

1 THE TIME RIPPERS

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"Time is an objective phenomenon."-Tom Servo

"Yeah,well,history is gonna change."-Marty McFly

"I believe that human time travel could happen in this century."-
Ronald Mallett Theoretical Physicist

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Howard Batemen woke on the last day of his life with the sun, he didn't know this was his last day but knew he didn't have very many left. His lungs and part of his liver were riddled with cancerous tumors the size of golf balls. He sat up in bed next to a tank of oxygen with clear tubes attached to it. He once had a full white beard and long silvery hair, but the chemo therapy had turned his hair into a gray straw and his beard was like a patch of stunted grass, he was lanky standing over six feet tall, but the cancer made him hunch over in pain giving him the appearance of shortness.

He quit smoking almost ten years ago, but the damage had already been done. He had almost given it up completely, until that summer of 1947. They didn't know it could kill you then but Howdy, as he is called by friends and family, would wonder why they made him feel sick sometimes when he smoked one too many.

He pushed back the few strands of hair he still had out of his long face and slowly got out of bed wheeling his tank behind him. He looked out the window and thought back to that night in June. It was a sight he never forgot, like the time Lake Erie caught fire when he was a boy, it was an awesome but terrible thing to see. It happened as quick as a bolt of lightning, a green bolt of lightning that put blue holes the size of manhole covers all over the area surrounding his tiny house.

He turned back to his nightstand where his manuscript laid, he had

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spent the last six months writing things down. Not everything though, the military he was sure kept an eye on him, when he would use the phone he would hear faint clicks and pops. The occasional UFO buff would come asking to look around the area believed to be part of the Roswell crash sight, they became frequent after the late seventies when the story resurfaced after the Marcel interview. Major Jesse Marcel of the Roswell Army Airfield was an alleged witness to the recovery.

Howdy had never met Major Marcel, but he did meet a strange man not long after the crash. He was dressed like a college professor about to give a lecture, dressed in a corduroy jacket with suede elbow patches, carrying a pipe he never lit up. He arrived a few days after the original story hit the wires. He looked to be about fifty with hair that was gray with strands of white and combed to the side, his eyes were like icebergs, that said he wouldn't put up with bullshit.

"I understand you own this land." he said through thin lips that frowned as if he were deep in thought.

"Yes, who might you be." Howdy asked with a friendly tone. But he didn't answer, beside him stood a soldier with Sargent stripes on his sleeve holding a large machine gun at chest level.

"Hey sarge," he said with a smile.

He silently glared at Howdy, as the pipe carrying man looked around with a purpose. He spoke with quick sharp words that left Howdy with goosebumps despite the weather.

"Are you chilly, Mr Batemen?" said the man with the pipe who wasn't even looking at him.

"Your army buddy there is making me a little nervous with his toy, there's no need for it."

The man faced Howdy and wiggled the pipe, the Sargent lowered his rifle and headed for the black sedan they drove in.

"Did you serve, Mr Batemen?" he asked after five minutes of chilly silence.

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"No, I was born with the flattest feet in Pennsylvania." he said lifting up a bare foot with a sheepish grin.

"I know," he said which brought more goose bumps to his arms. "I don't like to be lied to."

Hearing the man speak the way he did made Howdy scared for his life.

"Yes sir." he said hoping he sounded calm but his stomach was in knots. He looked around once more with searching eyes, another drawn out period of silence followed.

"Is there anything you would like to share with me, Mr. Batemen?" he said tapping his pipe softly on his blazer.

Howdy wasn't sure if he was being tricked or not, he knew things most people knew about him things that could hardly be called a secret. The man may have been doing this all week to people, hoping for a nervous set of lips that saw something, or maybe he knew what he was hiding and was just messing with his head. So he answered hoping it wasn't the latter of the two.

"No, sir. No aliens here." he said trying to sound good natured.

He looked quickly at Howdy, eying him the way a cat eyes a mouse. In the end all he did was say good afternoon and headed back to the car where the Sargent stood and opened the door for him without saluting.

Sure they got the magic tin foil and the beam with funny symbols, but Bob said they were useless pieces of junk that were of materials no different than things found on Earth. The cubes though, they were the treasure. He hid them for the first few years wrapped in an old blanket behind the preserves he kept in the cool dark basement, now they sat in a jewelry box he had given to his mother for a birthday present, in a dresser drawer.

When she died after a bout with double pneumonia in the 1934, he and his younger brother Sam received a few thousand dollars selling the

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house and farm they lived in. Eager for a change of scenery, they bought an old pick up and took turns driving two thirds of the way across America from Erie, PA, until they got to the state of New Mexico.

"Why here?" Sam asked him.

He looked at the sign welcoming them to the state of New Mexico and said: " I dunno, I like something new." he said with a laugh.

Sam, several years his junior, trusted him and figured he was right. They settled in the town of Roswell and they had a good life their, Sam even found a woman he was head over heels about and eventually married her after serving in the Army during the second World War. Howdy had been with a few women but had never taken the big plunge, as Sam called it, he was content with his little piece of land, raising chickens and selling their eggs as he had done in Erie for years. Sam took college courses with the GI bill and became an accountant.

But if anyone asked Sam who was the smarter of the two, he would have said Howdy. He was good with cars and machines, neighbors would go to him with their car or truck or appliance when they were acting up. He could fix nearly any problem with his vast array of tools ,anything he couldn't was usually beyond repair. The cry of a rooster from the neighboring farm brought Howdy out of his memory. He walked over to the nightstand and paged through the manuscript, there was still a lot he had to write down yet.

He was still waiting on Bob though, the ships only passenger, who promised Howdy he would be in contact no matter where he ended up. He hadn't spoken to Bob in a few years but hadn't seen him since the mid seventies. All

Howdy had was the cubes, Bob would send messages to the cubes with Morse code which blinked from the plastic like material that covered it like a bow wrapped around a present. In early 1992, he received a message which

stated: Internet, get PC will contact you through electronic mail.

"What the frig is electronic mail?" he said after writing out the message.

Sam's daughter Patty Ann, who resided in New Mexico, had brought along

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her son Quake. He was an odd boy who would talk sometimes using strange words and phrases, the doctors told his mother he was Autistic, but he was smarter than most kids his age.

"Hey Patty," he asked her during her customary visits that had become more frequent when Sam, her father, died. It was about a month after his last message from Bob. " do you know what electronic mail is?"

Before she could answer, Quake was staring at the wall as if hypnotized but came running into the kitchen when he heard the question.

"It's short for E-mail." he said happily.

He raised his eyebrows, he was only thirteen, but looked younger with a thin pair of glasses covering his cherub like face.

"Really?" Howdy asked surprised by the boy's knowledge.

"Yuppers!" he said with a smile that was crooked but sweet. His mother put an arm around the young boy, his doctors also said he was emotionally stunted but she loved him just the same as her sister, Sue Ellen loved her son Abe.

"You can trust him, Uncle Howdy, he got rid of a computer sickness in my card drive."

"Agwa, mom it was a computer virus in a hard drive." he said rolling his eyes.

Howdy chuckled and said: "Well I've been thinking about getting a computer, do you think you could help me set it up, Quake."

"Gakwa."

"Quake, say the right word." his mother said tenderly.

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"Yes, I can do it Uncle Howdy."

And he did too, Howdy paid a few hundred dollars at a Radio Shack with money from Social Security and within two hours Quake was surfing the Internet and giving Howdy a quick overview of how to use America On line and the numerous anti-virus programs For the last seventeen years it had been a one sided conversation of Morse code that he could only receive, mostly telling Howdy where he was and if he had found any cubes, which he had yet to do. He would find him in a chat room titled illegal aliens singles, a joke Howdy was sure. They would chat usually for an hour once every two weeks, but in 1998 he stopped hearing from Bob.

That was four years ago, he gave up going to the chat room two years ago. It wasn't long after that he was diagnosed with lung cancer, though they told him he had at the outside six months to live, he held on like a captain aboard a sinking ship not ready to give her up yet. He crept slowly downstairs with his oxygen tank encased in a whited plastic tube, that to him made it look like the worlds largest cigarette.

He was panting heavily as he sat down in front of his PC, as Quake called it, to check his e-mail, but there was nothing from Bob. On the desktop was a picture of Quake and his cousin Abe arms about each others shoulders wearing their graduation gowns, Quake with the same crooked smile, and Abe with a grin that radiated confidence. He had assumed a boy with such brains would have lots of friends. But he had the hardest time getting along with the other kids, so his parents paid to send him to a Catholic school.

The only friend he had was his cousin Abe, they were about the same age but rarely saw each other since Sue Ellen, Patty's sister moved to Porter a small town outside of Philadelphia before Abe was born. When the private school was not faring any better for Quake, Patty and her husband moved to Porter when he started high school.

"I think it's what would be best," Patty told Uncle Howdy one night in 1996. "Quake always adored Abe. From what I understand Abe's had a few bullying problems as well."

"I think you should, Patty. He needs friends." Howdy said knowing he might not see them as much anymore, but hopeful it would help Quake.

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When he found out he was dying, he went to Sam's lawyer, who took care of his brothers estate when he passed on, and asked to have a will made up. In it he gave everything to his nephews, the house, the land and most importantly his mothers jewelry box and his tools that helped Bob make the adapter for the cubes.

He felt bad when he did it, knowing it might take up their entire lives like it did his. He hoped it was the right thing to do, he had done what he could with the time he had but it still wasn't enough. He felt deep regret over the isolation he put himself through too keep this secret. Had I ever told them how important friends were? He asked himself.

"No, I didn't." he said in a raspy voice.

He told them trust was a hard thing to come by, that was something he told them both time and time again. It was hardly sound advice, he thought looking back at all the years gone by, with no wife or children or close friends to speak of, Sam would sometimes scold him for his distance that had come from Howdy after his visit from the man with the icy stare. Sam didn't know what he found, but still tried to keep close to him and asked his daughters to do the same before he died. They were always close growing up and was dumb founded by Howdy's attempts to keep a distance between himself and his family.

He felt his heart wretch at the memories of years gone by keeping his family away from him. When Sam died of a heart attack Patty Anne started visiting every week even if Howdy said he was to busy.

"Well, I'll just sit here until you have the time then." she said sitting down and taking out a thick book to read while waiting.

He relented, and was glad for it in the end, but that was years ago when he still had contact with Bob and hadn't found out about his cancer. Now Bob was stuck somewhere, he was dying and no one else knew about the cubes, not in this universe at least. He looked at the picture of his nephews again, hoping they would lead fuller lives but not believing they would. He wanted a cigarette, he still longed for them when he was nervous or upset, he felt both now.

He got up hurriedly and went back to the stairs leading up to his

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bedroom, anxious to write more down thinking of all the things that he hadn't included, things he should have added besides the technical jargon. In his haste he tripped over the clear tubes that gave him oxygen and fell with a bone cracking thud. The tube pulled out and a faint hiss emanated from the tank like a snake, he let out a cry of pain that was more of a breathless whimper.

His lungs felt like a balloon that wouldn't inflate no matter how hard you blew, he could taste blood in his mouth it was a coppery, unpleasant taste. He choked for a few seconds as he tried to take air in, his face as red as the morning sun began to turn blue as he looked up at his desktop where AM and Quake were pictured. His last thoughts were of them, hoping they would find friends that would help them during the trying times that were ahead.

Date: January 11, 2010 Universe 1

Doug "Dig" Robins sat in a recliner that was new twenty years ago. A heavy glass ashtray filled with cigarettes sat lopsided in the wears of the chairs' arm. He spent the last couple of days drinking, two cases of Coors, and a half bottle of Smirnoff, then spent the following two days working the liquor off not bothering to eat more than a few sticks of beef jerky he had purchased at the same store he bought the case of beer and vodka.

Eight hours at the Eco-frig factory making lining for refrigerator and freezer doors and coolers. Seven fifty an hour after 90 days probation. Then ten more hours doing the graveyard shift at the local UPS loading packages two or three nights a week and some weekend nights for fifty cents more, but this weekend he tended the bar at McCully's a local watering hole. After that he would be back at Eco-fridge or pumping gas at the Time Kill gas station on Independence avenue.

Work was work, he did not liked the jobs (McCully's was OK) but they paid. He kept his problems at home to himself, he was a private person by nature. Camille, his live in girlfriend, came out from the bedroom they shared, her reddish brown hair flying behind her as she made her way past him. She wore skin tight jeans and a sleeveless black blouse trimmed with black lace, a spring time blouse, but the weather tonight was springlike for January.

Her perfume, something sweet and flowery filled his nose, he turned his head as she passed him too use the small bathroom or powder room

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as she would often call it. He made an attempt to apologize again, but seeing him in the mirror she huffed and kicked the door shut with out turning around. He faced forward again, a vodka bottle sitting in between his legs, turning it with his fingers. He looks to the wall on his left were a large mirror framed in wood hangs slightly off center.

He stared at his reflection looking at the drunken slob that stared back at him, he ran his fingers through his shaggy blond hair that was greasy. Girls had loved his shade of hair.

"Strawberry blond" he said to his reflection.

He was six feet tall and once had an athletic build he earned through rigorous high school sports. The reflection tonight showed a man in wrinkled work shirt and chino's with a belt buckle that held in a large belly that had once been six pack abs that girls wanted to touch almost as much as his hair when he was younger.

Dig doubted a better body would appease Cammie tonight, a half mile from home the car they owned began to thump harshly somewhere in the the engine. When he turned on Cedar street, a puff of black smoke poured out from under the hood, forcing him to pull it over to the curb. He was still pissed when she got home, and when Cammie began grinding her teeth in anger saying it was his fault, he exploded by shouting a word in her ear that made her pale Irish face turn red.

He didn't know square one about cars, nor did Cammi, who needed the car more than he did, she was a hairs breath from being manger of a Citibank branch in downtown Philadelphia. Septa ran bus routes too and from Porter to the city, but it was an hour long ride on I-76 on the Expressway. By car even through rush hour traffic the ride was quicker.

It was hard to keep the venomous statements on his tongue from leaving his lips. They hadn't had sex for a while and it made him all the more aggravated. She made more money and worked less hours, he had to keep three or four jobs just to keep up his side of the rent.

The house they rented was not a shack but needed work, it was much better than the trailer he had grown up in. If Dig fixed up parts of the tiny one story home, money would be knocked off the rent. This, his second serious relationship was fairing no better than his last, there was just more alcohol and anger this time around. Jenn Babitz, a

girl from Philly, was the only other girl he had been serious with.

That relationship in anyone else's eyes was doomed to fail. Dig was clueless about certain things in life. He was not dumb, just lacked direction. The door to the little bathroom opened again, with lips shining a dull pink Cammi flicked off the light switch.

He felt her eyes on him, as he fiddled the cap on the bottle of vodka, twisting the bottle that sat between his thighs making the label swirl. She stood in front of him looking down at him on the chair, her eyes filled with fire. He looked up at her, a migraine was starting making his eyes blur.

"What are you going to do about the car?" she said in a furious tone.

Dig looked at her for a second before answering.

"And what would you have me do?" he asked

Her eyes rolled back in disgust.

"Fix the fuckin thing you dumb ass."

She called him worse things, this fight was so far tame by comparison to what usually occurred though no one had ever called the cops because of it, but Dig was afraid someone would eventually.

"Cam...hun..."

"Don't hun me you fuck!!! All the guys in the world I date the one who can't fix a fuckin car?!" she said it as if he were a mental defective.

The rage was seemingly there all the time now, he never struck her and never would, but would reprise with cutting remarks. He took a swig of the warm clear alcohol.

"Well I guess I can't count money as fast as you,"

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That was pushing it, he knew it, she always made a deal about how fast she could count money, Dig would say she was faster than a hooker paying her pimp, Dig laughed but Cami did not see the humor. He couldn't fix a car, figure out their electric bill which seemed to double and triple every couple of months inexplicably. The wood work needed fixing and the little area of ceiling above the stove was always dripping water even if it wasn't raining. But every time Dig tried to repair or work on anything, it always seemed to come out half ass-ed and worse than before.

Twice he tried to put together a home entertainment center, the kind you buy at Walmart and has extremely detailed instructions. The first time he tried it he was drunk, not fall down drunk, just tipsy, and punched a large hole in the wall when he turned a screw to tight and cracked the fiber board, the second time he tried he was sober, and he fared no better.

He stared at the instructions trying figure out what went where. All the little drawn screws and hinges and black bold arrows pointing at indiscernible holes. Staring at them made his head swirl and his eyes burn with frustration every time.

"Dig," she said making him forget about the entertainment stand for the moment.

She lost the haughtiness in her voice and slowly leaned forward letting her blouse hang a low. He could see the dark green brassiere under her blouse and the cluster of freckles that sat in her cleavage, the aroma of perfume filled his nose again, she teased him, constantly. Dig was very horny, she knew it too.

In a sultry sexy voice she leaned close to his ear and whispered, "you can think about me while you go fuck yourself," she said with an hate filled smile.

She was trying to antagonize, she knew what buttons to push. There were nights were he would be showering and he could hear her moaning with pleasure. He would enter their bedroom while she lay there nude an writhing in ecstasy while she fiddled with a little vibrating egg. Then she would open her eyes in shock telling him to get out.

Another night while he showered she was masturbating, it had to have

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been intense, he was sitting next to her on the bed. He barely caressed her nipple before she realized he was there and immediately smacked him across the face. She hadn't always been prudish. In the beginning of their relationship, the sex was downright pornographic.

After being hired by the job she now works about a year ago, she started to behave a bit snobbish, after her first promotion she became even more arrogant towards him. While the relationship was still semi-civilized, Dig thought back to the night he realized the relationship was headed for trouble. Her friends from work had a party last Christmas at a house in the better section of Porter that had a large deck and a heated pool with a jacuzzi, Dig hadn't drunk much, Cami though, was loose lips drunk that night. It was unseasonably warm night and Dig found himself on the deck in the spacious back yard, nursing a rum and Coke, looking up at the stars, mesmerized.

"You need to grow up, Dig," she said standing behind him hands on her hips "you look retarded staring up at the sky."

He looked and saw a few people with awkward smiles, pretending not to see or hear them. Needless to say he didn't talk to many people that night. A car horn honked outside, bringing Dig back from his thoughts about the past, Cami stood up and turned her head looking too the bay window in the living room.

Fixing her blouse, she continued too look at Dig waiting for his vulgar response, none came, he was too exhausted to fight, and his head felt like it was being pounded with a sledge hammer. She seemed to sag a bit at his silence, almost as if she had been in hope of an argument. Seeing he wouldn't be provoked, she grabbed her purse on the coffee table and flicking her red-brown locks with her hand off her shoulder to allow her purse strap to sit, she gave him a final glare and left.

After the door closed behind her Dig grabbed the ashtray and flung it side arm at the door where it shattered. With a savage growl he heaved himself of his chair and picked up the glass pieces and the butts scattered on the floor, cutting his fingers a few times but not caring. He went outside and put the broken glass and butts in a green Rubbermaid trash can, the Sunkist thermometer on the porch overhang claimed it was fifty eight degrees.

Dig feeling too jittery to sit around drinking and watching the

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Flyers on cable decided to try to start the car, hoping it would work buy the drunken assumption that it will work because it sat for awhile and that the fresh air would help his migraine.

"Christ," he said approaching the car.

He had left the driver side window down, it hadn't rained thank God for that at least. No worries about thieves, the car was made with standard tape deck, and Cami always took her I pod with her. He got into the car leaving the door open, and tried force the keys into the ignition before realizing they were upside down. After dropping the keys through his bloody digits, he finally got them into the ignition turning and waiting for that dreaded sound.

Click...Click...Click

Falling back into the seat, Dig pulled a cigarette out of his work shirt pocket and lit it, the first drag was harsh and good at the same time. Dig pulled the lever marked hood and climbed out of the car and walked in front of it, searching for the hood latch, hoping he doesn't cut his fingers more.

He lifted the hood and looked down into the cars insides, into total darkness. Smacking himself in the head with his palm for forgetting to grab a flashlight, not wanting to search the house for one, he settled for his Bic instead. The lighter cast a sick orange glow on the greasy engine, as he hoped the problem would announce itself to him.

A breeze picked up causing the flame to graze Dig's thumb and drop the lighter.

"Shit," he hissed

The lighter clicked and clanged its way into the recess of the cars innards. Great, he thought, putting his hands into the greasy darkness, he finds it immediately just with in grasp of his finger tips, but only manages to knock it down through to the ground. Dig got down on his hands and knees putting his hand under the car feeling around for the lighter, but finds a wet, mushy, hairy glob instead.

The smell of rotten meat hits him like a punch, he stands back up,

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with a cry of disgust, holding up his hand far away from him. The fetid smell hung in air like a bad cologne as he opened the back passenger door with his free hand. He grabs a day old newspaper sitting on the seat and wipes furiously at his hand then balled the paper up and threw it to the curb.

He sat back down in the drivers seat of the car, closing the door and rolling up the window to the heinous odor. He laid his head back and looked through windshield at the stars. Leave his mind said, and do what he said back. No this was a little more different than it was with Jenn, who wanted to help him, but it became evident to her she couldn't help him.

College was not for him, the idea of going back now was laughable. He last tried 3 years ago, the paper work was endless, and applications were a hundred dollars a piece. When he took his SAT's, as during any important test he, had to leave for the bathroom(a big no no during the test) and vomited from being so nervous, he had that happen to him his whole life. In 6th grade, his mother, during one one of her attempts at sobriety, took him to a doctor to test for a learning disability, but the tests were negative.

"He's a healthy young boy, I think it's just anxiety," the doctor explained to his mother, who was sure her son was an idiot.

"Your gonna be in school until your thirty." she told him when they got back from the doctor. "I'll put your head through the fuckin wall if you don't smartin up."

"Be easy on the boy." his father said sitting on their couch with a glass of Old Grand Dad.

"Don't you start you lazy hunk of shit," she said through clenched teeth that were rotted from years of crystal meth abuse. "it's not bad enough I gotta survive on your worthless ass, now I gotta kid whose half retarded!"

She stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her, his father, who would die a few months later, was kinder to him about it.

"Diggy," he said with whiskey on his breath, a smell that always made

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him think of his dad when he was older. "when you find out what your good at, then you'll see you got a brain."

Dig did have one talent, his quick hands and reflexes. He spent many years behind his trailer after his fathers death bouncing a tennis ball against a cinder block wall that ran the length of his home which cut off the trailer park from the road next to it. He would throw it hard at crazy angles and with break neck speed try and catch the ball. Even when ice coated the ground and the wind howled during the winter, he would be at the wall slipping and sliding after it.

High school had been easier for him socially running track and being on the baseball team, put him up to the level of the jocks. He even had a school jacket but only wore it for the pep rallies. The baseball team had won state each of the four years he had been on the team, so the grades of players usually had there own curve.

He was a brick wall at short stop when the position needed filled and was the go to guy for a pinch runner, though he started smoking his freshman year, he was still fastest runner on the team. But the reason he didn't start was that he couldn't hit. The winning line drive he had hit to win state senior year was only the second hit he ever had. He didn't get taunted too much about it, but was prone to fisticuffs when he was.

