

Death Ray Butterfly
by Tom Lichtenberg

One

If there's one thing I hate it's private detectives. And lab guys. Lab guys think they can figure out who done it just by measuring how hard it was to mop up the blood. And private detectives think all it takes is some kind of unique slant on things and there you go. One time there was this crippled albino midget gypsy detective from Albania who thought that all that individuality he had was enough to go solving crimes, but he just got in the way, like they all do eventually. The main thing that kept all those cases cold was people sticking their noses in and mucking up the waters.

Pet peeves. I could go on and on with those. Don't think I ever found the limits to that! Maybe it's what they want, I don't know. They told me go ahead and start talking into this little black box here and just keep talking, long as it takes. Said don't worry about it. Whenever you start talking, whenever you stop, the little black box will know. Don't have to turn it on or turn it off. It doesn't make any noise either so I don't know. Just keep talking, they said, so that's what I'm doing. Wanted it all for "posterity", their word. Me and my famous cases, all of that. Another cranky old man going on about the good old days. Tell you one thing, it ain't gonna be like that. Never were no good old days I knew about. Or maybe there were and just nobody told me "here they are! Enjoy 'em! Ain't gonna last!"

So here I am, seventy-two years old, been retired from the force a few years now. Worked that beat a long time. Fifty goddamn years. That is a long time, tell you that much. Started out, there was one telephone in the whole department. By the time I retired, they got one planted in everybody's skull. So a lot can happen in fifty years, even if you don't stick to the one same

universe the whole time, or even get back to the one you started out on. That's the thing. I can't tell for sure if I ever did. Back when I chased old Cricket Jones throughout the time-space continuum, I'm pretty sure I started out on the one old Earth I was born on, but did I ever see it again? Can't say for sure. Similar, definitely, very much so, and maybe that's enough. You'll see what I mean when I get to it.

They want me to talk about Cricket. Want me to talk about Reyn Tundra, Melvin Eldon and Eldon Melvin too. Make sure you get Racine in there while you're at it, they said. Everybody loves to hear about her. They can't get enough of Racine, the cold-blooded mini-skirted killing machine she was. Talk about who stole the lady's leg bone. Don't forget about Shrimpie. All right, all right, I'll get there. In my own way, damn it. In my own time. See I'm just talking here, me and this little piece of black plastic I am holding in my hand. They said I didn't need to hold it, just be somewhere nearby but hey, if I'm talking to a thing, at least if I touch it I don't feel like I'm just talking to myself, which is what it looks like. They said I could go out and walk around if I like. Why would I do that? Seventy-two years spent mostly on my feet chasing bad guys. Time to sit down now. Look out the window. Raining out there anyway!

Two

So then my assistant Kelley says, why don't you start with the time they dragged you back in time to stop the toddler assassin? That was some weirdness there. See I'm sitting on my ass in the headquarters' office canteen enjoying my meltdown caffeine when the General - he's got bangles and shit on his coat - comes charging in, barking orders like straight out of an old time crappy movie.

“Mister Mole? Come with me. Big trouble. I need you to plug it like a leak.”

I don't budge too easy so the guy started shouting louder like it would help me get the picture. Never did understand why people wave their hands around while they're talking. If I want to play charades I'll let you know. Generals don't impress me neither. I did some military time myself. Boy was I young then! Must have been some kind of war going on, it's hard to say. We did a lot of marching around. Some kind of yelling they did too. I don't get with all the talking so loud. I can hear you pretty good so just pipe down will you?

He's jabbing his finger this way and that, saying he's got some kind of machine and no time to waste, or rather a time machine that was going to waste, or he only had a few rides left before the thing expired, like it was going to pop like Cinderella's pumpkin. I finally dragged my butt over to the window where he was trying to show me it was outside. Thing looked like an ordinary car to me.

“Let me get this straight”, I said to him. “You want me to go for a ride in that old buggy of yours, is that it?”

“No bugs,” he shouted. “Nobody will hear a thing!”

“The car”, I shouted back. I can shout too when I want to. “Go for a ride in the car?”

“Yes, of course”, he jumped up and down all agitated. That was what he wanted after all, so I said okay and I followed him down the stairs and out to the street. He opened the passenger door for me and so I got in. He got in the driver's seat. It was pretty much your regular everyday car, only when he turned the key, it wasn't any engine turning on. We just vaporized. Poof. Like Cinderella's pumpkin after all. Next thing you know we're in some place I had never been before. He showed me a newspaper and jabbed a finger at the headline.

I was carsick. I climbed out of that thing and puked all over the sidewalk. The General he's there offering me a glass of water but if I remembered one thing they always told me about strange places it was don't ever drink the water so I didn't. General shrugged and led me into this really nice hotel room where they were planning to put me up. Slowly I got the story out of him, once I made him understand he didn't need to shout and to talk more slowly please.

Somehow they'd found out - I guess it was from their time machine - that some nameless three-year old girl was going to assassinate a presidential candidate. Sounded kind of fishy to me. Three-year old girls usually have names! Okay, a sorry excuse for a joke, I know. Sue me.

I didn't know what they wanted me to do about it, but it turned out they wanted me to stop it from happening. Since I was a detective from the future, they figured I'd know how. I wanted to ask him how they'd come up with such an incredibly stupid idea but he beat me to it.

“Look”, he told me, “It's a disposable time machine, okay? It's got pre-sets.”

When and where it could go was already fixed and it could only go two places and one time each place. They found out about the murder the first place and time. They ended up outside my office the second place and time. The general only had an hour so he asked the first person he saw who the best detective was and that was my assistant, Kelley, who said it was me, and that he could probably find me sitting on my fat ass in the kitchen drinking yesterday's coffee.

So now what, I wanted to know. How much time did I have to solve the case, and how was I supposed to get back to my own time after I did that? Then the general told me, speaking quietly for a change, that he didn't have a freaking clue. He'd done his bit. The rest was up to me, or God, or whatever.

Three

So where the hell was I? Somebody's going to have to go through this someday and do something about it, put it all in order, or not. What do I care? I'm just doing what they tell me. Seems like it's always been that way. Regulations and rules. Follow the procedures, fill out the paperwork. I spent half my career just staring at a piece of paper with a pencil in my hand. Summarize, they tell you, as if you can take the constellations of events, the coincidence of all those lives colliding at that very point, all of the accidents, alignments and misfortunes that it takes for every little thing that ever happened to happen at all. It astounds you if you have any sense whatsoever.

If that old lady had gone only one mile an hour slower or faster and if that city bus had stalled out only one or two seconds before and if that grocery cart wheel wasn't crooked and bent and if that umbrella, lying in the street, and if that young man had trimmed his sideburns just a hair, and if the sun had come up in the south and the cosmic dust had settled on a different rock ... you can drive yourself crazy thinking about stuff like that.

The boys on the beat never let me forget a word of it. Maybe I'd been in a coma or something for a moment, but once it got around, there I was, reputation and all. Stanley K. Mole, finder of lost souls, of Alma Perdida, the only police inspector in the force to witness the quantum mystery. That's when they started piling all those cases on my desk, beginning and ending with the coldest of the cold, Reyn Tundra.

I never let it bother me. At least I wasn't stuck on traffic duty, like Sergeant Oliver Jamm was after his close encounter with the alien grape. I wasn't pensioned off like Captain Zanzig Neese was after she was caught coddling cadavers in the cooler. I may have

gone off my rocker but I got back on pretty quick and I stayed back on that rocker ever since. I take it all with abiding grace if I do say so myself and I do. Say so myself.

They called the cases cold but I called them hard, and I was a hard case myself. Back since I was a kid, is what my dad always said. That boy's a hard case, got a hard head. All because I rode my bike down Ganges Hill without any brakes, just flew off into the hedges at the bottom, put my faith in God. Caught me all right, but scratched the hell out of me too. I still have the lacerations on my chest, been sixty years by now. Me and Smidge McCullers used to do that trick, him on roller skates even, the rickety four wheel kind. One summer we swore to conquer that mountain, limbs be damned, and damned if we didn't. Old Smidge could have used that kind of perseverance later on in life. Never did amount to much, did Smidge. Last time I saw him he was spending time alone, a lot of time, in solitary.

Don't we all? Shoot, here I am walking around the backyard with this dumb old black box in the palm of my hand, getting my sweat all over it and chatting up a storm. Feeling kind of stupid. Like Smidge McCullers. Now that boy was dumb. I remember one time I had to stop him from jumping off the roof of a six story building. Said he could make it, was sure he could, and wanted that twenty five cents I bet him but I took it back. Gave him the damn quarter just to save his life. That's what I call being a friend.

Four

My assistant, Kelley, is pestering me to talk about the girl Racine. People love to talk about her nowadays, since she got all mixed up in things and became so famous, and who was it who knew her way back when, when she was nothing, just getting started out? I guess I had my chances to nip that sucker in the bud, but what are you going to do when the kid is only twelve and facing life for a butchery so appalling that no one could believe it?

She was some kind of orphan I'm told, raised by the criminal mastermind sometimes known as Dennis Hobbs. Hobbs always claimed he worked for Jimmy Kruzel but I always suspected it was the other way around. Kruzel was kind of wimpy for an organized crime boss, always sniveling his way through interviews, whining about the room being cold, or the chair being hard on his butt. Kruzel owned all the riverboat gambling, it's true, but I think it was in name only. Hobbs had something on him and was using him like a front man.

Hobbs himself, though, what a piece of work. Man was wide as he was high and spoke in such a low voice and so softly you could never make out what the hell he was saying. Sounded more like the distant rumbling of a freight train than an actual human being talking. I remember some nights getting so pissed off I had to leave the room and turn on the TV just to hear the sound of an intelligible human voice.

Hauled that bastard in so many times, it wasn't funny. Then he had this little girl he was always towing around. Said he had to take her to school, pick her up from school, help her with her homework, always some excuse he thought would get him out of coming down to the station. Crazy. There'd be some killings on the docks and everybody knew that Hobbs was in it up to his

elbows. We'd come around, me and some rookie partner they were always saddling me with, and I'd be like, come on Hobbs, time to take a ride, and he'd go, "heck, officer" - son of a gun was always calling me 'officer' like he didn't know my name and rank - "I got to take my little girl to her dance recital tonight. She won't stand for it if I don't take her. Come on, officer, give a dad a break."

