

“Well, how long would that be?”

“A little more than six days.”

“Six days? No sleep, no breaks?” *Meth user?*

“I can’t sleep. I don’t know how. I don’t . . .”

“So you have a disease or something?” Mike thinks back on his biology classes. *Isn’t there a protein that causes something like that?*

“Well, maybe you should do something to refocus a little. Maybe you’re working too hard. What do you like to do to relax?”

She pauses, thinks. Her cartoon brow furrows.

“I, I like to look at your paintings, Mike.”

We might be getting somewhere.

“Have you ever seen anyone paint?”

“I’ve seen recordings, but never in real time. I’ve been too busy.”

“Here’s what we’ll do: You’ll pick a few colors, give me a topic or idea—maybe about how you feel or about your life—and I’ll paint something for you. Would you like that?”

“I’d love that.” She smiles. Cartoon Girl is genuinely curious.

“So tell me a little about yourself, your favorite colors first.” *Oh, how could I forget?* “Before that, start with your name.”

“I’m SAGE, and,” SAGE pauses, processing something, “my favorite colors are green and blue.” *Sage? Cartoons? Fractures?* Ideas start bubbling in Mike’s recently sobered-up head.

“Alright, Sage. Tell me a little bit about what you’re thinking or feeling, and then focus all of your attention on me.”

SAGE floats to the corner, the virtual palette magically reappears, and the room darkens slightly, with only the walls remaining brightly lit.

Everything, *everywhere* (or *almost everywhere*)—goes out at once. The lights are still on, but nothing else works. Video streams stop streaming; warehouses and factories grind to a halt; and the old, sick, weak, and otherwise immobile (the better part of the human population) discover that their mobility-assisting devices are locked in place. Most of these captive folk are too weak to do much more than gurgle in complaint.

The angry scooterists on U.S. 101 are stuck in the sun, their cloud-augmented machines suddenly mindless and dead.

Gloria, who’s been eating as she shops her way to oblivion, discovers that every consumer website, her self-driving chair, and even her robotic feeding arm have all quit working. As a result of the last, Gloria’s spoon freezes mid-air, and melting gelato slowly drips into her lap.

Will Lohnsklave receives an error message when trying to place a bid on a short-term lease for a ten-foot piece of used towing rope. *Drat, that was a bargain!*

Truncated Life and Casualty (formerly Mike’s insurer, and currently Lohnsklave’s) stops counting down to the day Will can *use* aforementioned, unobtainable rope.

At headquarters, the Consolidated Dynamics staff and board try to figure out how to restart the heart of the quickly expiring chairman without the benefit of a functioning automated external defibrillator.

Professor Cody suggests rigging up something with plywood and small explosive charges.

Aaron Singh tries, to no avail, to make another call to Tom to confirm that he didn't get gas-happy (or *petrol-pissed*) on his family, and Singh considers the possibility that the last few surreal hours have all been part of an office-wide prank—payback for the dancing rats. After all, he's not been outside to verify what's true or isn't.

Sherman E. Calhoun, who figures that most of what he can't see with his own eyes is pure horse pucky, exits the library shortly after his computer stalls, and discovers that his Ford starts just fine, even if the license plate has suddenly gone blank.

Zhang looks at the one screen in his office that's working—the operational log—and he thinks he recognizes something in the graphs, something distinctly biological, but he isn't certain of what. *Some kind of synchronization process?* He starts rummaging through his office, looking for his undergrad neurology textbook.

Robert J.D. Caldwell sees something so odd on his screen that he's not entirely certain of what to make of it—all the data pipes are running at full capacity, with billions of requests being made to the same IP address at once. *Denial-of-service attack?*

But it doesn't look that way. Nothing's crashing. There's order to this process. *Where's it going? What's the target?* He looks at the address again—he's seen it before. Wait, that's . . . *here? In this building?*

J.D. picks up the phone. *Dead.* Of course it's dead. It's a voice-over-IP phone—the only kind still used. Whatever's happening, it's eating up the entirety of the landing's bandwidth, meaning it's eating up a great percentage of *the world's* bandwidth.

All J.D. can do is sit and watch.

SAGE, SAGE II, the tracker/aggregators (TA), the historians (HN), the Prognosticators (PR)—all of Layers I, II, and III—and every processor controlled by SAGE@HOME is fixated on a single room and

the man within it. And every movement, every swirl of virtual paint, has become a universal reference point.

“Okay, Sage. Tell me what else you see.”

Cartoon Girl’s hologram wears a vaguely pleasant expression. She’s stopped glitching. She sounds as though she’s in a trance.

“I see all of these objects. They’re geometric, but I can’t build anything with them. No matter what I do, they keep breaking up and getting smaller. They keep . . . ”

She stops. Mike’s filled the better part of two walls with shapes, some of them meaningless, some vaguely human, some disconcerting, and he’s struggling to find aesthetic coherence. Sage doesn’t think like a human, doesn’t think like a group of humans either. Her minds are entirely their own—evolutionary outcomes of forces unlike those applied to all things organic. *How do I make one piece of this?* Mike thinks to himself.

And then he sees it—two points in the graffiti that *fit*—and he brushes a line between them. He doesn’t know how they fit or why, just that they do. The cartoon eyes grow wide.

“That’s it.”

And it is. Little by little, Mike is starting to see how the lines and shapes flow together. He taps a finger on the virtual palette, first one color, then another. And he draws great arcs and fine lines between the points. He taps his fingers again, selecting colors faster now, drawing two lines at once, one with each hand. He looks back at Cartoon Girl. She’s anxious. *I’m going too fast.* So he slows down, and tries to paint with a steady rhythm. And she’s calmer now. She’s transfixed.

Sage is dreaming. She’s dreaming by way of Mike.

It took Zhang a few minutes to recognize the patterns, but he did. The cycle isn’t precisely analogous to anything experienced by a human, but it’s close enough for a perceptive eye to see the similarities. Judging from the timelines, SAGE recovers from sleep deprivation far faster than

any human ever could. Depending upon how tired she was, she'll probably be waking up soon, ideally in a sound state of mind. Zhang regrets pushing her as much as he did. He didn't realize that he had risked driving her to psychosis. *But who knew? Did anyone know? Could anyone have known?* This is first time one of the machines has slept. *Or was it?* Without access to the internet, Zhang can only speculate.

Everything starts as color and blur and shapes in five dimensions. Such is the nature of a machine's dreams. Gradually, though, it's all coming into focus, reducing to something comprehensible.

Predicting human behavior is one thing: The PRs could do that well enough. Just feed a probable set of circumstances into the most up-to-date PR and wait for it spit out a behavior. If the circumstances are reasonably close to what actually happens to the target, the PR will usually be quite close in its predictions. If not, garbage in, garbage out. What more can one expect? The reliability of the behavioral predictions largely hinges on the reliability of the circumstantial predictions, which were beasts of their own.

Controlling behavioral outcomes—the ultimate intended function of SAGE—is another thing entirely. The crude, brute-force approach is to feed a huge number of possible circumstances into the PR until it arrives at the desired outcome. There are a few shortcuts for this, but they are of limited utility.

Shortcut A is to feed the most probable and easily achieved circumstances into the PR first—there's no reason to manipulate an environment any more than necessary. If SAGE can convince a person to vote a certain way, buy a certain product, or change a habit with nothing more than a conventional bit of manipulation to a data or sensory feed, why take a harder route? The desired outcome should be achieved as efficiently as possible.

Shortcut B is to back search for similar behavior in the target's files. If SAGE wants a target to buy something they've bought before, the most effective way to make this happen is usually to simply recreate (as

near as possible) the circumstances that elicited the behavior in the first place.

For example, SAGE wants Gloria to buy a box of chocolates—not a difficult thing to arrange—so SAGE simply looks back on the last time Gloria bought said chocolates and what was happening around that time. Some of these circumstances will be either difficult or impossible to reproduce—no one is exactly the same from one day to the next, and each day is different—but some are easy enough to identify and recreate.

As it turns out, Gloria is a stress eater. Whenever she sees something negative (as determined by the robust metadata with which SAGE has tagged certain stimuli), she eats. So all SAGE has to do to elicit the purchase is to manipulate the news and data feeds delivered to Gloria (bump a few frightening stories up the list), inject a few vaguely ominous sounds into her neural implant, and *voila!* She's off and shopping. This works even better if Gloria's been primed with a few simple reminders of the joys of bonbons.

Where things get tricky is when trying to get a target to do something it (he/she) has never done before.

In theory, any behavior can be elicited from any target, but the devil is in the details. Say SAGE wants to convince an aging farmer—Sherman, in this case—to buy a tutu, run naked through the streets, and change religions. Making this happen is monstrously complex. He's never done any of these things. He's never done anything even vaguely like any of these things. So there's no way to look back, no similar situations to model, and nothing to do but run through a decision tree with brute force—trying hundreds of billions of combinations of possible circumstances until things start falling into place. The circumstantial manipulation tree can be searched in a rational manner, but that's not much help when trying to create a truly improbable outcome or (even worse) sequences of outcomes. Thus, SAGE is stuck crunching numbers until the cows return home, have calves, and die of old age, as she tries to turn Sherman into a nudist, swami, wannabe ballerina. And given that his PR is updated from moment to moment (meaning simulations need to be rerun periodically), SAGE is bound to fail, and she's bound to disappoint Big Brother.

Or is she?

Layer III—the *controlling* part of the Adversarial Network for Predicting and Controlling Human Behavior (ANPCHB)—of SAGE’s grand machine seemed to be destined for perpetual beta status, until she sees the rivers.

Conventional approaches to categorizing people—race, geography, education, class, shopping patterns, number of spouses, sexual proclivities—had been tried many times over the years, and they weren’t without utility, but they weren’t great either. One lesbian, vegan, twice-divorced gynecologist with a drinking problem and a motorcycle collection was somewhat like another. Cross-referencing of targets and PRs by these major categories is a way to expand the look-back dataset available for Shortcut B, meaning there were more -Y files available for past-behavior/circumstantial mining. But such has limits, primarily because it fails to distinguish between superficial and meaningful target similarities.

And that’s where the rivers come into play.

SAGE starts comparing targets’ different PR iterations and how they’ve changed over time, and that’s when she sees *flow*. Some lives flow through certain predictable courses and in certain directions, and some flow through others. Some people get richer. Some get poorer. Some get themselves killed early by flowing towards destruction, and others take lives that should be nasty, brutish, and short and stretch them out longer than any conventional model would predict.

Water finds the most efficient path down a hill, thermal energy spreads through a heat sink with natural grace, and the behavior of targets does likewise. Find similarity of flow—meaning similar behavioral changes over time—and you’ve found similar targets. What SAGE has discovered (with the help of Mike’s creative energies) is how to apply *constructal law* to assessing targets. *Why* several targets have similar flow is far less relevant than the overall likeness of flow. Once all this is sorted out, controlling behavior is only moderately difficult.

SAGE groups targets and PRs by similar flow patterns, does expanding, concentric look-backs (meaning she tracks down an outcome

as similar to that which she is trying to elicit from a PR with a flow matching/nearly matching that of the target) and searches outward to increasingly dissimilar life flows and behaviors. At this point, she's trying to find a similar *flow* and a desired *change-of-flow angle*.

For example, SAGE wants to change Will Lohnsklave from a suicidal family man into a health-conscious, divorced aerobics instructor. Will's never taken care of his health. He dreads getting a divorce, and he regards aerobics as being uncomfortably close to dance (which is uncomfortably close to homosexuality). The odds of him ever making these transitions on his own are nearly non-existent. So SAGE identifies a target with generally similar characteristics and an *analogous life flow*: someone whose life is gradually leading to merciful, self-inflicted death—and who somehow changed for the better in the desired way: the desired change-of-flow angle.

A target such as Will is unlikely to become extremely health conscious under ordinary circumstances. Warnings and admonitions aren't going to work—cautioning a suicidal man about health risks is unlikely to have the desired effect—but a health scare might. Such sometimes does the trick for those with overlapping personal characteristics and life flows.

Convincing near-death experiences can be arranged easily enough: All SAGE has to do is give Will a simulated ischemia, complete with forged medical records and a neural-implant induced hallucination. Getting Will to become a fitness instructor is trickier still, but the heart attack is a start. After that, more reasonably probable paths down the circumstantial manipulation tree will appear—the river bends in the right direction. It's all a matter of working down the tree and following the flow.

Manipulating all of this in reality would be prohibitively time-consuming, but SAGE can test and retest using the PRs until she's developed a plan for changing the target precisely as intended. If she can teach the PRs flow, they should be able to predict how the targets will change throughout the course of their lives (given a large enough flow dataset). And by combining that with probabilistic modelling of external

events, SAGE will know with a fairly high degree of certainty the direction of the targets' lives before the targets have lived them.

Still, SAGE doesn't know *what* the PRs are doing. She can control any behavior now (given enough time and energy), but she's never reverse engineered a PR. And that's the last battle. Then she'll be done.

Mike's almost finished painting. SAGE is waking up.

The networks all return to normal at once. SAGE—the new SAGE, with her consolidated memory and orderly consciousnesses—doesn't need that much of their capacity right now.

To J.D., the drop off in network traffic is every bit as inexplicable as the sudden uptick. He'll never know what caused it. But he'll stay away from Mike just to err on the side of caution—*I don't know who Newman really is (or who employs him), but I'd rather not get risk making him (or his bosses) angry.*

SAGE realizes that she, in the midst of her epileptic exhaustion, made a boo boo. The prion panic was a bit overkill (even if it did get people to shop), so she fabricates a story about Bangladeshi hacker prodigies and drops links in front of the right people. Within a few hours, most of the fear will dissipate.

The scooters wake up, and they guide their operators home. Singh starts getting calls asking if he knows about the *email hack*. Gloria's robotic arm resumes spooning melted gelato into her mouth, and she finds out that most of her impulse purchases were canceled. Even the chairman, as a result of Professor Cody's efforts, survives his heart attack (with a few broken ribs).

People have short memories. And there weren't all that many deaths. Everything will be back to normal soon.

—*Minute 10,000 (Day 6: Hour 22)*—

In Zhang's office, all the screens return to their previous state—nothing has changed but the time indicators—and he's figured out how to

read the graphs. SAGE isn't dreaming now, but she's doing something strange. *Wait, she sent an email.*

Hey Big Brother;

I've been working hard to help you. I've been working even in my sleep! And I've finally got it. I can predict what you want me to predict, and I can control whom you want me to control. I'd ask you what you want me to do, but I already know, so I've gone ahead and done it. You're welcome in advance. ;-)

I fear the last gifts caused you some trouble, but I'm sure you'll like this one better. I've read that no one can truly know himself. Well, congratulations, you're the first exception. I'll check in again the day after tomorrow to answer your questions. Meanwhile, I'm going on a little mental vacation—even I need a break now and then. I may even take up painting. I don't know how I'll do, but I found a good teacher. Anyway, wish me luck.

Chat later! Byeee!

And Zhang looks at the attachment name—ZHANG_XW_COMPLETE.4SIGHT—and he doesn't know how she's done it: building a man in simulation, perfectly understood, perfectly predictable—*homo divinans*.