His senior year was great and bad at the same time, the line drive made him a local celebrity with the community. People began calling him long drive when the Porter Sun Gazette showed Dig on the front page, not the sports section, but the actual front page with a screaming font that said LONG DRIVE SEALS FOURTH CONSECUTIVE TITLE. Pat Di mayo, normally the starting shortstop sprained his ankle in the fourth on a double and Dig was put in his place.

The Porter Broncos had been down by one with two outs left in the last inning, with a runner on third and second. Coach Ingersoll, who was as aware of Dig's hitting problems as he was, said with a heavy sigh "keep your eye on the ball, just wait for the right one and swing."

The coach didn't hold much hope for them, as Dig made his way to the batters box the buzz of the crowd, the lights shinning up the park like it was the middle of the day though it was nighttime, but he was never bothered by any of that. He saw the wind up and felt his heart freeze as the pitch went by, his arms like stone, were immobile.

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"STRIKE ONE!!" cried the umpire

The pitch had come by so fast that he had hardly taken a practice swing, even the opposing teams pitcher knew he wouldn't swing. Then the anger started to build, he felt his arms tremble and shake, as the pitcher wound up again.

"STRIKE TWO!!" cried the umpire much louder as the crowd began to hiss and boo at Dig's failure to swing again.

Steady your arms! shouts his mind. He instinctively clenches his teeth and immediately the sway from his arms is gone and he see's the ball coming, his stomach clenched as the ball began to curve away from him. He screamed a savage war cry as he swung and ran like the wind as the ball shot passed the first baseman like a missile. With laser like precision the ball traveled right along the first base line straight into the outfield fence, and nearly broke through the wooden billboard with the team's mascot painted on it, allowing the two runners to score before the outfielder could throw the ball home.

The locals there said if it had gone over the fence it probably would have made it to New Jersey, Dig wasn't sure about that, but enjoyed the praise none the less.

His mother was the bad, she had spent most of the winter with her boyfriend in Atlantic city. She started to leave him at home by himself the summer after his father died. He was 13 when his father, also a heavy drinker, drove into a tree near the trailer park. His father was big man of six feet and had the same color hair as Dig, they were much closer than he was with his mother.

Sometimes they would fish or go hunting, but he had rheumatoid arthritis most of his adult life, after he turned forty he started to collect disability but that didn't help the pain. The doctors gave him pain killers, Percocets, Percodan, even morphine but they made him feel too groggy so he stopped taking them, he preferred whiskey as his medicine.

"Too bad the Blue Cross don't cover Old Grand Dad." his father told Dig, which always made them laugh.

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His mom on the other hand was more than happy to take care of the prescriptions that still needed filled even though his father never took any. Dig was about 10 at the time, his dad still in pain but acting as if it was nothing more than an annoying paper cut, even thought the pain cut lines across his face like water through rock. Dig was in the bathroom in the middle of the night urinating, he left the light off simply out of childish sleepiness.

All of a sudden the bathroom door burst open and the light in the room turned on before the door had hit the wall.

"What are ya doin?" his mother said standing in the doorway with predatory eyes.

He didn't smell booze but her eyes were bloodshot and glassy, she wore a nightshirt and was half covered by an ugly maroon bathrobe.

"pee...peeing," he said heart pounding with real fear.

"Oh...oh OK," she said visibly relieved.

She patted her hand on her chest and smiled as if she had actually found her wallet in the freezer and not almost given her only child a heart attack.

"I just need to keep an eye on things, honey."

His parent both had there own cabinets hanging on either side of the bathrooms' mirror, but she had gone into his and took out two different pill bottles still filled to the top.

"Ssh," she said putting her finger to her lips and stuffing the pills into the robes pocket.

When he was told his dad was dead he cried for one of the few times in his life, he was glad because his mother wouldn't steal his medicine anymore. But his dad was still dead and in the end his mother seemed nonplussed by it, she would put on the tears for neighbors and friends, but Dig could tell she was just putting on an act.

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It wasn't even two months after he died before his mother was already fooling around with someone that would either buy her a drink or get her high or maybe just get at her. It was then that he started drinking for the first time, just beer, Pabst Blue Ribbon, he remembered how it made him want to pucker his lips on that first sip. One man she brought home that Dig genuinely liked was a man named Tim, but insisted on being called Steve for some reason, who had bar tended at a famous nightclub in New York city for many years.

He was much shorter and skinnier than his father and was at least ten years younger than his mother. He was balding prematurely which made him look older than he was, and was always wearing a Dr Marten boots and a black t-shirt with some obscure music act with the sleeves cut off.

Dig's mom already had him make her screw drivers and rum and Cokes when too drunk to do it herself, Steve observed this and asked him if he could make a Long Island iced tea.

"I don't know how." he said.

Steve got up and from his seat and gave Dig a glass that was tall but narrow. He pointed at the five or six bottles of liquor and showed him how much ice to put in and how many shots of each to pour in, when it was finished Steve took a small sip and swallowed.

"Not bad, Dig." he said.

When ever Steve had come by he would show him how to make a different drink, even letting Dig taste them so he knew if they were done right. By his freshman year in high school he was making them faster than Steve could. The following year, his mom began seeing her now current boyfriend Frank, who cared little for Dig, and told him Steve wouldn't be around anymore.

Dig was disappointed, Steve would bring Dig to McCully's on Sunday afternoons when the Phillies were playing and buy him french fries that they would share while he told Dig about the finer points of baseball, teaching him how to figure out batting averages, pitching signals, why the Phillies always seemed to finish in last place nearly every year. It had been Steve's suggestion that Dig try out for the school team.

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"I've seen you behind the trailer, Diggy. You got good reflexes."

He made it on the team only because of how fast he could run, so he usually would be put in as a pinch runner when needed, which was rare, spending most of the time during games bouncing a ball behind the dug out hoping he would be put in. He made the best of it, though the anger at his mom for never being there and for stealing from his dad, was always in him. Two days before he graduated high school, she called him to say how proud she was but her and Frank were going to be in Ocean city all week.

It had pissed him off so much because she would tell him that he was stupid, or would be stuck in school until he was thirty, he just wanted to show her he could accomplish something using his brain that she told him he lacked. The line drive paled in comparison to this. To him that hit was luck, he always kept his eye on the ball, and always choked up on the bat, but he only had two hits the entire four years of high school baseball.

After the party's and celebration and no college, Dig made his way sometimes doing various jobs. He met Jenn Babitz in 2002, who came to McCully's her first time after a Penn State football game. Her and a few friends drove all the way to State College to see it. She was blond and curvy in all the right ways, wearing skin tight jeans and a blue Penn State hoody with the Nittany Lion in full roar on the front.

They flirted and talked, eventually exchanging numbers, after a year and a half they moved in together, but it was slowly falling apart from there. She majored in law, at Penn State and planned on going to law school, he was stuck pumping gas in the afternoons because the Eco-frig factory laid him off as they usually do every couple of months. She loved him and tried to help him all she could. She had a brother who had gone to a Vo-Tech school in Philadelphia specializing in cars, the promise of a career with good pay sold Jenn, but the idea of more tests and school made Dig nervous.

"You've got to at least see what they offer." Jenn said plaintively in bed one night.

And he had, they offered an open house and a class sit in. The schematics of an engine of a Toyota Corolla the teacher had drawn on the blackboard made him dizzy, the math he used to explain what he was doing made him run to the bathroom and vomit. She would call him lazy, he would scream at her, while drinking himself stupid. They went there separate ways not long after he gave up vocational school, the idea he

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had nothing going for him was obvious to her as his slow self destruction.

He didn't blame her for leaving, but it hurt when she did. After Jenn had gone, Dig indulged himself in the idea of no future binging on women and liquor like a child in a candy store. After a few years he met Cami, a local girl, who was a regular at McCully's who he would flirt with sometimes when he and Jenn were at each others throats.

He figured she would go when she got bored, it was fun being together in the beginning. She had been working at the Walmart on Independence avenue as a cashier and would drop by McCully's after her shift on Tuesday and Saturday nights while Dig was tending bar and didn't care about his economic situation, until she started working at Citibank. It all seemed like a million years ago as Dig looked through the windshield looking beyond it and into his past.

Dig pulled another cigarette from his shirt pocket, searched for the lighter before remembering what had happened to it. Looking back down at the dash board he realized he was no closer to fixing the car. He'd have to walk down Jeter's garage in the morning which was about a mile down the road, they had been on the team together in high school and were good friends. Feeling the need for a drink he made his way home, thinking about giving the entertainment center another try tonight, the trip down memory lane had angered up his blood and felt the need to move around.

After an hour of working through the instructions, his head started pounding again. He spent most of the hour glaring at the instructions swearing at the son of bitch who bought this god damn thing, he couldn't remember who, taking a swig from the harsh vodka. When he finally gave up he placed the bottle on the floor, went into the kitchen and took the hammer from the tool box on the counter and began wailing on the thin planks of wood.

Each time he hit it, he thought back to the night of the line drive feeling like Hercules when the bat made that sweet cracking sound when it hits the ball dead on. He continued to hammer away, letting the exhaustion seep his anger. Covered in sweat and arm on fire, he up ended the contents of the bottle down his throat, and threw it across the kitchen where it landed in the waste basket, without breaking.

"The gods favor me, again," he said in a mock Hercules voice as he looked at the mess his hammering had created.

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It wasn't so bad he couldn't clean it. He could do almost anything drunk, except drive something he had no intentions of ever doing anyway, never forgetting that was how his dad died. After cleaning up, he took a long hot shower letting the water run over his head which felt like it was in a vise grip.

He exited the bathroom and heard Cami talking on her cell phone, sounding a lot happier than when she had left. Her back was to him, unaware he was there, he stared longingly at her shoulders that were light and creamy and smooth, he place a hand on her shoulder, she flinched from his touch as if burned.

"Damn it, go away!" she whispered fiercely.

He went to the kitchen for a beer, scolding himself for thinking she might be in a better mood. Sometimes she would surprise him with a hardy screw after a night out, but the last time was awhile ago. Digging out the familiar yellow can he pulled the tab and took a gulp, when Cami came into the kitchen putting her cell phone on the kitchen table chewing on her tongue. A good sign, she only chewed her tongue when she was annoyed not angry.

"What happened to the entertainment stand? Why is it covered in holes"

"I had an accident with the hammer." a half lie, he couldn't lie very well but was never afraid to be honest with people.

She rolled her eyes and went to the refrigerator, and took out a Pepsi.

" My mother paid a hundred and seventy five dollars for that asshole." rolling the can in her hands giving him a look filled with poisonous daggers.

Her mother, of course.

"I'm sorry," he said as he finished the rest of his beer and went to the refrigerator for another, he would have bad heartburn tonight.

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"Yes, you are sorry." she said drinking her soda as she walked back into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

A few minutes later music played softly and the light under the door went out. It sounded like Smashing Pumpkins...1979 maybe. He finished his second beer in two gulps and went to the kitchen for another.

It was almost three thirty before the antacid had somewhat dulled his raging heartburn. By quarter after seven he awoke from a hazy sleep, his mouth and tongue were pasty white from dehydration. Turning on his back he looked over at Cami, curled into a ball bed sheet pulled tightly around her body breathing softly, panty line visible through the white cotton sheets.

He quietly crept out of bed and dressed in the bathroom. Making a quick breakfast of water, and aspirin he went out to Jeter's garage. The morning was cold but the clear sky promised a sunny day. The remnants of the snowstorm last week were still lingering in the gutters and on the curbs in dirty piles of black slush.

Jeter had gone too the famed Vo-Tech school Jenn had been raving about years ago. He had graduated and opened a garage, which did a fare amount of business. He was a very happy go lucky guy, always with a smile and a handshake for friends and customers.

When he arrived the door to the garage was rolling up, behind it was Jeter. Looking around he finally noticed Dig approaching.

"Dig baby! How are ya." he asked jovially.

Hang over or not, Jeter could easily make Dig smile with his friendly welcomes. Zipping up his work coveralls from the early morning cold he met Dig halfway.

"Hey, Jeter." he said shaking his hand.

"How come you don't visit more, are you that busy. Hey Mindy baby! Dig is here."

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The door next to the garage opened, wrapped in a white terry cloth robe was Mindy Jeter's live in girlfriend. She was an attractive brown eyed brown haired girl. A real mechanic's kind of woman, she worked in the garage with Jeter and was as good as him. Though Jeter always said she was the better mechanic, Dig wondered if it were true, or did he say it just to make her feel happy.

"Hey Dig, honey."

"Hey baby girl," Dig said and waved.

"You want some coffee?"

His heartburn from last night still strong, he politely turned it down.

"I'll have some baby,"

She smiled and went back inside. She came back out a few minutes later steaming mug in hand and handed it to Jeter. Asking again if Dig was sure about the coffee, she went back inside.

"So how's the garage doing?"

It was obvious to Dig though, a Penn Dot diesel truck and a Jeep Cherokee sat in the garage, off to the side stood a small motorcycle it looked old but usable.

"Not bad, so is this a social visit I don't see your car." he said taking small sips from his mug.

"The pos stopped last night, it's a mile down the road and it wont start back up. Would you mind takin a walk to look at it?"

"That's cool baby. This coffee is given me hot flashes."

They arrived in front of the car, Jeter put his mug on the curb lifted the hood and peered in closely. He looked for a minute or two before

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digging out a pen light from his coveralls. After a few seconds he whistled softly.

Dig leaned on the passenger door. Hearing that slow soft whistle, Dig knew the news would not be promising. Jeter pulled his head out from under the hood and closed it gently.

"How bad is it?" he said sighing.

"I'm sorry the block is cracked, man."

Dig rolled his head back on the car and looked up at the clear blue sky. Damage like this, you were better off getting a another car.

"I guess Cam needed the car more than you do," Jeter said sympathetically, knowing how she felt about taking the bus.

Everywhere Dig worked was within walking distance, saving him gas money until Cami was hired at Citibank. Yesterday he took it, and because he was driving it when it died, Cami let him know it was his fault.

"You want me to tow it to the scrap yard, it would be no problem, baby."

"Better let me talk to Cami first, who the hell knows what she'll want done with it."

Looking at his watch he saw it was almost eight-thirty. He'd half to let Cami know the car was dead. Before departing Jeter told him to stop by tonight for some drinks, Dig said OK. Walking up to the front door key in hand, the door opened abruptly. Cami came out dressed in a black business suit. The skirt she wore had a slit in the side showing her long legs covered in black stockings, a shiny chrome name plate with the name Camilla in red bold letters shined prettily.

"Is it fixed, I needed to get going!" she said standing on the porch looking up and down the street for the car.

"No, it died."

"What the fuck, Dig, you had to drive the piece of shit to work?"

"I didn't murder the fuckin thing on purpose,"

"How am I supposed to get to work,"

"I don't know, take the fuckin bus," he said sharply

Her eyes darkened with anger.

"A real man would know," she said in a low angry growl that would have been sexy if it were a porn movie.

She shoved past him in white sneakers for the walk to and from bus stops she had anticipated. She came stomping down the steps, muttering swears under her breath with pouty lips because she would have to ride the bus, and the fact that most of the passengers would be black did not help the situation. Cami was as layman racist, 'as long as I don't have to sit with them on a bus they could go do what they want.' Dig wasn't racist, he had grown up in a trailer park, were the only blacks had ever resided. By high school that had changed some, there were a few more in the better section of town.

Nearly a third of the football team in high school was black, and there was also a Hispanic and 2 Filipinos, brothers, on the baseball team. She headed in the direction of the bus stop, a car horn honked at her as she walked as if to say, hey sugar tits. She smiled and stuck her nose up in the air as if she were insulted, he watched her turn the corner two blocks away, grateful that they hadn't started to scream at each other.

Dig looked up at the sky again wishing he could see the stars. 'Grow up', said Cami's voice inside his head, 'no future for you looking at stars.' The future, there was a word that made him feel uneasy. No hits, no future a college baseball scout said to him once, no talent for hitting, no talent for cars, no talent for anything except a monkeys job, and polishing off a case a beer in one sitting.

He drank the last beer in the refrigerator and swallowed another

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aspirin, and tossed and turned on the couch for three hours hoping he could get a nap before his shift at Eco-fridge. When the alarm on his cell phone went off, he still lay wide awake, and got up with a heavy sigh.

The afternoon was biting cold so he grabbed a hoody and walked to the factory a narrow building filled with various machines, the majority of them dusty from lack of use. Most of the people who worked there, less than 2 dozen even during its busiest time, were mostly young guys in there early twenties, spending there pay checks at the bars in Philly on weekends, or a bag of weed.

Donny Mailer, was one of the oldest guys working there at age 59, he had been at the factory on and off for almost three decades and was a little slow. He would occasionally call Dig line drive. He made Dig afraid, not of the man but of what he was. Donny spent time in jail after a drunk driving accident when he was in his thirties.

From twelve to nine thirty, doors came and went. Industrial glue coated his gloved hands as he worked the back line pressing the lining with a rubber mallet and removing the excess glue with a utility knife.

"Damn shame what happened to Lou," Donny said when Dig was smoking a cigarette during the lunch hour.

"What happened, did they lay him off?"

He nodded with a constipated look, his wiry black hair, was whipping wildly in the howling wind, Lou had been the second oldest guy working here, for a good number of years. And much better at his job than Donny, if they let him go, anybody could be laid off for the next couple of months. The whistle that signaled the end of lunch blew, crushing his cigarette under his work boot, Dig wondered if he would be on the chopping block.

They would usually call you by your last name and tell you to come into the office were they would thank you for your service and let you finish the rest of your shift. Most did if they wanted to be back again when the busy season came round again. By nine Dig was hopeful they would wait until tomorrow, his day off, to continue the purge, but at quarter after, three names came out over the loud speaker.

"BALE, MITCHEL, ROBINS- FORMANS OFFICE"

The news was as expected, 'don't bother coming in the rest of the week, we'll be in touch.' Finishing his shift, the only thing he wanted was a shot of Smirnoff and a cigarette. He stopped by the liquor store to purchase his favorite vodka on his way to Jeter's. Walking up to the door, he could hear laughter as he knocked, a moment later Mindy answered.

"Hey Dig, come on in."

Jeter and his cousin Willie were arm wrestling at the kitchen table but not very seriously. Jeter gave up when he noticed Dig walking in the room.

"Dig baby, this fool cousin of mine keeps cheating," he said joyously.

"Hey you keep twisting your arm when I start getting it down, look at the mess he made," Willie said all smiles.

A beer had been knocked over, the foam still bubbling on the table, Mindy rolled her eyes in amusement. They drank and smoked a bowl of good weed, as they talked about the old days, playing cards. He didn't talk about being laid off, he would have too once he saw Cami. It would be the same old story. You should have found a another job before this happened, though he already had a second and third and sometimes fourth job. What she probably meant was why didn't you find a better job, Dig supposed.

Many hours later with the vodka bottle in had, Jeter gave Dig a drunken hug and wished him a safe walk home. The night hadn't gotten any colder but the breeze was like a knife. It was well after midnight, the echo's of his footfalls and January's howling wind were his only companions. Looking up at the stars, the situation came to mind again, sinking his head back down to the walk ahead.

He stopped walking and took a gulp from the bottle, wondering what the hell she's going to say. Dumb ass is probably what, his mind said. 'Or loser', he said to himself. The idea of another argument gave him the sweats, the breeze made his skin feel cold and clammy.

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The walk seemed forever, no cars were driving around, most of the houses lining the streets were dark. The occasional upstairs window showing the shine of blueish light from a TV. A lot of the people living here were blue collar people, with kids and house payments working nine to five jobs. If you wanted action this late at night you had to go to Philly.

His house lay dark and quiet, he turned the knob and felt the lock in place, and unlocked it, all the lights were off, music emanated from the back bedroom. Making his way to the kitchen, Dig heard the music click off and the bed creak. Well he thought, best to get it over with now. Opening the door to the dark room, his eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the odd shape laying on the bed.

The shape on the bed was odd because it was two people. Cami lay draped over a man's chest, she picked her head up and saw Dig, her eyes were as big as saucers. A small squeak escaped her throat. He felt a giant weight sink in his stomach and his heart skip three or four beats.

He stared for about five seconds, before finally speaking.

"Don't get up, you've had a long day."

The man lay there still asleep, oblivious as he walked out the room heart pounding with adrenaline. He took another swig from the vodka, and looked around, but didn't know what he was looking for. He took a deep breath and walked out the front door. Dirty slut he thought as he made his way back into the winter night, but it wasn't all her fault his mind said.

Take the car for instance, he could have gone right to Jeter's as soon as it died he hadn't gone until the next morning. He hadn't bothered to tell her he would be out all night, she assumed it because he had spent so many nights out drinking. He had always been that way even when they were still being civil.

He walked to the curb, looking back at the house they shared...'no, was the house you shared' his mind said with finality. Nothing seemed to be moving in the house, as if he had imagined it all. He turned left and walked down the street, passing the dead car he gives it a heartfelt pat on the hood.

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It had served him about as well as you could hope for a Ford that was almost as old as he was. The vodka bottle dangled loosely from his fingers by the neck. The wind picked up with a force smacking him in face, a swig from the bottle keeps the worst of his chill at bay.

After twenty minutes of walking he came to the fence marking the property of farm land owned by The Laurence family a sign proclaimed. Under the sign a drawing of a cornucopia was the words 'Visit Our Produce Store!' He wasn't sure about getting fruit but the covered bridge that connected Dark Hollow rd with SR 405 lay a mile further, that seemed like the place to go.

He spent his teen years going to the bridge, it had a ladder bolted to its side that went to the top, which he would climb, to gaze at the stars, in high school Dig, Jeter, his cousin Willie, and a few others would go up there and would drink, smoke pot, make out with there respective girlfriends under the nighttime sky.

He enjoyed going alone, looking for the constellations and counting the stars that would shoot across the sky, it helped him to unwind without the aid of alcohol. The sky was crystal clear and the moon was full and shining blueish light allowing him to see the ladder. Lighting a cigarette after another swallow of vodka and shoving the bottle in his pocket, he grabbed a rung and climbed up to the roof. The Schuylkill river flowed under him towards the city. He reached the top and stood looking down at the water below.

The reflection of the moonlit sky gave the river a dreamlike quality to it. Beyond the river the lights of Philadelphia glowing like a giant light bulb in the sky. He looked down at the inky black water that sparkled with moonlight and considered jumping. He could swim, but swimming wasn't his intention.

It would be deep enough for him to do it, though it was shallow at certain points, so shallow that if it rained hard enough the mud under the water would be kicked up making the river look like it was running with blood. He fought the urge to do it and sat down with a thud, thinking about the bitterness that would eat him alive like the bitterness at his mother devoured his youth. 'You were always angry when you swung the bat' his mind said.

Fielding he would focus trying to stay light on his feet. Going to bat was different, he would feel raw emotion surge through him if he did swing. Rarer if he didn't. He took another swallow of the clear

liquid.

He thought again of just letting himself fall off the bridge into the coldness of the river to douse the fires of his rage and his life. He took a bigger gulp of vodka and stood up again daring himself to just say fuck it, and leap in. Knowing the hypothermia would kill him in less than five minutes, five minutes and the bitterness would be gone.

'Is she really worth your life?' his mind asked plaintively.

"Who, my mom or Cami?" he asked himself.

It was then that he realized it could mean either one, or the drinking, or the bitterness that he was letting win over him. He and his mother barely spoke anymore, Cami was now out of his life for better or for worse, the last demon to fight was the bottle he now held in his hand.