Like I gave a damn about giving breaks! I'm a cop, for Christ's sake. But he'd get those big old sad eyes going and my partner, always some wet-behind-the-ears little flake, he or she would get all sobby into it too and I'd just have to leave it, come back later. And damn if that little girl of his wasn't up to her knees in blood as well. Heard the strangest things about that kid, like she was literally born of the devil and some devilette, whatever you call those female demons, I forget the term. Long straight black hair, black eyes, thin as a rail, pale as a ghost, Racine came out of nowhere and was always tagging along her adopted papa Dennis.

She never said much, neither. Times I brought her in, always for murder or attempted murder - she never did anything less, never anything petty or small about that kid - she would never say a word. Knew her rights. Come to think of it, I'm not sure I ever even heard her voice back then outside of pleading "not guilty, your honor". They never sent her up for anything, never had the evidence, never had the witnesses. Clean as a whistle, every time, but the word was she had killed at least a dozen times, and rarely only a single person when she'd done it, usually a spree. They said she used a variety of weapons on her criminal occasions; guns, knives, swords, machetes, whips, chains, poison, acid. Girl had a repertoire.

Of course she vanished, that's how she got famous. Vanished but kept popping up from time to time, like the spirit she resembled. Rumors every day, years later, people claimed they'd seen her, same as she always used to be; somewhere between fifteen and

twenty, you could never be sure, though she had to be more than fifty by then. Last I saw that Racine she was smiling at me from the back of a getaway car. Like always, she was getting away!

Five

The crimes that go on nowadays, you can hardly believe it. We have people stealing skin - literally swiping the skin off your forearm, just to scrape the data and passwords that are embedded there. Not to mention the leg bones worth a fortune on the international market, shipped here from Ethiopia and Madagascar and God only knows where else. Then they got people cracking pacemakers for the serial codes and doing what they call 'spot-checking', which is a fancy term for mimicking gestures to control a personal auto-bot.

I don't even know what half these crazy crimes are but at the bottom of it it's always money, so that's one thing I do understand. Money and the screwed-up human being. It's always one thing or the other. Now with all the people in the world it's no wonder they're always talking about the remote personality control. A big city needs it. You can't have a hundred and fifty seven million people in a small space going about their business on their own!

Once they instituted that it was just a matter of time before the hoodlums and the lowlifes started working the angles around it. They can tap your wavelength, mess you up real good. You see these people staggering around now because somebody jacked their life and put them in a mood. You got them lying around on benches wondering where the hell they are, and then their families come and find them and take them back to Starters so they can get their tune up back to normal.

Mental technicians, there's a job. Down to a science, this business of what they call 'life ordering' and 'predisposition'. I'm lucky I got out of it because I retired in time and they were saving the cops for last in any case. Someone's got to be alert when

everyone else is sleeping, or might as well be. They tell me that the innovators have a special plug-in to keep them going. Got to have new stuff, you know, always got to have new stuff.

One time I was in a room somewhere, I'm forgetting where it was exactly, and I look outside the window, and I'm way above the street, and down there I see people walking and just like that, somebody just popped in, just popped right in. Weren't there but a second before and kept on walking like they'd been there all the time. I was rubbing my eyes because I couldn't believe it and I didn't tell nobody about it for a while, not even my assistant, Kelley. I know what I saw, though. It was real as you and me. Well, real as me in any case. I don't actually know about you.

There are strange things like that so I would never be surprised by anything anymore. You could tell me there are people who believe in billion year old souls living deep down in volcanoes that came here from another universe and I would nod and say, could be. Who knows? I've seen lost souls, and even found one, once upon a time.

She was just a corpse when I met her, a body laying up there in the woods around Pink City. She'd been in that state for quite awhile, nothing but bones were left. I don't know why they called me to the scene, because I wasn't in Lost Persons at the time, but Captain Cameroon - Rendir Cameroon - she thought of me, and asked for me specifically. I came up on to the scene - just a gully in the woods, nothing special, pile of bones there in a ditch.

Cameroon comes out and shakes my hand, she says,

“Mole, I got a feeling about this one. There's something missing here.”

“Looks like a whole lot missing”, I told her, “like a case, for one thing.”

“Oh, she was killed all right”, says Cameroon. “Shot right through the back of the head, execution-style, like they always say. Small

caliber, close range. She was kneeling, hands tied behind her back.”

“So who done it”, I asked facetiously. I was being rude because Cameroon seemed to have all the answers. Turned out she did.

“It was Curly and Rags”, she told me. “Curly already confessed. Been on his conscience now for seven years. Couldn't live with himself anymore. Even turned his own brother in as the shooter.”

“Hobbs' boys”, I nodded, and Cameroon agreed.

“He cut them loose”, she continued. “Hobbs didn't do nothing for them. Let them go.”

“So what's missing?” I asked her, and that's when she shook her head.

“Who she was”, she says.

“Now wait a minute”, I tell her. “Didn't Curly tell you who she was?”

“Claims he doesn't know”, she replies, “and Rags, he won't talk. Doing the time but in silence. Boys convicted of killing no one! No one with a name, that is. So that's why I wanted you, she said. I can't find out who she was. There's nothing on her, dental records nothing, missing persons nothing, federal agents nothing. You might say she's a real lost soul.”

“I bet her family'd like to know”, said Cameroon.

“I bet they would”, I told her.

Turned out to be a real puzzler. I won't bore you with the details now. Damn near drove me crazy, I can tell you that much.

Six

Maybe the case that dogged me the most over the years was Arab "Cricket" Jones. I can't even remember the first time I had to deal with that guy. It seemed like deja vu all over again every time he came to my attention. One time it was Jimmy Kruzel complaining about Jones - I can see him clearly now, sitting on the swivel chair in my office, swinging back and forth and scratching his nose, whining about how this nasty little man kept showing up on his riverboat casinos and swindling him out of all his money. Jones' modus operandi was legit, which only annoyed Kruzel even more. The guy would come in, gamble, and win every time. There had to be something wrong.

Jones won at everything and literally every time. No one could remember a single losing hand at cards, a single losing roll at craps, a single losing spin at roulette. Kruzel insisted that I do something about it. I did. I laughed in his face and enjoyed it. I told him to get out and stop disturbing my peace. But that wasn't the end of it. I figured Hobbs would put an end to Jones once and for all if he had a mind to, but I wasn't in the business of protecting gamblers from the trouble they brought on themselves. Funny thing was, Hobbs never seemed concerned about Cricket. He always let him in, always let him play, always paid him his winnings. That got my attention, eventually. There had to be an angle in it.

Okay, it didn't get my attention directly. I was never going out looking for cases - they had a way of finding me on their own. This time it was a squirrely private detective who bothered me about it. I hate private detectives, especially these corner cases, like this one, Shrimpie McDaniel. He was a short, fat, club-footed gay Eskimo with a Fu Manchu mustache and a mouth on him like

you wouldn't believe. Usually came in on a case after the crime lab assholes had totally screwed up the evidence so the real police, meaning me, couldn't locate a single uncontaminated shred of it. I don't know whoever told those lab guys they were supposed to be solving crimes! As far as I know, their job's to measure things and mop up blood. Sure enough there's some in every case who can't help but step all over the scene. Then they call in some loser like Shrimpie to cover their ass, pretend it was all his fault in retrospect. I'm on to that game. Seen it for years.

So Shrimpie comes in and tells me there were two Cricket Joneses at Kruzel's at the same time the other night. Absolutely two identical Joneses. Not brothers, not twins, not cousins - the same. And one of them was sticking out of the other one's trousers. I told Shrimpie to stuff it. Obviously he'd seen the bottom of too many bottles that night, but he swore on his mothers' graves, after letting me know he had three moms; a birth mother, a foster mother, and later an adoptive mother, all of them oddly passing away within a week of each other though hundreds of miles apart. Strange.

Arab Jones was at the blackjack table, standing behind the players, when the second Arab Jones popped out of the first one's pants, and strolled over to the bar. Every one who saw it dropped their jaws. Whatever that means. Like 'chiseled features'. Whenever I hear that I always have to say, are you kidding me? Who the heck drops their jaw? Shrimpie brought in the dealer, and he brought in some other witnesses, and they all swore on Shrimpie's mothers' graves that they were telling the truth.

“So what?” I wanted to know. “So the guy's some kind of magician, is that a crime? Is that worthy of my attention? And why are you telling me instead of rounding him up and selling him into the circus like a freak?”

Shrimpie says it's because I'm the one who gets the weird ones. It's my reputation, I'm telling you. So what am I supposed to do, pay a visit to this Cricket Jones and ask him how many of him there are at any given time?

“Get out of here” I roared, and Shrimpie beat it. But it wasn't the last I was to hear about Arab “Cricket” Jones. Some time later I get a package in the mail and inside was a note from Jones himself, along with what looked like a plastic cigarette lighter. In the note he tells me to be very, very careful, that it's disposable, and there's only a limited number of turns you can take, and that each of the parallel universes you can click to is very much like the one right next to it - just a teensy bit different - and the further you get the more the differences add up, but you never know, he underlined, you never know which direction you'll click into - backwards or forwards, it made no difference - or even how many layers at a time.

I stared at that note and I stared at that lighter. I came close to burning the first and melting the other. Wish I had. Would have saved me a lot of grief later on.

Seven

Now that I'm here - where I think I am, at least, it's hard to know for sure - I have a lot of time to think about things, and I've found that the more time I have to do that, the more they bother me. Things in general, that is, like marching bands - I don't know why, but they make me feel like throwing and breaking things. Then there's rich people looking for bargains. It just bugs me. If you can afford to buy something and you want it, then buy it. Don't try to get it cheaper, especially when the person you're haggling with is probably earning almost no money at all. Or when the news-people tell you things that you know aren't true, and they know aren't true, and they know that you know, but still they tell you anyway, such as the price of something is due to "supply and demand". It's nonsense but they keep on trotting it out on every occasion.

I've got lists and lists of peeves, pet ones and otherwise. Like professional announcers who mispronounce words, even famous people's names! Or they accentuate the wrong word in a sentence. The other day I heard somebody saying IG-nub-bull, instead of ig-NO-bull. And these are people who are paid to say things right. Then there's the people who launch their booster packs right in your face, never mind the noise and dust. And the doctors who give you diseases so you don't get them later on and they call it "good for you".

I was in a place the other day where I had to wait in one line just to be able to wait in another. I had to submit my papers for inspection. You have to carry them around, and they do these spot checks, where they'll haul you off to the stadium for the night if you don't happen to have them on you, and that's not enough. No, you have to go into their offices every three months

to get your papers renewed. You wait in the first line so you can wait in the second line, and in between the two lines there's a man who takes some money. You have to give him the money or else he'll put you back to the end of the first line.