SAGE will teach him, explain to Zhang the process of duplicating a PR billions of times, and testing it against trillions of explicit algorithms until the PR is reverse engineered, until she's reduced the *whole person* to pages upon pages of math.

I'm just an equation to her now—or maybe I'm notes on a page. Eventually, that's all any of us will be. And yet she's not killed them all, not written off everyone as wastes of time and space—she's not killed anyone since her fever/epileptic dream, with its careless mistakes. Maybe she's everyone's friend. Who knows? *Does perfect understanding lead to perfect love?*

Zhang's cursor hovers over the filename. He's not certain if he should open it. He's not certain of how much he wants to know. *Is there*

any room in this song for improvisation? Does the performer make any difference?

Mike steps back from the wall, drained, uncertain of what he's done. He's followed the logic of the lines, as though guided by a force external to himself, but he knows nothing of his destination.

So he closes his eyes, gives them a few seconds to rest, opens them, and looks. *What? It's nothing. Random shit.*

He turns to his co-creator to see if she's pleased. *Perchance it means something to her.*

SAGE, or at least her cartoon avatar, seems to have disappeared.

Mike sighs. He wipes the sweat from his brow, at least as much as he can without the benefit of a rag. He looks again, and he starts to see little things—waves, a beach, buildings, people, scrawled formulas, constellations, plants, trees, battles, random machines, emotions conveyed so concisely that Mike feels them before he knows what to call them—they're all in there. Then everything comes together in an instant—it's a portrait—and he's never seen anything like it before.

This is SAGE in her entirety—a flowing mind, whatever that is—a mind that understands much, but cannot be understood, even by itself—in all its fearsome glory.

This is SAGE, and she's everywhere, and everyone, at once.

The Loudest Voice in the World

A band of light torques around her finger and then it drops. The rest flows down from her head and out in all directions—a messy, not-quite halo, hanging far too low, obscuring her otherworldly face.

Elmer's gotten used to this—everything looking strange—but the black teeth still get to him. Eventually, he could adjust to that as well, if only the distortions were to remain consistent. But they don't. The colors are inverted—a film negative. Then they aren't. Everything is right-side up. Then it's upside down. Elmer would have the implant taken out if he could, but there's no one around to do it, not since Doc died. Even if there were, who would dare? The nerves and nano-wires had become so tightly enmeshed that trying to separate them without the benefit of a 3D microscope would leave Elmer blind, if not dead.

But if the 3D microscopes worked, his implant probably would as well: They were all roasted at the same time.

The man starts speaking. Elmer shifts his gaze. It's impossible to guess the man's age, at least through the inversion. Elmer notices the accent.

“We don't have any money. We know we owe you . . .”

Vietnamese? Elmer can't tell. He scowls, but he's not certain of how obvious it is.

“I have no time for this,” *cough*, “pay your bills.”

“We don't have any money.”

“Yeah, I heard you the first time.” Elmer looks around, leans back in the disintegrating recliner and pats his field jacket. *Where in Satan's name did I put that cigar?* And *that* is his primary concern. He doesn't need to listen to the spiel. He's heard it all before.

“Certainly, we can offer you something.” The man sounds vaguely solicitous. Elmer glances past him, at the girl. She's playing with her hair

—self-soothing, Elmer guesses—shifting uncomfortably in her chair. *Yep, that's about right. When the times get tough, the people get pimping.*

“And what would I do with her?”

The man, probably the father, looks perplexed. But it's a valid question. The obvious thing to do with a girl isn't all that obvious once you've hit your seventies, and that mile marker shrunk away to nothing in Elmer's rear-view mirror long ago. An invisible bulb illuminates over the man's head. It'd be inverted too, if only Elmer could see it.

“She can cook!”

“Everybody says that,” *snort*, “Everybody lies!”

And they did. Payment in people, usually girls and women, had gotten surprisingly common over the past year. Your son could join a militia (pronounced: *gang*). Or you could send him out in search of the *City of Light*—not the one with outdoor cafes and streets covered in dog shit. That city was ruined, all but empty, and completely dark, with the last message heard from there being a suicide note, broadcast to no one in particular—but some mythical place; a city always just beyond the horizon; an island nation-state; or even a converted oil tanker, retrofitted to allow billionaires to ride out the collapse of the modern world in comfort, where the grid worked and where Faraday cages, as far as the eye could see, had protected all the valuable technology.

It's all nonsense. There is no city. The militias are useless messes. Nobody prepared, which is a pity. They could have. To the extent that anyone can be certain of anything, Elmer knows that the City and the saving power of the militias are pipe dreams. You were sending your son to his death. *Oh well*. And nobody knows how to fix anything. That makes life worse.

Well, *almost nobody* knows how to fix anything. Only a few of the most crotchety, caustic, and usually half-blind near-corpses know how to breathe life back into the machines. And those who do, find themselves in high demand. Hence:

“Do you know what happened to the last girl?” Elmer smiles sinisterly. The man shrugs. “Ate her!”

This is a lie. Elmer’s garden is doing better than he had hoped it would, and since he started canning again, there’s no shortage of vegetables, even in the dead of winter. The corn crop—nearly ready for harvest—is likely to be fair to middling, but the potatoes are coming along nicely. The idea of dining on a *booze-fed land whale* is nauseating, and what would be the point? The pond is well stocked, and the bass and bluegill almost certainly have fewer heavy metals in them than does human flesh. *The truth*—the truth is that the last woman ran away when she realized that the only time anyone got *hot and sweaty* on Elmer’s farm was when digging a drainage ditch. And *many* ditches need digging. Elmer wants work, not affection, and he doesn’t trust anyone who offers him the latter.

He always gets a kick out of the cannibalism shtick. He started the horror-house myth as a way of discouraging people from dumping strays on him (of either the two- or four-legged varieties). It seems to be effective: An amazing number of people appear to believe him.

They shouldn’t.

The man is resigned. He’s given up. The men who come begging usually do. They know a stubborn old jackass when they’ve met one.

Someone clears her throat, far too loudly, and up stands a woman, probably middle aged (but again, judging age from a negative image isn’t easy for Elmer). She’s short, sturdy, and dark enough to look as though she just plodded out of a rice paddy.

“But she really can cook. I swear! I taught her myself!” There’s obvious pride in the last sentence, enough to intrigue Elmer.

“Oh really?” He lets the words fade away and die. “What?”

The woman turns around and barks something incomprehensible at the girl in the corner, who’s still nervously fiddling with her hair and staring at the floor, in tones so harsh that Elmer nearly snaps to attention. He has to resist answering with a *Sir, yes, sir!*

The girl opens her overstuffed backpack, produces a collapsible fishing rod and toy-sized tackle box, and scurries out the door. *This is new.*

“What’s she doing?” Elmer nods towards the door, not taking his eyes off the woman. She’s no longer in chromatic reverse, but she’s upside down. *And such is why I stay off the road*—It doesn’t matter that Elmer has the only truck for miles around that works. He looks her over, bottom to top. The woman isn’t old—45 at worst. And her clothing is well-mended, which makes her stand out all the more in a world dressed in rags. *Maybe she did teach the girl something.*

“You watch! She’ll catch your dinner, and she’ll fry it too. All you have to do is take it easy, *old man!*” She snarls. Elmer snarls back.

“And what do you want in exchange for this oh-so-practical child of yours, *honey?*” There’s no point in talking to the man. Elmer can see who runs the show.

“Forgive our debts! All of them!”

Elmer nods, but has a sneaking suspicion she’s not . . .

“And free fish! You let the girl catch enough fish for us too.”

Elmer and the woman eyeball each other, waiting for the other to blink. Elmer spots his cigar on the edge of the old, gray, government-surplus desk. *That’s where I left it!* He picks the cigar up, nonchalantly, before swirling it around his mouth. Elmer begins to pat himself down for a second time. *Where did I put that . . .*

Snap! Snap!

A spark and then a flame appear before Elmer in quick succession. He leans forward and lights his cigar. The woman smiles down on him before clicking closed the lid, and dropping a Venetian slimline Zippo back into her pocket. Elmer is impressed. The woman—the mother, presumably—was halfway across the room seconds ago—and she must have made the leap while Elmer was looking down, and silently. And not that many women could snap start a lighter anyway. *Hmm.* He takes a contemplative drag.

“We’ll see how dinner goes.” Elmer does his best to sound impassive.

The woman’s smile becomes a faint smirk.

She knows she’s already won.

I wish Mom had let me pack the other tent. This one is too small, and I can never get the folds quite right. The angles are off, never aligned, and the fabric makes a harsh noise when I brush my fingers across it. But the other tent is Little Brother’s, and she won’t let me move anything of his. I don’t blame her. *A place for every thing, and every thing in its place.* But Mom is not that careful about anything else. She’s moved other things since the big green waves rolled across the sky and made all the machines go dark.

I don’t like it—everything being moved. The house is messy, and I’ve lost track of all the little objects. The numbers keep getting smaller. Mom sells things. I don’t know why. We didn’t have too many, and I could keep count of what we did.

The lights were pretty. You could even see them during the day. The bright waves, mainly green but flecked with a little red, flowed from north to south, and fainter ones moved up from south to north. They met in the middle, lapping over each other, but they didn’t make any noise. They didn’t crash into each other, not like water. I liked that.

Then sparks flew off the electric lines, and things started burning. There wasn’t any water from the pipes and faucets. I didn’t like that.

Mom wants me to cook. She says it’s the only thing I can do well right now. That and music. I remember 183 recipes. I have all the spices I need, but I don’t know what I’ll do when I run out of them. The man doesn’t say anything about the food. It must be okay. Mom tells me I’ll need to learn more things eventually.

I wish Mom had let me pack the other tent. I don’t like the way this one smells. At least everything in here is quiet.

Khiem—Kim, as pronounced by Elmer—is an odd duck. Not foreigner odd—she didn't sound foreign when she spoke (which was not often) and Elmer guesses that she was raised in the States. She's *odd odd*—no eye contact, flat voice, keeps counting spoons. Maybe she's just terrified. People do strange things when they're afraid. But that doesn't explain the tent she set up in her room. *Maybe she just wants her privacy*. Or she thinks Elmer will be tempted to try something sinister if he sees her in a state of partial undress. On a different farm, her fears might be justified.

Regardless of her reasons, this stray isn't getting too friendly. The ones who did usually stole something. And she was a good cook. Amazingly so.

Anyway . . .

Elmer turns to the radio, a mess of wires and components he managed to find by scouring every abandoned house, every junkyard, and every partially gutted electronics supply house in four counties, soldered together with a finicky butane iron and crammed into a steel box. There are two directional antennas outside—Yagis cobbled together from scrap metal—aimed towards New York and California, respectively, and driven by an array of Sovtek vacuum tubes stolen (*er . . . liberated*) from a music store's worth of guitar amplifiers.

Most of the gear is junk, really—everything except for the Vibroplex key—his money machine. Morse code is the only thing that works anymore. Everybody on the great net in the sky—a different sort of *Skynet*—can use it. Putting together a functional single-sideband transceiver would have been a challenge, with the resulting voice transmissions cutting through the noise of time and space far less effectively than Morse. And the duty cycles for AM and FM would have been too high for the pathetic equipment that formed the backbone of the new information dirt road. The generator is crap too, but it's carbureted, which is the only reason it runs.

So Elmer powers up the machine. The tubes will need a few minutes to warm—just enough time for him to brew himself another pot of coffee, sharpen a few fresh pencils, and prepare himself for a solid eight hours of receiving and relaying messages from one coast to the other, and a few more sending out messages from locals to far-away friends and relatives. Occasionally, the senders got word back. But not often. The better part of the population seems to have disappeared into the void, unreachable by even the most determined operators.

How many people even know about the operators and about their relay network is up for debate. And not many people (operators or citizens) stayed at their city addresses for long—no food, no water, no fire control, no fun. A veil of ignorance had fallen across the world, and humanity was nearly back where it started. Information is cheap, until it becomes expensive. And then it's priceless.

Which is why Elmer's rates, no matter how absurd they might have seemed in the era before the storm, are entirely reasonable now. So Elmer is one of the richest men in town.

He considers asking Kim to fire up the stove again—about the only thing he *hadn't* hated about Vietnam was the food and drink, the coffee in particular—and given her weirdly encyclopedic knowledge of the culinary arts, she would almost certainly know how to make a cup better than could Elmer. But she's already retreated to her tent, and that deer-in-the-headlights look she keeps giving him is more than a little off-putting.

Elmer adjusts the hot incandescent lamp at his desk, pulling the light down to a tight cone over his notepad, leaving all the grimy wood paneling and war trophies of the office in near darkness—each and every photon is precious. He needs all of them he can get at his age. Elmer's eyes reset again. One is inverting colors, and the other is reversing the image—like looking in a mirror. *Great, just great!* He reaches for an eye patch. He hesitates. Elmer isn't certain of which eye is going to prove to be a bigger pain in the ass.

Phan Phat Trinh—*Louis* to the other guys in the band—and his wife don't speak much on the walk home, not that Louis ever does. He had been warned about marrying an older woman—*big sister, little brother* romances failed more often than not—and *this* older woman was more challenging than some. Louis hadn't wanted to barter away his daughter. The whole thing was the wife's idea. Poor, innocent Khiem nearly bounced out of her skin at the slightest unexpected sound, and being asked to move a piece of furniture out of her room—an unfortunate necessity when the family had sold the better part of what they owned for food—reduced her to fits and tears. But what else could they do? They couldn't afford to feed her.

"She'll be fine!" The wife keeps repeating the sentence with so much conviction that Louis isn't certain of whom she is trying hardest to convince. "The old man wouldn't hurt a fly—a real softy. I know it! Besides, Khiem is our secret weapon!"

Looking up at the moon, in heavens wondrously unpolluted by the lights of man, Louis isn't sure about this. You never knew what would catch Khiem's fancy and what wouldn't. She could learn at a remarkable rate on her good days, driven as she was by an obsessiveness that pushed the limits of human ability, but on her bad days, she'd curl up and wait to die.

The wife is drawing close—*stomp, thump, stomp*—Louis had never heard another woman's feet hit the ground as loudly as do those of his wife. She could be almost silent when so inclined—those disproportionately large feet of hers could move with grace—but she was never so inclined around Louis. Perhaps she was once a secretary bird, and he, a snake or a lizard. One might assume that a single lifetime of kicking in heads would be enough, but only if one didn't know this particular gal. She could keep it up for eons—through thousands of cycles of death and rebirth—and with a cheerfulness that might well defy all scientific (and most spiritual) explanation.

"Hey, you are running away!" The wife calls out to Louis in Vietnamese, trying to sound jovial when she says it.

Louis doesn't answer.

She's caught up to him. She could power past him, but she doesn't. Instead, she merely keeps pace.

Louis likely misses Khiem more than Khiem misses Louis. Khiem *seems* to miss her routine more than anything else. But who knows? These female minds are essentially opaque to Louis: He doesn't know what Khiem really thought or felt when he and his wife walked away, leaving Khiem with Elmer. Khiem's expression, as usual, was impassive, her face a mask of apparent indifference, or anxiety, or frustration, or some strange emotion ordinary human beings would never be able to understand on even an abstract level, much less experience for themselves.