He looked at the bottle studying it like an ancient artifact. He had told himself countless times, when he was sober enough to think straight, that he would wind up like his dad who he loved despite how pathetic he became from the drinking. He thought back to the nights his mother would go out, dressed a like Cami was the other night, and his dad would stay home and Dig would see him with tears in his eyes, he wanted to approach him and give him a hug but was always too afraid.

'You could have a simple life, no booze, no excuses, ' his mind said. 'and if you fail it will not be because of anger or alcohol.'

It'll be stupidity, he thought.

His mind quiet for only for a second retorted 'Guys, it doesn't get any stupider than this.'

A childish laugh escaped from Dig.

"Where did I hear that from," But he couldn't remember. "damn, has my memory always been this fucked up?"

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He held the bottle tight and took the cap from his pocket and screwed it back on. With his right arm he heaved the bottle by the neck into the river, the liquid sloshing loudly as it flew. He couldn't see it land but heard it splash in the water.

He sucked in the cold air and exhaled deeply. ' a simple life' his mind said.

He had a harder time getting down, slipping on the last rung he found himself precariously dangling over the river. He looked down at the rapidly moving water, his heart filling with ice and pounding unmercifully against his chest. Pulling himself with all the strength his drunken body could manage he got both hands and feet on the ladder. Finally out of harms way and back on firm ground, he doubled over and vomited.

"fuckin stupid," he said through slimy lips.

He stood for ten minutes letting the nausea pass. His heart was still pounding a mile a minute he felt panicked he would keel over from a coronary until his track coach's voice spoke in his head. 'Don't just stop, slow your heart down, you gotta move at a slow pace, '

Taking any advice his memory could give, Dig walked back into the direction of town at a slow pace.

"fuckin stupid," he said again.

'Guys, it doesn't get any stupider than this,' he reminded himself.

He laughed again, easing his stomach. Simple life, it was weak almost pathetic but where he was at was more than pathetic. The wind picked up again making Dig's teeth chatter. Anything he had a real hard time figuring out, he would have to just get around some how, he couldn't give up he told himself three or four times aloud. With no clothes, no home and little more than a hundred dollars at the local bank under his name, no Citibank account of course, he walked back into town.

Date: July 15th 2011 universe 1

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The air pulled out of his lungs, a moment of breathlessness and it is over. The lyrics to a Pink Floyd song fill his head.

"home, home again"

"Home.." AM Lincoln said as he steps through the wormhole, older but not aged, his gray-green eyes betray his youth. A sense of weightlessness fills his body every time he rips. The cube glows a florescent green. The journey although less than 5 seconds is 13 years across 1 universe.

He looks at the familiar beige wall that stands before him. Water dripping into one of the many drains that kept the labyrinth from flooding and the hum of traffic above ground were the last things he heard when left and were still here to welcome him back.

Quake, his cousin, would be waiting in the safe-room. The entry back to his present time left him feeling airy, almost light on his feet as it always did. The sensation you might feel after a long flight on a airplane, AM didn't feel queasy, not a bit, just a little off.

Although not the first rip back in time, this rip had given him the years that would never show on him. He put the Q pad back in his backpack. Quake and AM purchased a half dozen 2nd generation I pads, which Quake hacked into it for the purpose of inter-dimensional time travel, by navigating wormholes that circle Earth, each version of it. So far with the help of the cube, Quake has found nine dimensions.

It was the cube that allowed travel through time and dimensions, the Q pads were how they controlled the cubes. The cube continued to glow bright green as he walked down the corridor with many false doors, and stairs that would go up to more hallways and another set of stairs to lead you back down again. Only two doors were real, the first was to the "safe room" as his cousin Quake would call it. The other led to a staircase, after 50 or 60 steps leading up you would come to a door made of reinforced steel, through this you would find yourself exiting the Mifflin street subway station in south Philadelphia.

A fire engine red sign with bold white letters read was bolted to the outside of the door it said: NO TRESSPASSING VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED. A fifty year lease with the city of Philadelphia paid well in advanced with allowances to let the city do what it pleases around, and on top of the property. The labyrinth was designed by Quake

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himself, after purchasing a thousand sq ft in 1904 the current subway station was formerly a stage coach for those traveling in horse and buggy. Most of South Philadelphia in the early twentieth century was a mix of farmland and swamps.

AM, with a thousand dollars in gold coins sitting heavily in his backpack, purchased the land and paid the city most of his gold to keep the land for the next five decades. Given a lease from the notary republic, AM would return in 1954 with twenty thousand dollars to renew said lease. The increase in cost was due to the fact that the South Eastern Pa Trans. Authority had plans to expand its Orange line subway route through Mifflin street where the stage coach once stood. An additional fifty thousand was needed to begin construction on the labyrinth.

With some cash handed over to a local construction company the labyrinth came to life. It was 1958 when construction began.

"What the fuck is this?! Is this a joke?!" asked the foreman trying to understand the blue prints Quake had made up.

"Just do it by the prints and don't worry about it. You wanna get paid, right? Just do the fuckin thing! I paid you in cash, didn't I?!" AM said furiously.

He had given the foreman a hefty stack of twenty dollar bills before giving him the prints, AM discovered no matter what year he was in, money always talked and bullshit always walked.

"Hey it's not me" the foreman said trying not to piss off the cash happy man "I just don't want to get in trouble for fuckin with city ordinances an all that. I got kids, too!"

Removing the fedora from his head, and wiping the sweat off his forehead AM knew he would have to set the man straight.

"Hey you don't tell me, I tell you! I own the area all around this shit hole, you don't need to worry about the city, that's my fuckin problem not yours either build it or I pay someone else."

AM rarely talked like that and enjoyed it even less. Getting the

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things that you needed done sometimes required vulgarity and lots of cash. Placing his hat back atop his head he fished in his pocket and removed an additional five hundred in tens and twenties and stuffed it into the foreman's tool belt. It was a half bluff, although he could afford to shop around as there were plenty of company's to solicit, but time was a factor.

The foreman sighed and finally agreed. Looking back down at the blueprints, the foreman wondered what the point was to the design. Hallways that led to more hallways fitted with doors that would open to a two foot recession behind it, five or six sets of stairs leading up and down the entire underground.

Probably a bomb shelter for all the city bigwigs the foreman thought vindictively. "good way too keep the little people runnin around while the Soviets drop a few bombs," he said to his wife later that night. "just wait till it rains. Idiots!"

South Philly is famous for many things one thing the local resident could tell you unhappily is that it's prone to flooding. Any thing under ground would be bombarded with water with just a little rain in an area that was swampland until the 1920s. The ground was filled in over the course of the 19th and twenty centuries as the swamps were drained and the population expanded, where the labyrinth is now is underground, but before the 20th century it would have sat above ground. The labyrinth was done by the time Kennedy was mixing it up with Khrushchev over Cuba.

It was quick walk for AM he had the route to the safe-room memorized. The glow from the alien cube faded from a bright green to a dull amber. Digging out his Q pad AM noted the date, although stuck for four years only a day and a half had passed. 1998-2002 was rough the second time.

The four thirty-five train arriving right on time next store, no sound proofing except in the safe-room. He walked briskly taking lefts and rights. He didn't find any other cubes, they still had only three. One was used to locate universes and wormholes from the safe room.

The second was for AM's Q pad that could control the wormholes, but the Qcalc app miscalculated what should have been a quick rip to 1993 turned a long wait in the wrong year, waiting for the worm hole to erratically make its way back to his position.

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If the third cube had a user it would allow better management of the wilder wormholes called Willies, but with only himself and Quake they were stuck at two. The I pad's six axis was perfect for controlling the wormholes, anyone familiar with a game controller could easily handle one of the Stiffies as Quake liked to call them. AM came to the door of the safe room and unlocked the deadbolt, the creak of the door opening was a welcoming sound.

" I think I may have figured out what went wrong." Quake said before AM said anything

Thin wire rim glasses sat on his chubby face, five or six empty cans of energy drink were scattered about the desk. He sat in his computer chair turned away from his monitors and keyboards. Each displaying something different, the planet straight from the international space station, another of planet earth from a television satellite a third through a 3d game engine that spun in real time to the actual speed of the Earth.

AM stood at the top step seeing the mess of cans and wires and towers and routers and wondered how he got anything done. What may have been a system to Quake, confused AM.

"I need another person, I can't control them by myself."

Quake was leery of time and dimensional travel, also Quake could honestly say no one in the nine known dimensions could operate his computer. A PC wizard in his own right, a lot of his programs were hacks of computer programs and I pad apps. When AM asked for a type of program Quake would say: "Yeah I got an app for that."

Quakes' workstation, consisted of late 20th century and early 21st century PC hardware, each different in height and width and capabilities. One computer tower was nearly two feet tall and was adorned on its side with a near equal size Sonic the Hedgehog, but colored the same as the glow from the cubes, another had an internal fan that buzzed as loud as a car engine.

Each of the computers plugged into various power strips, while internal fans whirled constantly keeping the hard drives and video cards at least room temperature. The three alien cubes that AM and Quake inherited were identical, each the thickness of a deck of playing cards, and the dimensions of a ring box. They all had a small

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recess in the back which acted as a plug for an adapter made by Quake but based on an original design from there uncle Howdy.

It pulled on and off when you pressed a button that was little more than a pin hole at the adapters base. The recess in the cube was cylindrical about the size of a ten penny nail, the plug no more than half an inch long locked in when inserted. The other end was flat with an opening a half inch wide and a quarter inch high. It looked similar to a USB port but with three prongs in its opening.

Quake spent years trying to recreate a plug for the adapter, and eventually succeed. Although the first time he tried he fried a half dozen computers, lacking enough power to process all the information in just one cube. So after spending countless weeks rebuilding and formatting he had each PCs internal hard drive plugged in to a port that was connected to the cube to take the Hundreds of Tera bytes of data they held being backed up on countless external hard drives that filled a bookcase behind his desk.

Uncle Howdy's wormhole detector was a primitive first step, Quake's PCs were the second step, the Q pads were the final step in the time travel process. Portable, easy to use, and available everywhere for consumers.

"These I pad's are really shixplight." Quake said, shixplight a word he would use to describe something awesome or cool.

Now years later, they had been able to control them and AM had traveled with them numerous times. Quake was the brains but AM did the leg work. He had been never been stuck before, the other rips were to get there resources through the Stiffies. Going through the wormhole it sat at 1998 not 1993, Quake had miss calculated.

"I'm sorry, I thought I had it added up right."

AM nodded , it was more his fault than Quakes , by himself he new the chances of controlling a Willy, were small. But he had to try, they had played around long enough. Building this underground maze, bribing city officials across the 20th century, dressing up for each visit like it's Halloween so not to seem to out of place was thrilling but took up time.

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"I still need another person with me, you know that."

Quake didn't say anything, they knew the situation was insane enough to get them put away, either in white coats or Guantanamo bay for violating national security. For years they spent thousands of dollars from money meant to go towards tuition for college. Constant nights programming computers to interface with an alien technology much more advanced than any egg head could dream.

AM spending countless months researching the past 200 years of Philadelphia, going over countless newspapers, periodicals, titles and deeds that sat in local libraries outside of the city, searching across Roswell NM combing the farm land once belonging to their uncle that was bequeathed to them after a battle with cancer. Searching for anything uncle Howdy may himself never have found.

He had left a hand written manuscript which was limited in details about what happened in 1947 along with a jewelry box he had given to his long since departed mother as a birthday present. It was this box that held the three cubes.

"Take sometime off, I can work on fixing the apps. "

"I'm gonna head home." he said distantly

"Hey."

AM turned and looked at Quake.

"Is anything else wrong?"

He was silent for a second before answering.

"Jet lag. I'll see you later."

AM went down the steps and left Quake by himself, something more was bothering AM, thought Quake. Abraham "AM" Mordecai Lincoln could be hard to read. He was short in height, unlike his namesake, 6th cousin to the Great Emancipator on his fathers side. He kept his light brown

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hair short and combed to the side, thought it was a bit messier today.

He was usually a better dresser as well, but time travel means being inconspicuous. For most of the second half of the twentieth century a pair of work pants and shirt and a hoody was as non descriptive as you could want. Before that time period a wool trench coat sufficed for anonymous in most of the 19th century, summer time was not much different a few more varieties of shirts of course but not many.

Quake thought he had the evasiveness of a politician but his voice could command attention like a true leader. AM was a natural at the debates in high school, even getting accepted to PENN University. All of that was out of AM's life the moment the cubes came into their lives though.

AM took it as seriously as he did his studies when still a student. The ripping though seemed to make him sterner sometimes colder in demeanor. Quake hoped the rip would be a successful mission but left AM sitting around for quiet a while. He was ripping his hair out and spitting out a string of expletives laced with his own made up words when he saw it happen on his monitors, it was a simple mistake of adding up the wrong numbers, but cost AM four years.

When he returned he thought AM had aged, but he hadn't. In all of Quake's adult life he had never seen AM show his emotions, he usually hid them very well with a quiet dignity. Today though, Quake saw that something had upset him badly, Quake felt guilt come over him like a wet towel on a cold night. He turned his chair back to his monitors and keyboards and began another all nighter reprogramming the Q pad, making sure AM's next rip would be successful.

The door at the side of the Mifflin street station slowly creaked open, AM careful not to hit anyone walking by, stepped out and let the door close behind him. Hearing the click of the internal lock, AM turned the knob several times making sure.

He stood in the midst of pedestrians streaming out of the subway station and out of the buses lined up next to the station. He took the sunshine in his face and relished it, it was February when he left 2002 for home. He had forgotten he had left at the mid point of summer. The walk in the summer sun would make him feel better he hoped.

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As he walked his mind had wandered around his short list of acquaintances, none were very promising. Most people he called friend in his present time were few, Quake, even fewer. When AM was in college he had plenty of friends, his cousin Quake was originally born in New Mexico, moved to Pennsylvania his freshman year in high school. The only friends he would have were of the strange outcast types ranging from Goths to pot heads to faceless names of those he gamed on line with, he was a master of programming PC's, but couldn't socialize very well.

AM hadn't gone and done things with other people in years. He was comfortable around people, no fears about speaking in public or any other phobia of people. Trust was simply hard to come by, especially when the fate of time and dimensions are involved. AM was terrified he'd destroy the whole universe the first rip out, another Quakism, but all was well when he returned, up was still up the USA was not altered into a fascist state, the Eagles still played lousy.

Walking down Mifflin street towards home, AM's brain went round and round. How can anyone be trusted, it all presented to many temptations, who wouldn't want to go to Atlantic City and go Biffing it, yes another Quakism, at the race track. It would take someone above temptation and strong physically as well as mentally.

Reaching the apartment AM felt that sinking feeling again. Taking several deep breaths he pulled out his keys and unlocked door to the stairs leading to the apartment. There was the only one so it was quiet, the only noise coming from outside where pedestrians, and cars honking and drivers swearing as they fought their way down Broad street.

Being originally from Porter, PA just a few miles outside Philadelphia, the first time he came to the city to watch the Phillies play when he was 9 he was shocked to see so many people. The population of Porter during the last census was less than twenty thousand, Philadelphia boasted over 1.25 million. Now it was no more a shock to him than time travel or parallel dimensions. Opening the door to his apartment the cool breeze and the drone of the air conditioner embraced his senses.

Setting down his back pack, he made his way through the living room and turned on his desktop computer and walked into the kitchen and removed a water bottle from the refrigerator. Taking a swallow from the bottle and putting it back in, AM sat down at his desk. The Linux logo of a penguin appears then fades to a picture of Quake on the desktop giving the middle finger with a smart ass grin like he did

something with your sister.

Taking mouse in hand he right clicked play random on a folder named MST3K, lying down on the couch across the room kicking of well worn shoes that were fairly new two days ago. Watching his favorite TV show from childhood always lifted up his spirits, to him it was hands down better than Prozac.

The show was about a man and two robots that would watch bad movies in silhouette at the bottom of the screen, sent by mad scientists, who called each movie an experiment, to break there will. They would make fun of the movies in order to with stand its cheesiness.

He laughs at the irony of the episode that plays. The characters of the show get stuck in an ion storm sending them into an alternate universe. Searching his mind he asked himself when he last saw this episode. A yawn opened his mouth wide, exhaustion was slowly taking over.

"Trust is a hard thing to come by." AM said to no one.

Honor, integrity, courage, the crap they sell you at the army recruitment centers, that's the kind of person they needed. Most of his friends, he knew through Facebook, had families now, paying taxes having a normal life. Another yawn escapes him, his eye lids growing heavy while he thinks back to years gone by, people and places now only a memory. He looks at a six inch scale model of MST3K robot Tom Servo, scratched and with a few grass stains on his clear plastic bubble head that he could never clean off completely, that sat on his computer monitor, its arms made from springs sway slightly from the breeze of the air conditioner.

Slowly he slips into sleep staring at the Servo model, deeper and deeper his mind takes him to a time when the biggest problem AM worried about was not letting anyone push him around. Adolescence is a time in life when school feels like going to war. Were a possible embarrassing encounter with a bully was like the threat of terrorist attack to an adult.

Giving a girl a look to long from the popular crowd by someone of AM or Quakes status could easily result in a declaration of war were the battlefield is first period gym and can reach as far as eight period shop.

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Until the massacre in Colorado during his sophomore year most teachers hardly paid attention, having grown up with it themselves. But Columbine changed the battlefield, teachers began acting like U.N. Mediators during any dispute whether it was serious or not.

High school had been for him like it was for any one of his brains and size. Hellish at times, but with steely resolve he strode on towards the future. It was near the end of May 1999 the 15 year old AM, known as just Abe back then, hair combed over neatly to the side wearing Lee jeans and a black and orange hoody representing the school color's, made his way for the mailbox at the edge drive way to his childhood home.

'Aha! It came.' he thought as his hands gripped the small cardboard package which had the MST3K planet logo on it. Opening it was a bit of a challenge, he kept his nails trimmed too short for packaged tape, and stood in the middle of the driveway back pack slung haphazardly over his shoulder, as he excitedly tore open the box.

Pushing aside the flaps and digging through the packing foam, there it lay. A six inch model of the puppet Tom Servo from Mystery Science Theater 3000, its glossy red paint reflected a beam of sunlight in his face. The thirty dollars, he had earned it through the usual small town kid labors, was well spent he thought. Glancing at his watch he saw he had spent ten minutes just opening it.

"Time flies," he said, a phrase that would change meaning for him over time.

Disposing of the box and its packing in the garbage can that sat uncollected yet, AM walked as briskly as would he as an adult back to the safe-room. Only an inch shorter than he would be as an adult and a hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet, his demeanor even at that age was focused and with a purpose. He was picked on sometimes badly, but would not be intimidated. Something that showed so much that he was rarely a target for constant bullying, though at times it was bad, this instance was no better.

He made his way through the school parking lot, which sat along Independence avenue where a 7-11 sat on the opposite side, kids would stop by for chips or smoke a butt before the last bell. Most of the seniors were gone already, classes had ended a few days prior for them. But even with graduation at the end of the week, some seniors still had detentions to report for, if they wanted to graduate.

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A few cars sat in the parking lot, all of the lower classes were mostly at the front of the school. Report cards had been arriving in mailboxes since yesterday, so the obligation to continue classes was mostly due to the end of year pep rally. It was a draw for the lower classes mostly because there wasn't much else to do unless you drove, most of the kids in the underclasses wouldn't have a license until seniors themselves.

The lot ended near a canopy with a half dozen picnic tables with benches sitting on a grassy hearth at the southern most edge of the school. There was no smoking on school grounds, but if you sat down low in front of the picnic table you could easily sneaking a butt. The canopy, made out of two by fours of wood, stood on four stone pillars.

It looked empty even as he passed right next to it, but Peter Rosen a five foot nine wide receiver for the School football team, stood up from behind one of the tables, as if from out of thin air.

A crooked smile spread across his face, adorned with bad acne and numerous nicks and bumps from shaving, he looked more slovenly than intimidating, but he scared AM. He flicked his Winston across the table and made his way around to block his path, standing seven inches higher and eighty pounds heavier, angry about being here for detention two fucking days before he graduated.

AM stared back up at him, his courage his only strength.

"What's this, fagot?"

His hands, stained and reeking of cigarettes, snatched the Servo model. To any one not a Misty, as fans are called, would see an over sized gum ball machine. To others it would seem something a bit more vulgar.

"Is this a dildo?!? What the fuck!" he said with a horsey laugh. "You carry some big red dildo around all the time in public?!"

Holding the model in front of him AM made a grab for it, but missed it by almost a foot as Peter a wide receiver, had quicker hands. He held the model out behind him over his shoulder waiting for AM to jump like a damn fool. Taking his eyes off the model, he saw someone standing at the end other end of the canopy, his back towards AM seemingly unaware

of what was happening.

"Hey fagot, you hear me! I said you can get arrested for carryin dildos in public." he said poking him in the chest with the model.

AM's eye's found there way back to the football players face, he could hardly fight to save his life. But if you knocked him down, he would get right back up. His only true weapon at his disposal, as any debate coach in the county could tell you, were his words. Quake once told him even his insults had an eloquence to them.

"You are an inbred bastard." AM spoke the words defiantly and he hoped without sounding afraid.

Peter's grin turned to a scowl at the insult. He heard this kid thought he was tough, he was not in the mood to let some kid related to George fuckin Washington act tough. He threw the model down hard to the grass.

"I'm gonna inbreed your ass with my foot, you little shit."

He approached AM, standing over him like the worlds biggest giant. Nostrils flaring, yellow crooked teeth showing slight decay bared like a dog, his breath smelled like mustard that had gone bad. What happened next would have been comedic on TV, but at the time, AM found the experience quite harrowing.

The sun was shining in the wide receivers eyes, making him squint until a shadow filled his face. He looked up with a confused grin. Then it happened. A swooshing noise followed by the sound of hard flesh hitting soft flesh filled AM's ear.

AM jumped back as Peter pinwheeled to the table. AM looked to his right at the person who delivered the punch. He stood close to six two but had a bigger build than Peter, and had the good looks of a Gap model with blond hair and broad shoulders. AM new who he was, but the name escaped him as did nearly his breakfast, his body shook with adrenaline just watching the punch.

"What the fuck,Dig" he said in a high pitched voice.

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Suddenly his demeanor was not aggressive, but plaintive. The guy, Dig, or Doug which was his real name as AM finally recalled, walked towards the sitting wide receiver. His eyes seemed beyond fury, but the calmness of his voice when he spoke unsettled Peter.

"Leave him, the fuck, alone." he said stopping mere inches in front of the football player.

He got up, feeling the side of his jaw and wincing in pain as it swelled, grabbed his lighter sitting on the table and headed towards the school. Doug, or Dig as he prefers to be called, watched him run to the schools entrance . Then suddenly he turned and faced AM. In the hey days of school shootings, there was always that dark corner of your mind were you wonder who of your class mates might go Columbine, as was the slang, the massacre had happened a few weeks earlier.

Looking down Dig picked up the Servo model, stained green and scratched a little but no worse. He walked over to AM and handed it to him, as nonchalantly as a paperboy handing you the days paper. The anger was still raging inside, but he was not unkind in passing it to him.

"Here you go."