You get to the end of the second line and present your papers to the person behind the bullet-proof glass, where he or she will shuffle them for a few moments and then, depending on whether he or she likes the look of your face, will either stamp them with a rubber stamp, or send you outside to wait in an outside line to buy a different stamp from somebody else who takes some money. There's no way out of this, even for a member of the police force, or an ex-member like myself. I could probably get an exemption from the General, but he wasn't very happy with me last time I saw him.

The General had gone to the trouble of bringing me from the future to help him with that case he had. It's true, he wasn't looking for me in particular, I just happened to be there, and there wasn't much I could do for him anyway, nothing much that anyone could have done. He knew, or said he knew, that a three-year old girl was going to kill someone and he didn't know where or when, but she'd have a gun and she would be doing it deliberately. She was an assassin. A three-year old assassin. It sounded pretty crazy to me. Although I had a nephew once and I wouldn't have put anything past him. My little sister's kid, Wilhelm. Brat used to whack me with a sword every time I came within striking distance. Had a notion to pick him up and heave him across the room. Sister wouldn't have been too thrilled with that so I just put up with it.

The General put me in a nice hotel room. I appreciated that. The lobby was draped with curtains that looked like they were made of gold, and maybe they were. And the lounge chairs, velvet and red, were very cozy. I took some real good snoozes there.

Couldn't complain about the liquor either. I was never much of a booze hound but they had some fine Scotch in that place. Every day the General would join me for breakfast and barrage me with questions about my plans. Where to begin? What to do? Where to look? How would what he called "a seasoned investigator" approach such a problem.

All I could do was press him for every detail he could remember about the case. Which wasn't much. On his first trip to the future he'd seen a headline in a newspaper machine, stooped to read the story but didn't have any change to actually buy the paper, and before he could run off to get change he was pulled back into the machine and returned to his own time. The girl had no name. The woman she shot had a name but it wasn't her real one. She was rushed to a hospital. That was pretty much it. I made him tell me the story over and over again.

I didn't get was so urgent about this. Clearly, people running for president got protection, and this candidate, whatever her real name, would have more protection than usual because of the General's discovery, but when I told him this, he became very nervous and finally admitted his real concern was that there even was a presidential candidate. Because, as it turned out, there were no elections to be had. The General and his friends ran the country themselves and were quite happy to keep running it indefinitely. The last thing they needed was an election. I began to get the idea that it wasn't the little girl he wanted to stop, it was the other one, the candidate. I was in no hurry to help him. Politics has never been any of my business.

People who cheat. That's another one of my peeves. The General was out to cheat history. That's almost as bad as people who take on some enormous challenge and then do everything in their power to make it easier, like sailing around the world and doing it with an enormous yacht with all the comforts and conveniences.

Why bother? Might as well stay at a nice hotel for a few days until the machine pulls you back and returns you to your own time and place.

Eight

I'm not used to having all this time. It's bugging me. I was so busy for so long I never stopped to think about what I'd do when I retired, so when the time came it took me by surprise. I hate to be one of those reminiscers always going on about the old days, but I do miss the action. There weren't too many boring days back then. Now it's all I've got. The memories come flooding back sometimes, a bit scattered I have to admit but they do come in a rush all jumbled up. My assistant, Kelley, probably thought that talking it all out like this would help me sort them all out in my mind, but too many things run together, too many coincidences, too many loose threads. Just when I think I've put some pieces together, it all comes unraveled. I had cases that took years and years to come to some kind of conclusion.

I'd get called in on all sorts of things. I'd wonder why they were bothering with me at all, like the time they brought me in on the Reyn Tundra situation. Here was a job for a scholar, I thought, an archaeologist or an anthropologist at least. They'd found this body, frozen in a block of ice inside a glacier somewhere in Europe. He'd been dead, oh maybe twenty thousand years or so, they said. Said he'd been murdered. Now they wanted me to solve the crime! What could I tell about a frozen stiff that old? Some kind of Neanderthal at that. They flew me over there to see the body in person. I had to think that was the most ridiculous case I'd ever been dragged into.

All these skinny men and women with spectacles and white lab coats were gathered around this ancient body, now encased in a vacuum-sealed clear chamber in some chemical stenchy lab. The dead guy looked pretty pissed. Brutal. What eyes, and eyebrows, and thick long brown hair, and the body all wrapped up in some

kind of wolfskin or bearskin or mastodon. What the hell did I know? Nasty looking fellow. So there I am, this fat old cop from the great southwest of the U.S. of A. - I was always kind of heavy, and I was already getting old by that time - anyway, there I am along with my assistant, Kelley, and we are like some kind of fish out of water to say the least. Kelley, smelling like tobacco as always, and me, smelling like burgers most likely, and looking like hell because I hate to fly, absolutely hate it. Makes me sicker than a dog most every time. And the time change wasn't doing me any favors. I was ready to puke already and then one of those scientists flicked some switch somewhere and the chamber started to revolve. The dead guy rolled over like a chicken on a spit and then the scientist who did that, he must have been the main guy, says in some kind of German-English, 'you see, Inspector, why we wanted you', and he pointed at the back of the dead guy's head, and sure enough, there was the entry wound.

Small caliber, close range, unmistakable. The caveman had been murdered with a gun.

The scientists had waited for me to witness the fact first hand, before proceeding with any further extraction of the bullet. I gave them the go ahead. For once, there were no crime lab "detectives" mucking up the scene. These scientists did a clean job of it. They had used some imaging machines and knew precisely where the bullet was - what the bullet was - and had some very fancy medical techniques for getting it out of there. Wasn't long before the thing was on a table in front of me, clean as a whistle.

Of course it would have its own unique markings. Anyone who ever watched a cop show would know about that. What they never tell you is the chances of finding a match were a billion to one, let alone the gun it came out of. This thing could have come out of any yard sale, any gun show, any time from the second half of the twentieth century on. I ventured to say it was American.

They agreed. It was why they hadn't brought in Maigret, I suppose. The working theory was, the guy had somehow got himself forward in time at least long enough to get shot, and then was somehow shipped back to his own time as a corpse. Or else somebody went back to his time and did it.

Yeah, I said, why not? If only it was so easy. Turned out there were some further complications.

Nine

Of course it wasn't always homicides. I started out on a regular beat like any other cop, but those were different times. It all seems so innocent now. I can't even remember too much about it; things have gotten all jumbled up and confused since then, which reminds me of another case that caused me a lot of trouble. I'd been in narcotics until that whole situation suddenly disappeared with the legalization of all drugs. Man. You spend a lot of time tracking down hoodlums for doing something that the very next day is perfectly all right in the eyes of the law. Some of those that got themselves arrested and locked up were right back out there, back at work but now wearing business attire and doling out firm handshakes!

Some others moved on to trafficking in substances that remained illegal - I guess it was the thrill that got them hooked, or maybe just the independence, being your own boss, living that adrenaline lifestyle. Now they had banned subatomic particles and boy, were those some tricky items to trace. Not just the particles themselves - everyone knows about the quantum effects - but the dealers and their minions too. Just when you thought you'd busted the girl who was carrying, it turned out she was clean, and maybe the loot was on her grandma instead. Hard to know. In the early days we didn't have too many ways of testing so it was easy for them to move the stuff around and get away with it.

There was a lot of panic in high places, top officials publicly worrying about these particles slipping into the mainstream and causing catastrophic anomalies, black holes and such. As if the criminals were going to suck all the air out of the cosmos for fun and profit! They always sold those suckers short. The criminal

mind is said to be devious, and there are always rumors of 'masterminds' and geniuses and such, but really these guys are just out to make a buck, get laid and look good. Last thing they want is cataclysmic Armageddons. Even Root Turagu. This guy was said to be the kingpin of the whole nanoptic subworld. Ruled the whole East Coast from an over-sized dollhouse in the backyard of his mother's uncle, an old barber named Clayton Jeffries.

Of course his real name was not Root Turagu. It was something like Billy Pride, or Rick Rock, something like that. He went with Turagu because it sounded tribal. Man had tattoos up and down, around and about, pretty much everywhere he had skin, and they were all especially tribal looking too. Kept his war councils on the lawn back there. One time I went and looked him up, just to see for myself. I'd been hearing his name being whispered here and there so I figured I would take the bull by the horns, so to speak, find out if it really was all bull and no horns like I thought.

Turagu was sitting there on a lawn chair, eating a grilled cheese sandwich and drinking an orange soda. One of the tattoos on his right forearm was running Xvfd and he had some kind of jigsaw puzzle application running on it. Every now and then he'd glance down and tap on a piece with his left hand index finger to direct an alteration in the pattern. He seemed pretty engrossed in the project. He didn't notice me for a while, or at least I thought so, but eventually he looked up and briefly nodded towards a chair (his own was surrounded by several other, equally ratty looking faded plastic pieces of furniture).

“Go ahead, Inspector”, he said, “Take a seat. Can I offer you a sandwich?”

I declined his offer of food but did sit down.

“You got some questions”, he continued, “but I don't got no answers. You see me. Here I am. This is it.”

“People say you're some kind of big shot”, I remarked, and he laughed.

“I built my rep with care”, he grinned. “It pays to have some word.”

“So what is it?” I asked. “You get some kind of tribute delivered?”

“Every Friday night”, he smiled. “Eight o'clock sharp. You should come around and see. Home worship delivery. Don't it beat all?”

“I don't get it”, I said. “What's in it for them?”

“Some of them want to follow”, he muttered, checking his forearm with a look of disapproval. “Frickin' loom-bot, do what I say, dammit!”

He tapped away furiously on his arm and I had to ask him what he was doing.

“Mongrel config”, he replied, as if that was supposed to mean something to me.

“I'm shaping the shapes”, he continued. “I'll dish 'em out when they're ready.”

“Shapes for what?”

“The shapes, man”, he said, staring at me as if I was crazy.

“Everything's got to have a shape. Where do you think they come from? Out of the sky?”

I had to admit I didn't know. I always thought that things simply formed themselves as they were destined to, according to their genetic blueprints. Maybe this guy thought he was God.

“Nanoptics?” I guessed.

“I don't deal with that”, he spat. “Leave that for the crooners and the spoilers who think they know but they don't know. It's the shapes, man. It's all of that.”

I didn't get much more out of him from that interview. The more we talked, the less sense it made. It was pretty clear that I was going to have to get some more education on these matters. I had to turn to some kind of expert, which meant I had to find one.