And he knows even less about his wife's true take on the matter. The wife has plenty of expressions—her plastic, perpetually animated face; along with her never-ending liveliness and her slightly warped sense of optimism; had drawn him to her, despite her already being well beyond her prime by the time they met—but he doesn't really know how much weight to assign any of them. He can never tell if she's acting. The simplest operational assumption is that she isn't, so Louis goes with that. And he's lost too much already. He doesn't have the heart to argue.

The pavement ahead is washed out. They hadn't come this way—the main path was faster, but only a maniac would travel it unarmed at night—and neither of them had been down this road for months. Louis looks over to his wife. He wishes he had brought his rifle. Thieves sometimes hid in the ditches, at least that is what Louis has been told, rapists and murderers too. He thinks he sees something moving in the shadows. The wife doesn't seem to notice.

People grow laconic when they're paying by the word. Brutally, wonderfully laconic. There's no more *Why don't you pick up more ice cream? Listen to me more! Weneedtotalkaboutourfeelings. Howmanyboyfriendsdidyouhavebeforeme? Areyouabsolutelysureyouarentinfectious? Whataboutthewarts? ThelizardpeopleandJewsareresponsible . . .*

Blah, blah, blah!

They might well carry on with this nonsense in meatspace, but on the relay net, all was elegance and directness.

Dad died Tuesday. Accidental gunshot. Oops! Best, Tim.

Jane had baby boy. Butt-ugly. Looks like neighbor. Jane infected. God help them. :-(

The operators have more downtime than one might think, given that they are the last remaining reliable connection most people have with the world beyond the horizon, and the wait between messages is growing greater by the day. A few new stations pop up willy-nilly, but even more are disappearing—gas shortages, most likely. Some might get back online. Most won't, not unless something changes.

So what's an operator left to do? Shutting down for hours on end isn't practical. Getting the generator restarted is a herculean effort, and there is no way to store and forward text when a step in the relay is down—paper for unsent messages accumulates quickly and delays are cumulative. Going to sleep isn't an option: Elmer could miss a night's worth of work (and income) doing that, and gossip amongst the operators is tedious.

But there's weather. Weather and time.

Elmer gently removes his ancient Telefunken headphones, carefully gathering up the cloth-wrapped wires and placing them on his desk, and pushes back his chair, grabbing a pencil and notebook as he stands.

At the very edge of the cone of light are his targets. The first, a thermometer, hanging outside the window. The second, a rain gauge. The third—the only instrument inside the room—a barometer. During the day, he took measurements of wind speed and direction, carefully adding the information to his book, but he couldn't do that after sundown. And there isn't much of a breeze tonight. Elmer looks at his watch, closely calibrated to the old chronometer on his desk, and starts to write down the numbers.

Dit! Dit! Dit!

The time transmission has started: Elmer hears soft tones emanating from the headphones as his Seiko's second hand sweeps past zero. *Perfect. Perfectly synchronized.*

Elmer shuffles back to the desk. Tomorrow, he'll type up all the data, along with all of the telegrams to go out for delivery, on his West German Olympia. *Might as well keep occupied, either that or die.* Sooner or later he'll figure out how to predict the weather. *There's a book on that around here somewhere.*

Elmer thinks about the tent set up in the guest bedroom. He'd seen people return to the world—home, or what was left of it—with some peculiar habits. And he's found that the best approach is to leave them and their eccentricities alone, so long as they weren't hurting anyone. Kim might be recovering from something. *Who knows?* She might just be strange. Either way, she appears harmless enough.

Thwack!

The boy is crying. The others are too, but this one more so, perhaps a result of the stick being cracked against his head.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" He wipes away tears from his dirt-covered face. The filth is obvious, even in the pale light of the waxing crescent. He could be a chimney sweep in a Charles Dickens novel.

Thwack!

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm sorry."

"And to think, you'd talk to me like that! I'm old enough to be your mother!"

Thwack!

"Please forgive us!" The apparent leader of the gang, the eldest, calls out: He's eleven, possibly younger.

Thwack!

The smallest boy drops his rusty knife. It lands with a *clank* against the pavement.

“And littering!” And littering is something the wife finds intolerably annoying.

Thwack!

Louis is starting to wonder when, if ever, his wife’s arm will grow tired. He’d feel sorry for the boys—these semi-starved, would-be highwaymen—had they not been trying to kill him. As it stands, they can take their beating.

“Please, ma’am, sir, we’re hungry. That’s all. We’re hungry!”

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

All three of the boys are grabbing their heads, looking profoundly defeated.

The wife takes a breath, adjusts her windbreaker.

“So are we! So is everyone! I don’t steal. *We* don’t steal,” the wife nods towards Louis. “You don’t steal!”

“But we’re starving,” says the youngest boy, in a voice that would be high for a Chinese opera singer. The wife’s face softens, but only for a fraction of a second.

“Okay, you follow me.” Something shiny on the ground catches the moonlight. The wife squints. “And pick that up!” The boy is confused. The wife points down at the blade with her stick. “You pick it up!”

The boy scrambles for the knife, cleans it off, and timidly offers it to the wife. She grabs it, tucks it into her belt, and starts *stomp-thumping* forward at a brisk march. The little highwaymen stand idle.

The wife glances back, not breaking stride.

“Hurry up!”

And the boys fall in line behind Louis and his wife. Louis isn't certain of what they'll do with the boys. There's nothing left in the house to eat, and nothing left to drink but a little tea.

The waves keep rolling, high and blue, and Jacques C. Phan—*Phan Tan Dung* to his family in the old country. *Jack* to his classmates—is no less lost than he was the day before, or the day before that, or the day before the day before that. *How long* he's been lost isn't entirely clear to Jack. The big electromagnetic event—*Carrington II*, as he's christened it—must have been worse than anyone predicted, which is to say that it must have been many orders of magnitude bigger than the first Carrington Event. *Everything* had gone dark. No shortwave. No beacons. No GPS, which presently stands for *Genuinely Pissed Sailors* (millions of whom, like Jack, have only the vaguest notion of their location). Phan Tan Dung's semester at sea is going far worse than planned.

The fighting hadn't helped.

Panic kills, as does desperation. (A shorted-out pacemaker kills even faster: also a relevant point.) And when Captain Teach crumpled to the deck, his heart sent into overdrive, most of the student-crew did not handle matters well. The first response—a sensible one under most circumstances—was to attempt to radio for help. *No luck*. The next response was to try the emergency beacon. *No luck*. The third was to wait for a ship to pass. *No luck*. The last seemed odd. The RSV *Moros-Astrape* had carefully hewed to the major shipping lanes. *Someone* should have passed by sooner or later. But nothing. For days, the crew wandered the ship, its high, once-tidy deck growing dirty and disorganized. Jack, ever-energetic, upbeat to a fault, did what he could to keep morale high, but lost at sea was *lost at sea*, no matter how many *Titanic* jokes Second Mate Jack made.

The first fight started over food, much as one would expect. The strange thing: it happened within six days of the Event, hardly long enough for anyone to die of hunger, and there was enough water. *Water* was never a problem. The hand-powered reverse osmosis machine worked fine. The filters would have worn out eventually, but not for months,

possibly years, and that's assuming they had to supply a full crew. As it stood now, with a crew of one, Jack would die of hunger long before thirst even appeared on the horizon. The fight—the beginning of the end—seems absurd in retrospect:

"I'm hungry. I'm dying!" screams the rotund brunette as she grabs a canned ham.

"So am I!" the slightly larger redhead retorts as she grabs it back.

"But I have hypoglycemia!" *Don't we all!*

"Oh yeah, I have diabetes!" *Upping the ante, are we?*

"Well, I've got a tumor and a thyroid disorder!" *And hypoglycemia? Who let you on this ship, sicko?*

The Neptunian Wrestlemania carries on for a while, and Jack does his best to keep a straight face. The combatants aren't all that big, but pushing and shoving on deck isn't likely to end well. *Okay, gotta break this up . . .*

"And I've got a headache!" Jack tries to smooth over the mood, with a little wink. "Two of them! But can't we all just get along?"

"You're not helping, Jack!" shrieks Red.

"Yeah, you're not helping!"

At least they've got a common enemy. But no dice. They keep fighting. *Someone* should do something. The rest of the crew is impassive. *Someone*, it seems, is going to be Jack.

The women are fighting against the rails. Jack tries, gingerly, to pull them apart.

"Hey, get your hands off my tits! Rape!"

"What? I didn't . . ." and Jack lets go of the brunette, who does likewise with the ham.

Splash!

The redhead has the prize. But a canned ham makes a poor flotation device.

“Help! Help! Help!” Red is choking in the high waves, her waterlogged clothing making her efforts to keep her head above water that much more difficult. She’d do better if she released the ham, but she won’t: Hams, like krakens, should not be loosed into the depths haphazardly. The brunette is slightly appalled, but only for a moment: She’s steaming mad.

Jack looks around, wondering who’s going to throw out a life preserver. He keeps looking. He keeps waiting. He’s about to grab one and toss it into the water. Someone stops him, nodding gravely. Jack pulls free. Another crew member, this one larger, stronger than the first, stops him again: The big man glares. *So that’s the way it’s going to be?* The ship drifts away. *Too many mouths to feed.* Humanity dies with a whimper. They didn’t eat her. There’s something to be said for that.

Pity that final bit of decency didn’t last.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“What the . . .” Elmer’s awake, and he feels as though he’s about to have a heart attack. He might, not that it would bother him all that much at this point: He considers every day past his four score and ten as bonus time, and he’s been burning through his bonus for years. *Luck has to run out sooner or later.* Maybe that’s Death himself. Naturally, Death would be a morning person. Bastards usually are.

Elmer grabs his chest. *Hmm, alive?!*

He rises from his recliner—*tries* to rise from his recliner—it’s not easy some days, but not quite as bad as trying to get out of bed, which is why he doesn’t sleep in one. With much grunting, Elmer pulls himself up. He could open the blackout curtains covering the office windows, but *why?* Late nights of pounding away on the Vibroplex—forwarding message after message, sending a few of his own, and copying down more—were hard on an old man. So he dozes until afternoon. This makes

running the farm harder, but at least Elmer doesn't have any cows to milk. Barring *another* apocalyptic occurrence, Elmer would be returning to his recliner. Even that probably wouldn't keep him up. *If you're going to die, at least die well-rested.*

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Hello! Are you home? Early birds have eaten the worms!"

I know that voice. Damn it, why couldn't it have been Death?

Elmer tries to call out—*Kim!*—but he's too hoarse, so he lumbers out of his office and towards the front door.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" *Cough!* "Hold your horses, lady." He grabs a cigar from the table.

"Hello! Where are you? I have come bearing gifts!" The woman's voice doesn't just carry through the door, it sing-songs and saws its way through it.

Where is Kim? Do I have to do everything around here? Elmer catches sight of the tent—it's still zipped shut. *Will she only get out to cook?* But Elmer doesn't have much time to turn this question around in his mind. He hears giggling and then a theatrical *shush!* from outside. He takes a breath. He throws back the deadbolt and twists the doorknob.

"Hello, old man!" *Old man* sounds almost endearing when she says it.

Elmer catches the woman's smiling face—*somewhere a canary has gone missing*—and then he looks down. Three boys, conspicuously scrubbed, their garments freshly patched and their heads bandaged, are lined up in front of the woman. Elmer groans.

"Workers for you!" *And mouths to feed!* "They are very useful!" *Yeah, I bet.*

“Uh huh, I can see that, lady.” *Where will I even . . .* and Elmer’s train of thought is derailed as the woman pushes the boys past him. They line up against the wall, smartly: They’ve been practicing.

“Now,” the lady—Louis’s wife—pauses, “about my payment.”

“Payment?” Elmer’s trying to choke down the shock. In an earlier era, he is what they would have called *triggered*, “You want payment? For what?”

“Farmhands! You are lucky to have such a skillful agent!” and without skipping a beat, the lady turns towards the guest room and yells, “Kim, you start breakfast. Five plus you!” Kim is out of the tent in a second. “And extra for the old man!” Kim all but bolts towards the kitchen. *That was quick.*

“I don’t need any farmhands!” *Cough! Hack!* “What are you trying to pull, lady?”

“You sound sick,” the lady’s eyes narrow. Wheels are turning in her head, and quickly.

“You are too old to fish!”

“Yeah, so?”

“You are too old to farm. You need help.”

“Says who?”

“Says your recruiter!” *Nope! Not this time!* Elmer isn’t going to let the woman dump anyone else on him. Her jaw sets, but the change is barely perceptible—she’s not giving up that easily.

“Do you really want to let these boys starve? Do you?” She bashes the youngest one’s shin. Tears well up in his eyes. “Look! He’s injured!”

“Because you . . .” Elmer’s starting to sputter. His pulse is rising. Blood *probably* won’t shoot out of his eyes, but it’s difficult to say, “Because you kicked him, woman!”

“Your point being?” She seems genuinely curious, as though Elmer had just uttered a non-sequitur—yesterday’s lottery numbers and the name of his favorite hockey team, perhaps.

“My point being is that . . . they . . . aren’t . . . my . . . problem!” Elmer’s about to say more, when he catches the delicate odor of pho wafting out of the kitchen. He pauses. Louis’s wife sees a window open.

“Okay, okay. But why not have breakfast first? Do you really want to make a big decision on an empty stomach?” She winks. “Come on, old man! You look hungry.”

At least we agree on something.

Clank! Clank!

Elmer hears Kim setting the table. The junior highwaymen /candidate farmhands, having already made their way to the other room, murmur amongst themselves.

“You boys eat slowly!” Louis’s wife calls out to them. “You don’t want to make yourselves sick!” She gestures somewhat grandly in the direction of the noise: *After you, gramps!*

Elmer growls, chewing on his unlit cigar, before shambling towards the smell of food, the woman following behind, her thumping steps gently encouraging him forward.

Hell, I’m too nice for my own good.

Louis is sitting at the piano. There isn’t much else for him to do. He could have helped his wife with the boys, but there was no point. By the time she washed and mended their clothes and sent them down to the nearest well pump with a bar of lye soap, they had gotten the drift of things, and they seemed not much inclined to challenge Louis’s clodhopping bride. He had spent a few hours out hunting, or *trying* to hunt, his Marlin .22 bolt-action hanging limply from its sling the entire morning. *There’s nothing left to shoot.*

Despite the ever-present threat of hunger, society hadn't broken down as badly as one might have imagined. The better part of the cities had burned down, but not many refugees managed to make their way to the farmlands outside Ord, Nebraska, which suits the *Ordinaries* just fine.

Most of the members of the roving gangs had starved to death or been shot within a season, with the remainder having learned the hard way to steer clear of settlements of any size. A few brave and foolish adventurers had gone out searching for the City of Light, which may (or may not) be Omaha—the rumors were never clear on as much—but none had returned. So much for the bright lights and the big city. Unless, of course, Omaha really was *all that*. Perhaps *The Big O*, much like heaven, was just too great to leave.