And headed in the same direction as Peter did. AM looked around, no one had seen any of it. Not a teacher anyway, after what happened in Colorado students fighting was now an mandatory expulsion. The students milling around were still making there way over from the 7-11 but not through the parking lot. If other students had been near by, it could have drawn unnecessary attention as well.

Alone he stood, taking in all that happened, not even two minutes had passed, it was that quick. He watched Dig make his way between cars and disappeared around corner to the front of the school.' What the hell did he do that for? his mind asked.' Dig which was his nickname but not known why to AM, was one of the school's baseballs players.

If not for the paper bragging about a winning line drive he hit during the state finals, or the bungee jumping for charity in the Poconos last summer, AM wouldn't have even have known his name. They had never spoken before, or even said hi to one another. He was a senior, probably in the same classes as Peter. He never bullied AM, and never heard Quake or anyone

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else on that part of the social ladder say anything about him particularly.

With detention being the only requirement for seniors at this late day AM saw neither Peter or Dig, as the detention room sat in the cafeteria in the schools bottom floor. Away from the snickers an curious eyes of other students. The PTA decided in April to have students serve detention here in case some gun toting pissed off kid should be in detention, the students could immediately exit through the fire doors, the purpose was safety, to AM in seemed more like paranoia.

His body turns to the side as he slowly descends deeper into sleep, his sub-conscious dreaming mind and his conscious memory began to intertwine, fantasy and reality coming together like lovers. A soft voice whispers as he walks the labyrinth he and Quake designed. Not a brisk walk as usual, a slow stroll trying to hear the soft feminine whispers. NO, he thought as that sinking feeling filled his stomach again.' Hurry, fool!' His mind yelled.

Time travel did not mean you had all the time in the world, he began to walk briskly trying to lift himself with his determination of the task at hand. The wormholes must be closed at all costs. The alien cubes must all be recovered, what's done is done. Should the universe possibly be destroyed just so you can feel better? His mind asked him sternly.

He hurried on, trying to find the safe room, had he forgotten already, impossible he was just here. Taking various rights and lefts that felt wrong to him, AM's heart felt like it was in a knot when whispers so achingly sweet sounding filled his ears again. The four thirty five thank God, AM ignored the whispers again and continued to the safe room, but he couldn't find it. 'The Q pad his mind screamed, check the Q pad!'

Fumbling through his backpack he could barely see in side, the labyrinths florescent ceiling lights began to flutter as he dug around. Finally, he simply turns the pack upside down and lets its contents fall to the ground. Not caring if the Q pad broke in the process, he tossed the shirts and equipment aside and many other things before he found it face down on the tiled floor.

The 4:35 had come and gone, AM kneeling on the floor reached out slowly for the Q pad The whispers coming back, and that sinking

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feeling returns again, heavier than ever. If he tried to hear the whispers, he couldn't look at the Q pad trying to look at the Q pad, he couldn't hear the whispers. 'Dreams always have the strangest rules.' he would think later.

A choice, the universe or the voice...he had chosen the universe. Looking down at the Q pad screen, the wormholes that circled the earth began to slow down, and reverse in direction. The earth spun quickly forward, then began to reverse in direction. The wormholes surrounding the planet began to reverse a spin much quicker.

Horror filled AM's heart as each wormhole began to shake violently, the 3d graphical output for the Q pad couldn't keep up with readings. Before the screen blacked out the wormholes began to peel off of the earth like wet spaghetti noodles. Then all the lights were gone, putting him in darkness, even the cube had no light emanating from it. Then a flash of zero's and one's in harsh red filled the Q pad's screen.

A message scrolled up, SYSTEM CRASH in the same bright red font, the Q pads' screen flickered a white light making his face look like the Nosferatu. The earth appeared this time spinning violently backwards, off its axis. Not a 3d model of the earth, but the earth itself. The Q pad grew hot, hissing in pain he dropped it to the floor the screen faced up showing the worlds final tilts and spins.

Large cracks began to show all across the surface of the planet, like hairy black fingers AM's body felt like it was being crushed. The whispers return but are now screams...the labyrinth and the world surrounding it began to shake. AM covered his ears as gravity seemed to be pushing him down to the ground, either that or the force of the scream as the universe collapsed on him.

AM's eyes opened to the apartment still as cool and as quiet as when he laid down. His stomach slowly began to unwind as he saw that universe had not collapsed, he had crawled up into the corner of the couch as he slept. The sensation he was being crushed was his own doing. Pulling his head out of the cushions, he stood up but lost his balance and plunked back down on the couch.

Taking a few deep breaths and waiting several moments , AM thought back to his first dream.

"Dig," he said out loud

Finally standing back up, the pins and needles sensation fading, he made his way over to the window in the kitchen. You could see all the way to New Jersey on the roof, here all he could see was the night sky turning from violet to deep blue, the sun would be rising soon. His heart still thumped hard in his chest from the dreams apocalyptic ending.

Was something like that possible? AM thought so, he saw the power these cubes had. Putting his hand to his chest to calm his heart he noticed his shirt was drenched in sweat. He removed and tossed it to the floor, and reached into the refrigerator, and removed a water bottle and took a gulp.

He put it back in the refrigerator and went to the computer, and with mouse in hand began a search. AM himself was no fan of social websites, he had a Facebook account but only to keep in touch with certain friends and relatives that might otherwise drop by too often. He stopped cold when he logged in.

"Damn."

What the hell was his last name? He got up to see if Quake was in his room but no surprise, he stayed the night at the safe room. He doubted he would know his last name anyway. Pushing his palms into his eyes to rub out the last of his sleep he thought back to high school. His name was in the papers twice, he remembered seeing the name spelled out under his picture during the state finals, Doug Roberts...was it Roberts??

No school year books in the apartment of course, hardly a time worth remembering.

"No, Robins!"

Yes that's right, the charity bungee jump in the Poconos all the students dressed as superheroes. The article had made a quip about Dig being dressed as the Boy Wonder.

"Hey, it's my name sake," he was quoted as saying.

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A search through Facebook yielded no results for Dig or any relations, My space and Friendster the same. Through Google he had found archived articles from his high school playing days that was just a link to the high school's main website. There was nothing else about him, no status on him through the Alumni page either.

Did he still live in Porter? Or had he moved away? Was this the person to reveal their secret too? Why was he so damn sure?

"Because who else is there?" he said looking at the Servo model sitting on the monitor.

No one, AM turned the desk chair, got up and walked back over to the kitchen window. The sky was turning a luscious red-yellow as the sun made its way to the sky. It would be hot today.

Date July 16th 2011 universe 1

The wind blew threw his shaggy hair as he ran through the forest and hurdles a downed oak. Dry leaves are kicked up by his pounding feet, one foot steps into a small puddle and soaks his foot but it feels too good to stop. He passes a group of hikers, he knows there faces and waves as he passes on by.

"Hello Dig," one of them says

"Hi guys,"

He continues to run at a faster pace, forty pounds of beer and liquor burned away and forgotten, his lungs tobacco free for over a year was a hard won battle by itself. He had a disciplined regiment of sit ups, push ups, and running through Porter's mountainous countryside that he performed every morning since he had quit drinking. Dig decides to let up as the path went downhill now, and walk the rest of the way, as he wiped his sweaty brow with the front of his t-shirt.

The other battle was with giving up drinking. He put himself in the face of the devil that plagued him buy quitting drinking but still continuing to bar tend at John McCully's Pub were he lived in an apartment above, it was small but had a bathroom and bedroom and shelf

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for a few books and a table for a second hand computer.

Wandering around still drunk after he left the bridge, he found himself in front of Jeter's again. Jeter and Mindy were taking out the garbage as he walked by freezing. Rushing him inside and serving him coffee heavily laced with sugar as he wished, he told what had happened but left out the incident at the bridge, Mindy seemed quite upset already.

After Jeter talked to John McCully, owner of McCully's pub, and made him an offer of discounted auto work he agreed to let Dig live in the room above. With the little money Dig had, which he insisted Jeter take and the deed to his dead car he bought the motorcycle in his garage a small 500 cc Alpina from the mid eighties . Dig rode a motor bike all summer in the Pocono's and had always though about riding one again.

Dig had quit working at most of his jobs after leaving Cami, but working at McCully's getting good tips was hard to give up. 'You think you can bartend on the wagon?' his mind asked honestly. The first six weeks of sobriety were a surreal nightmare, it took tremendous will power to keep from sniffing his fingers or take a quick shot from the many green and clear bottles that decorated the back wall.

It was weeks before he slept more than two or three hours a night, waking up crying and panting, body pouring out sweat like he had run ten miles through hell's hottest neighborhood. The local Methodist church had AA meetings and suggested reading the good book, but to Dig Jesus was just as fictional as Santa or the Tooth Fairy, he read a book about the war in Afghanistan instead, it was a good book. Besides, he wanted to win on his own terms.

He was fighting a losing battle in the beginning, he felt on edge most of the time and was constantly puking and feeling like he had diarrhea. After so many nights of cold sweats and nightmares of a drunk old man that looked like him sleeping on a musty couch with a copy of the Porter Sun Gazette from the day he had hit the line drive to keep him warm.

One night he had woken from his nightmare momentarily forgetting where he was. After shaking the last of the chills out of his system and remembering where he was, he wandered to the living room to play computer solitaire but found a Reader's Digest magazine sitting on top of the keyboard, he some times purchased random magazines at the

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supermarket for something different to read. There was an article written by a Betty Ford clinic doctor who said that addiction was mostly psychological, he went on to explain that the biggest reason people can't quit smoking was that they needed to keep their hands busy. The constant flicking and tapping of the finger when holding a cigarette becomes ingrained into the subconscious mind becoming a behavioral pattern.

A test had been done where three groups of people attempted to quit smoking one group was told to hold a pencil between their fingers when craving, the second group was told to hold a golf ball when craving, and the third group went empty handed. The other two groups were told to hold on to the object as long as the urge stayed. The group that held the pencils showed a higher rate of success when quitting than the two other groups combined, the doctor explained that the smokers need to hold something between their fingers is what causes most to relapse.

So Dig took the article's advice and applied it to his drinking problem. When he got the urge to drink he would fill a glass with water and drink that. It hadn't worked very well, the first two times he tried, he vomited up what felt like three gallons of water on both occasions. Changing tactics he decided to use cranberry juice, the bitterness allowed him to nurse it slowly. He found green apples liquefied through a blender was a hell of a good drink, the sour and tartness reminded him of beer but with a sweeter after taste.

He drank grapefruit and cranberry juice by the gallon for the first six months, after another six months the urges became less and less, usually only needing to sip his juice and only because of thirst. The nightmares were becoming rare but were never gone. They could still sneak up on him like a cold on a summer day.

Any free time he had he would spend exercising or reading, mostly for the fun of it, but he had hoped it would help him if he should ever make another go at college. He figured it wouldn't hurt to expand his intellect. He never read much in school, a few stories by Poe when in grade school, Sleepy Hollow was another he had read in high school.

The Hobbit was one he read three times, and he had The Lord of the Rings books back ordered on Amazon.com. He didn't know if he was educating himself, but he enjoyed reading it. That was how he kept a simple life, enjoying the little things. He hadn't been dating either.

The thought of dating or even flirting with a woman made him feel the

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same way taking tests did. He wasn't sure if he could ever go through it again.

He even started a little garden. McCully had a big patch of yard that was behind the bar. Last summer he started growing some herbs and a few tomato plants which produced very sweet cherry tomatoes that fall. The regulars at McCully's especially enjoyed them when Dig put them on the BLT's he made.

This summer he had added a few more tomato plants and decided to grow some Jalapeño peppers for a hot wings recipe he read in a culinary magazine last spring. The football season would begin in a month or two and nothing compliments cold beer and football like hot wings. He came to the end of the path where the road began again. His Alpina old but clean, shines in the afternoon sun leaning on a large maple at the side of the road.

The town of Porter was below him, the cars and people milling around looked picturesque. He smirks and starts his bike and heads into town. Jeter and Mindy were the only others that knew most of what happened except the thought of jumping, he didn't want people to think he was crazy. He doubted Cami would go talking about it, her mother still lived in town where news like this would look poorly on mother as well, there were rumors of course, there always are.

The fact that it just happened so suddenly made people all the more curious. 'Just juicy gossip is what they want to hear,' his mind told him. 'stay above that.' When people did ask, which was rare and only in confidence they would claim, he would just shrug his shoulders and say "just because" as smart ass an answer as he could come up with.

He had only seen her once since then, it was about 8 months later. He was riding his bike on a late afternoon, he came to the stop sign where SR 405 comes across Dark Hollow road. A red Dodge Neon turning onto Dark Hollow road passed him, Cami was driving. The turn seemed forever but they locked eyes, her eyes went big as she sped her car off towards town.

Apparently she felt guilty or was afraid of him, Dig discovered he didn't really care. Crossing Main street, the motorbike vibrating under his body, he felt tense again as he always came to the same end, how long could this simplicity last him.

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Sure he was doing fine now, but ten, fifteen years down the line what then. How lonely he felt was not really a big deal to him. Not many people had ever been there for him anyway. And because of that he developed the classic case of I'll hurt you so you'll leave and can't hurt me, which was a way of life for him when dating.

He was horny but he didn't want to just take some girl home for a one night stand, it made him feel like a pervert, but that left him having stay celibate since he was mortified of commitment. In high school and for years afterward he would brag that if the devil had a dick he was it, taking woman to bed with no more than a second thought about it. 'Your trying to grow up' his mind told him.

Drinking was his past but there was still the rest of his life to get on with. He didn't feel anymore confident despite his turn around, he didn't pat himself on the back or even tell anybody he had quit drinking, he just did it. He walked past his garden which was bordered with various wild flowers, into his apartment towards an unknown future, scared.

July 18th 2011 Universe 1

AM drove down Main street, at a slow pace. It had been a while since he had been here last. Mom and dad were happy to see him, he stayed the night and begged off breakfast the next morning. He wanted to see old friends he told them. Just one, really, not even an actual friend.

"You just got here," his mother said sadly, with gray-green eyes that she had passed on to him.

"We'll have dinner, mom." he said distantly.

She gave him the same look when he was four years old and was getting a shot from the doctor. It was a motherly concerned look he had seen since he came over late last night. She asked if something was wrong once or twice but both times he would shake his head slowly like he was afraid his head would fly off his shoulders.

"Abe, honey." she never called him AM

He looked back at his mother hoping she would say I love you and let

him be.

"Is it girl trouble?"

"I have to go, love you." he said monotone and starting his car so he wouldn't have to pretend not to hear another questions.

The weather was hot and humid, summer in all its glory. Red white, and blue pennants and banners hung lazily on store front awnings, like leaves on a tree. The smell of burnt firecracker and the sound of the kids screaming with delight on a weekday morning made him smile despite his mood and the heat.

The air felt thick in the car, sweat clinging to his skin like a shirt as he rolled down the passenger window, the air conditioner never worked. He turned down Independence avenue and pulled in to the Time Kill gas station across from the shopping plaza. The man who came up to pump his gas was an older man in his fifties or sixties. He didn't look familiar to AM but it was a small town and figured he could try.

"Here, keep it," he said handing the man a twenty after he filled his tank "can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," the wiry haired man said happily pocketing his tip."ya lost?"

"No, actually I'm looking for a friend of mine. Dig Robins, do you know him?"

The man's face lit with recognition at the name.

"Oh yeah. I know long drive! He works at McCully's still but not the fridge factory no more. I worked there for the longest time too, but they even let me go."

The man almost seemed to pout when he spoke of being laid off.

"Oh, well do you happen to know where he lives?"

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The mans face went from pout y to concentration instantly, AM wondered if the man wasn't a little slow.

"He was livin at his girl's on...a... Cedar street I think. It's a mile from Jeter's garage uh... but he left there."

"Did he leave town?"

"No," he said smiling not realizing the inherent question.

"So he lives..." AM said not unkindly

"Oops uh I don't really know. I don't go to McCully's myself anymore, I just sit home with some Thunderbird anymore, too cheap my girl says."

"Do you know when he maybe at McCully's?"

"I think most nights he's there,"

AM gave the man another dollar for his help and decided to try and speak to this man Jeter, perhaps he and Dig had been neighborly.

The name wasn't familiar to AM, he had never driven while living in Porter and went to the one of many mechanics that seemed to grow out of the sidewalks in south Philly when his car gave him trouble. The place he drove up to looked a few years old but the sign out front looked new and expensive, it was a caricature of a man and woman on a motorcycle, the tail pipe shot out smoke that spelled out Jeter's, below that was Diesel Vehicles our Specialty. Two Penn Dot vehicles sat in the garage as well as a late model Harley Davidson that gleamed in the morning sun, making him think of how his Servo model gleamed the same way. Walking through the roll doors he was greeted by a lovely brown haired woman in greasy coveralls.

"Hey sweety, can I help you."

"Are you, Jeter?" he asked the woman who looked like the one on the sign.

She smiled and pulled her hair up in a pony tail.

"No that's my man's name. Hey, Jeter baby, a man wants to see you."

Jeter was quite the character, dressed like a biker with leather chaps and all and dark sunglasses, his jovial demeanor could get a smile out of anyone it seemed. He called AM, and even a customer on the phone, baby. His easy going manner made you want to be in a good mood.

He told him Dig was living at McCully's as well as working there, and gave him his business card and told him to stop by if his car should ever act up, the man was so nice AM made a point to do that. Getting back into his car and driving off into the heat, he wondered if searching out Dig as a partner was the right choice. It felt a little hasty to be seeking him out already, but choices were few.

McCully's was another place he had never gone too, the first bar AM ever visited was in Philadelphia while in college. He drank wine and the occasional beer, but rarely indulged since dropping out. Though dropping out and explaining to his parents with lies made him want to take a shot of whiskey.

When he first pulled up to the establishment, he though he was at the wrong place. The bar was built out of a ranch style house, with a bay window that had a curtain drawn across it, and a huge indoor out door porch. A closed sign hung on the front door.

A little orange motorcycle stood far down the side wall next to a door with a mail slot, guessing that was Dig's place, he went and knocked on the door, after five minutes with out an answer, AM got back into his car and decided to wait. He laid his head back, trying to think of the conversation about time travel and parallel dimensions he would have to instigate, he spent last night tossing and turning in his old bedroom thinking about it. He still hadn't told Quake either about Dig.

The scenarios of how to explain and approach the whole thing swirled like a tornado in his mind. Closing his eyes he thought of the reactions he might get if he tried to explain his reason for seeking him out. As he sat thinking in his car, eyes closed trying to fight off the sleep that wanted to embrace him but after a few minutes he dosed off. Dig came out of his apartment fifteen minutes later, hair

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damp from a quick shower not paying much attention to the car parked in front of the bar, hopped on his bike and was speeding off before AM woke up and caught an orange blur in his side view going by.

"Damn," he looked at his watch.

It was almost ten, he decided to sit and wait hoping Dig's departure would be brief. After dozing in and out of sleep for two hours in the car and no sign of the orange bike, AM saw the sign on the porch had been changed to open and went into McCully's to escape the oven of his car.

He opened the door which jingled, to a cool dark room. The bar sat in the middle of what would have been the living room. A door, presumably to the kitchen, smelled of fried chicken as he walked by and sat at the bar.

"Just makin lunch, be with ya in a second," said a voice from behind said door.

Two TV's sat bolted to the ceiling above the bar at each end, both were dark and silent, the cool of the bar was a relief to his baked skin. After sitting down on a stool a chubby man with rosy cheeks came out of the kitchen. He put a basket of fried chicken on one of the tables that were spread out over the former living room, and came over to AM licking grease and oil off his fingers. His nose as red as his cheeks were flaring as if he had run a four minute mile.

"What ya need, pal?"

"Pint of lager, please"

Placing the glass in front of him, the man asked if he wanted anything from the kitchen.

"No, thank you. Could you tell me does Dig Robins work here?"

"You play on the team together?" he said nodding his head past AM.

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He turned back and saw a variety of headlines from the Sun Gazette decorated the wall in cheap wood frames. One of them showed Dig his senior year, bat in hand securing the school's fourth consecutive state championship with a laser the caption under the picture said.

"No but we were in high school together and wanted to say hi."

"Well if his bike isn't there than he probably ain't home. You want me tell him you stopped by."

"I'll wait and see if he doesn't get back soon. How's the chicken?"

After two or three hours of lager and fried chicken and still no Dig, AM decided to try back tonight. Making his way he out walked over to the wall with newspaper headlines. Some went as far back as the mid sixties, mostly local sports, he looked at the picture of Dig, caught in mid swing.

Teeth gritted, his eyes looked filled with fury rather than concentration, AM wondered what he may have been thinking about as he swung. The bar had filled up with a few more customers while he waited so he didn't turn around when the door to the bar opened.

"Hey John I got gas for the genny, where do you want it?"

"In the basement, to damn hot for the shed, Dig"

AM turned around and saw the back of Dig's head as he made his way through the door that lead to the kitchen. AM sat back down and waited for him to return. After a minute he came back out.

"Hey Diggy, how was the bar be cue chicken I made for you?" said an attractive thirty something blond with thick curly hair.

"The best ever, Grace. Still stickin to my ribs." he said with a smirk and rubbed his sides.

He made his way to John, and handed over some money.

"What was that cheap bastard charge for a gallon of oil today?" John said counting the few bills that were handed to him.

"It's funny he asked the same thing about your chicken," Dig said nonchalantly.

The few patrons there laughed as John's face, already red, grew a darker shade of crimson.

"Go talk to your friend there while you mind the bar I need fresh air."

John passed Dig and headed back into the kitchen. Making his way behind the bar Dig looked around for a second before seeing the familiar face. AM nodded to him before speaking.

"Hey Dig"

A half smile appeared on his face when the name came to him.

"Abe, long time no see." he said holding out his hand.

"Yes it has been, but every one calls me AM now." he said shaking hands.

"OK,AM, what can I get for you?"

"Pint a lager,"

He turned around and pulled a glass from a cooler, filled it and placed it in front of AM.

"I wondered if you would remember me," he said taking a sip from the frosty glass.

"Yeah , I'll never forget that afternoon,"

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AM had to think momentarily before realizing Dig was not talking about the fight on the last week of school. Seeing AM was not remembering Dig with half a smile told him.

"You called that kid from Neuman high an uppity cracker during a debate. I laughed my ass off."

"I forgot all about that," he said with a chuckle.

AM 's first debate, during his freshman year, was about state rights vs the federal government. AM debated on the side of the federal government. The audience was mostly kids from detention, why they were there was still a mystery to AM. The debate got heated and after his opponent quoted Strom Thurmond, AM got angry.

The student from Neuman had said "Segregation is a matter of law and order not race!"

"It's not about law and order it's about INJUSTICE!" he said slamming his fist down on the podium on that word with a burning passion in his eye's.

A couple of the students black and white cheered for AM when they saw how angry he had gotten. The Neuman student had then begun to quote the fire storming senator from the south.

" You and Strom are UPPITY CRACKERS!!!"

The audience laughed and applauded but AM still got disqualified.

"You won over a few people that day,"

AM laughed now but was embarrassed at the time, and he hadn't won over mom and dad that day. The detention that followed, and the grounding was not something he was very proud of either.

"The follies of youth," AM said with a smile and raising his glass

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"Hey Dig make me a margarita, sweety" said an older woman with lips painted a loud orange.