Ten

Turned out the big number one expert I was looking for was the one and only Arab "Cricket" Jones. I'd already been curious about him because of Jimmy Kruzel's nonstop whining about his gambling luck, but I had no idea who he really was. I didn't know he was actually even famous. He was some kind of physicist-novelist-pop-culture-pundit-hero, had published all sorts of books and given all kinds of speeches, and was even renowned for naming his son Enrico Fermi Planck Einstein Newton K. Jones.

He lived in a top floor penthouse apartment in Fulsom Towers downtown. I met him there, flanked by his supermodel wife and aforementioned infant son. Jones was an ordinary looking sort; not too tall, not too light, sporting a crewcut and thick tortoise-shell rimmed glasses. He was very polite, ushered me in, offered me a brandy, and sat me down in a thickly carpeted library with a picture window overlooking the harbor. He sat himself behind an obsidian slab of a desk, and with his head propped up by his elbows, seemed to be studying me carefully. I was inspecting him as well. He seemed inordinately confident, like someone who had everything all figured out, and yet was not so above it all to be bored or condescending. The look in his eyes was one of genuine interest and curiosity.

"I've heard of you, of course", he said. "Certain acquaintances of mine have even threatened me with your name."

"Kruzel?" I offered, and he nodded.

"Among others", he agreed. "Some you may have already heard of, others of whom you most certainly will."

"I'm not here for you", I reassured him.

“You have questions?”, he suggested.

“Nanoptics?”

“Nothing to worry about”, he said dismissively, leaning back and waving his hands in the air.

“Child's play”, he continued. “It's like people selling oregano for weed. Only the ignorant would pay and it's completely harmless to boot. There won't be any inadvertent collapses of this galaxy, I can assure you, or any other galaxy for that matter. Subatomic particles are everywhere. You might say they ARE every thing. If there were to be some kind of shortage, now, that might make it interesting. As with blood, or livers, or fashionable leg bones.”

“Leg bones?”

“Or cheek bones, if you prefer. Some people will always want to upgrade their appearance. This is a trend that knows no limit. If it became necessary, they would swap their own DNA if possible. Perhaps it will be, someday”, he mused.

Jones resumed his elbows-down posture at the desk, after brushing aside some papers and seeming to appreciate his reflection in the shiny black surface. I posed another simple question, this time about Root Turagu. Jones looked up with a broad grin across his face.

“One of my faves”, he said. “A man after my own heart. I should like to be the first to sell someone their very own personality.”

“I don't follow”, I told him.

“Snake oil”, he said. “The one thing your nanoptics and Turagu have in common. Or at least, it seems so, on the surface. Yes, it is so. No need to concern yourself. None at all. People will succumb, as they always do, to the shrewd and the crafty and the brilliant. Turagu is two of those. I myself am all three.”

It seemed that our interview was over, as he stood, and guided me toward the door. I couldn't leave without one more question, however.

"You once sent me something", I began.

"Yes, yes, a gift", he replied. "You will be making use of it someday, I promise. I will let you know exactly when. Until that time, however, you'd best be keeping it in a safe place, out of the hands of children, or any other creature for that matter."

That certainly cleared things up! I left, with the definite impression that I'd been most carefully lied to, and that it wouldn't be the last time.

Eleven

We had some pretty fancy operations going on back in the day, especially in the "War on Stuff". We called it the War on Stuff because the stuff was always changing. At one time or another, pretty much every kind of substance you could absorb was declared war on, whether it was prescribed by a doctor or not. We were used to constantly revising the list of stuff, which we also called "the goods". If somebody had the goods, that was too bad for them!

Law enforcement went to extremes when it came to the stuff. We had machines, we had tests, we had animals, you name it, we had it. One of the geniuses in that last department was a woman named Kiki Photoscu. She'd come from Romania where she had a history of amazingly bad luck. She was originally a circus freak, able to twist herself like a pretzel. They said she could dislocate every single bone in her body at the same time, and pop them all right back into place on cue. Somewhere along the line she picked up some animal training, beginning with cats, if I remember right. She would have these cats distribute themselves randomly in the audience, then they'd all leap out and started yowling at the same time, scaring the crap out of everybody in the building. Some people got scratched, and Kiki got canned.

Now on her own, she moved on to birds - mourning doves, another unfortunate choice, because these birds were able to sniff out death. She'd let them go and off they'd fly through the city, coming to roost within a few feet of where a murder was about to be committed. The cops took to following the birds, and that actually saved a few lives, I think, but then the birds got specialized, and started to forecast "official" killings. The secret

police were not too thrilled. Kiki had to choose between emigration or else.

She ended up here in the great southwest where she worked for a while on a rescue ranch, the kind of place where all the zoo animals get shipped off to once they're no longer useful. They also had some mountain lions relocated from La Honda, California, and some other exotic creatures too wily for mankind. This place was also used for some experimental purposes, and Ms. Photoscu was welcomed into that little fraternity there, and got involved in the War on Stuff.

We always had drug-sniffing dogs. Everybody knows that dogs are good for pretty much anything. They're smart, they train up well, stay under control, and people like them. Other creatures get tried out from time to time, but usually you end up with dogs. Kiki was never a dog person. Cats were pretty much useless - she knew that - and she'd become a bit superstitious about birds after her dove adventure. She moved right on to insects. No one's ever been sure how she did it, but she ended up breeding and developing a number of species of curiously adaptive insects. I remember reading about some of them; the roaches that could track down methamphetamine and swarm the labs by the millions, the bees that could sniff out corn syrup, and the ants that marched directly to patchouli oil fields.

What got her into trouble this time - and not just her - were the butterflies. In some ways they were her crowning achievement, those huge yellow and black monarchs she called Fonticiads. Crazy as it sounds, these overgrown caterpillars had a special sense for prides of unstable dibaryons. Kiki Photoscu had somehow anticipated the coming Stuff list, and there she was, all ready with the tools when subatomics made it. The feds paid a hefty price for her services; after all, they had generated this new panic and needed something showy to highlight their efforts

against it, and these masses of gigantic Fonticiads were just the thing - photogenic, larger than life, and unerringly accurate.

The day she brought them here to Spring Hill Lake is the day that everything changed. She kept them in special baskets, a whole pickup load of them; must have been a hundred thousand or more all packed together in the back of that old black Chevy truck. Federal agents had their suspicions, but mostly they just moved from town to town, putting on a show. They'd plant some dibaryons in a building somewhere, let the butterflies loose and sure enough, they'd show up right on time for the six o'clock news. Nobody ever said what the problem was with those particles - research even showed them to be harmless, even hypothetical - but that was not the issue. Getting the public on board was key. There was always some new fright cropping up that needed calming and soothing. The feds liked to get some local involvement too, so there I was, part of their bug and pony show.

This time there apparently weren't enough of the decoy particles to attract the interest of the insects. Nope. They flew straight off in a different direction, headed right down to the waterfront where they surrounded an old abandoned storage warehouse by the railroad yards. Nobody could have guessed that Arab "Cricket" Jones had a thing about butterflies, a pet peeve, if you will, about that old saying about a butterfly flapping its wings in China and causing a hurricane in the Atlantic. Well, those butterflies were flapping their wings all right, but not in China. They were flapping them right where Jones and his crew were busy packing up crates of very illegal and very unstable subatomics. It was showtime.

Twelve

Caught up in the siege were a couple of legendary thugs - Krispy Talbot and Jalapeno Perez. These two were better known for their incendiary work, but it seemed they'd graduated to a more subtle explosive level. The whole scene was straight out of a movie. First the feds dragged out the crackly loudspeakers, demanding immediate and unconditional surrender. The helicopter waited until the news cameras showed up, perhaps in a cost-cutting maneuver. They brought out the spotlights even though it was still broad daylight and everyone knew exactly where the fugitives were. Hell, they weren't even running away. Even though you expected to hear something like "you'll never get me alive, coppers", in fact the opposite occurred. Jones and the other two walked out the front door as calm as you please with their hands already over their heads.

They were quickly surrounded by butterflies, and I thought I could sense the disgust on Jones' face as he swatted the critters away. Talbot and Perez, both giants in stature compared to Jones, grinned sheepishly as if embarrassed at being so easily apprehended. The federal agents moved in, cuffed the men and led them toward the waiting black vans. As he passed by, Jones gave me a wink and a nod and whispered,

"Not yet, Inspector. Not quite yet."

I knew what he meant, but I pretended I didn't when grilled by the authorities. I told them I thought he just meant it wasn't the end, that he'd be back, and indeed he was, in remarkably short order. I learned through connections it was Hobbs, Dennis Hobbs who posted their bond, and not a meager amount at that. I'd already guessed there was some connection there and now I was more certain than ever. But I adopted what they used to call a

'wait and see attitude'. After all, the War on Stuff wasn't really my beat. I was only a part of the show. I had other matters to attend to.

My immediate concern was a fellow by the name of Kram Fletcher. I had been tailing him for a few weeks, convinced he was the same person I formerly knew as Filcher Peron. Peron had slipped through my fingers many years before in as crazy a case as I'd ever come across. He'd been operating in the area of involuntary conversions, taking ordinary people who belonged to one church or another, and sliding them into a different one altogether. He was a slick operator who had no loyalty but would work for whichever evangelical was hot and willing to pay. In those days, ratings were king, and ratings were determined by numbers, kind of like the popularity of television shows or opening weekends for movies. Most of the churches around the state had signed up with the RTN, the agency responsible for rating and ranking religions.

What Peron was up to wasn't strictly illegal but it sure wasn't kosher either. He used chemical inducements along with straight up cash. It was also rumored he was able to transmit convertability through immediate semen injection. He called it a "transfer of energy" but it was clearly more than that. Not a few susceptible women found themselves inexplicably attending a temple not of their regular persuasion. Many were so astonished by their own actions that they resorted to desperate measures, even to the extent of praying and paying for candles to be lit, activities which hadn't been seen in ages. Peron had vanished along with a tidy sum of money for which he had allegedly not yet fulfilled his obligations.

Now there was Kram Fletcher. The moment I saw his picture on the screen I just knew he was Filcher Peron, and yet it was going to be damned hard to prove. Fletcher had a full and complete personal history, along with witnesses, many of whom had

known him his entire life, all forty seven years of it, including his parents, his siblings, his friends, wife and children. Filcher Peron, on the other hand, had just as full a life (up to the point of his disappearance) with a completely different set of individual testimonies. It was only intuition on my part, and as it turned out I was completely mistaken, but it bothered me quite a bit for quite a while. I followed that Fletcher person, pestered his associates and family, grilled his employer and co-workers - this guy was a mechanical engineer, responsible for the safety of obsolete farm equipment - and generally made a terrible nuisance of myself. I'm not proud to admit it, but I am far from perfect. As my assistant, Kelley, likes to say, I'm often wrong but never in doubt.