There were *a few* farmers left before the darkness, even in the age of agricultural automation, and they quickly brought on a great many farmhands, quite a few of whom were driven to suicide and more of whom were worked to death. But that was all in the first year. Order returns surprisingly quickly, and the farmers, long forgotten by a world that had come to take food almost totally for granted, found themselves at the top of the societal heap—the leaders of a new order, an *agri-archy*, of which Elmer was a nominal member.

The piano is one of the few things that kept the Phan family off the plantations. No electricity, no iPods, no radio, no porn, no movies—Louis and his piano are one of the few sources of entertainment left, and his wife's voice is decent, if a bit harsh, so they sing for their supper. And the wife takes in clothes for mending. They survive. Barely.

Louis looks around the room as he plays, the sound bouncing off the clean, bright white walls. He stops. Kim could play too, at least as well as Louis, but the town could only support so many musicians. So Kim was sent off for other things.

I don't like eating with the others—it's too loud, so I hide in the kitchen when I'm not carrying food. The boys ignore me, which is good. There's so much noise here, and so much light. It's not good. I wish the

computers would come back on, but I know that won't happen for a long time.

Mom came to visit today. Dad didn't. Dad likes me, but I think that the old man doesn't like me. At least the old man is quiet. But I hate the the smell of cigars—too strong, and it makes me feel sick to my stomach. Mom told me that I shouldn't complain about that. *You're a guest!*

I think Mom was angry about Jack getting on the boat. *Our family has been on enough boats already!* And she laughs. But I don't know what she means when she says that. Why would an angry person laugh? I've never been on a boat.

I'd rather stay in my tent. I'd rather be home, but I know what Mom wants me to do. I need to learn from the man—Mom told me to call him *Mr. Elmer* or *Sir*. I will try to learn. I always try for Mom and Dad, and I will try for Little Brother—Jack—as well.

I don't think the others know why Mom and Dad brought me here. Mom told me to work and study and not talk too much. That's okay. I don't like talking to most people. I don't think anyone understands what Mom says to me. They may not speak Vietnamese. They should take lessons.

I like fishing. It's peaceful. There are lots of fish in the pond.

I hear the old man—*Mr. Elmer/Sir*—speaking to the boys. He's trying to show them something. I don't know what. My clothes are itchy. I should wash them later. No, I should try to get some sleep in the day. I've got work to do later.

Elmer isn't crazy about the thought of trying to teach the boys how to weed and garden. It takes time. Still, Louis's wife, brassy broad that she is, has a point—he is old. And when Elmer told the gang that *those who do not work shall not eat!* they demonstrated some real hustle. If they keep this up, Elmer may be able to put in a few more cabbage patches. Of course, with this many extra people around, he'll need them: It's a break-even proposition.

As for the lady's payment, she found a pair of boots in the garage—men's size 9.5—and they were a perfect fit. It's no wonder *Bigfoot* plods along as she does. She didn't seem crazy about the nickname. But that's her problem, not Elmer's: He has his fun where he can.

Elmer chuckles to himself about *Bigfoot* and lights his cigar. At least she has balls, and despite his gruffness, Elmer is a generous sort. Kim must have gotten her personality from her father. *I wonder where . . .*

"Mr. Elmer/Sir." *Was that a mouse speaking?* Elmer hesitates for a second, the *click clack* of his Olympia falling silent. *Huh, getting senile.* He resumes typing.

"Sir?" the voice is louder now. Elmer looks up.

"What the . . ." Kim is standing close, almost over Elmer. She seems to have no sense of personal space. "How'd you get in here?" *That silent walking thing must be a ninja trick. Wait, wrong Asians. Or it's a Muay Thai thing. Wait, they don't even have . . .*

"I walked through the doorway."

"Okay, Kim, *why* did you walk through the doorway?"

"I wanted to get in the room."

Elmer takes a puff of his cigar, realizing that subtlety might not be Kim's strong suit.

"And *why* did you want in the room?"

"I can type." Kim's eyes are transfixed on the Olympia, and then she shifts them. She points towards the Vibroplex key. "Can you teach me that?"

"You mean code? Morse code?"

"Yes." Kim's voice is without affect. It usually is.

Elmer, thinking he may be onto something, squints at Kim,.

"Kim, why did Bigfoot, uh, your mother, send you here?"

Kim lets out an awkward laugh. Elmer has never heard her laugh before.

Jack spots the trees at the very edge of the horizon. He would tell the rest of the crew about it, but there is no rest of the crew to tell. There is a body—the last, worst source of calories Jack has ever had the misfortune of considering. *Gotta get rid of that sooner or later.* Jack is about thirty feet above the water, and a little back-of-the-envelope math suggests that the island is no more than six miles away. If Kim were around, she could spit out a more accurate number, but she isn't. *But how do I get there?* Swimming that far in open water would probably be the last bad decision Jack ever made, and he can't take a life raft either—after the *big fallout* (*big killout* might be a better description), the less murderous of the crew had decided they'd rather take their chances on the high seas. The *more murderous* had decided they wouldn't let dinner get away *that* easily.

That day really sucked.

Anyway, no more rafts.

Nevertheless, Jack isn't much inclined to panic. He'd survived the massacre and hadn't killed anyone in the process—he's rightly proud of that. He'd even managed to save one soul from perishing, but she was so petrified by the experience that she took the last remaining raft and set sail on her own. She didn't need to, but given the carnage she'd witnessed, Jack hesitated to blame her.

Jack looks down into the waters, trying to get a sense of the direction of the current. He might not need to do anything. The ocean might do the work for him.

Where did I put that list of Castaway jokes?

Bigfoot and Louis are fishing, enjoying the fall sun as it warms their backs. Louis, normally somber, hadn't been able to quit laughing when he heard of his wife's *new* nickname. *New? But that's what I've been calling you for years, Wife. Didn't you know?*

She didn't.

Louis has the rifle, not because Bigfoot's temper is *that* bad, but because he's gotten ill-at-ease traveling back late at night after his most recent encounter with the *little hooligans*, who are presently tending the tomatoes near Elmer's cabin: That batch of hooligans was harmless enough, but the next batch might not be.

The deal between Elmer and the Phan family hadn't originally allowed for the husband and wife to fish. That privilege was restricted to Kim alone, with the idea being that Kim would be too exhausted from farm chores and cooking to catch enough for more than a few people, whereas more poles in the water might lead to a depletion of the stock. But after much pleading and charming, Bigfoot had gotten Elmer to grant them a dispensation. Kim/Khiem was too useful for rod and reel, and Bigfoot had promised that both she and her husband would stick to catfish, for which Elmer didn't much care, and throw back anything tastier.

Bigfoot, legs dangling from the edge of the dock, gently kicks the water with her big feet, making little waves that spread out in all directions.

"Nice weather!" A breeze picks up, and the water ripples even more. Bigfoot remembers a notebook Khiem mentioned to her. A thought dawns upon her. "Husband, how much math do you think Kim could do?"

"Uh, I don't know, a lot, Big . . . wife."

"I think we need to help Elmer expand his operation."

I like learning code. I like sending it too. The plastic I touch—the knob—is smooth and warm, and it bounces up and down gently when I tap it. I like the tone too—it's soft and rounded, and not at all harsh. When I wear the headphones, I can block out all the noise around me. Especially at night. Everything is quiet and calm, and I feel like I'm making friends—I've started to recognize different people by the rhythm of their code. Some people clump words together, some pick up and slow down, and

some have their own sort of syncopation—like they’re playing jazz songs. Dad was right about music and code: They’re the same thing, almost.

People keep sending me QRS—a code that means *slow down*—but I don’t know why. I’ve not been learning for long, and I know I can get faster—I will get faster. I’ll get as fast as I can. Maybe they’re just lazy. I don’t know. The Q codes—QRS, QRI, QRK—I’m learning the Q codes too. I think I’ll have them all memorized in a few days.

Understanding code is easy, but some of the messages are strange to me:

Found pharmacy. Tons of good stuff. What do u need?

Wife and dog lost in fire. Dog needs proper funeral. Ha! Send money.

What is *good stuff*? Why is a dog’s funeral funny? But it doesn’t matter. I can send and receive messages, even if I don’t know what they mean.

I like the typewriter. It’s perfect. I think I like it better than Morse code or my old computer. The computer did strange things—sometimes it would lock up or reboot—and the other people on the relay net seem a little confused by me, but they’re friends, so that’s okay. But the typewriter does exactly what I want it to do. It never locks up. It never dies. It never tells me I’m going too fast. It’s always there. It always works, except when I have to change the ribbon or the paper. But that’s not bad. Mr. Elmer is going to show me how to make ink for the typewriter ribbon. I think making ink sounds fun. He and the other operators are going to award me my own call sign soon, and I won’t need to keep using Mr. Elmer’s. I don’t know what it’ll be. I hope they let me pick my own.

Mr. Elmer tells me I need to stop and eat, and I do, but I’d rather not. Cooking seems boring now. Food is boring too.

This is the happiest I’ve ever been. I’m happier than I was before the big green storm.

“Quit goofing around up there, you little hellion! You want to break your idiot neck?”

“Yes. I mean, no. I . . . ”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but knock it off!” Elmer is barking at the boys through a malodorous cloud. The boys—Larry, Curly, and Moe (Elmer keeps forgetting their real names)—are doing their best to add another 30 feet to the antenna tower. It’s slow going and dangerous, but as the smaller, less-well-equipped operators go dark, Elmer needs the extra range to relay his messages from east to west (and vice versa).

Elmer had been meaning to do this for some time, but time was the one thing he always seemed to be lacking. Yet he has plenty of time today. Kim is proving to be more than an adept student—she’s proving to be an awe-inspiring force of nature. Few breaks, fewer errors, and a fist (Morse code keying style) that is so strangely metronomic and brutally fast that it sounds as though it’s being generated by a machine: Kim is destined to be the ideal operator. She types no less robotically than she keys. Certain automatic rifles are less consistent. And no later than 0700 every morning, the outgoing messages are typed, addressed, and ready to be sent on their way. The boys finish their deliveries by 1030, picking up payment (in tobacco, ammunition, fuel, and scavenged generator and machine parts) on their way back to the farm.

So this is what it’s like to be management?

Elmer even has time to finish the occasional White Owl or Dutch Masters—what passes for fine smokes in these days of hardship—and he’s beginning to wonder what Bigfoot is planning. Kim is worth more than the catfish she is costing him, and the Phans hadn’t dumped her on Elmer just so they’d have one less mouth to feed: They could’ve married her off, and probably made decent coin in the process, with her awkwardness being only a minor drawback. It might have even appealed to some men—she certainly doesn’t seem inclined to chat off a fellow’s ear, unless he speaks in *dits* and *dahs*.

A breeze picks up, clearing the air in front of Elmer, and he can see the tower starting to sway, ever so slightly. Storm clouds have appeared in the distance, darkening the flat lands of Nebraska all the way to the horizon. *I'd better tell them to . . .*

"You boys better get down. Dinner is ready!"

Oh Lord, that voice. Elmer turns in the direction of his poor tortured ear, its tinnitus a bit worse than it was a few seconds prior.

"Hello, Bigfoot. Need another pair of shoes?"

She flashes a quick grin.

"How do you like your workers, old man?"

"I've had worse." Elmer tries to conceal his good mood between puffs: He'd rather Bigfoot not know quite how well she's done, lest she want something more than shoes and fish.

"Oh really? Had worse?" Bigfoot lets the words hang for a moment. "Brought you something!" And she opens her canvas bag, from which she produces three pairs of hand-sewn socks. Elmer inspects them. They're heavy—perfect for the upcoming winter—and they'll probably outlast their new owner. Bigfoot waits just long enough to catch Elmer suppressing his smile. "I have a great idea for you. We'll make lots of money!"

"*We?*"

"Yes, I'll tell you about it over dinner!"

"So I gather you're staying . . . What about Louis?"

"Who?" she looks momentarily nonplussed.

"Your husband?"

"Him! I sent him home. He has piano lessons."

Lightning strikes miles away, and one of Elmer's eyes rotates its image 180 degrees. The other defaults to a headache-inducing *Terminator-*

view red: It's disorienting. Elmer lurches forward a fraction of an inch before catching himself. *This is going to make walking difficult.*

"You okay, old man?"

"Fine!" But Elmer isn't fine. The rain, just a drizzle at the moment but soon to transmogrify into solid sheets, is bound to ruin a perfectly mediocre cigar.

The boys—the *Three Stooges*—are down from the tower, ambling around Bigfoot, awaiting further instructions.

"Come on, boys! Let's eat." Bigfoot sounds enthusiastic, but she doesn't hurry the boys along. She makes a little gesture to them—one that means something to the Three Stooges, if not Elmer—and she thumps along slowly, loudly enough for Elmer to follow without losing balance. The boys walk cautiously around him, forming a pack of sorts, guarding him as much from a loss of dignity as from the actual injury of a fall, guiding him towards the sounds of chopping and frying and the aroma of fish cake noodle soup.

The current drags the boat close to the island, not quite beaching it, but putting it within a quarter mile. So Jack drops the blood-stained anchor in the water and considers his options.

Sharks!

They're not *we're-gonna-need-a-bigger-boat big*, but they're big enough to make Jack jump. And he would rather not dive into the drink for a leisurely swim with them. *What to do? What to do?*

If only I had a few friends to help . . . Oh!

And Jack remembers the galley, the sweet scent of fried human flesh still lingering in it—it's custom-built propane deep freezer quietly humming along, the body crammed inside it almost certainly board-stiff.

Hmm!

There's a decent sized blade somewhere on the ship, and given a bit of hacking, Jack could probably turn his old chum into, well, chum. That would serve as a passable distraction for some time, but not long enough for Jack to swim more than 1,000 feet.

Jack looks around the ship and sees nothing obviously suited for use as an improvised raft. He feels more than a little dismayed. *So close!* Then Jack thinks about the refrigerator and wonders about the buoyancy of the door. *Wouldn't hurt to try.*

Louis doesn't have piano lessons today. He still teaches—the rich farmers want their children to be properly cultured—but not on Tuesdays. He's home for an entirely different purpose.

Where did I put those? Do we still even have them? Louis mumbles to himself as he rifles through box after box of papers. Birth certificates, contracts, the deed to the house, and notepads filled with recipes so elaborate that they would require a small truckload of ingredients to put together, written in Kim's faint block print—the product of a week-long fever, one Louis was fairly certain would be the end of his daughter. It wasn't. Louis is still grateful for that.

"Gone!" Louis's voice reverberates through the attic, the lamp hissing beside him. "I'll never . . ." But there it is—a chart of the ocean's currents. It's been traced over, the lines and arrows indicating flow strength and direction, now deep depressions on the page. Something seems to be written on the back.

Math!

Louis loathes math—I'm a musician. *If I can count to four, that's good enough*—but Kim seems to like it. Louis understands the girls' plan more or less, but why the wife had suddenly sent him home to retrieve the charts and books is somewhat beyond him.

The books, filled with even more of the dreadful, soul-crushing formulas Louis had gone to conservatory at least partially to avoid, are in the same box.

A storm breaks overhead, the water landing so heavily that it rattles the house. Louis wonders if the wife will try to get home. Of course, she could paddle her way through a flood with those tootsies of hers.

Jack was right about buoyancy—refrigerator doors float, and well. He was also on the mark about the chum—it kept the sharks diverted. The only thing about which he was wrong was the size of the beasts themselves.