"Sure Val, hey you know you look more and more like Rue McLanahan every day."

More people began to come in keeping Dig busy, the Phillies were playing and both TV's had been turned on and he was in and out of the kitchen bringing food out and the occasional margarita. AM decided to wait another day before talking to Dig. Upending the last of his drink, AM made his way to the front door.

"Callin it quits for the day?" Dig said from behind the bar.

"Yes I promised my parents I would go out to dinner with them today. It was good seeing you."

"Like wise, don't be afraid to come by. Your good people."

AM nodded and went out the door, but hesitated before leaving the porch. He turned and went back inside.

"Hey, Dig?"

Dig turned from the cash register to look at AM.

"What's up?"

"Why did you stop Peter Rosen from beating me up?"

The half smile appeared on his face again. Perhaps it was the debate that won him Dig's protection, other than that he was clueless.

"Us Msties got to stick together." he said with a wink.

"Hey Diggy sweety, I need another!"

"Coming Ms McLanahan,"

"So fresh." said Val with a mischievous smile

"Like a cucumber."

Dig said as he made his way into the kitchen with out a look back. AM stood thinking for a moment before going back outside to his car. He decided make a trip back to Philly tomorrow and talk to Quake.

"Did you tell him anything?" Quake asked in a higher tone of voice than normal when he found out the following day.

AM sat across from Quake, one leg crossed over the other, arms resting on his lap, the picture of calm. He hoped Quake would be more reasonable to his choice.

"No, I didn't ask him, all he knows is that I'm in the neighborhood."

"He was a fuckin jock, man, and what because you both like the same frigging show."

He wasn't a fan of MST3K, the few times he watched he was more trying to watch the movie than hear the riffing.

Quake turned back to his computer but turned back a second later to speak, but AM spoke first.

"I need you to get past all the old rivalries and clicks. High school is over, you even said he never bothered you personally. Like it or not he had my back that day."

"Your back? OK Mr fuckin thug. I just heard things is all I'm saying"

"What did you hear?"

Quake turned back to his desk of monitors and towers.

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"That he's an alki, I've been on Facebook too, mother fucker, I've seen your search history. Try searching for ex girlfriends next time. I heard he caught one in bed with some dude, and beat the shit out of him and his girl." he said head half turned to AM, fingers still clicking on the keyboard.

"He didn't seem that bad to me."

"Yeah well, if he's workin in a bar I can only imagine what his liver is like. Maybe he didn't fuck with you or me in school, but what if he's crazy. He was in a lot a fights in school, other than that douche bag Rosen," he said facing the monitors again. "I don't think you need to be taking an angry drunk across time and shit. "

AM sat quietly for a moment looking at the monitors showing different renditions of earth, all spinning on its axis. Some with wormholes spinning along side them.

"It could all be rumors. I'll talk to him some more, if he is really as bad as all that your heard well then..."

Quake turned around to face his cousin.

"Just don't say I didn't warn you, by the way I fixed the values on the Q pad's navigation. It was easy to figure out what I did wrong but it wont happen again I promise."

He said opening an energy drink, the pop of the can seemed to emphasize his promise.

"Did you make the copies I asked for?" AM Said getting up.

Quake with a sigh got up and walked to the corner of the safe room, rifling through a milk crate filled with disks that sat upon other crates filled mostly with disks. Pulling out a stack of nearly a dozen and handed them to AM.

"I'll be back." he said putting the disks in his backpack.

AM made his way to the door.

"No thank you?"

AM Turned and bowed "I thank you, sir"

"Get the fuck outta here." Quake said in mock disgust.

With a laugh AM left. The drive back to Porter was quick, the afternoon was still young and traffic was light. The sky was filled with heavy rain clouds that slowly made their way over Porter. Pulling up to McCully's he saw Dig pushing an ancient looking push lawn mower in a tin shed shirtless, absently brushing grass clippings off himself.

He looked to be in better shape than AM would expect for a heavy drinker, perhaps the alcoholism was just a rumor. He was still rummaging about in the shed before he noticed AM walking over.

"Hey AM, what's up?" he said placing his hands on his lower back and stretched and grimaced when his back cracked.

"I wanted to stop by and give you something."

He unshouldered his back pack and removed the disks Quake had given him.

"You missed my birthday by a few months. "

"It's a thank you for picking up for me back in school."

He took the disks still in their cases and read the label on the top one.

"MST3K season 1, holy shit."

A whole smile filled his face, making AM smile.

"It's every episode from every season, enjoy."

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"This is cool, I haven't seen this show in years. Hey I was gonna fire up the grill, stick around I'll throw on a steak."

They sat across each other on the picnic table, the air filled with an aroma of grilled meat and fresh cut grass, the smell of summer. The steak was rare and juicy and garnished with fresh mushrooms and a baked potato. They talked about school and Porter, books they read, reminiscing about episodes of MST3K.

"HIKEEBA!" Dig shouted ,a riff from MST3K, at one point and both laughed until their eyes welled up with tears.

"I always wanted to shout that at someone during a debate back in high school." AM said wiping tears from the corners of his eyes.

Although the day looked like rain the sun broke through after only a few drops. They didn't have any beer or alcohol, the drinks Dig offered were three or four different juices or water, AM chose the latter. Dig drank lightly from his grapefruit juice, seeming to nurse it, the thought of grapefruit juice made AM's teeth grit.

"I'm surprised you could drink something like that, is it mixed with something?" he asked as casually as he could sound.

"No, I quit drinking. " he said "at least alcohol anyway" and raised his glass to show his point.

"Did you have a drinking problem?"

Dig put his glass of juice down and shrugged.

"I did, I haven't had alcohol in over 17 months. "

"That's got to be hard, if your bar tending. Why deal with it?"

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Dig was silent for a moment looking up at the breaking clouds in the sky.

"I told myself at first because of the good money, but the reason I do it is because I knew it would be hard to do. "

"To your courage." AM said lifting his water bottle to him.

"nah... " Dig said with a wave of his hand not feeling the least bit courageous, although AM was sincere.

"What brought on the sudden change" AM asked though he had a fairly good idea.

Dig looked down at the table with an awkward grin.

"I walked in on my girlfriend in bed with another guy." he said picking up his head and looked at AM.

"Christ, that's horrible." he was expecting it to be the reason but still felt sympathetic.

Dig took another sip of his juice, and shrugged

"In the end it was for the best. I started feeling like a party guest that had over stayed his welcome, you know. I never really felt at home there anyway, I've been on my own since I finished high school."

"What about your mom? You ever see her anymore?"

"No, last time I talked to her was about two years ago right around the time I got on the wagon, she called from Atlantic City to borrow money. I was broke myself and told her I couldn't so she got pissed and hung up."

The thought of having no one had never really occurred to AM, he had a fairly large family and plenty of cousins besides Quake. Other than his mother Dig didn't have any family.

"That's got to be tough, at least you have a home of your own now." AM said

Dig nodded his head though he sometimes wasn't so sure. He had a grandmother on his fathers side that lived in Lancaster, she was sweet old lady that smelled like mothballs and peppermint candy, there was a neat and tidy kitchen with a large green GE refrigerator, that was covered with magnets. One had a sketch of an Amish farm, in the back ground was a whole family in the yard, with men hammering and sawing on lengths of wood and women bringing out food and placing it on a table similar to the one they sat at now. In the foreground was a boy in stride in the direction of the family waving.

Emblazoned on the bottom in bright yellow was "Home Is Where The Heart Is." He didn't understand it as a kid, but the last few years had showed him what it meant. He didn't want to tell AM all of that it felt complicated, so he changed the subject.

"So how come you call your self AM, now?"

"Well when I started at Penn college I had a roommate who worked at the radio station there WPNN, Mother Goose he called himself on air, he was the morning drive guy of a real popular call in show, he said I had a good voice, and thought I should be his co-host. At first I called my self honest Abe, but he thought and several callers agreed it sounded pretentious. So he suggested using my initials because it would be perfect because it was a morning show. It kind of stuck with me ever since. "

"Damn, I wish my nick name was that clever." he said with half a smile.

"How did you get yours?"

"When I was about 8 years old, my mom bought me a Nintendo at a flea market, with the game Dig Dug. It was the only one I ever got so it was the only one I played, so mom would call me Dig, I think it was during one of here attempts at sobriety." he said taking a bigger sip from his juice.

There was a silence that followed for minute before AM spoke.

"Did you ever try for college, maybe on a baseball scholarship?"

"Ha," he said with a smirk. " no, I couldn't hit for shit, and I graduated school only because of that hit. So what did you major in at Penn?"

"Law, but now I study history."

"You want be a teacher?"

AM never thought about teaching, his parents were upset when he dropped out of college, he told them he wanted some time to think his life over . After a few years of that he told them he wanted to back pack through America, which was true in it's on way. When he arrived last night he told them he thought about writing a book only out of a desperate attempt to keep them from asking what he did with his time.

"No...I think I might write a book. "

"What kind of book? "

History, he thought. It's about what all his notes come down too in the end. A first hand account of life in America's past, he'd have to sell it as historical fiction of course.

"History, though my parents think I should have stuck going to law school."

"Yeah, you were good at debating that kid from Neuman though," he said with a smirk.

"True, but a judge would not accept that as a valid argument."

"Yeah maybe" he said "It still beats this place. "

"You seem to be doing OK."

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Dig looked at his juice thinking. He looked off in the distance at all the large oaks that surrounded the town of Porter as they had for hundreds of years as far as Dig knew.

"I guess, I wrestle every day with how fucked up my life was, now I just try and get my shit together. I made a garden because I feel restless, like I've wasted all this time and I feel like I'll lose my mind if even a second is being wasted. I just wish...no I want....fuck."

Dig threw his hands up in frustration, he couldn't word his feeling's the way some people could.

"You want more out of life you mean?"

"Yeah, or maybe I want to feel like I'm not stupid or a fuck up. I wont go back to drinking, but I wake up sometimes in the middle of the night and..." he never told anyone about this but he had begun to consider AM a friend. "my hearts pounding, I feel like I just had a winning lottery ticket and used it to light a cigarette. I feel like I put myself in a stupid situation sometimes. It doesn't get any stupider than this I guess."

"That's a riff from MST3K." AM said with a laugh.

"Huh, I always hear it in my head. I could never remember where I first heard it." he said laughing himself.

AM felt confident about Dig now, school fights and cult TV shows aside, the fact that he had willingly battled his demons with such poor odds on his succeeding showed AM the strength and courage that to Dig was simply something that had to be done. The pain of his last rip still sat heavy in his stomach, what Dig had to deal with over the years was something a kin to hell.

Dig's eye's went back up to the sky, taking in it's enormity he said:

"I just take each day keeping the fear out of me from not knowing who or what I'll be five or ten years from now. All I have is my garden, my books' and my bike."

"Would you like to work with me?"

Dig's eye's left the sky and went over to AM.

"Work with you? Doin what?"

"Researching history."

"I don't know much about history...I've read a few books on World War 2 and a book about the war in Afghanistan. But I don't think that would make me a historian."

"That's not an issue."

"Look, it's not that I don't want too, I just don't see how I can help you write a book."

"Then just come to the city with me, for an interview if you like. If you don't want to then you just say no."

Dig scratched his chin thinking before answering.

"Philly, huh? You got an office there?"

"I suppose you could say that."

"OK, let me clean up first."

AM Drove back to Philly with Dig after excusing himself to shower. He had hoped the traffic wouldn't be too bad but it was five o'clock and rush hour was peaking.

"So why me?" said looking out the window as the cars slowly made there way over the Schuylkill river. "You could probably get some college kid to help you for free."

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"Probably, but it's the research that I need the most help with, it's not for the faint of heart." AM said keeping his eyes on the road.

"You make it sound like bungee jumping, is researching history that exiting?"

AM thought for a moment and said:

"Sometimes,"

The answer confused Dig, but didn't ask anymore questions. Because of a traffic accident the trip took close to two hours, by seven thirty AM was parking in front of his apartment.

"It's a few blocks from here."

"Lovely neighborhood, that hookers' purple blouse really brings out the of the color of her eye shadow,"

AM smiled and led the way: "Follow me."

They walked at a brisk pace, Dig took in all the people walking the streets, it had been a few years since he last came to the city. It was when the Phillies went all the way in 08, he and a group of friends stormed Broad street the second game 5 was over. They spent the whole night drinking at a local sports grille hiding from an out of season storm. Dig went home with a red headed Irish girl named Renee that screwed him until the sun was up.

They came to Broad and Mifflin streets. Making there way towards the subway station, Dig wondered if they were heading down town. But instead of entering AM walked to the back of the station. Dig followed and came upon a large heavy duty door. It was blue and had a red sign forbidding entry. Dig knocked on the door, as AM looked for the keys, it was solid and hurt his knuckles.

"Is this cool? I mean us going in here?" Dig asked a little nervous.

"I should hope so, my cousin Quake and I own it. Do you remember,

Quake?"

Dig shrugged as if to say he wasn't sure.

"No matter I suppose, " he said and inserted the key into the lock.

The door creaked loudly even over the noise of buses, cars, and pedestrians heading home. The door opened to a brightly lit staircase of steel, the floor was tile and the walls were concrete painted a light beige. AM held the door open and gestured for him to follow.

"So you own the subway, your like the guy on the monopoly game, how much for a hotel on Mifflin, I'll pay half!"

Dig made his way down as AM closed and locked the door with a laugh.

"No just a small section under it."

The city noise was all but snuffed out behind the heavy door, but a subway train could be heard in the distance. Dig followed him down the steps and into an immense hallway. The ceiling the same color as the walls and was adorned with fluorescent lights and dusty black pipes that were huge in diameter. The hallway seemed to stop dead but Dig saw it was an optical illusion as he approached the end of it.

"I thought it was a dead end" he said surprised to find it was a t junction.

"Yes, I had it designed that way. Were almost there."

Dig still confused, followed. After a few more turns down seemingly endless hallways AM stopped and turned to face a wall that was the same as any of the others, except that it had the words "player 1 start" spray painted on the floor. After a minute of silence, Dig spoke.

"So you built this place to research history, I would gone to a library but that's just me."

AM Ignored the remark.

"Do you believe in aliens?"

Dig was not prepared for such a question.

"I heard illegal immigration affects all of us, at least Lou Dobbs says so."

AM smiled but it was small and looked at Dig with seriousness.

"AM, your confusing me."

"This thing I'm going to show you is confusing at first, but if you see it, I'll have an easier time explaining the rest."

He kneeled down and unshouldered his back pack and took out what looked to be an I pad, but had a black metallic cube sitting on its top. He tapped on its screen and spoke into the I pad

"Quake, were here."

After a second or two Quake responded.

"Is he there?" he asked with mild annoyance.

"Yes, were going to do a rip any travel suggestions."

"1829 might be a good choice but it's April there if you go now," AM was quite thinking for a minute, before answering.

"OK."

Dig watched the whole exchange feeling like a the only person in the world who didn't know what they were talking about. AM rummaged through his back pack and removed two long black coats of wool.

"What's with the trench coats?"

"It might be cold, but we'll have to make do." he said standing up and putting on his coat

"It's July,"

"We can't have anybody see our clothes,"

Dig stared at AM trying his best to understand him but was at a loss.

"I believe I can trust you, I just need you to trust me. Stand back." he said nodding back at the wall.

AM tapped some more on the screen, than held the end firmly in hand and turned it back and forth slow at first, then faster. Dig looked at the wall while putting on the coat, not seeing anything at first, but suddenly the wall began to look hazy as if heat were coming off it. The concrete seemed to ripple like water, as if a stone had dropped through it. Dig's eyes widened as it seemed to swirl in a clockwise motion. The wall looked like water going down a drain, it mesmerized Dig, almost like the stars at night would.

"What the hell is this?" Dig asked apprehensively

"If you go through it will be easier to explain."

Dig looked back at AM who kept his eyes on the I pad screen

"You said you enjoyed Tolkien right?" AM said eyes now on the him

"Yeah," he said still looking at the wall that looked like a sink drain.

"Watch your feet or you'll get swept away. "

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AM didn't know how else explain it, but the comparison was fitting for Dig. Nodding his head a half smile on his face he responded the same way he did when he first went bungee jumping.

"Fuckin A!"

And leaped through the wormhole.

Date: April 9 1829 Universe: 1

Dig landed in a heap on the ground, a cold wind went through him. He thought he was suffocating but his breath caught, the idea that this would be like bungee jumping was close enough for him to describe it to AM later. He had that feeling of being motionless when he was falling through the air back in Poconos. Standing up he brushed the dirt and leaves from his coat, the fact that it was windy and cold made the trip feel even more surreal.

"Where the frig am I?"

"Broad and Mifflin,"

Dig turned back and saw AM standing behind him putting his Q pad back into his pack.

"Is...Is this the past? Is that what you meant by 1829"

"Yes" he said walking past Dig and out onto the road that lay in front of them, the day was unseasonably cold despite the sun. Looking back over his shoulder Dig saw a stream by large trees. Beyond that the trees continued to expand in size and sprawl out in an area that would be row homes in the next century, Dig realized it was a forest behind him.

"Come see Broad street, and south Philly."

They walked for a few hours as AM explained all that he could to him. The smell of exhaust and and the din of motors of the 21st century was

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absent. The smells of early 19th century south Philadelphia were similar to Porter, an old country smell of hay and woods and dung.

The idea that this rough urban sprawl was once swamp and forest surprised Dig. Broad street, one of the largest in the city was a dirt road with piles of horse dung, there were no houses but there was a large farm that sat a few hundred feet back and random shanty houses that looked like undersized sheds that were sitting along the road. The rush hour traffic for this day and age was horses led sometimes by a buggy or being ridden by a farmer.

"Time ripping?"

"Yes, the crash literally caused rips in the fabric of time. That's why I call it time ripping"

"And this is just one universe, what are the others like?"

"I haven't gone to any others yet, some might only be accessible through the Willies."

"The more unstable ones you mean,"

AM nodded.

"And we stop aging?"

"Only while ripping, look at this."

AM raised his hands with finger splayed out.

"You got a manicure?"

AM shook his head and said:

"My nails stopped growing, as well as hair when ever I am ripping, I was gone for four years and never had to trim my nails shave or get a

hair cut." he rapped on the air with a shave and a hair cut.

" I have spent nearly a dozen years in different times while in the past, let me ask you do I look forty?"

To Dig he still looked about mid twenties, though his eyes had a different look to them, as if carrying a heavy burden.

"No."

"We can still get sick and need to eat and sleep, were not invincible."

"What does that manuscript your uncle wrote say about it?"

"It was vague to say the least. There may even be wreckage from the space craft still lying about some where."

"Damn, and we go after it even if it's in a blaze a glory?" he said with a smirk

AM stopped walking and faced Dig, his eyes showed the seriousness of the situation.

"Yes, Dig this could be as dangerous as being a soldier or a spy or who the hell knows what else. Some universe may have already been altered, ours may have in some way and we may never know it. These cubes allow cross dimensional time travel. The space craft itself crashed and caused these rips. If someone with ill intent and a good brain finds a cube or some of the wreckage it could be disastrous."

"OK, OK, I'm not afraid."

They began walking again.

"I don't doubt your courage, but you must realize lives will most certainly be lost, and temptations are plentiful."

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Dig could hardly disagree, the idea of going in the past and betting on the 69 Mets to go all the way or perhaps on the Mike Tyson-Buster Douglas fight, or maybe screw with history and use the cubes to enhance weapons instead of I pads and sell it to the highest bidder. Maybe Hitler would offer a piece of land the size of France for it , or the Confederacy would receive it at a special discount from a sympathetic racist.

"So how many wormholes are there in this dimension?"

"Three, but only one we have a definite location for, somewhere in South Philly circa 1993 , the other is some where in the nineteenth century possibly this state, the third is a dimensional gateway to the next universe, with another cube I'm sure Quake will be able to get a definite location. I tried locating the 1993 cube but a miss calculation shot me 5 years too far, which made location impossible. If the coordinates are not exact, the Q pad can't track it."

"Has it been sitting around since 1947?"

"No, if we went to far before 1993 it wont be there, the crash in 1947 sent debris not just on my uncles land but across time and dimension. At some point in the early 1990's it crashed unobserved, I've been over every news paper for the first half of the decade looking for any news story in south Philly dealing with unknown lights or UFOs or anything of that nature which was beyond explanation."

"Did you have any luck?"

"No, nothing."

The wind picked up again sending a chill through them.

"Will we be able to get back, I mean we wont get stuck here will we?"

"No this is an easy rip, I have done plenty by myself. "

"What for?"

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"The safe room and labyrinth, I needed to acquire funds." removing his pack once more AM opened it and pulled out what looked like a comic book and handed it to Dig.

"Detective comics number one , this is the first batman comic isn't it?! Is there anything you don't have in that thing?"

"The other six copies,"

Dig guffawed with laughter, a man with a straw hat walking passed them looked back suspiciously at them, AM put a finger to his lips but was smiling.

"You have another six? How did you get six?" Dig asked quietly.

"I had fifteen to start with" AM said smiling as he put it back. "I picked them up from different newsstands and five and dimes and corner stores in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, during the mid 30's. I sold them to private collectors in the present, and bought gold. Not certificates mind you but actual coins. Running is exercise for you but lugging around thousands of dollars in gold coins before the existence of cars is an exercise itself." he said pulling out his arm out of his coat sleeve showing his muscles in a mock pose.

"Popeye would be proud."

AM laughed before continuing.

"I only did it because it was a necessity, I don't like to think about it too much. I was afraid I might destroy the universe but I had no choice."

"But why build it in South Philly? Why not a cabin in the woods around Porter, or some place were there aren't many people?"

"Sometimes, the best place to hide is right in front of your face. People come and go through that subway by the thousands each week, even when it was still a stage coach at the turn of the 20th century. But a man running up into the woods might draw curious onlookers, even

if of the harmless local variety."

The thought of hiding in plain sight would never have occurred to Dig, it was genius when he thought about it. Dig found himself relieved to think some one like AM had discovered these cubes, or at least a relation of his had anyway. The wind picked up again, Dig shivered visibly and buried his hands deep into his pockets.

"When do we go back? I'm freezing."

"Tomorrow. We camp back where we entered."

"Were staying here?" he said stopping in his tracks.

AM walked a few feet before realizing Dig had stopped.

"Yes, when we go searching for the cubes we maybe be gone for months before locating and retrieving it."

"But how long will we be gone, I mean back home how long?"

"I honestly don't know. Each time we go anywhere the time that passes back in our time varies. The most amount of time that past back home for me was a week and a half, that was after a few months in the mid 50's...1950's that is."

"That's a lot,"

AM nodded and began walking again, Dig followed.

"I was gone for four years recently and only a day and a half had passed back home. It is a constant variation that doesn't seem to have any pattern to it."

"Do I get my own Q pad? I've never even used an I pad before."

"Do you have a computer, have you ever used any programs at all?"

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"Yeah, I've surfed the web but I don't know how to do much else except play a few shooter games."

"Well I can teach you how to use the apps, there very simple."

They returned to there entry point just as the sun began to set, AM placed his bag on the ground and hunched over it. After a few seconds he stood up with a hatchet in one hand and a small yellow bottle with a tiny nozzle. The words lighter fluid was written on it in black marker.

"You know how to start build a fire?"

"Yeah, I've camped out plenty of times."