Thirteen

My assistant, Kelley, keeps badgering me to get to the juicy stuff. Okay, okay. I like a good story as much as anybody else, but sometimes it can get a little confusing, so you're going to have to bear with me. What Kelley means by the 'juicy stuff', is, of course, the murder that didn't happen, or that did happen but maybe not. Of course it all went down on Jimmy Kruzel's riverboat. Seems our friend Mr. Jones showed up again not long after he got bailed out of the subatomic particle charges. Not only showed up, but all dapper and bragging about how no one could touch him, no one could stop him. He had a secret and was going to change the world.

He was drawing a crowd, which he often did. He was commanding the bow of the boat and standing on a half barrel, making this speech, must've been a hundred people gathered around, at least it seemed there were a hundred witnesses I had to interview, each with his own particular version of events, events that no two of them seemed able to agree upon completely. The one thing they had in common was that Kruzel didn't like it, not one bit. He came down out of his captain's cabin up top and pushed his way through the crowd, some said, but I had my doubts. Kruzel was a weakling and a coward; chances are he merely begged and pleaded his way through to the front, employing that whiny obnoxious voice to squeak people out of his way. In any case, he came right up in front of where Jones was pontificating and shouted at him to get down, get out, and get lost.

Jones got down, all right, and that's where things happened; what things exactly, it is very hard to say. Some claim that Kruzel pulled a knife. Again, I found that hard to believe. Kruzel was

never known to pull anything on anybody ever. And yet, when I got there, Jones was bleeding from a stab wound to his left bicep. Some said that Jones whipped out his blade first. Never did find out for sure, really. The lab guys got there before me and wiped the sucker clean. Not a print, not a drop or even a speck of blood remained on the thing. Lab guys. They'll get you every time.

The crowd pulled away, opened up as Kruzel collapsed in a puddle of blood and died right then and there before anyone could get a doctor or a medic on the scene. The timing seemed a bit odd. The first call went in to emergency about fifteen minutes after the stabbing was alleged to occur. That's a lot of people standing around doing nothing for a while. Of course, they were leaving it up to Hobbs. He was there all right, in the front row too. Probably could have stepped between the two of them and made it all never happen. That was one of my main questions.

There's no doubt Kruzel was jealous of Jones, and wanted to know why Hobbs had bailed him out. He wanted to know why Jones would always win. Wanted to know what Hobbs' role in that was too. I think I know. It wasn't magic, or luck. It was fixed, and Hobbs was taking his cut. Used some of it for the bail money, but there was plenty where that came from. It makes some kind of sense. Kruzel's name was on the boat, Kruzel's name was fronting the place, but the money all flowed to Hobbs.

But Dennis needed Kruzel, needed his name, his face, so why did he let Jones kill him? My guess is, he didn't. Had no idea it was going to happen. Jones had never killed before, as far as anybody knew. Still, it was Hobbs who held him up in the captain's cabin until the police, meaning me, could get there. Hobbs had him locked in the room and when he let me in I could see he didn't look happy at all.

The room was filled with cigar smoke - I mean really filled. You could hardly see a thing. I was coughing and choking so bad I

kicked back open the door and let it stay open. I had a couple men posted outside so I wasn't worried about Jones getting away. Jones himself was bleeding quietly on a chair beside the fireplace. I asked him if he needed a doctor and he just smiled and shook his head.

"No need, Inspector. It won't be long now."

"What's that supposed to mean?", I asked.

"You remember that thing I gave you?"

"Of course I do."

"You're going to need it, now", he said, and he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a plastic lighter just like the one he'd given me. He grinned, gave it a flick, and he was gone.

Poof.

Gone.

Fourteen

I couldn't believe my eyes, but of course I had to. There weren't any secret chambers or hidden doorways or concealed trapdoors or anything like that. Arab "Cricket" Jones had vanished. I looked around a little bit, sure, and then I did something totally out of character. I went through the motions.

I guess I was just in denial, couldn't absorb the incredible, so I just asked Hobbs some questions about the murder. He rumbled some answers I couldn't really understand, so I moved on downstairs to where the witnesses were assembled, and started plowing through their improbable stories. Each one seemed especially long-winded, but it was mostly my fatigue. By the time I got around to the crime scene itself it had been thoroughly trampled and mucked up by the lab techs. There was only one knife, although most of the witnesses claimed there had been two. There was only Kruzel's blood, though most agreed that Jones had been wounded too. The body, at least, was gone. I would look at that in the morning.

It was very late at night by the time I got home and settled myself on the back porch rocking chair. I live in a little house well out of the way, on an alley down by the river. It's quiet out there and I like to look at the water and the harbor lights blinking all night. Sometimes you can hear a fish jump, or the occasional toad advertising his presence. Mostly there's nothing and no one around. I picked up that little lighter, the one Jones gave me. I'd been keeping it on the mantelpiece, trying to ignore it, but now I was holding it my hands while I rocked a little bit and thought about the note. Without even thinking about it, I flicked the lighter, just once. No flame came out, and nothing else

happened. I continued to sit out there in the dark, listening to the silence, for maybe another half an hour.

Then I heard somebody knocking on the front door. That was strange. Hardly anyone ever came out there, not even my assistant, Kelley. I got up, went and opened the door, and there was Cricket Jones, standing there on the top step.

"Mind if I come in?" he asked, politely.

"Not at all", I replied. I realized I was still holding the lighter and glanced at his hands to see if he was holding his, but he wasn't. I did see that he wasn't bleeding. He wasn't bandaged. His arm was not even cut. I showed him in to the kitchen and offered him a seat and a drink. He took the first and declined the second.

"You're probably wondering why I'm here", he said as I sat down across the table from him.

"I ought to be arresting you", I told him.

"For what?" he smiled.

"Murder, of course", I said.

"But I didn't kill anyone", he said. "Not here, at least."

"What does that mean?"

"Let me ask you. Who am I supposed to have killed?"

"You know as well as I do", I grumbled. "Jimmy Kruzel. Stabbed him in the gut, and let him bleed to death on the floor of his own establishment."

"Kruzel?" he laughed. "That little puppy is alive and well. Here, I'll prove it to you", and he turned his right forearm over to reveal the video screen he had implanted on it. He tapped his wrist a few times and the screen came alive with the wide face of Dennis Hobbs staring at us.

"Jones?" he asked.

“Evening, Dennis”, he replied.

“Evening”, Hobbs said back.

“Evening, Inspector”, he added, turning his face towards me.

“What can I do for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“The Inspector's got the idea that Mr. Kruzel's been killed”, Jones said, “Stabbed in the belly, so he says.”

“Jimmy?”, Dennis chuckled. “Why, he's sitting right over here. See for yourself”, and he turned his own arm to show the very same and very alive Jimmy Kruzel sitting in the chair I'd seen Jones sitting in not four hours before. My night of weirdness was apparently not over. It was Kruzel all right, the same little whiner he always was. He started right in as soon as he saw Jones on Hobbs' armscreen.

“Jones?” he screeched, “How many times do I have to tell you. You are not welcome here. Not now, not ever. Not in person, and not on the flesh either.”

He couldn't help but laugh at his little joke, "on the flesh". Those skincams were still pretty new at the time.

“Sorry, boss”, Jones cracked, and tapping once more on his wrist, turned off the screen.

“See what I mean?” he said, turning to me. “You can't arrest me for killing someone who isn't dead.”

“Not dead here, at least”, he added.

“I don't follow”, I said.

“But you did”, he told me. “You followed me here, to this universe. Which universe exactly is hard to say, impossible to say, really. There is nothing but the infinite recursion of adjacent universes, did you know that? What happens in one doesn't have to happen in the next. But it might and usually does. Most of the

time. But the little things add up. Maybe the only difference between this and the next one is that a certain pop song sold a few more copies. Maybe the difference is a revolution. Right now the difference is Kruzel. Here he lives, and that's all you need to know right now.”

“Right”, I said.

I didn't know what else to say. I'm not the quickest when it comes to absorbing radical information. I was going to have to think about it. And his motives. What was he up to? What was he trying to prove? Was he even telling the truth? Maybe the whole setup was an elaborate hoax. I was going to have to check on Kruzel in person. And Hobbs. I didn't trust him either.

I sure didn't feel any different, and neither did my house, or anything around me. There was Jones' arm which wasn't wounded but that could have been part of the scam too. Adjacent universes, slightly different, stacked together infinitely like pages in a book. Sounded shady, maybe even illegal.

Jones got up and bowed like some old timer.

“Good night, Inspector”, he said. “We will meet again soon. In the meantime, I release you. You may use the device to your heart's content, but I would warn you. There are only a certain number of clicks in it - I can't tell you how many - and when it runs out, there you are, in whichever universe you end up in, and there will be no further way out of it. Ever again.”

And with that, he turned and walked out of the house, leaving me stuck in the molasses of my mind.

Fifteen

I had a lot of questions. Naturally they hadn't occurred to me until Jones was gone, and he was probably the only person in the universe - or in any universe - who could answer them. For instance, if I really had switched into another reality, what happened to the me that was already there? Was I that me now? Did I merely turn into that person, merge with him, replace him, be replaced by him - how did that work? And what if I switched into a reality where that me didn't exist, had died perhaps. Where would I go? What if I clicked into a reality where that me was in the midst of dying? Would I die too, within him? And what happened when I switched out, was it visible, was it audible, what would witnesses observe?

If I was a different me now, a me that had always lived in this place and not in that one, how would I know? Would I even know? Would familiar things seem strange and strange things familiar? If the differences were slight, how could I tell? And if the differences were great, would I even be aware of them? It was a lot to sort through. First I had to nail down the fact of Kruzel's death or non-death. How could I remember a crime scene that hadn't in fact existed? That would make the case for the merging-of-me's theory, but wouldn't necessarily negate any others. All of them could be true, and none of them.

I don't believe I slept at all that night, and in the morning I required a pot and half of coffee just to get my ass downtown to HQ. There my assistant, Kelley, was as industrious as ever, waiting with a stack of new and old cases for me to mull over and decide which one to pursue that morning. I told Kelley we were going to visit Kruzel's again. Kelley said,

“What do you mean again? We haven't been there in months.”