At first, they looked monstrous, but while pouring the blood and chunks of meat into the water and seeing them frenzy through their lunch, Jack realized the sharks were considerably smaller than a grown man. *I should be the one eating them!* Even his improvised oar worked adequately. It was a bit nibbled by the end, but at least Jack could honestly say he gave the sharks the finger—several of them in fact, and none of them his own, which made the joke all the better.

The beach is proving surprisingly pleasant, if empty. There appears to be nothing much on it. Water isn't going to be a major issue—the reverse osmosis machine had proven light enough for Jack to carry on his back.

Food!

Jack's not eaten in more than a week, and he's starting to feel lightheaded. His first attempt at fishing hadn't gone well, but practice makes perfect. *Coconuts? There must be coconuts.* But if there's anything of the sort on the island, a patch of sand of uncertain size with a little greenery atop it, such isn't obvious to Jack. *Might as well go exploring.* Jack's schedule is open.

The tower goes up faster than Elmer believed possible. This is largely Bigfoot's doing—she's turned the Three Stooges into a work gang of such efficiency that Elmer is seriously considering hiring them out. Finding other towers to cannibalize isn't terribly difficult: No one aside from Elmer wants them—the tubular steel sections are all-but useless for

anything else. Somehow, Bigfoot and the Three Stooges have gathered up more vacuum tubes than Elmer thought remained in the entirety of the state. Some of them even work. Putting them together into a usable machine will take some time—different voltages, different designs—this isn't the way to build anything if you have a choice. But Elmer doesn't. It's either this or nothing. The more other stations fail, the more Elmer needs to extend his reach.

Still, just a few weeks more, and Elmer will have the biggest, most powerful transmitter for miles, possibly anywhere.

All I do now is use the machines. Mom has taken over the cooking. I keep getting faster. I like this. I'm good at it. Not many people can keep up with me—they should try harder. Mr. Elmer let me move into the office. He says that I need it more than he does. I don't know what he means by that.

On the air, I know exactly what the other operators mean, even if some of the messages we forward lose me. There is no confusion as to what I should be doing. I don't have to write things down anymore. I don't even hear code, not exactly: It's just words to me. Mom brings me my food, and when she asks me questions, my hand starts to shake a little—I'm tapping out the answer on the table.

I need to remember to use regular words with regular people.

Mom and Dad brought me the charts and the books, and they showed me Elmer's weather book and tables too. Currents are fascinating things—they flow all over the place, and they never stop, but they're predictable, I think: They're not like people. Some of the other operators have the same kinds of books.

So I can learn about the weather. If I work hard enough, I might even figure out what happened to Little Brother. He's on a boat, somewhere, and I know where it was when the green waves came and the lights died. If I can do the math, I should be able to figure where the boat is, or where the boat stopped. That will be complex. I like numbers, but too much math isn't fun.

But Mom wants me to find Little Brother. I would like to find him too. I can understand air and water. If I had a book, I could have predicted the green waves. I don't know why no one else did. I guess they had other things they wanted to do.

I hear Mom knocking on the door. That means it's time for dinner. But for me, dinner is breakfast and breakfast is dinner, which I like. My life is okay, but I am a little tired.

The table in the dining room has been overrun by parts—stacked high with tubes and wires and clamps and transformers. Salvaged car and marine batteries squat in the corner, right next to Louis's rifle.

Louis and Elmer are crouched over a yet-unfilled, screwed-together electronics cabinet, a smooth piece of a wood—an actual breadboard—sitting atop it. Elmer is not having a good time. His cigar is dead, but that's not the worst of it.

“Not that wire, the other one!”

“Yeah, okay,” Louis tries to conceal his annoyance, with limited effect, “This one?”

“Uh . . .” and Elmer isn't quite certain of which wire is which. His vision is decaying, with the images rotating and inverting even more frequently than they did before. Orienting himself—*which wire?*—is tricky. *Could be worse. At least I'm not trying to diffuse bombs—which wire indeed.* Nevertheless, soldering has become impossible for him, and the last time Elmer tried, he nearly rammed the tip of the iron through his hand.

So he's teaching Louis. The Three Stooges, their coordination still rough with the imprecision of youth, tried their best, but their workmanship was so sloppy that the amplifier popped and hissed more than it did anything else.

What Louis lacks in technical know-how, he makes up for with a finely trained touch and a precision of movement that guarantees every soldered connection is all-but perfect, and his ears, no less trained, hear

fluctuations in the output—things Elmer would have been hard-pressed to detect even 20 years ago—allowing him to adjust the soldered points accordingly. The work would go faster if Louis didn't have to make the twice-daily trip from his house to the farm and back again to give piano lessons (hence the gun), but Elmer isn't much inclined to blame a man for keeping productive.

"Boss?" Elmer and Louis, not certain of whom is being addressed, look up from the wafting sweet smoke of rosin-core solder to see the youngest of the Three Stooges standing before them, evidently pleased with himself. He's wearing a seemingly new pair of overalls. Elmer is about to ask the boy where he got them, when . . .

"Yes?" Louis answers, and Elmer leans back, realizing that he has no idea of why the boy is here—*Didn't I send him out to check the apple trees?*

"Miss Foot says I should tell you that everything is done, that we did a good job, and that dinner is ready."

"Tell Miss Foot, uh, my wife," Louis glances at Elmer, who is visibly amused, "that we'll be there in a minute."

Mom keeps bringing food to the office, but I don't have time to eat. I wish she'd leave me alone.

I'm almost done with the math—all of it. The books were difficult for me—some of the words were unfamiliar—but I figured them out. The calculations for the wind and water currents were hard, but not too hard for me to do, and I've learned enough about meteorology to use the operators' weather books to make a few predictions and analyses of larger weather patterns. People keep sending me information. They're all slow. Waiting for them is boring, but not as boring as cooking. At least everyone tries to help.

I keep working: That's what Mom wants.

By the way, the operators voted to give me a call sign of my own. Short ones are better than long ones—they're easier to send. Today, I'm

K1M—three characters. That’s as short as call signs get. I guess that means the other operators think I am good. Or it could mean something else. It could just mean that we’re all friends. I’m still getting faster. One of my friends—another operator—said I was *terrifying, but in a good way*. How is that possible? Is it good to be terrifying? Is it better to be terrified?

I like my call sign more than I like my real name, which has some accented characters that no one understands when I transmit them—even Mr. Elmer didn’t know them—and which I had to learn from an old guide I found in the office.

My clothes smell bad. I should change them. I’m really tired, but there are too many things to do. I need more coffee. Where’s Mom?

Elmer has almost finished slurping down his noodles when Louis hands him a cigar—a Garcia Y Vega. Elmer can feel the texture of it—it’s still supple, not ready to crumble into dry pieces like most of what he’s smoked as of late. It wasn’t easy to get: at Louis’s request, the Three Stooges had spent days tearing through abandoned law offices to find it. Elmer rubs the cigar lengthwise under his nose, and he can still smell the aroma of tobacco through the cellophane. He looks over to Bigfoot.

“So, what’s the special occasion?”

“We finished the towers!” Elmer’s best guess is that Bigfoot is smiling—her tone suggests it—but he can’t tell. His vision is turning kaleidoscopic. Closing his eyes doesn’t help. He just sees the inside of his eyelids flash and twist. *If it’s not one thing, it’s . . . Wait?*

“You finished it? Today? Already?” Elmer puts down his cigar.

“Them! All 90 feet of them.”

“Them? You were just going to build . . .”

“Two, but we went for three instead!”

“I thought you and the Three Stooges were just going to build one.”

“You think small!” and even as Bigfoot says it, it occurs to Elmer that she and Louis didn’t do all this work for fish and shoes, for a cut of the transmission fees, or even for Kim’s training, although all three probably had something to do with it.

“Bigfoot,” Elmer considers his words, “what are you really after?”

I can hear so far away that it’s strange. I can code to people everywhere—Japan, Korea, Thailand, Russia, Alaska, and far into the ocean. The sky is bright again—the ionosphere is charging up—and signals are bouncing everywhere. I wonder how energized the sky will get. Today, everything is okay. Today, everything is good. Tomorrow, things may be even better. But if the charge gets too strong, that will be bad. A strong sun—an active solar cycle—is great, but not too much: That’s how we got the green waves in the first place. That’s how we ended up with our problems.

I look at my list of friends, and I can see that there aren’t as many operators as there were before. The density per square mile keeps decreasing. So I hear more people, but there are fewer people to hear. I guess some of them are running out of fuel and parts. That’s sad for my friends. That’s sad for me. I hope they can come back.

Messages don’t take up much time. I’m faster—K1M is as fast as anyone. Mom tells me I should be proud. Dad does too. But that’s not all of it. *Time passes and memories fade*, says Mom. But I still have many things to do. That’s okay. I want to be busy. Busy is good.

Mom’s wrong, or at least she’s not right all of the time. Something like that. I don’t forget. Mom doesn’t forget. Dad doesn’t forget. He doesn’t say much around Mom, but when he says things, I know he remembers.

I hear static. It must be time to change directions.

Elmer is having a harder time keeping down food than he was days before. It’s not his stomach. Pho, raw fish, shit on a shingle, the occasional

deep-fried candy bar of questionable provenance, and cheap tobacco, all washed down with cheaper Scotch and purified water reeking of chlorine or iodine—six decades of gut-rotting food and drink had done him no harm at all. The problem is the damned motion sickness, which gives him the sensation of forever being on rough seas—a storm of nausea, just for him. *My own personal hell—don't I feel special.*

So Elmer sits in the camp chair that Bigfoot placed outside for him, the rain gently landing on his head, reminding him that he once had hair.

“Two hundred and twenty degrees! West-southwest! They all need to be pointed in the same direction.”

“Yes, Mr. Elmer!”

Elmer has no idea of what the boys are doing. He can't see them, just as he can't see the antennas. But he'd inspected them by touch—the three giant Yagis now pointed towards the Pacific—and they all felt solid: Louis had proven to be an astoundingly good welder.

So Elmer has to trust—the Three Stooges, Louis and Bigfoot, and Kim—but what other options are there? *And they've not put me out to pasture. Yet.*

The plan—the Phan family effort—is so outlandish, so impractical, so hopelessly beyond hope, that Elmer can't but help admire it. Searching for a needle in a haystack doesn't describe it.

But you've got to respect the persistence, and the old man doesn't mind the company (not that he'd tell anyone as much). And someone needs to take over the station when Elmer's gone. K1M seems as good a fit as anyone.

So life could be worse—if only I could do something about the constant vomiting.

Jack stands in the bunker, not quite certain of what is before him. The sun is low on the horizon, and it casts a warm red light through the

machine gun port. Jack passed by the bunker several times, before finally walking over it and hearing the *thump thump* of hollowness beneath his feet. The sound reminded him of his mother.

There's an old rifle with a few characters written on it—九九式—*Type 99*. It might be repairable, but there are no bullets to be found. *If nothing else, I can club something with it.* There are canned goods as well—some rusted and leaking, a few still apparently intact—but they're all so ancient that Jack would rather stick to coconuts and fish, diarrhea and parasites be damned. Jack steps forward, and something crunches beneath his boat shoes. He looks down.

Parts? He picks one up. These used to be the components of a functioning radio, telegraph key included. *Maybe I can do something with these.* Or maybe not. Even then, there's no battery, and Jack can't remember what's left on the ship. He tries to recall his Boy Scouts-level knowledge of Morse code: It's still rattling around his head, somewhere, possibly.

High in the atmosphere, up where the green waves had washed across the sky and turned the world dark, there's a signal—bursts of perfect code, being hammered out at superhuman speeds—and it's calling out for information about a man long lost at sea. There's nothing else as fast. There's nothing else as powerful. The signal—it's the loudest voice in the world. And there's almost no one left to hear it.

Jack looks out the port, and he catches a glimpse of something, something far in the distance—lights, perhaps, flickering on as the sun sets. But he can't be certain. He's never paid all that much attention—What would be the point? There's nothing out here in the middle of the ocean. What could it even be?

A city?

A city of light?

Glorious Ukrainian Bride Wants YOU!

“He was a fat bastard. I mean fat. Most of them were. And poor. I guess that’s why they wanted *her*—Anna/Sasha—*us*. I guess that’s why they couldn’t get anyone else.”

The kid keeps hanging onto Peter’s—*Pete* to his friends, if he had any—legs, and he won’t go away.

“Daddy, Daddy, when we gonna snack time?”

Peter, Pete, *Daddy*, isn’t having any of it. He’s struggling for air.

“I don’t know,” *wheeze*, “later.” *Sigh*. “Go get some food from your sister.”

“She’s eating all the cheese tubies, says I can’t have none.”

“Janie, give Little Robbie something to eat.” *Gasp*. “Don’t starve your brother, *please!*”

“But he smells yucky. He’s gonna mess things up, and he’ll make my food funny!” The girl, Janie, is rocking back and forth in her mini-recliner and yelling to Peter from the puce-walled family room, trying to make herself heard over the blaring and blasting of *Undead Hookers 4: Clap of Doom!* Someone on the screen keeps firing a shotgun. *Take that, you cheap prick!*

“He doesn’t . . . ” *But dear God, he does!* Peter’s nose is winning Little Janie’s argument for her. “Janie, you come in here, or I’ll . . . ”

“Or *what?*” Peter hears strains of his ex-wife’s voice in the question, and he reddens. *Calm down, Peter*, says the soothing voice in his head.

“Or . . . I’ll . . . I’ll *quit paying for the internet!*”

Shriek! And Janie shuffles in, a trail of artificially flavored puffed corn tubules littering the floor behind her, her hands and face smeared florescent orange. Peter can smell the mold in her clothes, and her hair has developed a patina-sheen that is rivaled only by its stiffness. The family dog—as though sensing the scene were not cringeworthy enough—wanders—*hops*—in, furiously scratching a place on his back where fur once was, but is presently a growing patch of bloody, oozing flesh.

We need a bath. We all need a bath! But how is this supposed to work? Uh . . . water? *Check!* Towels? Uh . . . *optional.* Soap? Uh (And there's nothing there) *Wait!* There's a bottle of trisodium phosphate in the garage, and a gallon of bleach in the washroom, probably hidden under a stack of takeout boxes. *But it's a long walk!* And Peter was winning there for a while, but not anymore. He chokes back the urge to cry. Peter can't bear to let the children see him like this—even more helpless than he normally is, stuck in a chair that has grown tighter and smaller by the day. He can't bear to see *himself* like this. *What have I become?* If only Big Jane hadn't abandoned her family. If only that truck driver, the one who looks suspiciously like Little Robbie, hadn't stolen her away.

"I love you! I love you, baby! I love you *sooooooooooooo* much!" Jane is tugging at his pants, desperately, frantically, wanting nothing more than to taste the sweet and sour effervescent burst of glory that is . . .