He handed the items to Dig and rummaged in his bag some more, he then pulled out a pair of wool gloves and 2 thick hats that were similar to the Davy Crockett hats in the old Disney movie.

"We need something to eat. "

He handed Dig one of the hats but kept the gloves, while putting them on he said:

"There's a shop about a mile and a half west of here, I shouldn't be too long,"

"Do you have money?"

"Of course, I always keep money when I rip." he said and shook his coat pocket, emitting a jingling sound.

"What do I do if somebody comes?" he said anxiously

The thought of being here alone made his stomach twist. Making his way out of camp he said over his shoulder:

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"It's not likely, just relax the population here is low."

With out waiting for a response AM walked briskly in the direction of the setting sun, he was a speck on the road after a few minutes. Dig wondered how he would be able to make his way back, the sun would be gone in a few minutes and no street lights. Standing there for a moment he began to worry, what happened if AM got robbed on the way, what if he got killed by a runaway horse or a bear foraging, or a thief looking for food, while waiting for him to return.

It chilled his spine to think how possible it could be. There were no police driving around with there spotlights shinning, if someone decided to kill him how could they catch the killer? No fingerprinting no DNA, how did police ever catch anybody in this day and age? The howl of the wind brought his paranoia to a halt.

"I'll freeze to death before any body has a chance to kill and eat me," he said heading into the woods with his hatchet and the last of the sun setting behind the young city.

Two hours had passed before AM returned. Dig was tossing hunks of wood into the fire before noticing a light a few hundred feet away. Standing up Dig saw the light move back and forth in a waving gesture. Dig waved back not sure if he could be seen himself.

"Did you hit the Walmart or did you piss all the money away at some fancy place."

"No, I didn't care for Walmart's meat selection." AM said putting down a lantern and a bulging roll of paper from under his arm.

He removed the roll of paper tied up with a piece of twine, in it was a gutted carcase and a small cooking pan made of iron.

"Rabbit." AM said.

The meat was stringy and tough, it reminded Dig of deer jerky that he would sometimes purchase at the liquor store when he had still been drinking. A stream lay about twenty yards away that was used for drinking water and cooking. The stars filled the sky, without the streetlights the sky

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was similar to what Dig would see back home. AM sat opposite him, his legs crossed tapping away on the Q pad screen, the alien cube glowing green.

The wind had died down in the last hour, and the fire kept most of the cold away. All was quiet until a fierce but distant scream emanated from deep in the woods brought Dig out of his star gazing. He stood up hatchet in hand wishing he had a hunting rifle.

"Fuck that was a mountain lion!"

AM stayed in the same position legs crossed in a fashion that would make any Buddhist proud.

"Yes, they usually avoid people. By the sound of it, I think it's already found its dinner." he said coolly without looking up from the Q pad.

Sitting back down, Dig felt a little foolish. To AM it was all in a days work, he had probably slept in plenty of places where things like electricity and cars were still science fiction. The thought of that made Dig ask his next question.

" You have to have friends smarter than me. Why I am I the lucky guy?"

"Your smart, but brains alone isn't enough. When I said you were courageous back at your place, I was being serious. What you did to get your life together says more than anything else about you."

Dig, feeling self conscious about such an assessment, shrugged his shoulders but was too embarrassed to agree, so he asked another question.

"So you got stuck for four years, what did you all that time?"

AM stopped tapping, his face never leaving the screen, but his eye's went distant. For a second, Dig could again see the years that he should have aged in those eyes.

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"I read mostly..." he said looking up at Dig. He waited for the next question but it did not come. Satisfied AM changed the subject.

"Here I want you to have this."

He leaned over into his backpack and brought out a Q pad, a short flat plug similar to a USB stuck out of the top where the cube was connected, Dig got up and took the Q pad, getting his first good look at the device. It was similar looking to the I pad's he saw advertised every where. The logo that decorated the back though was not an apple, but the letter Q with a lightning bolt finishing the letter.

The icons on the touch screen were many but a few were obvious, one for music another for movies one for a camera. Others were less familiar.

"The music and movies are loaded with whatever strikes your fancy, it's also an E-reader and has a few hundred books on it as well.

"What are these icons on the screen, I mean these weird looking ones?"

"The one on top right with the magnifying glass is like a GPS it's called Sir Doyle, in the right time and dimension we use it to track the cubes, "

AM gestured for Dig to sit next to him, and took his Q pad from him and tapped on the screen and showed it to Dig, which showed the area they were sitting from a top down perspective.

"The cube is seeing everything around it like a satellite, this blinking green dot is our cube. Here take it and walk away a few feet and look at the screen."

Getting up Dig walked straight into the forest forgetting momentarily about the mountain lion. Sure enough the screen tracked his every step even showing tiny tree icons representing the forest that surrounded them.

"Wow, it's like one of those Tom toms." Dig said sitting back down again and handing the Q pad back.

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"This icon on the left that is shaped like like a worm is the most important one. It's how we control the wormholes."

He pressed the icon and showed the screen to Dig, a three dimensional representation of the earth appeared, surrounding it was a blueish looking tube spinning at the same speed as the earth.

"This is just one dimension, ours, press it."

Dig tapped it, the screen closed in on the wormhole, it moved smoothly enough, despite the fact it seemed to have three smaller ones sticking out of it. One spun erratically and was moving back and forth sometimes fast sometimes slow. The second was much slower in it's rotation but would seemingly disappear at one end then reappear at the other. The third was stationary and spun slowly.

"Those are the rips in our universe, one Willy, one Stiffy, and the third is to the next dimension, most probably a mirror universe of our own dimension. That is of course if the cube's are still undiscovered."

"How do we control them?"

"When we lock on to a wormhole we harness it by turning the Q pad back and forth," AM made a see saw gesture with his hand " it's similar to tug of war, but your not pulling your rotating the worm to your position. The faster you go, the better control, but the Willy's are too strong for me to control by myself."

"How many dimensions are there?"

"At least nine, but we know of only these three wormholes. We don't know how badly the other dimensions have

been affected, if at all. With each cube we find we'll be able to see the other dimensions better. They act like antenna's, the more we have the better the reception"

"This is unreal, this thing is like something out of Star Trek, so

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does Best Buy have a charger for this or can I plug it in to the camp fire when the battery is low." Dig said studying the cube with a half smile.

"No," AM said. "on the side of the Q pad there is a latch that opens it like a book, inside are solar panels hard wired into the battery, simply face the panels at any light source."

Dig pressed the screen and looked over the many apps. It all seemed complicated, but Dig was excited to learn all that he could.

"So we find every cube and pieces of the alien ship, and then what happens?"

"I don't know, nothing is certain"

Seeing the worry on Dig's face AM tried to reassure him.

"We just have to work at making sure humankind is free and safe."

"This means a lot to you,"

"I would defend this with my life."

Yes, Dig thought, he was glad AM was the one who wound up with the cubes. The pride in his voice made Dig feel proud that he happened upon this friendship. Lifting up a can filled with water Dig tilted it towards AM.

"To your courage."

The evening went uneventfully, by sunrise AM was up and gathering their supplies, Dig groggily came out of sleep, still amazed by the sites of a much more country looking Philadelphia. The world around them still quiet, far off a rooster squawks the new morning. When they gathered up their supplies they walked into the forest a little ways to make sure no one would see them.

"OK, press the tequila bottle icon, and then the Stiffy."

Dig looked at him nervously, he felt cool about it last night when he told him he was going to get them home. He felt OK with it after taking a leak in the woods earlier he felt less than confident about it while packing up there gear, right now he felt like vomiting.

"You have nothing to fear, but fear itself."

Dig nodded wondering where he heard that before, and pressed the wormhole on the screen, immediately he felt a shift of invisible force in the Q pad that shook him to the elbows, on screen the worm hole filled it top to bottom, it looked like glowing circle of blue yarn. The spinning reminded Dig of the spiral graphs he played with as a child.

"Face this tree, and stand still if you move around to much the wormhole will keep moving."

Nodding again he placed his feet firmly on the ground, he felt like he was going to bat, digging his heels in, mouth closed tight, nostrils flaring.

"Start turning, but start slow and then go faster when it tries turning the opposite way."

He started slow at first, keeping his eyes' on the large oak in front of him, waiting for it to start shimmering.

"Keep an eye on the Q pad, make sure it's center on the screen by leaning forward or you won't get through."

The wormhole was half way off the screen, but when leaning forward the wormhole filled the screen again, that's when the bark of the tree began to look hazy. The invisible force that seemed to focus on the Q pad made his arms want to turn it counter clock wise, as AM said it would.

"It's hard to control, it keeps trying to go the other way,"

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"Close your eyes and think about a ticking clock, you can't force it, let your mind move your hands clock wise with the ticking clock."

The idea seemed strange, but Dig tried. He pictured the clock he would stare at while in detention back in high school. Just an ordinary clock you would see in any school or office building, white face black numbers and a red seconds hand. Dig would watch that one, wishing the hour hand would move as quickly as the seconds hand as he sat waiting for detention to end.

The hands on the clock in his mind began to move forward, the minute hand picking up speed, the hour hand much slower but picking up with each pass of the other hands. The black hands, spun faster and faster causing the numbers to blur and streak like fresh black ink. The streaked number started to swirl, points of light appearing at the ends of some of the streaks, slowly changing into a wormhole. The white face becomes black as the streaks turn blue.

"You did it!"

Dig snapped back from his memory of detention, the invisible force had been greatly reduced, the words "TEQUILA" appeared on the screen, a sound bite from the song Tequila emanated out of the Q pad

"Go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

Dig walked towards the swirling bark of the tree, anxious to get that feeling of weightlessness again.

"Oh Dig."

He turned and looked back, to a smiling AM.

"Just walk through, falling on concrete hurts"

Dig smirked and walked through the tree. Catching his breath he returns to the beige hallway, walking a few feet forward he turns and watches AM step out of the wormhole. The wormhole reacts to his body and quivers as he

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steps out. After a few seconds the swirl continued a clock wise motion then slowed down into tiny ripples before disappearing.

"I can't believe I did that." he said removing the wool coat tossing it to AM. " I mean it was like turning a knob the wrong way and then..."

"The clock." he said taking off his wool coat and tucking them under his arm. "it's telepathy of some sort, I can't maintain control unless I picture a clock of some sort."

Dig exhaled deeply taking in that information, the warm air was a welcome change.

"Telepathy, but that means you can move objects, like that girl Carrie."

"It seems more like a meta-physical telepathy rather than the teen-age angst pigs blood telepathy," he said tapping his forefinger on his chin as if it were a real comparison.

Dig laughed and followed AM to the safe room.

"Were you serious about the telepathy?"

"Yes, after reading my uncles manuscript a few times I had figured it out. After a few rips, I tried picture something other than clocks."

"Like what."

"Egg timer, stop watch, even a sun dial, they worked but not as well as a clock."

After a few minutes of what seemed like random turns they reached a door that looked identical too all the others. It required 2 sets of keys to unlock the door. The room was small but felt cozy with crates and file cabinets and book shelf's filled end to end with books that looked new and some that looked like they belonged in an antique store.

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Off in a corner was a well worn cot with a pillow and blanket balled up on the floor below it. In the middle of the room was a forest of computer tower and wires and routers. Littered on the desk were almost a dozen empty cans of energy drink. In front of this chaotic mess sat Quake, energy drink in hand.

"How long were we gone?" AM asked entering the safe room.

"Three days. Is he cool then?" he said nodding in Dig's direction.

"Knock it off. Dig this is Quake,"

Dig could see Quake was not thrilled about his being here, but Dig wanted to be friendly, and shook his hand.

"You know I love that game."

Quake gave him a funny look.

"Quake... uh...the video game... it's my favorite. That's how you got your nickname right?"

Quake looked at him for a few seconds face like a mask before responding.

"It's not a nickname , I was conceived during an earthquake."

Dig looked over at AM as he removed his back pack and newly acquired supplies and nodded. Quake rolled his eyes before breaking the silence.

"How'd he do?"

"Good, we can begin looking tomorrow."

Quake biting his lip, leaned back in his chair and turned it to face

Dig.

He stared for a second up at him and crossed his arms. Tension filled the room, Dig leaned against the wall crossing his arms staring back.

"I know your some big tough guy, and maybe you didn't fuck with us in school,"

"Quake knock it off,"

"AGWA, stop telling me what to do!" he shouted at AM before turning and facing Dig again "You maybe tough but if you get my cousin killed, I'll fuckin kill you."

Dig felt anger bubbling inside of him, his nails dug into his arms, even though he had good reason to worry about his family, keeping his temper in check, Dig stayed silent.

"Now I need a real shower and a real bed to sleep in, adiós mother fuckers."

With a heavy sigh he got up and left the safe room, and with him the tension evaporated.

"Dig, I'm sorry. He gets worried and hyper from drinking all this garbage."

Dig nodded his head, it was understandable from Quake's point of view. They must have heard some rumors, about him and Cami, anybody with half a brain could have figured out what had happened. The past (his past) came back to him all at once, making his stomach twist in a knot bathed in fire.

"You want a lift back?"

"No, do you mind if I stay here?"

"You don't you want to go back?."

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Dig walked over to the cot and sat down, his knees popped loudly when he did, sleeping on the cold ground left him feeling stiff. Going back home seemed pointless, he had only a few books and an old motorcycle waiting for him. Hell, John was probably tossing the few things he did own out the window right now, since he was supposed to be tending bar last night and tonight.

"My whole life even when I was a kid, no place ever felt like home to me, I just want to forget it. Too many bad memories, you know."

AM, who held a lot of hurtful memories nodded and said: "I don't mind."

"You sure you want me to come along? Quake seems worked up over it."

AM nodded and said: "He likes to watch out for me, even when we were kids he would start fights if he thought someone was messing with me, he'll have to get over it. In the mean time check out my uncles manuscript on the Q pad, there's a shower in here some where, the water doesn't get very hot but the pressure is good. I'll be back in the morning."

When AM departed Dig got up to look at the monitors sitting on the large table ,the screens would switch between real video and a 3d video of the planet rotating.

Had Quake hacked into communication satellites? AM said he was a computer genius, which probably meant he was a hacker. To reprogram I pad's for time travel you probably have to break some rules.

With all these movies, music and books loaded on the Q pad, Dig assumed Quake had pirated them off the Internet. With wireless Internet, you could easily jump on some open signal and steal all kinds of things. One screen showed the earth in 3d wrapped by a wormhole, turning at the same speed as the planet.

It was the same one he had seen on his Q pad Sitting back down again Dig picked up the Q pad and tapped the book icon. It was filled with hundreds of books of seemingly every subject.

History seemed to be the dominant subject, but there were others

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including fictional works and astro physics. Dig put the Q pad down and laid on the cot. Astro physics, the word filled his head with worry. Something this big would require the brains of people like AM and Quake, but Dig could hardly hold his breakfast during a test.

He was never afraid of going out and doing things most people never would. During the summer up in the Poconos, he was the first one to dive off the wooden bridge and was ready for more, he had taken the dirt bike while everyone else had chosen a four wheeler. Hunting and camping were second nature to him, he personally never got anything, but he had shot plenty of rounds into trees and junked cars when the hunting season was over.

Though that may not help much in the year 1993. Picking up the Q pad Dig looked through the books again. He came to a book titled manuscript with the name Howdy Batemen underneath, and selected it.

It was only fifty eight pages, the first dozen had drawings of various things. One was a drawing of a wormhole sticking out of the ground. Another five or six showed what looked like a metal detector with a cube attached to it at the control panel, the word wormhole detector was written at the bottom of the page. Under each of the wormhole detectors were the words magnet written boldly and underlined twice and surrounded by a picture frame.

Two or three were drawings of the cubes. The adapter that it came with was designed by Uncle Howdy but didn't explain how, just a few details and how to interface it with the wormhole detector. The first pages with writing told about a mysterious man in a suede jacket and bow tie carrying a corn cob pipe with an army escort.

They hadn't found anything, he wondered how Howdy could have kept his cool, he had said in the manuscript he saw wreckage but didn't detail any of it or what happened to it for some reason. He had probably been afraid they might find out about the cubes, or at least his manuscript. It lacked any pertinent information, unless you had a cube to work with it might as well have been written in Chinese.

At the end of the manuscript written in the same boldness and underlined and surrounded by a cube were the words: FOREVER YOUNG. It left plenty of clues that Quake and AM were able to work out how to make the cubes work. He looked over it a few more times before deciding he could make no more sense of it and went searching for the shower.

After moving a large cabinet he found the door to the bathroom. It had a toilet, sink, and stand in shower, Dig showered and scrubbed absently, his head caught up with the whole day he had spent in 1829. The enormity of it sunk in, he couldn't get around whatever would come his way. There lives could end doing this, maybe not in 1993 but what if it's 1829. An injury could easily become deadly in the distant past were there are no Emergency rooms and tetanus shots.

Quake's reason for being less than happy about his being here was understandable, he even felt guilty about getting angry. There was no way to know where and when and what they might end up in the middle of. This wasn't bungee jumping, no matter how close the sensation. AM took it as seriously as he had those debates back in high school, probably more so.

After toweling off, he picked up the Q pad again and looked at Howdy's manuscript, the words didn't divulge anything more than before. Dig sat on the cot, water dripping off his blond hairs in big drops and splashing on the floor, and put the Q pad aside. The idea was exciting, but the situation could become grave if the cubes were found by the wrong people. He shuddered despite the warm air in the room.

Dig spent a restless night trying to comprehend all that had happened in the last twenty four hours. It was almost nine before AM returned.

"Did you sleep OK?" he said carrying a big plastic bag filled with clothes.

"Fine, did you hit the Walmart again?" he said nodding at the bag.

"I went to the Salvation Army and picked up some clothes for the rip."

Taking the bag, Dig removed a large thick black hoody with a shamrock, in the center was the words House of Pain.

"I'm Dutch-German, aren't there any rap groups associated with my ethnicity," Dig said in mock disgust but AM ignored him and tossed him a T-shirt.

It was a Phillies shirt with the deep maroon colors from the 1980's on

the front was the team logo.

"Put those on."

"Where's Quake?"

"I told him to go blow off some steam, he's been here for weeks and gets caught up in computer code like I do in history. He doesn't always act that way. I'm sorry"

But Dig waved him off.

"Don't apologize, he's lookin out for you. That's what family is supposed too do, I was an only kid and well with parents like mine that was probably for the best."

AM changed his clothes then went to one of the many cabinets and removed a backpack exactly like the one he carried. Dig looked back into the paper bag and pulled out a headset from the late eighties with orange foam on the ear pieces, still in its original package but heavily worn and faded and with a price tag of a dollar written in blue ink.

"No Walkman?"

AM gave Dig the back pack and took the headset.

"It's for the Q pad, I can't have it sitting out in the open while we wander the city. It has an audio jack."

"So where do the Marty McFly headphones come in?"

"The Sir Doyle will beep as we close in on it. Did you check out the manuscript?"

"Yeah, your uncle seemed pretty scared of that guy with the pipe."

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"Yes, he was. He was handy with tools and was able to redesign a metal detector. I wish we could have found it, but he must of got rid of it before he died."

"I bet he had a lot more to tell, have you ever thought about maybe trying to go back then"

"No, that would be too risky. it's why we can only do each rip to a particular time once. God only knows what would happen if we did it and accidentally interfeerer with ourselves. Each rip is logged down to the exact second on the Q pad so we don't step on our own toes. Certain wormholes can only access certain areas of time. The Willy in

this dimension can range between the mid twentieth century to early twenty first. The Stiffy took me from the early 1800's to the early 1960's."

"You and Quake got it all figured out, huh" putting his Q pad in his back pack he got up and took a look at his clothes.

"So far yes, but we don't know what the future may bring."

"Or the past for that matter, like these clothes, very retro."

AM shrugged and headed for the door.

"Was it the picture of the magnet that made you think of clocks?" Dig asked as they made there way through the hallways.

"Give the man a cigar. It was the picture frame around it that made me realize it, turn left here, he must have needed to picture a magnet for the wormhole detector to actually work."

They arrived in front of the wall with words player 1 start. AM took out his Q pad, Dig did likewise.

"This is going to be tougher, we may be at it a few minutes before we can go through."

"What time will it be, will someone see us?"

"Morning hopefully, and no. Were going to come out right here in the labyrinth."

"Really? Will we be able to use the safe room?"

"Yes but in 1993 it's empty, Quake and I didn't set up any equipment or supplies until 2009. But no worries, were not cash strapped."

AM began pressing on the screen and located the Willy, and gestured for Dig to do the same.

"OK..." Dig said while pressing the screen. "How...CHRIST!!!!" the invisible force returned to his wrists but much stronger.

It hit his shoulders like a tidal wave, he thought his arms would rip off him if he held on to the Q pad

"Try and picture the clock, focus on it try to see the hands move."

Dig felt a kind of wobble in his shoulders and arms, he kept his grip on the Q pad and tried to fight the counter clock wise motion. He looked over at AM, his forehead showed beads of sweat.

AM looking over at Dig said: "Close your eye's and picture the clock, it will be easier with your eyes closed."

Dig closed his eyes and brought himself back to high school detention, clock at the front of the class room, or the cafeteria near the end of his senior year, but the clock seemed impossibly high on the wall. Dig leaned forward at his desk in his mind while leaning forward in the labyrinth with his body, straining to see the white face of the clock.

He tried to get up, to walk closer to the wall, but the invisible force keeps him sitting, his hands grip the side of his desk as he concentrates on the clock that looked smaller than it had before. Focus, damn it, he told himself. A violent shake goes through him as Dig quiets his mind, and looks back at the wall forcing the clock back

down from the endless wall.

Covered in sweat now himself, Dig grunts as the clock begins to go down and increase in size. The muscles in his arm burn as if in the middle of a weight lifting session. The force slowly gives to Dig's repetitive clockwise motion, the clock in his mind moves slowly at first. The fire engine red second hand moves at a snails pace but moving. To Dig it felt as if the invisible force put all of it's weight on the red hand of that clock. He didn't feel his arms moving or the Q pad in his hands anymore, just the desk he sat in and the weight of a clock that probably was replaced years ago.

"Come on you stubborn dick," Dig whispered fiercely

Saying that brought a picture of him wrestling a giant blue dick and made him laugh in spite of the tremendous force.

"You OK?" asked AM.

Dig keeping his eyes closed nodded and concentrated on the clock, slowly the seconds hand picked up speed, the resistance in his arms and wrists starting to diminish. Fuckin a, he thought as he watched the clock numbers smear.

"We almost got it, just a little longer." AM said
The streaks begin to emit blue light as the face turns into a black void. The lights grow brighter and brighter as the force gave way.

"TEQUILA," the Q pad rang out.

"OK we locked it, go!"

Dig opened his eyes and was ready to jump but reminded himself about the first time and ran straight into the swirling ripples of the wormhole.

Date: February 12, 1993 Universe 1

Dig at first though he hadn't gone through, it was the labyrinth again, exactly the same but that was were it began to feel different.

The hall felt cold and damp, there were a few small puddles nearby, a howl of wind picks up, making Dig shudder.

"Say hello to Winter again," AM said stepping out of the wormhole.

"I'd rather say global warming, did we just miss a flood?"

"No, the blizzard of the century. It hit about a week and a half ago I remember they canceled school all that week."