“We were just there last night”, I started to reply, but held my tongue. I wasn't about to go into the details. Kelley and I headed down to the riverboat, where everything was perfectly normal as usual. Dennis Hobbs was there to greet us, and Jimmy Kruzel was exactly where and how I had seen him the night before, in his captain's cabin, fidgeting behind his desk. He was nervous about our being there, but I didn't read too much into that. The little creep was always nervous. Hobbs, on the other hand, was overly formal and polite, and we didn't stick around long. I asked a few questions about Jones, when he'd been there last, and so on, and had to listen to Kruzel complain about him ever even being there at all, turning on Hobbs and saying, over and over again, how he just didn't understand, how come his instructions regarding Jones were always being ignored. Hobbs shrugged and pretended he had no idea.

I returned to our building and planted myself in the kitchen area with several bags of snacks and more coffee. For some reason I could always think better in the break room than anywhere else. Maybe it was the brightness of the lights, or the smell of the place, I don't know. I also enjoyed the trivial exchange of greetings with the other cops and staff as they drifted in and out of there. That morning I had the honor of a conversation with the haughty Captain Rendira Cameroon. She pulled up a chair and told me of a peculiar incident that just recently occurred.

“A woman came in to see me”, she said, “A woman I vaguely recognized but didn't put the name to until later. She gave me some phony one instead, Marka Willander, ring any bells?”

I shook my head. Never heard of a Marka anyone for that matter. Cameroon went on.

“Anyway, this Marka Whatever told me she'd been having a strange dream, about a murder. Well, that got me listening, I can tell you. I figured this woman must've had something to do with

it, and now it was on her conscience, so I looked her over more closely. Middle-aged, unnaturally thin, unnaturally pale as well; long and straight gray hair. She was dressed pretty shabbily, jeans and boots, flannel shirt, like she worked on a farm or something. She went on about the dream, said she knew where the body was. Well, long and short of it is, she convinced me to go with her and to bring along a couple of lab guys and shovels. We went up in the hills around Fulsom Park, on the riverside, you know? The woods over there, and she took us right to a spot, and I mean right to it. She'd been there before. It wasn't some dream, I was sure."

"The guys started digging in with their shovels and sure enough we came across some bones, so they started digging with their hands, with more care. Pretty soon we had the thing pretty much uncovered. Body'd been in there a while, long enough those bones were picked pretty clean. The woman all this time was just standing there alongside me, not showing any emotion in particular. I asked her if she knew who the body had been. She shook her head, but I didn't believe her. I kept asking her. I got pretty harsh, started telling her I thought she had done the murder, I was going to bring her in, arrest her, lock her up until she talked, that kind of thing. Finally she gave me a look and said, in almost a whisper,

I couldn't have done it. It was me they killed. That body is me.

I was planning on busting her anyway, freaky as all this was I wasn't satisfied, and besides it made no sense. I figured I'd better check with Mole! So here I am."

She laughed, and I wondered if this didn't seem like *deja vu* to her. It did to me. I knew it had happened before, but not exactly like this. Last time she had taken me to see the body. I had been there. In my own bones I knew about those. But something else she had said was bothering me.

“You said you figured out who she was?”

“Yeah”, Cameroon replied, “After I lost her. Did I tell you that? We went back to the car and she somehow got away from me. Must have slipped into the trees. I looked around for a bit, but that park's pretty huge, and anyone wanting to get lost in there, well, it would take more than just me to track them down. I had tapped her DNA in any case so I figured I'd just put her in the system and see if anyone turned up. They did. It was a female who went by the name of Racine. You remember Racine, don't you, Mole?”

Of course I remembered. And I think I had a clue how she vanished, but that wasn't the time or the place to bring it up. I just nodded my head and said something about how you see something new every day.

Sixteen

I had a queasy feeling in my stomach when I suggested to Captain Cameroon that she might want to bring in Curly and Rags for questioning. History was repeating itself, or it wasn't really repeating itself, it was simply happening in a different order, and maybe the sequence of events was not important, only the ends. And maybe those weren't important either. She wanted to know why I suspected those two, and all I could tell her was that they, along with Racine, were all known associates of Dennis Hobbs, and I just had a hunch about it. I wasn't famous for my hunches, but all cops wind up playing them sooner or later.

She let me sit in on the questioning. It was pay dirt, as I knew it would be. Curly spilled his guts right away, without even prompting. Rags said very little, and what he did say, he said in a whisper. It was clear he was spooked. The whole thing had rattled him. According to Curly, it was all set up by Arab Jones. Why was I not surprised? He told them they could kill her with impunity, and not only wouldn't she actually die, but she'd even be there to witness her own murder. Rags already believed her to be dead. He swore he'd seen her ghost murder a friend of his out in the woods somewhere. Killing her would be impossible, since she was already dead, but it would also not be a crime, for the same reason.

Curly was always good for an adventure. Usually Rags would try and shield him, keep him away from the really bad things, but this time there was no holding him back. Curly just had to see for himself. Kill her and she won't be dead? What kind of a trick was that? And it was okay with her? Jones said it was. Racine wasn't so sure. She made a bit of a fuss, wasn't so anxious to go along with the plan, no matter how many reassurances she got. So they

tied her up. That was no mean feat by itself. Everyone knows how dangerous that woman is. Or was. Or is and was both. It took all their strength, including Jones', to subdue her. Oh yes, he was in on it, and Krispy Talbot was there too, although he wasn't much help. Curly was happy to implicate anyone who even knew it was happening. He named a whole bunch of names.

He said they took her up into the hills beside the park. Everything was Jones' idea, the time, the place, the method of execution. Even the gun was his. Small caliber, silver bullet job. He made Rags do the killing, though. First he wanted Curly to do it, but Curly was too freaked out. It was all he could do to hold the victim down. Rags was shouting, so where is she? Where's the other one? You said she'd be here twice, or something like that. He wasn't very clear on the concept.

"She'll be here", Jones promised. He had that smug, self-satisfied look on his face like he always does, according to Curly. Rags nodded in agreement with that.

"I hate that Jones", Rags muttered. "Son of a bitch."

"Aw, he's okay", said Curly. "He's got his good side too, like anyone."

Not like anyone, though, Jones choreographed the murder of Racine. While she was kneeling in the mud, bound and gagged, hands tied behind her back, he kept talking to her, calmly, in a low voice, telling her it was all for the best, it would be good for her, she wouldn't feel a thing, he said, and she'd be a better person afterwards. It all sounded like nonsense to Curly. Crazy nonsense at that. Rags was ordered to pull the trigger at the count of three. Jones counted.

One.

Two.

Three.

Rags fired the shot and at the same time he saw Jones do something, he didn't know what, exactly, but he touched something, he moved his hand, and the moment Racine's body collapsed onto the hill, another Racine appeared, directly behind them, and she was screaming.

That was it for Rags. He took off running down the hill as fast as he could, stumbling and tumbling, gathering a whole collection of bumps and bruises but he didn't care. He was out of there. Curly just stood up and laughed his ass off. Jones wasn't messing around. He didn't lie. There she was, dead, and there she was, alive, and watching her own death. Jones smiled his best winning smile. He looked back at the new Racine and said,

“See? Just like I promised.”

Racine said nothing. Tears filled her eyes as her scream died in her throat.

“What happened then?” Captain Cameroon asked Curly, but he just shook his head.

“She took off too, like my brother did, only into the woods instead of away from them. Haven't seen her since.”

“What did she look like?” I asked him. “Was she the same as the one you killed? Was she different? Older? What?”

“Exactly the same”, Curly said. “No different. It was like she got cloned on the spot.”

“You're facing life in prison”, Cameroon told him, and Curly just laughed again.

“Jones said you'd say that”, he winked at her. “He also said he'd get us out, and there was no way on this Earth that you could ever stop him. That's exactly what he said.”

Seventeen

Why was I not surprised to get a phone call from Arab "Cricket" Jones? He was after something, I was sure, but I didn't know what it was, what he wanted from me. What he said he wanted was for me to watch him on the Kerd Palliver show that evening. He'd be on right after the famous supermodel, Elle Bee. I had never heard of Kerd Palliver, which Jones could hardly believe. Hey, I'm an old man and I don't really give a crap about who's who and what's what in the world of contemporary somebodies. They all just come and go as far as I'm concerned. If I even tried to keep track of them, I'm sure they would all just blend into one in any case.

So I followed Jones' instructions anyway. Found the segment, watched the bit with the girl. She blended, as I expected. Could have been any showgirl any time. Hair, smile, approvable bits and pieces, and nothing at all to say. Palliver himself was some kind of hairdo and voice apparatus. Had a distinctive style, which I figured was what he was famous for. Had a way of squirming in his seat as if he was about the collapse with sheer delight at any moment. Big teeth, happy eyes, loudness. In between the guests there were lots of commercials for IntelliWig, the mood-altering hairpiece, and the Latest in Subatomic Accessories. I had already clued in to the fact that the War on Stuff already consisted of different stuff, which was not proof I was in a different universe, only proof that a day or two had passed since the last time I checked on the list.

Jones was introduced as a gentleman, a scholar, and a prophet. He had a lot to say. Palliver would get in half a question, and Jones would jump right in, take over, and talk for several minutes.

I kind of already knew what he was going to say. It went something like this.

“I want to tell you a riddle about a butterfly”, he said. “They say that when a butterfly flaps its wings in China, it might cause a hurricane in the Atlantic. I ask you, what happens when that selfsame butterfly fails to flap its wings? What happens if that butterfly is squashed?”

Here he leaned over and pulled out a small board from under his chair. The board had a large yellow and black monarch butterfly pinned to it.

“This here butterfly”, he continued, “will flap no more, and guess what? It makes no difference. It didn't matter when it was alive and flapping, and it doesn't matter now that it's not. You see, not every butterfly counts. You might say it's the rare butterfly, the extremely rare one, that makes any difference whatsoever. It might even be so rare as not to exist at all.”

“And it's not just butterflies”, he went on. “We're all in the same boat. You, me, my friend Inspector Mole, whom I hope is watching right now. Are you watching, Inspector? Because you know what I'm talking about. All of those old cold cases of yours, people who died and were never missed? A cave man with a bullet in his skull? A killer who saw herself killed? A rich man who lost his temper once too often, and paid for it in blood? Nobody cared about them then, and nobody cares about them now. They are all mere butterflies no longer flapping their wings. Did they change the world? No, not when they lived, and not when they died.”