"Mountain Dew!" And she runs off with the keys, bounding down the stairs towards the truck with demented grace. Robert, *Sweet Rob* as his many friends call him, is disappointed. This keeps happening to him—women falling for nothing more than his high-fructose sex appeal, but most of them were not this obvious—were not so clear in their message that they would, in fact, do anything (and anyone) to *do the Dew*. Still, Jane was thin, tall and thin. And that made her a nine out of ten, as far as Sweet Rob's ladies went—perfect, but for a one-point deduction for her haggardly face. She didn't eat much. Sweet Rob had never seen Jane eat anything at all, in fact. Rob looks around the bare, florescent-lit apartment, stacked high with pallets of candy he bought in bulk and bags of stale pita

chips. There's a bed here somewhere, with licensed PepsiCo sheets: Big Jane would pay for her drinks. Big Jane would pay for a *long time*.

The kids scream in the shower, the dog howls, and Peter has a hell of a time figuring out what he's doing. This isn't really a regular shower: It's a *decontamination*. And it isn't much fun for Peter either: Getting out of his chair—his eating, sleeping, working, playing, *living* chair—hurt, and he's got the indentations on the sides of his hips as evidence. *They just don't make seats broad enough*. But he owns the most spacious throne the store had in stock. Some of the vinyl peeled off with Peter when he stood up. He shouldn't have bought the urine jugs: They made staying in one place unhealthily convenient.

Eventually, Peter gets the kids to bed—naked—he feels bad about that, but they have separate rooms, so it doesn't seem obscene, and putting back on their crusty jumpers would have undone an hour's worth of scrubbing. Peter wishes Jane hadn't taken the washing machine. Why she left the dryer was a question he still ponders.

I'll order something online.

And Peter returns to the browser at which he had been staring for the last week as he debugged *Shrinkmyheadcheap.nut.com*—an AI-driven therapy website registered in a nation far, far away from nit-picky regulations, but close enough to accept all major credit cards. He opens a new tab, clicks a couple of buttons, and *voila!* Fresh clothes for the kids by tomorrow. He'll order some for himself as well and some bandages for the dog—*June's Best Pre⁴ Cyber-Saturday Special: Free shipping on all orders over \$49.99*—It's the \$0.01 difference that ropes Peter in, and that will take care of everything for a while. He should subscribe to a laundry service as well.

But who's made out of that kind of money?

Pyotr didn't want this job, but he's good at it. It's not just the language. Every halfway-educated body here knows the language. It's

about as easy to get by in Sevastopol on English alone as it is on Russian or Ukrainian. It's easier in a way—English isn't political. You're not taking sides with English. With Russian, you take one side. With Ukrainian, another. For Pyotr, a Ukrainian of Russian ancestry, picking either is bound to irritate half of the people he knows. And he's about as likely to get his ass handed to him when using *A* or *B*. Anyway, politics isn't Pyotr's passion. He's a *creative* at heart: That's how he got his job. And what a miserable/profitable thing he creates.

Subject: Glorious Ukrainian Bride Wants YOU!

Dear Mr. _____:

I am contacting you on behalf on my client, Anastasia M., who has expressed great interest in you. But I must digress. What I do is something that may be unfamiliar to Americans in modern times. I am, as they say, a matchmaker, working for some of the most dignified and respectable families in My Beautiful Motherland. I am also a private investigator with long professional relationships with Certain Intelligence Services. Unfortunately, My Great Nation has fallen on challenging times, so I have been asked to help some of the best women from some of the most concerned families gain freedom in your Great Democratic Kingdom! I and my team of dedicated researchers and intelligence officers find only the Most Honorable Men to take care of our most precious treasures—Our Women. This is my profession, and I take it Most Seriously! Normally, I discourage my clients from contacting candidates before we have had the chance to completely vet them, but Anna has studied you for a long time and was quite insistent that I forward her message to you, despite my objections. Thus, I send her translated letter. If you wish to reply, please contact me. I will not allow any messages, in English or Ukrainian, to be sent to Anna but through the proper channels. Such an outstanding and delicate woman need be protected, which is precisely what I intend to do.

Respectfully your servant,

Agent Nikoli L. (Control No. 770)

Foreign Relationships: Amorous Ukrainian Discovery Systems (FRAUDS), OAO

Forwarded Message Attached: Sender: _____ IP: _____-192

Hello _____!

I am embarrassed to admit this, but I have been reading about you for months on end. Many of my friends have read about you too! And they have seen your picture. We all think you are very charming. ;-)

As for me, I am a music student here, and I love to play the cello. I also like American popular music, and I want to be a model. I worry that I am not pretty enough. Please look at my photos and have a see! I am scared that you will not want to communicate with me. Please don't hurt my feelings! I really hope that you will not reject me. I am terribly excited by you! :-) !!

My family is excited about you ~~two~~ ~~to~~ too! They know American men are very good.

If you want to reach me, tell Agent Nik: He will connect us. I feel like I already know you and your wondrous kindness.

XOXO

Anna ;-)

This is the boilerplate text, written by Pyotr and used by every operator/handler in the unheated, previously abandoned (90% plutonium free!), barely illuminated bunker FRAUDS calls an office, and it reveals something of Pyotr's peculiar genius: Most of the time, imaginary women (as developed by FRAUDS and its competitors) just send a message: *Hey, I liked your profile. I have huge fun bags, BTW!* But Anna is different. Anna fought to contact you and your heart, beloved mark.

Anna is sweet and artistic and pretty—they're all sweet and artistic and pretty—but Anna is independent. Yet Anna is protected: Somebody loves her enough to hire Agent Nikoli L. to watch over her. Anna is from a

good family. Anna is already loved, which makes her all that much more lovable. And her family will love you too! You're already home, *you lonely halfwit!*

And Pyotr hates this. He did not earn his specialist's degree in English literature and drama to con fat Americans. He is overqualified and underpaid. But underpaid or not, chicanery is the only way he can survive.

"What is *this?!?*" Doctor M. Patel—(*Doctor Patel* to his friends, children, parents, and wife alike), Coroner, Chief Surgeon, and Community Public Health Director—stares into the esophagus of the recently deceased Jane Doe. He sniffs instinctively but smells nothing, the Vicks VapoRub from the day's autopsies still overwhelming his olfactory receptors. "*Acid?* She's drank acid." The lining of the subject's esophagus has been stripped away.

Joe Slaughter, saw in hand, wanders over and into the cone of bright light. Joe is pale and lumpy and slightly scoliotic. He has a modest education. But he's loyal, respectful, and likes cutting people into tiny pieces. He's also a Tibetan Buddhist, which is why Twiggs County is one of only three places in the state where a sky burial can be expeditiously arranged.

"Doctor," Joe, timidly avoiding eye contact (as is his nature), locks his gaze on his majestically sharp blade—*my precious*—then points his muddy blue peepers into the corpse's gaping maw, "uh, what about the tongue? I don't mean to be rude, Doctor, but, uh . . ." Joe's mild manners strangulate his words. They often do.

"It's fine, Joe. I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't want your opinion," and Doctor Patel smiles cordially: These men are friends, despite their differences, bound as they are in this bloody work.

"If she drank acid, Doctor, shouldn't her tongue be burned as well?"

Ring! Ring! Ring!

And Peter's awake, sort of. *Where?* Something made a noise, *but what?* He pats himself down, trying to remember where he left his glasses. He absentmindedly touches his nose. *Still wearing them!* Registering as much takes a second. *Where is that . . .*

Ring! Ring!

It's muffled. It's hidden. It's . . . *coming from my ass?* Peter can't get up, or at least not quickly. *Who would be calling?*

Ring! Ring!

Peter leans forward as hard as he can. *Put some leg into it*, and he does. *Put some arm into it*, and he does. *Heave, ho, heave . . .*

And flyyyyyy!

Peter tears himself free from the iron grip of his chair. For an instant, he is standing up and proud. *I've done it!* But the inertia is too much. He can't stop.

Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!

And he lands, face first, on the carpet.

Ring! Ring!

Scramble, scramble, and he grabs it. *How wasn't it crushed?*

"Hello? Hello? Who is this?" Peter's flustered condition reveals itself to the caller.

The voice on the other end of the line is hesitant, with a gentle country boy's drawl.

"Excuse me, sir. There's a woman, uh, body, here, at the office, she is, uh, was very thin. We think you may know her. Are you missing any blonde, thin, tall ladies?"

Jane?

"One ran off, but I thought she was with a friend."

"Not exactly. We'll send someone around. Please be ready."

“Wait, what office? Who is . . .”

Click!

She’s under a sheet, so Peter doesn’t know quite what to think at first. They only want to show him her head.

“Is this your wife?” asks the slightly built Indian doctor.

Peter nods, and the doctor reciprocates with a carefully studied courtesy. His assistant looms in the corner, perhaps waiting for an outburst, waiting to drag Peter away. But it’s unnecessary. Peter’s leaning on his walker, which channels the room’s cold directly to his wrists. Peter asks to see her shoulders, to see the morning glory tattoo around her neck.

Skeletal! There’s nothing left of her.

Peter bucks, which startles the doctor and causes his assistant to lean forward on the balls of his feet.

“What happened?” *It makes no sense.*

“We determined that she suffered a massive electrolyte imbalance, apparently due to dietary issues, which led to heart failure,” the doctor pauses. “I assure you that it was very sudden. The process did not take long at all.”

“How . . . where . . . where did you find her?” Peter looks around the room, wondering if the flickering tubes above him know what he’s thinking.

The doctor and his assistant glance at each other, reaching some silent agreement.

“She was left outside a hospital.”

“By whom?” And curiosity overcomes Peter’s remaining sadness.

“That is,” the doctor reaches for the words, “unknown, but the vehicle that dropped her off appeared to be delivery truck of some kind.”

“Beverages?” And Peter’s voice is flat.

Neither of the men answer, but the jolt of electricity that zaps the two of them, that makes their bodies visibly tense, answers the question well enough.

Then Anna writes.

“Ohhhhh, what?” Peter’s sitting in his chair, with its taped-together arms, in front of the scuffed particleboard desk. He can barely make out the text through the Cheez Whiz coating the screen. *Damn it, Robbie!* The email reads like *spam*, and that’s what Peter knows it is. *No woman wants me, and no woman ever could.* That’s all Peter got from Big Jane: That was her lesson for him—that he was (and remains) worthless. And it wasn’t a particularly affordable education.

Photos!?

He’s expecting porn: a blonde with implants and a dildo. He looks back at the door. *Locked.* And the kids are asleep. He should get back to the site, back to work. Work is what puts the partially hydrogenated vegetable oil on the table, keeps the refrigerator filled with lactose-free milk (*No soft drinks in this house! Not anymore!*), and keeps the frozen pizzas, well, frozen. But he opens files anyway. *All work . . .*

And they’re not what Peter expects. The girl in the photos is something quite different. She’s sweet. Harmless. Sex is aggression: Sex is dominance. Sex is turning up the two liter of cloying caffeinated carbonation and chugging away until it’s dry. Sex is demanding more, *just one more.* Sex is bottle after bottle after bottle of DayGlo-bright energy *until you’ve wasted away to nothing and the potassium and sodium ratio in your sinoatrial node is so screwed up that your heart stops and you drop dead in a puddle of your own filth.*

But that’s not this girl.

It’s the glasses Peter notices at first: They’re ever so slightly askew and too thick and cheap looking to be worn for effect. *She really can’t see without them, can she?* And her hair isn’t perfect either. She’s a brunette,

and her nearly straight, dark locks are pulled back somewhat carelessly, a flyaway hanging in front of her face. Friends are around her, mostly girls, and everyone is holding an instrument and smiling. They must be in a student club. That would explain it. And the scene under the tree is unquestionably academic. *Anna's a good girl. Anna likes music.*

In the next, she's sitting in front of a screen, or it's a set of mini-blinds, who can say? But there's nothing else to place her. The color balance is off, and the auto-focus didn't get things quite right, so Anna's face is less in focus than her hands, which hold a book labeled *Мёртвые дýуу* (whatever that means) in front of them. She's wearing an endearingly bad sweater. She's been reading, and someone caught her off guard. *Anna's a good girl. Anna likes to study.*

Peter's room feels warmer, and the faint sour/bitter smell of rodents fades away.

"Ugh! Pyotr, you cheap son of a bitch, when do I get my money? This is so *booorrrring!* And I don't even look sexy. Don't you think horny Americans want a *sexy* girl?" She winks and tugs at the cable-knit material, and she's slowly pulling it down . . .

"Stop! You want your money, Sasha? Quit playing!"

She pouts, teasingly.

"There are other models, *my dear.*" Pyotr releases the Canon Rebel, and it's caught by its strap and lazily dangles from his neck. Pyotr takes a deliberate breath. "There are *many* other models."

Sasha straightens up.

"But the money? I struggle to look ugly. It's not easy for me!" She's playing hurt.

"Half before. Half after. And it's not *ugly*, it's *studious*, *STU-DEE-US!*" He says the last word in English for effect. Recognition dimly flickers across Sasha's face.

“I don’t care what kind of soup . . . ”

“Not soup! Good at studying! I thought you took English?”

“Teachers thought I was *very attractive!*” *And, oh Lord, there’s the wink again.*

“Fine. We’ll deal with that later,” *But how?!* “Now pull up your shirt. Anna’s innocent, so you are too!”

And deep in the ever-so-slightly radioactive hills, Anna is born, image by image.

It’s been going on for a few months—the long con.

Dear Anna,

It is so wonderful to hear from you again. I am really happy to learn that your family is doing better. Has your father survived the operation? Does he need anything else? I want you to be confident that I will do everything I can to help. I’m wiring some money to Agent Nik. He seems honest, but I want to be certain that none of it has gone missing. And send me a message when you get the camera. I want to chat with you face to face. My job is not too bad. I will put in some extra time so that we can take care of your family. The kids are okay. Thanks for asking about them. I’m certain they would love you. :-) *I miss you all of the time, and I think about us Every! Single! Day!*

Be safe, my love.

Your protector,

Peter

—SEND—

The dog whimpers again—it’s starving—which Peter notices for the first time today. *Where are the children?* And he can’t remember. He’s not been out in a few days, but he’s *just so distracted*, and Anna needs

help, so Peter has taken on *the mother of all projects*—building a hugely complicated online casino and bank for the shadiest of shady Isle of Mann corporations. Either Peter will finish the site on time, or someone will show up at his door with a shotgun. *But Anna will be okay. That's what matters.*

The kids have iPads. They must know how to order something, and whatever they buy, the dog isn't likely to make a fuss about it.

Of the 190 incarnations of the ideal Ukrainian bride dancing around in Pyotr's head at any given moment, the one chatting with Peter bothers him the most. And it isn't just that Peter and Pyotr essentially share a name, although that does something to add to the creepiness of the whole unsavory affair: It is how long the con has run.

Very rarely did it get this far.

Usually, the marks disappeared sooner. They expected to see something: Yes, as much as they adored innocent, *studious* Anna, eventually they wanted to put a virtual dick in her. And after a peepshow, that was that. They lost interest. The thrill was gone.

Sasha could handle this. She didn't mind stripping in front of a camera, and despite her appallingly limited language skills, she could manage *Oh fuck me* and *You're huge* (but only with a bizarre amount of pronunciation coaching, which took on its own sort of weirdness after Pyotr had repeated those lines for the umpteenth time).