"Oh shit, I remember that. That was a hell of a week! Me and a few friends played tackle foot ball in the middle of it at the football field behind the junior high school, no pads or helmets just the snow to keep you from breaking your ass." he said with full smile.

"I went to see the Flyers that day, they were playing the Kings but the wind from the blizzard broke a window of the Spectrum and the game was canceled."

"That sucks." Dig said

"Not as much as the traffic on the way home. Let's get ready, it's a little after ten in the morning so we have all day. We'll use my Q pad to locate it."

He tapped on the Sir Doyle icon and put on the headphones and waited a few seconds, he stared at it and furrowed his brow.

"What? Is something wrong?"

He looked at the screen for a few more seconds before answering.

"There are 2 signals, but I had expected only one."

"So there's more than one cube?"

"I'm not sure, it may not be a cube."

"Why?"

"The cubes emit regular beeps, this sounds almost wavy, here listen."

Dig put the head set on and heard what was presumably the cube which was a beep, behind that was a similar beeping but it had a sort of rhythmic wah sound to it.

"What the hell," he said removing the head set " I hope it's not a whole space ship."

AM chewed on his lip for a moment hoping that would not be the case.

"We'll follow the wavy signal, I want to find out what it is exactly."

He put the Q pad in the hoody's large pouch, were it was perfectly hid from sight.

"Let's go."

They opened the door to a dreary cloudy day, the wind whipped wildly into them. Mounds of black dirty snow, some almost ten feet high, sat through out the city, at the ends of streets and avenues, waiting for Penn Dot to pick them up and dump them into the Delaware river.

The subway was just as busy as summer, though people seemed to hurry faster than they did in July in an effort to escape the cold, their breath visible in the frosty air. Dig looked back from were they had exited, thinking that a hundred and sixty years earlier they were camped out in the woods right there, listening to the snarl of a mountain lion. He looked to the west were AM went to pick up supplies, the road was a large street now lined down the left hand side with cars and trucks and telephone poles that were as high as the houses, but there was a familiarity to it that Dig could feel when he looked at it.

"Which way, do we go?"

100 THE TIME RIPPERS

"Lets head north on Broad, if we get closer to either signal the Sir Doyle will beep faster, if it gets slower we'll head west." he put up his hood and started north with Dig following behind.

It was a few hours of walking before they made any progress, they spent most of it heading north before determining that both signals were slowing there beeps. When they began to head west the beeping from the wavy signal stayed at the same pace but the other slowed noticeably. The walking kept the cold from bothering them too much, but night time was coming.

After two or three more hours of walking west with out any more increase or decrease of beeping AM called it a day.

"So do we hit the Hilton or the Holiday Inn? I love those little mints they leave on the pillows." Dig quipped.

Instead they went to a hostel in a shadier part of south Philadelphia a few blocks away, the building stood about six stories high, the concrete and bricks of the building was nearly black. The front brick work looked like it had the Bubonic plague with its sporadic dark spots. On the side of the building was piece of graffiti in deep colors of red, green, and purple.

The words Young Guns was blocked in red and bordered by green with a purple background, the spray paint used to make the words dripped at the bottom giving it a runny look. A ripped and worn canvas awning that was either gray or green with the words "All Of God's Children Are Welcome" painted crudely in black hung over the entrance which was loitered with a few prostitutes and a shady eyed man with a bright canary yellow coat and fingers covered with large gaudy gold rings encrusted by jewels.

"Hey sugar, you lookin for some fun. You friend can watch if he want," said a woman with a bubblegum pink wig and green eyeshadow.

She looked skinny and had sores on her lips that were badly covered by her green lipstick. She looked at Dig so he decided to answer.

"I'm sorry," he said dryly. "I need my shots first."

"fags" she said as he and AM walked into the lobby.

The floor was sticky and smelled like bleach and urine, the lobby had a puke green throw rug. In the corner was a brown couch with a old white man sleeping on it, his arm curled around a bottle in a paper bag his body covered with a newspaper. The sight made Dig cringe.

Fake wood panel walls were decorated with pictures of Jesus and fliers advertising everything from car loans to saving your soul to increasing your libido. It reminded Dig of the spam mail he would sometimes get in his email. The front desk, was set back behind a short wall with a wire gate covering the opening.

A large bald man who was either Hispanic or Italian stood behind it, heavily tattooed arms thick and muscular crossed over his large barrel-like chest. Behind him was a short but fierce looking white man, with a tattoo of a pointy tailed gargoyle in green and gray and black ink colors on his shiny bald head, sitting on a metal folding chair staring back at them.

"Yes can I help you?" the man standing said in what sounded like a middle eastern accent of broken English.

"How much for the night?" AM asked.

"Forty for the whole night, one bed but very good bed. Usually stay one hour that good, you pay whole night that good too!" he assured him with a wink

"That's fine," he said and pushed two twenty's through the gate's slot.

"Room 29, second floor, up steps there," he said pushing a key with a flimsy greasy yellow plastic card attached to it through the same slot.

AM hoped there was running water as he gripped the keys. Most of the rooms sounded quiet, but some sounded like there was a party going on. Others with the familiar sounds of the girls out front earning a living.

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Room 29 was gray and dreary, the walls were bare showing holes in the plaster and ceiling. A bulb hung naked and dim in the middle of the room. The wood floor was creaky and rotted, from a leak coming out of the bottom of the rooms toilet. A TV with no screen, but with all it's innards sat on a slanting, pathetic looking stand that was meant for smaller lighter objects to sit on.

"You can have the bed, your too tall for the couch."

"That's kind of you but I'm willing to bet it's not any cleaner than the couch, what color would you call that...hepatitis brown or chlamydia tan?" Dig asked half smiling.

"As long as it can stand my skinny ass on it I don't care." he said with a long sigh. "I know it's dirty and all, but I want to remain close to were we left off."

"It's cool, we got to stay hot on the trail. I'm just afraid I'll need a shot of anti-biotic if I get to close too the bed. Did you stay at this place when you got stuck?" he said sitting on the musty and worn bed and removing his hoody, at least they had heat.

"The safe room mostly, "

"Just there?"

AM's stomach felt heavy again.

"Here and there. " he said stepping carefully around the holes on the bathroom floor and rinsed his hands off in the sink eager to remove the mystery grease off his fingers.

Dig nodded, he noticed how he had gotten vague and distant when he asked about his being stuck the night they made camp in 1829. Instead of pursuing he asked:

"Did you know your Uncle Howdy, I mean did you ever meet him."

"Yes," he said grateful for the subject change " Quake's family is

from Roswell originally as was my mother, Howdy is our grandfathers brother. We went up during the holiday's after Quake moved to Porter, until he got cancer."

"What was he like."

"He was smart, and smoked 2 packs of Camels a day but that never slowed him down. He was good at fixing things, a lot of his neighbors would come by asking him to fix a car or lawn mower. One Christmas he helped fix a neighbor's oven that was needed to cook a turkey for a homeless shelter, he even helped serve it afterwards." he said exiting the bathroom and drying his hands with a semi clean hand towel.

"He never said anything about aliens or cubes while he was alive?"

"No, we didn't even know about it until he died. The government never found anything, and Uncle Howdy never said anything. In all the newspaper archives and everything that's available through the Freedom Of Information Act, my uncle is never mentioned. He was tight lipped about it, it's probably why he never got married and had a family of his own. "

"How old was he?"

"He was eighty three when he died, not bad considering he smoked so much. Have you checked out the Qcalc app?"

"It's a way to calculate a wormholes arrival time."

"How accurate is it?"

"I have used it twice and I got stranded in 1998 the first time, but got back to 2011 the second time I used it."

Dig nodded slowly before speaking.

"So, it's not completely accurate?"

"Quake incorrectly programmed it, which means it was half working all ready since the Qcalc was accurate the second time. He's fixed it since then, and I trust his ability."

"Hey you get no argument from me, I can't even install Windows Paint."

"I don't believe Bill Gates can either."

They started early the next morning, which started with a loud banging on the door and a scruff voice telling them they needed to vacate. Not sure if it was the police or the man with the gargoyle tattoo from the lobby they hastily dressed and left. A few prostitutes were still there but were not the same ones from last night. The morning chill brought them out of there grogginess.

"That sucks, we didn't get our continental breakfast." Dig said sounding almost serious.

"Maybe the women out front were the continental breakfast?" AM retorted with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah. " he said realizing it had been nearly two years since he had been with a woman, he wondered if AM had any kind of social life.

Before renewing there search they made a stop at a Chinese restaurant that was the only place open in the early morning hours. Some streetlights were still flickering off for the day.

"I brought some food with us, I want to keep moving." AM said when they sat down.

"What granola bars?"

AM gave a half stern look to Dig for guessing right, after a second of staring back Dig laughed and said:

"Oh my god, "

"What," AM said anxiously

"You look just like Abe Lincoln on the five dollar bill, the way you looked straight at me was just like on the five."

"Nonsense, I am a 6th cousin."

"Don't you remember the Patty Duke show?"

AM shrugged at Dig, showing his ignorance of the show.

"Identical cousin. They look a like, they talk a like. You should've been watchin Nick at Nite instead of History channel, sure you know who won the Battle of Mitsubishi, but do you know how hard it was for the Fonz to jump that shark?" he said in a haughty tone.

"Where's the waitress?"

AM had every issue of the cities local papers for the entire 20th century on his Q pad while using the restaurants bathroom, he checked the weather section for the days newspaper which said to expect freezing rain and a possibility of snow by the afternoon. The Daily News the next day didn't specify when the rain began and it was still going as of press time, the day after that was to be sunny with a high of 42 degrees. Dig hoped they wouldn't have to hold up in another hostel to wait out a storm. With there hunger gone they made there way west again, hoping to get closer to the larger signal. After two hours AM stopped suddenly, causing Dig to almost trip over him.

"What?" he said catching his balance.

"The beeping is faster, I thought it was just me but it has been picking up speed."

He removed the head set and gave it to Dig, it had definitely sounded faster to him as well, AM began walking at a faster pace while Dig followed, after twenty minutes he stopped suddenly again.

"It's slowing down again."

"Should we turn back or go south?"

"South, we'll pick it up either way."

The majority of there rip so far had brought them to the residential areas of south Philadelphia they had never seen. An area of row homes with various colors of bricks, some brown others orange or red and some with a mix of both red and orange. Many had narrow concrete porches that would be comfortable for kids or very small adults to sit.

Numbers written in white paint on the curb were the four digit address of the houses, houses with flags of ethnicity displayed proudly with an American flag in front of the second story windows. The school trips always took them to Independence hall and the Liberty bell, to AM, the real symbols of America were the Swedish, Irish, Italian, Polish, African, and Asian, descendants of immigrants or slaves that brought with them there international traditions and beliefs making the residential neighborhoods of south Philadelphia a true melting pot. Aside from the hostel, AM enjoyed everything else he had seen, he wondered what historians might say about this time and place a hundred years from now.

The sun hid behind clouds that grew darker with each hour, before long flurries sporadicly made there way down from the sky. The beeping hadn't sped up since they started south, Dig kept a wary eye to the sky, a fat snowflake dropped on his forehead.

"Are the Q pads waterproof?"

"No," AM said with shoulders sagged. "I was hoping we would locate it today, but the snow and rain might damage the Q pads We might as well find shelter."

"OK, were do we go? Not that place from last night, please, I think I was sexually assaulted by a cockroach."

AM ignored the remark.

"There's a motel southwest of here, about ten blocks." he said " We

can stay until the weather clears some."

The snow mixed with rain picked up while they were still walking, AM hurriedly stuffed his Q pad at the bottom of his pack, covering it with a few shirts and recommended Dig do the same. The motel was cheap, but it was hooker and graffiti free, either way compared to last night it was a five star to Dig. The room had two beds and a working TV, a large bay window showed the rooftops of houses below, all lined up neatly, row upon row. Off in the distance the skyscrapers of down town lay shrouded in winter storm clouds.

Dig had returned to the room with a bottle of Pepsi he got from a vending machine as AM sat on the bed cross legged and tapping away on his Q pad

"Hey," Dig said. "Phillies start spring training this week, we should catch a game, it's the dream season this year, until we play the Blue Jays in October."

"No, we need to locate the cube and...whatever else is out there." he said without looking up

"Why not? I'm not gonna go Biffing, we both know how the season will end."

"No." he said more firmly.

Of course he knew how it would end, every would soon enough, but AM was more worried about where the signals were coming from. If it's in this area it could be sitting in someones house, or maybe in a public place were people go everyday.

"Are you worried? I mean were the only ones looking for them, there not going anywhere."

"As long as there out there they could be found by anyone, this isn't a vacation." he said impatiently.

Dig simply laid down on his own bed and stared at the ceiling, he felt a little ashamed. This was a serious situation they were dealing with.

He needed to be more focused on what the task at hand was, not make smart quips about everything.

"Hey AM, I'm sorry if I'm a smart ass at times...I just do that as a way to deal with stuff I guess." he said getting up on an elbow and facing AM.

He stopped tapping on the screen and looked back.

"It's OK, " he said and began tapping away on the screen again.

"What are you always tapping at that for? You texting?"

"I could send a message to you here and Quake back in the present though he may not receive it, but no I'm not texting, I m writing in my journal."

"You write down everything were doing? What if someone steals it and reads it?"

"Just have to be careful,"

Dig laid back down, and picked up his Q pad and tapped on the music icon.

"So what kind of music you got on here... Chemical Brothers."

"Quake,"

"Lords of Acid,"

"Quake,"

"Eminem...let me guess Quake?"

AM chuckled.

"No, that one is me"

99 THE TIME RIPPERS

"Really, you don't seem like an Eminem fan."

"Why not, he is a great American artist. Anyone who exercises free speech by protesting war, which is not a very popular thing to do, is someone we should listen too."

"Well lets see if we can't find you some Dylan. Shit there's a lot of club music on here,"

"Quake's into raves. Hell, he's probably at one now."

Dig had been to a rave once, the music was pretty cool, he enjoyed the way many songs had been mixed and remixed with others to a rhythmic bass. The walls at the club where the rave was held were painted with a kaleidoscope of colors and brightened from spot lights spinning and twirling like a neon rainbow from a dream. Everyone seemed to be sweating and drinking nothing but Evian water at seven dollars a bottle.

The dance floor was an orgy of light touches, rhythmic movements and glowing light sticks, the darkness of the dance floor was made more intimate and mysterious by the the light sticks. Every so often girls dressed as an Alice In Wonderland character and one quiet possibly as Red Riding Hood would come around with a wicker basket tossing handfuls of glittery confetti. He had gone with Jenn, and mentioned to her how people seemed to be sweating and thirsty just standing here. It was crowded but certainly not packed, and the time of year was still cold.

"People do E when they go to a rave, it makes you dehydrated." she said in his ear so to be heard over the music.

She had then placed a small blue pill in his hand that was shaped like a star.

"Is this Viagra?" he said half smiling.

She playfully pinched him and told him to shut up and take it, later that night they made love while still under the pills effects. It had made touching and fondling more intense and had certainly left them both dehydrated afterwards.

"I can't imagine Quake on ecstasy or dancing." Dig said smirking.

"He's a cool guy when you get to know him, he just has a hard time around people. He was diagnosed with Asbergers syndrome it's a form of Autism. Some people with Autism don't ever speak, he didn't until he was four or five. When he finally did, he spoke his own language. It's why he doesn't have too many friends."

Dig looked through more of the music when he saw another album

"George Carlin Class Clown."

"It's stand-up comedy."

"You like, Carlin?"

"I consider him to be one of America's greatest patriots."

"Patriot? The guy with all the stuff and flying on planes?" Dig said with astonishment.

"When we get back just Google his name and the US supreme court and you'll see what I mean."

"So Eminem and George Carlin are patriots? Who would you have one the five dollar bill then?"

"John Brown, or maybe Fiorello Laguardia."

Dig looked confused at the names but was more surprised by the idea he wouldn't be bothered if Lincoln where taken off the five.

"What? I shouldn't want my cousin off the five?"

"But he freed the slaves." Dig said.

AM could only nod his head, but did not agree.

"Lincoln was a politician of his time. He didn't believe blacks were his equal as he stated numerous times. At other times he would claim that they deserved equality and freedom. These weren't small comments he made to his inner circle, they were given to a large listening audience that felt the same way half the time one way or the other. He also said that if he could save the union and keep slavery he would, but that is a bit out of context as he also stated that if he could get rid of slavery and save the union he would do so as well."

Dig wasn't sure how to feel, history teachers and the text books they gave back in high school assured the young readers that Lincoln was adamantly against slavery and had always believed blacks as equals.

"So he was a flip flopper?"

"When giving the speeches yes, most politicians are. Lincoln freed the slaves but he never really believed that they deserved equality. Fredrick Douglass certainly thought so. John Brown believed in equality more than President Lincoln did."

"Who was John Brown?"

"An old white guy who killed a bunch of people trying to start a slave rebellion in 1859. Before they hung him for murder he said that slavery would only end through bloodshed. After half a million deaths in a four year war slavery was gone but replaced with segregation. For the next century they would remained enslaved psychologically. And no politician or general would secure victory this time but the people."

"I never heard about John Brown back in school."

"Most history texts books ignore him because now a days he would be called a terrorist. His actions have been swept under the carpet by history and those in positions of authority to try to avoid unpleasant

truths."

Dig laid back down on the bed letting AM's words sink in, it all seemed kind of cheesy to him now that he thought about it. School always taught that the founding fathers were all for freedom, but they would never explain why they didn't get rid of slavery then if they believed all men were created equal. And when they learned about the civil rights movements of the sixties, the text book had glossed over names like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr and seemed to go on and on about President's Kennedy and Johnson.

Yeah it all seemed kinda made up, to Dig. Like they were trying to sell it to you the way you would sell the Easter bunny to a five year old. He read some where that Jefferson used to have sex with his slaves. How could you do that? He thought sadly, that's rape, you can't bang a slave and not call it rape.

"That's fucked"

AM only nodded his head.

The next morning the rain was still pattering the windows with intermittent down pours of sleet changing the sound on the window from a soft patter to a sound rice krispies make when you pour milk on them. Although the paper said it wouldn't stop until tomorrow AM kept the curtains open and an eye on the sky.

Dig spent most of the day reading, he looked through Uncle Howdy's manuscript again, not in hopes of uncovering something new, but just to study what was in there. The history lesson Dig got yesterday left him feeling a little scared. He expected better from Abraham Lincoln the man who freed the slaves. And here he was, Doug Robins recovering alcoholic and a student in high school trying to save multiple dimensions across time, he felt grave doubt as to whether he should really be doing this, but it was too late to turn back now.

He looked through the window, watching the snow and hail falling slowly down, he hated the gray winter skies, it made him think of dirty sink water. To Dig, once Christmas was over winter lost its magic for him, he would have preferred the summer he had left back home.

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"If the paper is correct we can start again tomorrow, with an early start we can make up lost time," AM said watching the TV that was showing an episode of Family Matters.

Dig tossed and turned that night, it was well after two in the morning before he had finally dozed off. He had a dream that night, he lost the Q pad, and was back in Porter, living with Cami in the house they had shared. The floor was covered with glass from a broken ashtray and thin pieces of particle board from an entertainment stand.

The walls were covered with paper instructions, complete with tiny screws and minuscule arrows pointing everywhere and nowhere explaining to him where the Q pad was. He got on his hands and knees tossing things over his shoulder, broken pieces of glass and wood cutting his hand as he searched frantically for it.

"I'm sorry, AM" he mumbles to no one. But there was someone there.

"Yes, you are sorry."

He turned and saw Cami standing there, chewing on her tongue dressed as she was the evening their car died. He could smell the perfume filling up his nostrils again. She was looking down on him like an insect.

"I can't find it...I.." he stammered.

She slowly leaned down, green brassier visible and whispered condescendingly.

"A real man could find it."

She stood back up and walked past him and into the bedroom slamming the door shut. Smashing Pumpkins plays softly from the bedroom, 1979, he's sure this time. He continues pushing chunks of wood from the floor, glass shards pierce his fingers leaving bloody streaks on the floor. That last thing he remembered before waking up is finding an old five dollar bill but instead of stern looking Abe Lincoln on the front it's AM's face with a look of utter disappointment.

114 THE TIME RIPPERS

The day started cloudy with a temperature of almost 50, they made a quick breakfast of granola bars before leaving. They made their way south through the row houses and occasional packs of children making their way to school. They passed a bakery called Casia's, a hearty aroma of fresh bread wafts to them as they walk by.

"That bread smelled good, I almost forgot I ate breakfast." AM said.

Dig nodded his head though he wasn't very hungry, the dream he had last night left him still feeling sick. The day went on uneventfully until late afternoon, the wah beep sound had started to increase noticeably on 17th street after walking west on Jackson street.

"Were closer, I think we'll locate it today!" AM said excitedly.

They kept a slow pace so as not to miss a change in the sound, but the sun would be setting in less than an hour.

"What do you think, do you want to keep looking" AM asked Dig as the sky turned to a soft purple.

Dig could see the anticipation on AM's face, even he felt anxious. What would happen if they found a whole ship from another world?

"Yeah, let's keep goin."

After twenty minutes AM stopped and tilted his head slightly.

"one mile, maybe less." he said without stopping.

The sun had all but vanished from the sky, but no moon was present tonight to light the way. The temperature dropped to freezing, but their excitement kept the cold from bothering them, or from noticing they were being followed.

There are many things AM knows about the city of Philadelphia, other than it's being prone to flooding and the birth of America, it holds a more distinct title that has seemed to dog it for years. The city would have over three hundred violent deaths by year end (over 400

by 1997), it was something AM had known but never thought about.

The person following them that night had a hand in a few of those deaths, at barely nineteen he had already killed four people the last was just a week ago. An ugly kid with pimples covering his face, trying to buy some dope pulled out a cheap switch blade and tried to take what he was selling, but he showed that crater faced bitch you don't bring a knife to a gun fight.

It was a dark cold night and crater face had a hoody pulled over his head, one hand in his pocket as he approached. He asked how much for a quarter ounce, his desperate appearance and dirty clothing made Tito (or T as everyone one else called him) cautious .

He gave him a price and the kid pulled out his hand as if to pay him and T heard the dull click and made his move by slapping the knife from his hand and grabbed him by the neck and lightly squeezed, a move he learned from the hands of his father on countless nights. The thought of his father brought his rage up like a volcano, instead of making him beg for his life (which would have been a waste any way) he pulled out his .38, put it in the thief's mouth and said:

"How my dick taste, bitch?" and pulled the trigger , sending blood and brain matter all over the sidewalk. The report of the gun was loud and painful to his ears, but he didn't mind.

"Job hazard." he said to himself while keeping a good distance behind the two men he now followed.

They hadn't done anything to piss him off, he just felt like showing his power. He didn't get to do that last week as well as he liked, that pimply faced fuck had pissed him off too much for him to have a clear thought . He clenched his fists and looked at the tattooed letters on his fingers.

YUNG GUNZ

The webbing between his thumb and index finger of his left hand had a crude tattoo of a gun, made with pen ink and safety pins. He got it during his first visit to lock up at the age of fourteen for assault. His arms and neck were nearly covered with tattoos now, mostly naked women and random symbols of the thug life and jail.