“What in this world is not disposable? Who is not? Nothing and no one, I tell you. Nothing and no one. Like my little cigarette lighter here, fashioned to produce a certain number of small flames and then no more. On to the rubbish heap with the thing. Fill up the oceans, fill up the mountains, with all the crap we

throw away, and all of us as well. There's no limit to the waste of creation! God in his infinite wisdom has created an infinity of trash. What's one more butterfly more or less, eh?"

And with that, he pulled out his little shiny gun and shot poor Palliver dead. Then he clicked the lighter and he disappeared, right off the set. Palliver fell off his chair for real this time. The audience gasped. Quickly the show turned to commercial and when it returned, a pale, shaking producer announced that this was no trick, as far as he knew. Jones had murdered the host, and somehow self-destructed without leaving a trace.

But I had seen enough, and I thought I knew, finally, what he was up to. He was insane, that was clear, but insane like a cat gone crazy from the joy of toying with mice, and I was one of those. I knew I hadn't seen or heard the last of him. He had to be stopped, and I had two choices. I could either go after him, or I could wait for him where I was. Either way, I would have to be prepared for our next encounter. Everything would depend on it.

Eighteen

The more I thought about the matter, the more confused I became, because it occurred to me that stopping the one Arab Jones I knew would never be enough. If what he kept saying was true, there were bound to be an endless number of nearly identical Joneses, each doing more or less the same thing in their various locations. But that was only "if" he was telling the truth. If he wasn't, if the whole thing was a big lie, some kind of sham, then where did he get to every time he disappeared, and how did he pull it off? I've never been much of a fan of magic. I'm the perfect mark, because I never understand it, never see the sleight of hand, which was one reason why I was already at the point of saying 'forget the whole thing' and just going to bed. Maybe it would make more sense in the morning.

I knew I wouldn't, and I knew it wouldn't, either. I already hadn't slept in a couple of days and I wasn't feeling the least bit weary. I warmed up some honey water with lemon and sat nursing it while I sat on the top step in the front of my house. I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe I thought Jones would show up again. Maybe I thought a parade of ghosts or zombies would go streaming past my doorway. What I didn't expect was of course what actually happened. A bright red sporty car pulled around the corner, raced up my street, and screeched to a halt right in front of me. The driver and the passenger jumped out at exactly the same moment, and came rushing over. It was dark enough out that night, but not so dark that I could see that these two men were practically identical.

They were tall and thin, dressed very nicely in white suits and peach-colored ties. They wore brightly polished black shoes and each one carried a thin black briefcase. They had the same brisk,

professional stride and when they stopped, they stood stiffly erect, lips pursed slightly and eyes wide open. The one on my left spoke first.

“Good evening, Inspector. I trust we are not disturbing you.”

“In other words”, said the one on my right, “We believe you are not presently being disturbed.”

“Not at all”, I replied, and tried to appear friendly and calm, when in fact I was feeling suspicious and alert.

“The name is Melvin Eldon”, said the first one.

“Eldon Melvin”, volunteered the other.

“We're certain you know why we're here”, said the first.

“In other words”, added the second, “We are sure that you are aware of the reason for this visit.”

“I have no idea”, I told them both.

“You are in violation”, said the first. “You are not where you are supposed to be, and you know it.”

“In other words”, the other one continued, “You are what we call a 'claim jumper'. You have inserted yourself into the presence of your Other.”

“This”, picked up the first, “Is in direct contradistinction of multi-galactical rule number eight point seven point nine point three point six.”

“Point seven”, correct the other.

“Quite”, agreed the first. “My mistake.”

“Not a problem”, said Eldon Melvin.

“I don't know of any Other”, I said. “I'm simply me. Myself. And I.”

I thought I was being funny. My inquisitors were not amused.

“One cannot tell from the inside, obviously”, said the one on the right, impatiently.

“Just as one needs a mirror in order to see one's own face, so one needs the proper tool to view the Other within”, said the second.

He reached into his briefcase and pulled out what looked like a notebook sized tablet, and stretching it up towards me, peeled back a cover, and told me to look directly at the glass. I did, and I saw nothing. Or rather, I saw only myself, more nearly a shadow of my features, scarcely reflected in the darkness.

“There, you see? Your Other.”

“No, I don't see”, I told him. “I see only one image, and that one hardly at all.”

“It is the Other”, snapped the second. “Believe us. We know these things.”

“I don't even know who you are”, I replied.

“We have given you our names”, said the first. “Here is our card.”

He pulled back the tablet and with his other hand offered me a business card, on which was written their names, and a familiar address downtown. It was the same building where you go to renew your identification papers periodically.

“You are not where you belong”, said Melvin Eldon.

“In other words”, said Eldon Melvin, “You shouldn't be here. You should be there.”

“And where is there?” I wanted to know.

“Where you were. Where you came from. To whence you must return.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” I snorted. “Click my heels together three times and say the magic words?”

“Use your lighter”, said the first.

“Yes, we know all about it”, said the other. “Sadly, we also know it's been pre-set. You may never return to your own place, and yet you must try, or forfeit one of your souls.”

“One of my what?”

“Souls”, said the first. “What you have seen in the Spitter was the soul of your Other.”

“Spitter?”

“S-P-I-D-T-R”, explained the second. “Spiritual inter-dimensional tracker. Quite a device, I must say.”

“Invented by our friend in San Francisco”, continued the first. “It's how we know.”

“And it is our job to know”, added the other.

“Then you know about Jones”, I said.

“Of course”, said the first. “But that is none of your concern, any more than is his companion, Racine.”

“His companion? But he had her killed.”

“One of her, yes, we know. But again, this is not your business. We understand why you think it is. After all, we are also law enforcement professionals.”

“But on a different level”, added his partner.

“We give you this choice”, said the first. “You have precisely twenty-four hours. Try and get home, and if you succeed, then all is well and good. Otherwise you will forfeit a soul.”

“In other words”, said the second, “One of you will be erased. The other, of course, will go on as usual.”

“No harm done, really”, said the first.

“Why twenty-four hours?” I wanted to know.

“Because of your friend Jones”, said the first. “Tomorrow at this time, those little gadgets he stole will be added to Everywhere's Stuff list. They are easy to find. We know exactly where all of them are. Our friend is particular about his inventions.”

“In other words”, said the second, “The gadgets will not only self-destruct at that time, but their possessor's soul will also be taken along with them.”

“What if I give it to you now?”

“I wouldn't”, said the first. “You might want to give your self at least a chance.”

“In other words”, added the second, “If you give it to us now, we will be required to collect your spirit now as well.”

“Keep it”, advised the former. “Who knows? You might even get lucky.”

“But wait a minute, hold on a minute”, I said. “How do I know that I'm not, as you say, where I'm supposed to be. Everything seems the same to me. I don't think I even believe in this parallel universes gag.”

The two looked at each other for a moment, then turned back to me.

“We're not permitted to tell you much”, said the first.

“In other words, we can only tell you a little,” added the other.

“For one thing”, said the former, “Where you came from, presidential elections happen as a matter of course. They occur on a rather regular schedule.”

“In other words”, added the latter, “they happen every four years.”

“And there are no identity roundups”, continued the first.

“Then what do the generals do?” I asked, incredulous.

“They don't interfere”, said the first. “And neither will you, if you take our advice.”

And with that, they spun on their heels, strode back to their car, piled aboard and drove off as if they were already late for their next appointment. What a job, I thought to myself, collecting souls in violation! And that bit about elections. Seriously? That didn't seem normal at all, but I couldn't tell which one of me was surprised, and which one of me could no longer be surprised by anything.

Nineteen

I think I must have gotten a little sleep because I was woken up early the next morning by my assistant, Kelley, who'd come to check on me. Kelley was worried because there was a crowd of reporters already gathered outside of HQ clamoring to talk to me because of what had happened on the Kerd Palliver show. Kelley didn't want them besieging me at home, so we went in together in the squad car. There were a bunch of them all right, maybe twenty or thirty huddled around the entrance. I recognized a few of the loudest - Rae Beth Smirkins, from Channel Ten, Benny Schnizzle from Twenty Two, and the notorious Jan Etor from the National Set. I thought about sneaking in the back way, but it wasn't going to happen. They had spotted me and rushed the car. I had to get out and face it. They were shouting all at once and I had to wave my hands around to get their attention, calm them down, promising to answer each and every one of their questions.

“What can you tell us about the Palliver murder?”

“Where's Cricket Jones now?”

“ How did he get away?”

“What about the frigid caveman with the bullet in his skull?”

“What do you know about the sudden global extinction of butterflies?”

It was not my shiningest moment. I really couldn't tell them much about anything they wanted to know, and I wasn't going to tell them anything about what I didn't want them to know. Nobody seemed to have the slightest idea about what Jones was really up to. They all assumed there was a trap door or some other parlor

trick that explained his vanishing act. I wasn't going to raise an alarm about how this guy could apparently appear and disappear at will throughout unlimited parallel existences. That would scare the crap out of everyone!

I didn't know anything about the murder. I hadn't been assigned to the case, even though my name was explicitly linked to it thanks to Jones, and I could only assume that the regular schmoes had already botched the job in their customary fashion. Kelley had told me on the way that the bullet they took from Palliver matched the one that was taken from Reyn Tundra as well as that from the desiccated corpse of the former Racine. I already figured it would. Jones had a thing for that particular gun and those particular bullets. Most killers are superstitious, like professional athletes or anyone who wants something badly enough.

What caught my attention was the thing about the butterflies. When Schnizzle asked me that one, I turned the tables and asked him instead. What did HE know about it? It was the first I had heard. He told me, and the others confirmed his version, that out of the blue that very morning had come reports from around the world that butterflies were dropping like, well, like flies, as the saying goes. No one knew why, but it seemed to be happening everywhere. I of course suspected Jones, but how did it happen? Nobody knew. Scientists were stumped. The creatures had all simply stopped breathing.

Rae Beth Smirkins wanted to get personal, as was her trademark. How did I feel about being singled out by Jones for public mockery on the airwaves? How was my family handling it? Was there anything I wanted to express to the citizenry at large? Yes, I told her. It's not about me. Jones is a criminal, a fugitive on the run, and I was certain the authorities would catch him and justice would be served. Of course, I didn't really believe that. It seemed to me there was no stopping him now. He'd continue to rip

through the fabric of the space-time continuum, tearing holes in it willy-nilly, for whatever reason he was doing so. I didn't understand him, not at all, and that did not bode well for me. For once in my life I was the one being hunted. I was half expecting him to show up at any moment.