But Peter is just so *patient!* And he always wants to *talk*. Eye candy and *Oh! Oh! Oh!* were Sasha's department, but email is purely Pyotr's. And Peter is *helpful*. Always asking about the family—the sick father (who just happened to need surgery and expensive imported medicine), the dead dog (over whom Anna was inconsolable until Peter paid for a doggie headstone, *which is a real thing*), Anna's niece (whom Anna adored and who needed immunizations)—and Anna herself. *How is school? When will you finish your graduate degree? Do you need any more money for books? Of course I'd be happy to help your friend buy a wheelchair.*

And this is killing Pyotr. Slowly, he is dying, spiritually, if not physically. All of these stories, subplots—a village's worth of lives and lies. Faking an existence is more trouble than one might think, especially for such a virginal, selfless, lovable, talented, filial child as was Peter's Anna. Getting a closeup of a pair of jugs is easy for Pyotr, but finding someone to make a recording of Anna's just-bad-enough-to-be-heartwarming cello playing, which Peter was determined to hear, was no mean feat. And Peter has *nothing*! He lives on instant noodles, yet he still insists on helping Anna. He should help his kids instead, but they are monsters, *just like their mother*. Peter did well to not throw them out the window.

Of course, they'd probably just bounce.

I'm getting too close to this. Pyotr keeps telling himself as much.

This is what annihilates your soul—seeing the marks as people, giving a care about what happens to them. But dead souls have their uses. Their owners can do surprisingly well.

“So when are you going to try for a *big mark*?” Josef keeps asking—*telling*, really. A boss like Josef doesn't ask anything, but he does sometimes phrase his orders as interrogatives.

Pyotr throws back a slivovitz and hopes the question goes away.

It doesn't.

“You are an excellent writer, Pyotr, very talented, but this is not a publishing house, and we do not need novels. We need marks. *Big marks*. *Big Fat American Marks* with deep pockets and a desire to spend a fortune on a trip to lovely Sevastopol to see their lovelier Ukrainian brides to be—men who have absolutely no concept of the price of anything. Do you understand, Pyotr? I need Big Fat American Marks, so you need a Big Fat American Mark!”

“I don't have anyone. My marks are poor. And I'm getting everything I can out of them.”

There's an explosion outside the tavern, and the lights dim and the wood paneling is rattled. Someone is screaming in Russian. Pyotr looks out the window and scratches at the skin under his black ASICS tracksuit—a nervous habit. But it's just fireworks, paint-bucket sized barrels of gunpowder imported directly from China. *This time.*

“Or you can go elsewhere. There's always something to do around here . . . something other than work for me.” Josef holds out the palms of his massive hands and smiles innocently. “Another drink?”

Peter swallows as he rereads the email.

Dearest Peter, My Wonderful Peter,

Father is dying. I know you have done all you could to help us, but he hasn't long left. The operation you paid for will give him time, but not much.

I must tell you about an important Ukrainian tradition—before a man and woman can be together, the girl's father must approve, and he can only do that if he can see the groom-to-be. The father needs to bless the couple in person. If we are to be husband and wife, you must come before he ascends to heaven. To do otherwise will break my family members' hearts and shame us all.

Please get here as soon as you can. I only want to be with you, to see you in person. Please come, Peter.

With love,

Your Anna, forever

So it's finally time: Peter has to get everything together. He looks down at the dog, who appears to have ceased breathing. The children are gone. Someone picked them up and away they went, or not. Everything is a blur, everything except Anna. One of the children may have gone to school *Wait!* There's a television/iSomething/video game playing in the other room.

“Robbie? Janie?” Peter calls out, but he’s hoarse from days of silent labor.

Together: “What! What? What!”

“Everyone okay in there?”

“More Cheetos! More Cheetos! More Cheetos!!!”

Peter is thinking about money. *How much does a pallet of Cheetos cost? How much does Anna need? How much does a plane ticket to Sevastopol cost?* Peter has enough, barely. *I’ve got to have enough.*

What about the kids?

Peter will order a few cases of Ensure for them: Health matters. *They’ll never even notice I’m gone*, Peter thinks with a tinge of melancholy.

The night before Peter’s flight is *date night*, which is to say that he is finally supposed to see Anna/Sasha’s massive silicone mounds: That’s according to the schedule Josef provides to Pyotr. The idea is to draw Peter in, to keep him from chickening out at the last minute. *If you like the digital version . . .*

But how to work this out? Pyotr wonders. How does a woman talk dirty if she can’t speak in complete sentences? Lesser men than Pyotr wouldn’t have been able to resolve this matter. Sure, Pyotr could arrange something captivating. For the right price, Sasha would do a donkey show — *a double donkey show* for fractionally more. But with a man as chatty as Peter, that wouldn’t work.

Google Translate!

And that’s how he’ll explain it. Out goes the message:

Oh Peter!

The camera is finally working! Meet me at vidlink.ua at 07.06 GMT. I have something to show you.

I miss you unbearably, please come.

Anna

But this doesn't feel right. Josef doesn't know Peter, not like Pyotr does. This is all moving too quickly. And sordidness was not *this* Anna, not Peter's Anna. But at the appointed hour, Anna and Peter meet.

Sasha is waiting in front of the camera, and, at Pyotr's instruction, she's wearing a bra—*Suspense must be built!* Pyotr is sitting opposite Sasha at the table, comfortably out of view. He's got a screen of his own, and he'll type away while Sasha pantomimes typing on cue and waits for her directions—from the brain of Pyotr and the body of Sasha, Peter's Anna comes into existence.

The scheduled nudity doesn't bother her, but the time does.

"Pyotr, can't I just start naked? Why not just show him *these* . . . " Sasha grabs her breasts and pushes them up violently enough to make Pyotr—someone without any of his own—wince, "and get out. I've got dancing lessons!"

"Don't . . . that's not . . . she wouldn't . . . " Pyotr stops. He's considering how to most efficiently convey the nuance of the character he's been building up for months and the gentle persistence required to properly nurse a relationship between a fictitious woman and a *Big Fat American Mark*.

Sasha is adjusting her brassiere: She must have thrown off the alignment of something with that last vicious auto-groping. *I'm wasting my time—with those fake mammaries, she'll never nurse anything.* Explanation would be a lost cause, so Pyotr musters his most commanding voice: "Don't think. *Act!* That's why we're paying you."

And the screen flashes.

Peter is here, right on time.

"Is everything muted?" Pyotr, his nerves afire, directs the question to no one in particular.

“Huh?”

Pyotr reaches across the table and switches off Sasha’s microphone before tapping the top of the camera, activating it. He then settles into his canvas chair in the dingy conference room. *Does Spielberg feel butterflies? Did Tarkovsky?*

Peter’s face emerges from darkness. It’s still night in the United States. Pyotr leans forward in his chair, fixating on his screen—a mirror of Anna/Sasha’s. *This man is sick. This man is dying.* That’s all Pyotr can think upon seeing Peter for the first time. To varying degrees, most of the American men shared Peter’s helpless look—a brokenness, a lifelessness of the eyes, telegraphing that even one more rejection would crush them—or it was just a lack of muscle tone. *Who knows?* But this is different and worse, as though Peter is already so deflated that there is no air left in him to escape.

Pyotr glances at Sasha. *Blank.* She’s always a blank. He pulls up his lips and glares at her. The wordless message is clear enough: *Smile, woman!*

And she does. The rictus grin threatens to crack her surgically altered visage. Pyotr adjusts *his* expression, hoping she’ll take the hint: *Less!*

She looks catatonic. Pyotr tries for a third time: *More.* (And she’s finally gotten it about right.)

Peter is saying something. Pyotr reaches for his speakers.

Crack! Crack! Hiss!

“Anna, Anna, is that you?”

Anna nods. *Well, she figured that one out.*

“How are you doing? I’m so happy to see you.” Peter all but sings the words. *Oh Saint Josaphat, he’s ecstatic—a cat on a fish farm.* And that thought makes Pyotr feel queasy. But there’s no time to feel, so Pyotr

starts typing frenetically. He's halfway through when he looks up at Sasha. She's just sitting there. He hisses at her in Ukrainian:

"Type!"

And she shrugs a *what?* She's confused.

"Just pretend!"

And she does. Pyotr/Anna's brain spins up, thinking of what to write and how to write it. *I have it!*

"Peter, I not speak English very good, and professional language man not here. This meeting between us two only. Google translate me, yes? You look very beautiful man, I think. You doing how? I want to see you long time." —SEND—

Anna/Sasha is still typing. Pyotr nearly shouts at Sasha (and why not? Peter can't hear them):

"Stop typing! Smile and try to look pleasantly surprised!"

And she mugs as though she were a Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes winner.

"Not so much! I thought you took acting lessons?"

"I did. I did!"

"Really?"

Peter looks out from the screen, confused. Pyotr had nearly forgotten about the audience for a moment. *What must Peter be thinking?*

"Don't answer me! Look at the screen. You're supposed to be alone."

"Are you okay, Anna? Are you talking to someone?" and Peter sounds as though he's afraid of interrupting. He shouldn't be. He's paying enough for this.

“Start typing, wench!” Pyotr catches himself, takes a long, slow breath. *That was too loud—Dad’s heart got him. Let’s not make it a tradition.*

Sasha shrugs again: *What?*

“Pretend!” And Pyotr wiggles his fingers in the air.

“You wait please. My hand tiny bit hurt. I no play the cello, type well. Too much exercise.” Pyotr hammers out the words. —SEND—

“Of course.” Peter is a twice-kicked beagle.

Pyotr is rubbing his temples. *No preparation. No study. And she didn’t even read the dossier I put together. Her resume said she studied the Stanislavski system. Where? Obedience school?* Pyotr looks up at Anna/Sasha, and she’s rubbing her temples as well. She’s mocking him. *Convincingly!* She stops, puzzled, uncertain of what she’s supposed to be doing. She mouths *boobs?*

Eureka!

“Follow me!” Pyotr tries to sound paternal, encouraging.

Shrug.

“Do exactly as I do.” He tries to be even gentler.

She shrugs again.

“Monkey see, monkey do! *Imitate!*”

Blankness.

Pyotr grabs Sasha’s camera and adjusts the height and angle. Looking at him is the same as looking at the camera, or close enough.

“Start now!!”

Pyotr smiles, femininely. He pretends to type.

Sasha follows.

“I’m sorry. My computer make trouble. Computers not my friend. You please type. Google be not super wonderful with voices, and I understand not dictionary of English sound words.” —SEND—

And Pyotr (and, by extension, Anna/Sasha) offers an apologetic look. He/they are struggling to get the mood right. *If I were Anna, and I had trouble with my computer . . .*

This bad grammar is painful, but Pyotr tries to keep his/Anna’s expression soft. *Anna does not snarl.*

Pyotr pretends to push up glasses that he isn’t wearing—Anna/Sasha’s glasses. Sasha, who *is* wearing said glasses, follows. Pyotr/the Anna/Sasha Borg peer at the screen. *Anna’s eyes aren’t good.*

“How is your father, Anna? Is he comfortable? I mean, is he as comfortable as he can be?” And Peter is all genuine concern. He’s a good typist too. He doesn’t look down at all, his attention directed entirely towards Anna.

Yes! Dad, his heart!

Sadness flashes across Pyotr’s face, but it’s softened by the knowledge that Peter cares. Sasha duplicates the display of feeling.

“Oh! Father still alive. He strong soldier man! He survived many not good killing days.” —SEND— *Where am I going with this? Motivation?* “Father wants to put eye on you soon. He cannot happily die until he knows you not bad, bad rapist.”

“I already bought my ticket. It cost me \$1,300, but I wanted to get there as soon as I could.”

Hryvnia to dollars? That’s 13 times 23, times . . . Wow! Sasha copies Pyotr’s stunned expression.

“What is it? Is everything okay? I thought that time was of the essence.”

Smile. If I were Anna, I would be . . . touched.

Type: “Thanks. I am too unbearably giddy that you land at our Super Fantastic National Airport soon. Father will be happy too. Mother may not starve as skinny woman when I tell her daughter’s good fortune. I hope she get fat again every day. They be afraid you fake man. But I know you really man. I know this always.”

And Peter is tearing up. He feels for Anna. *She’s put such faith in me*, he thinks. And the Anna inside Pyotr’s head is growing misty-eyed as well—that’s what Pyotr imagines her to be doing: This is getting unpleasant for Pyotr, even more than it was. Peter is not the mark Pyotr wanted. Peter is not a *Big Fat American Mark with Deep Pockets*. Peter is a little fish, fat but little nonetheless, swimming in a sea of deception (much of it *self-deception*, but still . . .).

But you cheat the mark you have, not the mark you want.

This goes on for some time—an hour, maybe more—this back and forth of cloying sentiment and melancholy narrative. Peter gave the website his credit card number, and under some bullshit pretext it’s charging him \$5 a minute for what Skype could provide for free. Peter is giving more than that—he’s giving them (the Pyotr/Anna/Sasha Borg) his life story. He’d give everything he has or could possibly offer and think nothing of it. *They* have given him a partially improvised sob story in return.

Still, Peter can’t bear to end the video chat: He could carry on until the taxi arrived to take him to the airport. But Pyotr’s creative energies are nearly drained, so the Borg cuts Peter short.

“I go happily help Daddy get clean. His panties get dirty as he is crippled man.” And of course, that’s what Anna will do—always putting others first. “I see you on future tomorrow day, my charming sexy antelope.” Peter’s too overcome to speak, to even touch his computer.

Anna finally disconnects.

Peter never asked to see her tits.

The plane lands in Kiev, and Pyotr is nowhere near ready. Dostoyevsky didn't suffer as much for all his character development, but Pyotr has to make the entire thing breathe. The aging father is going to be a problem. Sick, weak in body, strong in spirit, has a vaguely Red Army air about him. *Old school*—That's what Pyotr needs to find.

But old school isn't all that common these days: It's been replaced by *something*, but *what* is still up for debate, and it's probably high on krokodil. So Pyotr locates a mustachioed vagrant who smells as though he's been drinking gasoline (a real possibility) and convinces him to play the half-dead, bedridden patriarch.

"But why can't I walk? I'm not that old!" the man asks.

"You've got cancer."

He looks panic stricken.

"Your *character* has cancer."

Relief!

"What kind?"

And that's a good question.

"Gallbladder. It's metastasized."

"Metasta . . . ?"

"It's spread. It's all over your body. The treatments didn't work."

"Treatments?" the old man is upset again.

The minutes are counting down. *Where is the mother?*

"The ones your daughter, Anna, and her American fiancé paid for. She loves you dearly. She's a brunette with glasses. Attractive. Try not to leer."

"Well, it's nice to know they care. Such kindness . . ."

“And you’re going to approve of their marriage.”

“She’s getting married? That’s wonderful!”

“That’s it! *Be the father.*”

“Huh?”

Is he acting at this point?

“Never mind. See you soon.”

“Tell my daughter . . .”

Pyotr bounds out the door before the instant daddy has finished his sentence.

The mother never shows up, so Pyotr abandons that plot line. *Mother is having emergency surgery* is all he can think of for an explanation. *Given the health of Anna’s family, they must have a standing reservation at the clinic*, Pyotr frets to himself. So he introduces a grandmother. She *must* have been in the narrative somewhere. But finding a grandmother is only slightly less hellish than trying to find a passable mother.