I got through the journalistic ritual. The reporters weren't satisfied but after I'd repeated my non-answers often enough they finally gave up and drifted off. Then I went into the building, where I faced another barrage of inquiries from my fellow officers. It went pretty much the same way. Nobody had a lead on Jones, of course. Everyone was expecting me to handle it. I even heard from the Chief, who almost never talked to me. He just stuck his head into the break room where I was hanging out and said,

“Mole? Get this all straightened out, will you? The generals are bugging me about it. Get it? Bugging me? You know, the butterflies and all?”

The Chief thought he was hilarious and wandered off, laughing loudly at his little joke. My peers all gave me knowing nods and winks, and my juniors gave me thumbs ups as they passed by. What a bunch of jerks. Even my assistant, Kelley, was not much use. Kelley made some excuse about paperwork and took off, leaving me all alone to, to do what? I realized they were all expecting me to DO something, like I could flip a switch and solve all the mysteries just like that. The truth was, I didn't even know where to begin. I was in way over my head.

Twenty

The big question I had to answer was, should I try and chase after Jones, or should I give it up. Really, it boiled down to that. If I went after him, that would mean using the lighter, hoping that the next pre-set would take me to where he was. I had good reason to think it would. I believed he had programmed it that way, in which case I would always be at a disadvantage. I would be going there blind, and he would be there waiting, just as he knew where I'd be the last time I did it.

And yet, I still didn't quite believe. After all, I had clicked the thing and it seemed like nothing had happened. I remained at my house, I didn't feel a thing, and after awhile Jones had showed up, but that might have happened anyway, even if I hadn't touched the device. The peach-tie twins assured me I had crossed over, but why should I believe them any more than Jones? That bit about presidential elections was confusing. I did remember those, of course. They still had them when I was a kid, but things were much more orderly now the generals were in charge. There was no more gridlock, no more stalemate, no more political posturing, no more puny half measures. Things got done, and if we had initially complained about losing our "freedoms", we were reminded often enough that freedom wasn't free, in fact it was damned expensive, and we were all saving a whole lot of money this way.

So, maybe Jones did have some kind of magic trick he used to apparently vanish, and maybe he was just another psychotic serial killer, in which case I should try and track him down the normal, police procedural way. Legwork. Interviews. All that stuff. I ought to be getting off my fat ass and doing my job, but I remained, rooted to the spot. I had in fact already decided I

would give it up. That's why I was even there at HQ and not at home, where the lighter was, where I would be tempted to click it, and keep on clicking it, as far as it went and until it ran out. I also had half a hope that by remaining in HQ I would be safe, not only from Jones, but from the repetitious twin officials as well. Where could be safer than national police headquarters downtown?

I couldn't stay in the break room. Too many people were coming by, giving me hangdog looks, reminding me that I hadn't solved everything yet. I went into my office and sagged down on the old maroon sofa in there. I kept the lights off and would have closed the door if they hadn't taken all the doors away for reasons of security. I slouched in attempt to be invisible but of course it didn't work. I was just too big and fat to hide. I stayed there all day, barely moving. Once or twice I got up and went back to the break room, grabbed some coffee and grub, and grunted my way through any attempts at conversation. By nightfall I was exhausted from doing so little. I kept an eye on the clock. That twenty-four hour deadline was approaching.

By "giving up" I knew I was tempting the fates. I was going to make those twins prove their assertions to me. If I was going to forfeit one of my souls, well, they'd damn well have to get to me first, if that's how it even worked. I have to admit, the whole idea was beyond my ability to grasp and I was content to leave it that way. When you can't even begin to think about something, it's better just to leave it alone. By my reckoning, I didn't have much time left when my visitors arrived.

I say it like that, pretty casually, "when my visitors arrived". Truth is, they scared the heck out of me. One moment I'm sitting there on my couch, staring out the window at the city lights below, and the next I hear a voice, two voices, and turn to see Racine and Arab "Cricket" Jones standing right in front of me.

“Evening, Inspector”, said Jones.

“Hi”, added Racine, with a little wave of her left hand. Her right hand was on the hilt of the sword she had buckled to her belt. Racine looked the same as I remembered her from long ago. I don't know how she could be that young. She was dressed the same, too, in her spiky black boots, denim mini-skirt and cobweb stockings, flannel shirt unbuttoned halfway down. Her cold black eyes were shining, even in the darkness of my office.

Jones was the Jones I'd seen on TV the day before - middle-aged, cocky, smirking, pointing that little silver pistol at me.

“You really like that gun”, I pointed out. “It's kind of like your trademark, isn't it? So predictable.”

“Predictable?” Jones practically screeched.

“Predictable?” he repeated, his lips curling into a smile.

“That's the word”, I remarked.

“What's with the girl?” I asked him. “What about your supermodel wife and your boy with the stupid science name?”

“Oh, I'm not greedy”, he chuckled. “I still get them in plenty of alternate realities.”

“Hey”, Racine pouted.

“I'm just saying how it is”, Jones told her.

“I don't want to hear it”, she snapped, and I thought I saw her hand grip the sword more tightly. Jones was going to have to watch his step with her. I didn't know much about Racine, but something told me she had a short fuse.

“So now it's your turn”, Jones said, turning back to me.

“So what”, I said, yawning, or pretending to yawn, really. Actually I was pretty nervous. I wasn't sure what to do except maybe stall for time and hope the twins showed up.

“So what?” Jones said, and began to pace around the room.

“What is up with you?” he asked. “One day you're a slug and the next day you're a sage. So what? Does mortality mean nothing to you now?”

“Yup”, I nodded. “Seems to me, now that you mention it, if what you keep saying is true, there are already enough of me to go around. What's one Stanley Mole more or less. And anyway, I'm an old man. I know my time is short, so if it's a little shorter, I can live with that.”

“Ha!” Racine shouted, I think in appreciation of my attempt at humor.

“What happens here, happens”, Jones said.

“Happens here”, I corrected him. “Didn't you tell me that the farther you cross, the less similar it becomes? The disparity grows over distance, is that how you put it?”

“Something like that”, he nodded. “So you're saying you're content if some of you survive.”

“Only one would be fine”, I replied. “Like you said, I'm not greedy.”

“Besides”, I added with my eye on the clock, “I don't even believe you. I think it's a joke. You've just got some trick up your sleeve.”

“Oh it's all true”, he snapped. “Look at her! How do you explain that?”

“Time travel, maybe?” I suggested.

“There's no such thing”, he snorted. “Don't be silly.”

“Then prove it”, I said. “Click yourself somewhere right now. I want to see it in person.”

“You just want me out of here”, he chided me. “You think you can tempt me to go somewhere else, while you run away. It won't

work. I promise. Even if I did, and you did, I'd still find you. You know it. So there. I hope you're ready. It is time for you to die.”

“Not quite”, came a voice from the doorway, and not a second too soon! I was relieved to find out that when they said twenty-four hours they really meant it, right on the dot.

Jones spun to see the two white-suited gentlemen standing there.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “Get out, or I'll shoot you too.”

“No you won't”, said the one on the left.

“In other words”, said the other one, “you can't.”

“Oh yeah?” Jones said, and he squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

“We've frozen your piece”, said the first.

“Laws of physics”, said the other. “You'd appreciate it more in other circumstances.”

Jones looked puzzled, then stuck the gun into his pocket, and held up the lighter with his other hand. He challenged them.

“Laws of physics, eh? I'll show you a little thing about that!”

He clicked the lighter, but nothing happened. No flame, no vanishing act, nothing.

“What?” he yelled, and tried it again, and again, and again, until he finally realized it wasn't going to work, and lowered his arm and stared at the two.

“What's happening?” he demanded to know.

“We have a friend in San Francisco”, said the one on the right, “He has adjusted the spin of the subatomic flux.”

“In other words”, said the other, “It's those pesky laws of physics again.”

“Just when you think you have them down,” said the first.

“They go poof!” added his companion.

“Don't be ridiculous!” Jones shouted. “I'm a physicist myself! What you're saying is absurd!”

“Doesn't seem any more ridiculous than anything else around here”, I muttered.

“You shut up”, Jones told me, and then to them said, “Who are you two, anyway?”

“Think of us as collectors”, said the one on the left.

“In other words”, said the other, “we've come to collect.”

“Your souls”, said the first.

“Our what?” asked Racine.

“Our souls?” asked Jones.

“If you say so”, I contributed. The two had sauntered into the room by this time, and were standing directly in front of the other pair. I remained on the couch. I was comfortable. Ever since the twins had shown up, I had a feeling that everything was going to be all right. I was ready to forfeit my soul, or even souls, as many as I had, or as many as they wanted, just to be done with this whole damn business. I was sick of this Jones fellow, his threats and his taunts. I'd had enough of his miracle nonsense. All I wanted was to end it.

“Don't worry”, said one of the twins. “It won't hurt a bit.”

“In other words”, said the other. “You won't feel a thing.”

So saying, he brought a different device out of his pocket. It was small, flat, gray and round, like a perfect skipping stone. He rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger for just a few seconds.

“There we go”, he declared. “All done.”

“In other words”, said the other. “Goodbye.”

The two turned and walked right out of the room. They were right. I hadn't felt a thing. The same couldn't be said for Jones or Racine, who both started howling like wolves and doubling up in pain. My assistant, Kelley, heard the noise and came running, along with a couple of beat cops. They were stunned to find Jones and Racine, the two most wanted killers in town, collapsed on the floor of my office, screaming. They called in more cops, and dragged the two criminals off to the cells.

As for me, I still hadn't budged off my sofa.

Epilogue

Nothing much came my way after that, nothing very interesting at least. I was pretty much put out to pasture after the toddler assassin finally struck. The General wasn't happy about that, not happy at all. I was lucky he let me live, tell the truth. Most of the folks on his shit list did not. I did have some hassles with my identification renewals, and then they took away my office. I had to hang out in the break room full time. Finally, they just told me to leave, go on home, tell my stories to this little black box. I don't trust the damned thing. Something tells me it was made by that "friend" in you know where.

But I can't complain. I even lost a little weight, which is something I needed to do. Maybe it was losing that soul. Maybe that was a few pounds in itself. I don't miss the thing, can't even tell that it's gone. I just sit out here on my porch, watching the river and the boats drifting by. Sometimes you can hear a fish jump, and sometimes a frog. One thing you don't see anymore, though, are butterflies. I guess Jones got his way about that. Hardly seems worth all the trouble.