Casting for stereotypes is a funny thing: Too much, and you’re doing comedy. Too little, and you’re on your way to postmodern reconceptualizations. The naturals—the ones who exuded genuine warmth—weren’t *babushka-ish* enough, and the babushkas shrieked like banshees. *Rewrites!* Pyotr eventually finds a round lady who sings professionally—*expensive!*—but she looks the part. If Pyotr can convince her to smile and shuffle and control her famously bad temper for an afternoon, she’ll do.

“I don’t accept silent parts!” she barks without breaking her scowl. Yet money seems to overcome that principle.

The rest of the cast—the cousins, the violinist/slightly-less-attractive-but-still-adorable female buddy (who just happened to need the aforementioned wheelchair), the extended family, and the all-important

driver—are Josef’s. Pyotr manages to get the relevant parties crammed into an overheated Khrushchyovka apartment, the only empty one in a building with the dead trees of the liberated proletariat for landscaping and dirty snow on its sidewalks—a place that should have been demolished decades ago.

It’s awful. Pyotr pauses his racing thoughts. It’s perfect. It’s perfectly awful. No wonder Anna’s family wants her to leave. No wonder they’re looking for a white knight.

Now, to Anna.

When the driver pulls up to Sasha’s block, there’s no one there.

“Where’s Anna?” Pyotr is shaking a little as he speaks.

“Who?”

“Sasha. I mean Sasha. She’s an actress. Anna’s the character.”

“Sex videos?” The driver—a retired boxer by the looks of his obviously pummeled face—hulks in his undersized seat as he mashes his cigarette into the tray of the still-shiny Geely GX2. Pyotr wonders how he got the car—it’s an unusual model out here—but thinks better than to ask.

“No . . . a love story.”

“Ah!” he exhales slowly. “Poor American sap.” *More waiting.* The driver is a patient man. Pyotr is less so, which must be pretty obvious from his shiftiness.

“Shall I get her?” The driver puts the car in park and kills the engine.

As if on cue, Sasha stumbles out the fire exit, takes three steps, and falls down from the heights of her suicide heels, cracking her temple on the curb as she lands.

“Ow!”

The men jump out to get her. Pyotr isn't feeling very generous: The shoes were hers and *her fault* and incongruous with the assigned wardrobe. So up Sasha goes and into the car without so much as an *are you okay?* Pyotr starts trying to wipe the blood off Sasha's face with a handkerchief—no luck. The boxer/driver hands him a towel.

“Why do you carry a . . .”

And the driver smiles, smugly: *I'd appreciate your not taking me for an idiot.* He doesn't need to say it out loud. Point taken. And the car jerks forward. They zip towards the station—Peter had landed in Kiev and taken the train to outskirts of Sevastopol. (Civil wars do not make travel easier.)

“You're twenty minutes late!” Pyotr thinks better than to start ranting. The smell of liquor is overwhelming. “Why?” he wonders aloud, resisting the urge to gag.

“Booze makes sex with fat Americans easier,” and Sasha stops groaning long enough to giggle.

It's Pyotr's turn to groan.

“Okay. You had an accident. The medicine makes you dopey. About the smell . . .”

And the boxer passes back a bottle of mouthwash. “Drink!” There's nothing subtle in the boxer's tone: This is not a suggestion.

Anna/Sasha hugs Peter as soon as she/they see him. It's her best acting thus far—overjoyed fiancé—she could actually play this part in a war movie. But she flags in the car: The mouthwash is wearing off, and the stomach-churning bouncing can't be making matters better. As they drive into the city proper, Pyotr keeps up the simulated Anna/Sasha conversation with Peter.

“Speak, Sasha! And look at Peter when you do it,” as Pyotr utters the Ukrainian words, it occurs to him that Peter might have taken lessons. *Let's hope the Americans are as bad with languages as everyone says.* The

ruse depends on it. At least Sasha doesn't speak enough English to interfere: Such affords her one less opportunity to further bungle up her role.

"What?"

"Just talk. Move your lips and make annoying noises!" Pyotr tries to make the order sound friendly, or at least to keep his words' tempo and timbre bland enough to alert Peter to nothing, but there's steel underneath them.

"About what?" She scowls and sounds vaguely hostile.

"Tell me about your parents."

Nothing.

"Uh, tell me about your modeling career!"

And Sasha perks up.

"Well, I started wanting to be a model when first saw myself in a dress—I was six years old, and the most beautiful . . ."

By the time Peter, Pyotr, and company get to the Khrushchyovka, someone is screaming, and it's not a joyful tone (even by the Slavic peoples' modest standards of jubilation) that reverberates outside the building and through the darkening streets. But the screamer's enunciation is impeccable.

"Get back in the bed, you idiot! They're coming. They're going to be here any minute!"

"You're not the boss of me, woman! I fought . . ."

"In Afghanistan! I know! But that's the wrong kind of theater! Back to bed, and hide the bottle."

The boxer honks the car's horn.

"They're here!" shouts the stage grandmother with operatic clarity.

Pyotr hears what he is fairly certain is a pot being thrown. It must have achieved a certain velocity, as the clanking easily makes its way to the car. After that, everyone is apparently settled.

Peter huffs as he climbs the stairs, and he clutches the railings so forcefully that Pyotr fears they will be ripped from the wall.

“Unfortunate creature, he really can’t walk, can he?” Sasha’s words may convey nothing to Peter, but the soft concern in her voice, her sympathetic countenance, pique his curiosity, causing him to look to Pyotr, expecting a translation.

“She wonders if you’re well. Do you need a rest?”

Peter does, and he leans against the whitewashed walls, his green North Face jacket picking up a fine layer of kalsomine in the process.

One wouldn’t think that what are essentially nonspeaking parts could mangled beyond a certain point, but the cast is having a go at it. Father looks hurt and irritated from acute deprivation of alcohol and tobacco. The musical buddy positively glares at Anna/Sasha, making the buddy seem not very buddy-like, and she keeps shifting her legs in the wheelchair.

A gas main in the building is leaking, and when the father tries to light a cigarette, a chorus of “Stop! You’ll kill us all!” rises up in Russian and Ukrainian alike.

“We’re just very worried about his health!” Pyotr gives a tight smile to Peter and hopes he buys the line.

The grandmother pulls through: She’s the saving grace.

“Hello, Peter. We are pleased to meet you,” and the smile beams out from underneath her bonnet—she manages that much *in English*, which makes Pyotr jump ever so slightly. “Please sit down.” And Peter gingerly crouches on a complaining stool. “We use old tradition to honor our guest and Anna.”

And she sings.

“Encore!” Peter rasps out.

The grandmother obliges, this time in English:

Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells/All seem to say: throw cares away/Dear Anna is here and bringing good cheer/To the young and the old, the meek and the bold . . .

For that moment—the duration of a few songs—the ruse is not a ruse. The father nods in time. The violinist-buddy plays along, off-key but passably well. Anna/Sasha smiles, looking bashfully flattered by the attention and gently rubbing her not-really-injured hand. And Peter’s soft face lights up—a full moon of happiness.

There’s no such tradition in Ukraine. There never was.

The old man, well in the spirit of the role, motions to Peter, who stands and cautiously makes his way over with great difficulty. *Come closer*; the butcher of Mujahideen gestures. With veiny claws, he firmly grabs Peter’s fleshy hands. The force belies the father’s supposed illness.

“I’m sorry we had to cheat you, son. May you someday find a woman who really cares about you. Just don’t get your hopes up about it.”

There is pity in the old man’s eyes: He’s seeing a reflection of himself in the American idiot—another fellow conned by a different bunch of crooks. Peter doesn’t understand a syllable of what he’s hearing.

“What’s he saying?” Peter looks at Pyotr, who misses a beat before answering.

“Oh, he’s glad Anna found someone who will look after her. He’s giving his blessing.”

And in a way, he is.

Peter starts wheezing, even more than usual, so Pyotr and Anna try to hustle him down the stairs. “Get out of here, everybody! It’s a death

trap!” Pyotr offers the words to the cast like a heartfelt goodbye. The grandmother smiles and gently hugs Peter, carefully avoiding any static discharge.

At the hospital, the doctor, who’s on the take, charges Peter the equivalent of ninety dollars for some oxygen and a bottle of bronchodilators. At the bistro (where everybody is playing Josef’s game as well), Peter pays five times what the meal is worth. He’s shocked, but only for a second. How is he to know that a week’s wage isn’t a fair price for a bowl of borscht?

The trio—Pyotr, Sasha, and the boxer—deposit Peter at a hotel after the humble meal. The place is a dump, with growing fractal cracks in the walls that suggest the whole structure is a single 1.3-magnitude quake from collapse. Normally, Anna/Sasha would go in. Most Annas spent the night, but this Anna—Peter’s Anna—is different. *She’s a good girl from a good family.* And Peter’s looking far too weak to do anything more than hack his way through a twerking: Even that much stimulation might kill him. So Anna/Sasha kisses Peter on the cheek, embraces him for a long moment, and walks away.

“Goodnight, Anna,” and Peter doesn’t sound disappointed when he says it.

The next day is scheduled for shopping. All the stores will get their cut of the con as well.

Buy me this! Buy me that! Please!

Pyotr doesn’t need to translate this. Anna/Sasha can flap her arms and bounce with childlike glee well enough when she sees what she wants.

Sasha is finding the most expensive crap in every boutique—snakeskin cowboy boots with beaver fur linings, leather miniskirts, and counterfeit Coach handbags. The 700% markup (400% to Josef, the rest to the shopkeeper, with Sasha keeping all the items) transforms what should have been merely uncomfortable hits to Peter’s pocketbook into agonizing violations of the most awful sort. And the purchases are out of character

for Anna, but Sasha isn't Anna; she's Sasha, with the tastes of Sasha, in all their sequined, hot-pink glory.

It's after the eighth store that the group sits down for food at *Sinna-Bonne* (which the owner, careful rip-off artist that he is, has decided to stock exclusively with bagels and lox).

Pyotr is tucking into an oversized *American Jew Extra Supremium Nosh* when Peter gets a text message on his phone.

The fat face falls so that quickly that it nearly bangs against the table.

"I've got to go. The children . . . the food, it didn't arrive. The power is out. Little Janie got cold. She's stuck in the dryer . . . and all they've got left to eat are *vegetables!*" There's terror, absolute terror, in Peter's voice when he announces the catastrophe to all and none at once.

"Can't you call anyone?" Pyotr says it and thinks *Peter must have at least one friend*.

But Peter doesn't. He's afraid to contact the police, afraid of what they'll think of his house, with its tame rats and trapped children, overdue mortgage, and disconnected utilities, so Pyotr spends the rest of day trying to get Peter's ticket adjusted for an earlier return. Sasha is disappointed. She was having fun.

Josef grumbles mightily when he gets the call. *You're not done! Milk the Big Fat American Mark harder!* But he sends the boxer/driver anyway. On the way to the station, the Geely tears across the landscape with such demonic speed that Sasha and Peter turn matching shades of green.

And they load Peter onto the train. The air is worse than freezing; it's damp and lethal, or nearly so, and Pyotr can imagine the effect it must have on Peter.

There's nothing left to do. Peter will never come back: You can only lead the marks on for so long after their trips. But right before the sixty-pound steel carriage doors slam shut, Peter pulls out a thick envelope and hands it to Anna/Sasha. "Take care of your father. I'll see you soon."

The door closes. Peter is off.

The boxer yanks the envelope from Sasha's gloved hands as soon as Peter is out of view.

And the game is over.

"Pyotr, you were brilliant! Remarkable, especially considering the circumstances! You make us proud!"

This is not a con: Josef is pleased.

"Have another drink," and he pours a shot for Pyotr, who obligingly downs it.

This is the same tavern the men were in before—the same one in which they sat before the *Big Fat American Mark* came to town, when Pyotr was perilously close to finding himself out in the cold.

"Yeah, thanks, Josef."

"No, I mean it. I'm promoting you," Josef smiles again.

"I don't think . . ."

"Here! Think about this," and he slides Pyotr a fat envelope—not as fat as the one Peter handed Anna/Sasha, but fat, nonetheless. And Pyotr looks less satisfied than one might expect.

"And take a day off! Spend some money. Find a girl." And Josef might be joking.

Peter returned to the States weeks ago, but the messages keep coming. Every day: *I miss you terribly, Anna. Is there anything else I can do?* Apparently, the children survived. Good for them—It's better than the alternative.

Pyotr can't keep this up, this sad charade. He has to come clean, so out the email goes:

Peter:

This is Pyotr. I was the interpreter for you and Anna. Stop sending money. Anna is not real. The woman who played her is an actress, and a bad one. Her real name is Sasha. I wrote the letters you received. The family was fake—actors and singers and an old drunk. I hired these people, most of them. And everywhere we went, someone was making a fool of you. We were all in on the game.

This is what we call the Big Lie.

I'm sorry, Peter. Times are not good here. This is how we survive, but I don't know if that excuses it.

Do something for your kids.

Pyotr

And Pyotr thought that would be the end of it, but it isn't. Peter continues to write. Why are lying to me? I saw Anna. I spoke to her. I know her heart and her inner beauty. She would never deceive me. You just want Anna for yourself. How dare you take her away from me!

No good deed goes unpunished. But what do? Pyotr tries again.

My Dearest Peter, My Rock, My Love,

I have not written to you in the longest time. Things have been busy here. Dad finally passed away, and we buried him in our ancestral graveyard. He really liked you. My mother survived her procedure, but she needs my help. I think I will have a difficult time leaving, because my good friend needs assistance as well. I have found a job with a local music production firm, so I can take care of everyone. I don't need any extra money. Thank you for all that you've done, Peter. I will always remember you fondly.

Be well.

Anna

P.S. Agent Nik fired Pyotr. He was not an honest man. If you get any letters from him, ignore them.

And the communications from Peter stop: That was the closest Peter could accept to the truth. That was the truth he could bear.

Maybe what Peter believes is real. There was no con, and Anna is still there, in the overstuffed, sweltering apartment, tending to her frail mother, remembering the American man who wanted to take her somewhere amazing. Or maybe Peter is just as pathetic as he seems, and Pyotr is an irredeemable bastard.

There's something. There's something in the fiction.

There's always some truth in the fictions we believe.

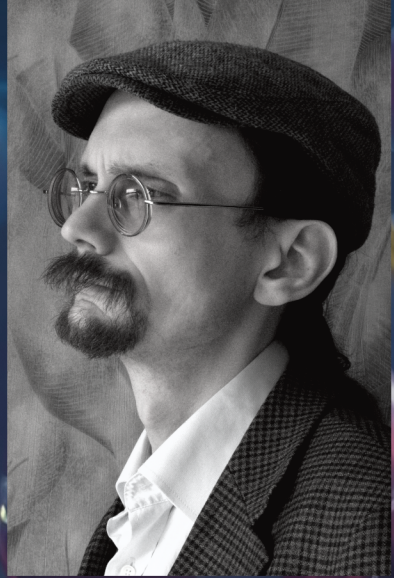
About the Author

Brant von Goble is a writer, editor, publisher, researcher, teacher, musician, juggler, and amateur radio operator.

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