He loved making them beg, it gave him a hard on when they blubbered and cried for his mercy. Another guy he killed, his friend help him do it when they stomped him for some minor grievance. The guy had gone down after two punches and when his head hit the ground he started to shake like he was being electrocuted, Jude laughed like a loon when he saw that, but T knew what happened and right then and there the man stopped moving.

"Oh shit cuz," Jude said still laughing wildly. "I thought he was fuckin wit us."

He was dead and they dumped him into the Delaware river in the dead of night. They wrapped the body in a tarp and tied up both ends with cinder blocks, T didn't like leaving dead bodies close to where he sold though some times you had to when guys like crater face forced you too. He dealt marijuana, heroine and crack. The only three that brought him consistent profit.

He only did a little coke and crack and not too often, just when he needed to pick himself up, it was good but power was the best drug he ever tasted, it made women get on there knees for his pleasure and enemies on there knees for his forgiveness. He pulled a chain of gold from around his neck with a gold locket shaped like a gun. He covers it with hand as he brings it up to his nose and pushes a button. It opens and he immediately snorts the little bit of white power and closes it quickly.

The stuff always made him feel stronger, more focused, he figured the tall blond might put up a fight while the shorter one would probably scream rape. When the coke hit hit him he stepped lightly so as to keep from them from hearing his steps to surprise them, it made scaring people easier if you seemed to appear out of nowhere. His legs seemed to quiver as he tried not break into a full out run as he unzipped his heavy jacket and made his way towards them.

They were talking as he roughly pushed between them and turned to face them.

"Whacu puta's doin?" he said in a short burst so as not to give away the fact that he was out of breath.

He kept his hands in his pocket, his left hand found the familiar

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handle of his .38 police special. This was a gun his older brother Ceaser had once carried, he claimed to have stolen it from a dead officer but he was prone to lie to T about such things to impress him, but he had admired him anyway. At least as much as any little brother could admire an older brother.

He was dead six months now and this gun was all he had of him. His body was found stripped to the waist with only a pair of boxer shorts, with his face blown off by a large caliber gun. It was his death that led to his killing two more people in a short but bitter turf war.

He ignored the past and refocused on the two white boys with back packs.

"Bitches goin campin," he thought humorously.

One had headphones on, maybe he had a CD Walkman he could use one. They both stared at him, the short one looked angry, the blond had a cautious look to him, he knew what this was about.

"What do you want?" asked shorty removing his headset.

"You gringo's can't be in my area wit out payin the local tax, youse hearin me." he said standing half a foot in front of them.

"Really? Are you a representative of the Federal government or do you collect municipal taxes for the city?" AM shot back defiantly.

T got caught off guard with that, any other time most people would ask to be left alone or possibly pretend not to be afraid, shorty here was clearly not afraid.

"Look puta, this my country you pay tax an maybe you live to pay them again."

But he would have none of it.

"I'm sorry," he was anything but. "the US constitution strictly states I will not pay taxes from anyone other than an agent of the government

the constitution also states..."

Now T was getting pissed, he pulled his hand out of his coat and pointed the police revolver directly at AM's head, Dig sucked in his breath and whispered to AM to stop. Although early evening, most of the windows were dark and seemingly without anyone home, no good Samaritan or concerned neighbor was nearby.

"How dis for you US constipation, you gonna pay the death tax bitch if you don't."

AM, a master debater learned more than how to speak while debating, his coach also told him you must watch your opponents. His father who is a lawyer and a great debater back in his school days also said when arguing cases you have to see the jury's faces and the lawyer you were arguing against, and how they react to what is being said or how they behave while they spoke. Little facial ticks, fidgety hands or even short in take of breath can greatly effect a sound argument better than any facts could.

AM watched this man with a close eye. When he expected anger or fright, he gave the driest response possible with a touch of indifference. When he saw that his eyes were beady and bloodshot, chest rapidly increasing and decreasing for air and his hand holding the gun was a tad shaky he decided to give him confident, out right refusal.

"I'm sorry no, that would be impossible." he said flatly.

Maybe it was the coke or the short vision of his brothers mashed face but he was speechless, he couldn't pull the trigger because this scrawny man was not afraid of him or the power he held, he felt a fire rage inside him, he wanted to kill him right there and take him and his friends shit, but he wanted to see fear more than anything else so he asked.

"WHY?"

"You left the safety on."

The confidence AM showed made him believe it, he took his eyes off him

for a second trying to see the safety latch in the darkness of the night. That second was all AM needed.

"HIKEEBA!!!" he screamed with a kick to the balls that even Dig felt.

The young hoodlum immediately dropped the gun with a metallic clank as he fell to his knees and grabbed for his genitals, eyes rolling back into his head as he gasps for breath and tries to speak at the same time.

"....uh....ugh..."

Dig filled with a sick sense of wonder watched as the young hoodlum tried to speak. When he started blinking and seemed to regain some sense Dig kicked him in the face landing him spread eagle and out cold. AM walked behind Dig and began rummaging in his pack and removed a shirt. He walked over to the young Hispanic, leaned down and placed his fingers on his neck.

"He's out cold"

Dig stared at the young man on the ground as AM scooped up the gun that had fallen next to him.

"Are you sure?" Dig said still looking down.

"Yes, I'm a licensed nurse." he said wrapping up the gun with the shirt.

He stood up and looked at both ends of the street, then ran in the direction closest to a connecting street. He reached the corner and disappeared behind a car for a second then ran back over to Dig.

"I tossed the gun down the sewer." he said and looked back down at the young hoodlum spread out like the letter x.

"Lets go he'll be out for at least twenty minutes if the cold doesn't wake him right away." he said grabbing Dig by the arm.

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AM, still in search mode, held Dig by the sleeves to keep him from running passed him as they made there way through the neighborhood.

"What the hell man..." Dig said when they came to a stop at Oregon avenue a four lane avenue that ran east to west. "did you say hikeeba?"

The slowed down to a brisk walk while AM led the way.

"We're close." AM said absent mindedly

"Hey man!" Dig said pulling himself roughly out of AM' s grasp "What was that? He could of blown your fuckin brains out."

AM was still concentrating on the wah beeps coming from the head set not looking at Dig but finally stopped walking and looked at Dig.

"What?" AM said as if nothing happened.

"What?! What....fucks sake you almost died, what the fuck, what if you got shot."

"Dig," he said " I told you this would be dangerous. If something happens to me you are to leave me to my fate and to keep searching for the cubes. I told you lives could be lost."

"No, that's fucked up what if you were...."

"No," AM said impatiently, turning to face him. " the fate of our world depends on this, no matter what the cubes must be retrieved. I told you nothing is more important, even if I die you must promise to keep searching."

"I'm sure Quake would be okay with that."

"Damn it, you will search no matter what he says or if I'm bleeding to death on the street. You find them at all costs." he said with the finality of a preacher promising hell and damnation to the

unbelievers.

"I promise," he was silent for a second before speaking again. " So if he shot me, you would've left me bleed to death?" he said.

"It's over, let's find it and forget about it." he said and started walking west again.

"It's all in the past I guess." Dig whispered and followed after him.

Dig's heart was still pounding, but the cold of the evening helped keep him from thinking about the near deadly encounter. The sky was purple going on black with a few stars like flecks of glitter on black construction paper. Dig walked behind waiting for a change in direction, but they continued west. The row homes began to taper off when they reached 21st and Oregon, there the area was fenced off all the way to 24th street going west and an entire six blocks south of Oregon ave to Packer ave.

The fence at the corner of 21st street had a sign yellowed with age covered with graffiti and filth that said:

PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY
NO TRESSPASSING GUARD DOG ON DUTY

At the bottom of the sign was the symbol of the Department of Defense and the words:

AREA PATROLLED BY MILITARY POLICE
TRESSPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED BY
MILITARY COURT

The two messages were separated enough for some one to use a red magic marker to proclaim 19th and Porter the kings of south Philly in large block letters. The initials KA and CK were written in a blue marker following the proclamation in the same crude blocky form.

Reading the signs filled Dig's stomach with ice, he was glad the thing they were searching for wasn't here.

"OK, it's here." AM said.

"Huh, are you serious?" Dig said wondering if he jinxed himself with his thoughts.

"It's within 500 ft of where we stand." he nodded towards the area behind the fence.

Short four story high office buildings built in Art-Deco style lined the whole area, behind that the darkness obscured all else as the street lights in that area were dark after two years with out maintenance. At the center of the entire complex was a building 12 stories in height, made of yellow brick. On each of the four sides of this building were clocks though only one was still visible from the light that still glowed in the clock face. The clock was stuck at 7:51.

"What is this place?" Dig whispered.

"This was the Quartermaster Military depot, a drop off and pick up point for Department of Defense toys and soldiers. It was closed in 1991. Budget cuts during the Bush senior administration, now that the Soviet Union is gone." he said " Though if what we were looking for had arrived before that this might have become another Area 51."

They walked until they reached 24th street where the fence turned south, along 24th street, across from the fenced area was a garage for the city buses, which was lined with a brick wall ten feet high. Besides the occasional late night bus the street was deserted, they walked halfway down 24th street before AM stopped.

"That way." he said facing the fence.

"Do we climb?"

Without responding AM knelt down and removed a pair of wire cutters from his pack, and began snipping at the rusty steel wiring. The clipping seemed loud to Dig, he kept looking around afraid that the concerned neighbor would finally arrive.

"Go," AM said pulling open the cut hole.

Dig crawled through and held it open for him.

"This area will be empty for another 11 years, it'll be a Home Depot by 2011." AM said when he stood back up.

They made their way towards the office buildings, as their eyes adjusted to the darkness, but Dig still had to squint in order to see. In the distance was the dead clock with the still lighted face. Did all the clocks stop at the same time, Dig wondered, or did they all slowly die, one after another each a little closer to 8 o'clock but never quite making it. They walked between the office buildings that lined the edge of the whole area, and behind the office buildings they came upon what looked like houses you might see in the suburbs.

"What's with the houses?"

"Some of the higher ranking officers lived in these houses, their families as well."

The whole area was boxed off from street view by all the office buildings that surrounded it, they would be unseen by any pedestrian or car passing by. They walked behind the mini suburb and came across its center where the dead clock tower stood, it was surrounded on all sides by a short one story building. The area of the building facing north had a driveway with a narrow glass booth that was covered in spider web cracks, protruding from it an arm, painted in yellow and black stripes with the letters STOP stenciled in red across it, hung askew across the driveway, its once bright yellow now a urine color.

They probably had to sign in and show five or six forms of I.D., Dig thought. This place was important during the Cold War, but now it was just a budget cut. The wind howled through the empty space between the houses and the dead clock tower. The darkness and the emptiness started to creep in on Dig, the police sirens and sound of cars going to and fro that was already distant seemed muted to him in here.

"We'll go in through the clock tower building."

The door to the building was chained shut, AM without hesitation went

in his backpack and pulled out a lock pick.

"Your always prepared."

"I was a Boy Scout."

AM removed the chains and began picking the lock to the door. After a few minutes there was click, AM stood up and pulled open the door.

"After you." he said

Dig walked in, the darkness seemed almost total, he was feeling like Mr. Magoo having to squint his way around. It looked similar to the room outside the principles office back in high school he thought. The linoleum tiles were peeling and braking after two years of being left to the elements. There were a few chairs and a small table covered with dust an inch thick, at the far end of the room was a door similar looking to the one at the end of the labyrinth, AM went over to the door and kneeled down and began operating on the lock.

"This might take a minute." AM said.

Dig walked around the lobby, trying to watch his step on the chaotic mess of a floor. There were no windows, only the two doors but the lobby like room was cold and drafty.

"Got it."

AM stood up and opened the door. They came out to a long hall,. AM removed an led flashlight and pointed it to the left and right to see what lay ahead. The hall had about a half dozen doors on each side made of heavy wood and frosted glass, names with military ranks and job titles like Officer of Communications and Director of Military Affairs painted on the glass were fading.

All though the whole area was lined with empty houses behind a fence with barbed wire, Dig still felt uneasy about being in a military installation albeit an abandoned one. The thought of some military police officer with a license to kill signed by good old uncle Sam still keeping guard with a half rabid German Shepard made Dig ask:

"Your sure there's no more security, right, do you think anyone will notice the hole in the fence we made?"

"No I wouldn't worry there is the occasional police drive-by, and once a month a private security firm does a drive around for the storage company behind this depot, they wont be looking in this area unless there's been a robbery."

That should have reassured him, AM knew a great deal about the local area, but the German Shepard with large fangs wouldn't stay out of his head. They walked down the left hand side and stopped nearly halfway in front of a pair of double doors, that opened to a set of wide concrete steps descending into ink black darkness. AM put a hand up and walked down a few steps to look.

"It's dark in there but there is light coming from further down." he said.

"A light?! Maybe we shouldn't..."

But AM shakes his head.

"We have to."

"But what if it's MP's or cops or..."

"What were looking for is were that light is"

AM made his way down the steps, flashlight in hand, and entered a large room with three rows of reel to reel machines that stood five feet high. The room in this underground area was colder and draftier than up stairs, but was fortunately not filled with water. If there was any flooding in the buildings bottom floor they had yet to find it. The glare of AM's LED flashlight on the large plastic wheels that held the reels made them look like a set of eyes.

At the corner of this room was another door way, which lead to a shorter hallway lined with five doors. Behind the fifth door a pale orange light emanated at the bottom.

"It's here in this room," AM said taking deep breaths working on the doors lock, after years of waiting he would finally retrieve his first cube.

The wah of the Sir Doyle was a constant sound, AM removed the head set and opened the door. At first glance he thought it was a flood light, but instead came upon a large squarish hole in the ceiling. Above the room was the base of the clock tower where the hole, the size of a manhole, went all the way through to where they stood. The last light on the dead clock face was shining down directly into the hole.

At a sharp angle below the hole a squarish divet was dug in the floor. Had it landed here and bounced around? AM wondered. At the far wall a chair laid on its sides, AM grabbed and placed it under the hole and stood on it.

"I want to see something." he said.

The hole was wide enough for him to wriggle through to the top which was only a foot or so up. He put his head up through into the late winter wind. Looking around there was no way anyone could see inside with out entering the depot itself, no one in the neighborhood had seen anything when it arrived and it came after the military moved out. AM felt relief when it became evident no one had been here.

"Did it come through that hole?" Dig asked.

"I think it hit here and bounced..."

"Bounced? The cubes don't look like they can bounce, what did we find A tire from the landing gear. If it's a Firestone tire I'm outta here I had two blow out on me once at the same time." Dig said being serious for once.

AM pointed the light at the wall farthest away from the hole. The wall was once plaster, but was now broken and ragged. Behind the plaster remnants were red bricks, AM walked slowly over and began to peel off the plaster and fully reveal the bricks behind. Dig helped rip the remaing pieces, when it was free of the plaster, he saw a small black metal triangle sticking through.

"Is this it?" Dig said rubbing point with the tip of his finger.

"Yes, now we have to get it out." AM said and began rummaging through his backpack

"How do we do that, some jackhammers? Maybe a little TNT to soften the bricks up?" he asked peering closely at the wall.

"This." AM said holding up a miniature pick ax.

"For real?" he said staring at the tiny tool.

"This too," he says handing Dig a small paint brush made of horse hair.

"Do we paint the wall before we take it down?"

"This is the safest way to do it. This is not much different than an archaeological dig"

"And the longest, why don't we just get a crow bar and wedge some of the bricks out? we'll be here until the Phillies lose game six this fall."

"We might damage it."

The idea did make sense, but Dig was not totally convinced.

"OK, but if it was bouncing around here wouldn't that have broken it?"

AM thought for a moment before answering.

"Maybe, but what if we break it trying to get it out with a crowbar?"

At that Dig could have argued but conceded, AM was the leader.

He handed Dig an object the size of a playing card deck. One side was quilted with a black material that felt thin but soft and strong, the other side was looked like a pack aluminum foil. Dig watched as AM took out another and unfolded it, like magic it unfolded to nearly the size of a blanket.

"Body Foil Wrap. " AM said. "Army Corp. of Engineers and designed by NASA , special forces in Afghanistan use it on the field. This metallic material absorbs body heat making fires for warmth unnecessary.

"Special forces use this? How'd you get one?"

"I have two." AM said smiling

"eh...I'm surprised they sell this stuff." Dig said unfolding it and taking in the total size of it.

"They don't."

"You stole it?" Dig said surprised.

"Not exactly, I paid for it." he said earnestly

"How...from who? Do you mean like the black market?"

AM only shrugged.

"We can't have a fire and they'll keep us warm in temperatures well below freezing, though it maybe summer before we have this and the cube."

Dig looked down at the floor they would both have room to stretch out when sleeping, it was carpeted but still looked hard and cold. He tried squinting at the corner of the room too see if there was any sign of rat droppings but couldn't see despite the light from the dead clock tower.

"What about light the batteries wont last forever in that flashlight."

AM removed the Q pad from his hoody pouch and leaned it on the wall opposite the alien artifact and tapped the screen rapidly three times. Dig stepped back as a square of white light shot out in a beam from the Q pad screen and covered the whole wall.

"Let there be light." AM said.

The first night was grueling for Dig, the floor was as hard as it looked but, the Reynolds wrap comforter as Dig called it, was every bit as warm as AM said it would be. Still, the morning after Dig felt as if his a knee was suck in his spine for the rest of the day. AM did most of the excavating for the first few weeks, leaving Dig with much down time.

"Why don't I go looking for the cube while you dig out this thing," Dig suggested one morning.

"I don't think so, I need you here in case something happens to me and this needs immediate removal."

AM had spoken about this theoretical incident a few times with Dig already. Especially after there run in with the guy with the gun. When still ripping alone AM had a final contingency plan should he be pursued by whatever enemies and unable to evade capture or keep the cubes safe. Dig's eyes went wide when AM showed him the time bomb that looked like a heavy duty calculator lined with a stick of clay pierced by multicolored wires.

"Black market?"

"For the components, but Quake and I built them. It'll incinerate everything within a block of here. If I'm gone and you are...you know, you hit this red button and zero together for immediate detonation, if you need more time than that this number pad is a timer and can go up to twelve minutes, just punch it in and hit red button twice to activate."

"Your gonna carry it, right?"

"We both get to carry one." AM said.

Dig thought back to the night he left Cami and thought about jumping into the river, a chill ran up his spine when he thought about how close he came and was glad he never went through with it, but it seemed that he might have to if he were in trouble. If the military or a corporation wanted to make some kind of death ray with the cubes or whatever they were digging up, then shouldn't they give up there lives to prevent what ever destruction these things could cause humanity. All though it scared Dig, he felt better about doing it for a more noble reason than a bad break up or weakness for drinking. Yeah, he thought sarcastically, Dig Robins the noble suicide bomber.

After a few more weeks , AM had more than half of the object free. It looked like the cube but bigger about the size and depth of a shoe box, what really caught Digs eye was the way it sat in the wall. It looked as if it cut right into the bricks, a clean, precise cut that formed perfectly around it.

The alien box was encased in the same type of metal while its edges were of the plastic like material that had an amber shade to it. AM put his hands on both sides and tried to pull it out but it barely moved.

"Damn it." he whispered.

The idea it might finally slide out of its perfect hole was still unsuccessful.

"Maybe it's got an antenna or something sticking out of it." Dig suggested.

AM could only nod, he was close to getting it free and each night he had to stop either out of exhaustion or hand cramps from the incessant chipping and brushing at little more than a snails pace. They would make the occasional visit to a nearby CVS for water while subsisting on a diet of granola bars and beef jerky. No showering and the office next door with a scavenged bucket was there bathroom.

Dig suggested taking a night at a hotel, but AM would not be budged from the task at hand. Once again reminding Dig they weren't on vacation. It was mid April when the box was free. It was still early

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in the morning, Dig was curled up in a ball at the corner of the room. AM spent the whole night slowly chipping away by the time the sun rose it was loose. The sound of dirt and rock falling to the ground woke him up from a heavy sleep.

"I'm getting it!!"

AM felt the granola bar he ate earlier churn in his small stomach, he hadn't eaten much the last two days. Pulling it slowly out of the wall like it had been waiting to be picked up. The box felt heavy so he gingerly put it down kneeling in front of it he took in all the details. The box was covered with grooves on its metal that was black in color with specks of silver, at its center was what was presumably a button. It was similar looking to the cube but with less depth, but high enough to keep the box from sliding out of the wall.

"Wow," Dig said no longer sleepy as he dropped his Reynolds comforter.

AM felt it's sides and back, there didn't seem to be any other buttons and didn't have any holes for a plug. He stared at the box thinking.

"Are you gonna push it?" Dig asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure." he said still caught up in the moment of sheer excitement.

"I wonder what it is."

" This thing could just be a black box for the craft."

"It is a black box," though he understood to what he was referring, he sometimes couldn't resist being a smart ass.

AM sat down in front of the alien box, crossing his legs Buddha like and sitting his pack in between his legs.

"Maybe you should try the button, if that's what it is."

"I don't know," AM said but was anxious to do just that. " it could be a weapon. It looks like it just sliced into the wall like a hot knife through butter, I'm not eager too see it turned on."

Dig was still not totally convinced "Do you really think this thing is a bomb that'll go off if you push it?"

Quake was the authority on the technical side of this, AM was an above average electronics user but that was a far cry from Quakes skills. AM scratched his chin, that had five o'clock shadow for the last 2 months, he had forgotten to shave the brief time he spent home between rips.

"Come on, man. It might be some crazy alien porn." Dig said as if an actual argument.

AM snorted with laughter and gave Dig a half embarrassed grin. If he hadn't laughed maybe he wouldn't have been so suggestible, but he reminded himself later he wanted to push it just as much. With an arched fore finger he placed his fingertip on the protrusion. The metal felt cold to the touch, Dig licked his lips in anticipation as he stood near by. AM felt his heart pound and then skip a beat as he pushed the button.

A blast of green light filled the entire room, a low level hum like the sound of an electric current filled their ears. AM clutched his bag in one hand and began pushing himself off the ground when he saw the button start to swirl like water down a drain. It was too quick though, before AM had gotten off his knees he was engulfed by a wormhole and disappeared.

Date: May 28 1992 Universe: 2

AM felt like he was free falling, but faster and more disorientating than using the cubes. The immediate sensation he had was a hot stuffy heat on his face, but his back felt slimy and wet. Leaning his head back from the dizzy spell stagnant water found its way into his mouth.

A gagging sound escaped his throat when he tasted the water. He sat up spitting out water and saw a hole above him where the only light seemed to be coming from, it was day time but the room was dark. The room which was empty before now had a wooden desk bloated and warped

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from the water it sat in, a chair sat in front of it minus its seat, the walls were water stained and crumbling at the top with vines and strings of moss hanging from it.

AM stood up and looked around frantically. All the green vegetation, water and heat reminded him of a summer trip he took to Florida as child to see his grandparents. They had visited the Everglades, and what he saw was similar too this, with out the building it might have been equal to it.

He spat out more of the grimy water nearly doubled over with dry heaves before the stink of the water made him stand up straight again, water seeped into his shoes, turning his socks into heavy sponges. He was in the same room, but not, the walls which were still mostly plaster before, were now gone as if never there to begin with. The bricks that had sat under it still looked new, bright even, here they looked dirty and eroded. Foul smelling water that reached his ankles, with patches of green floating at the surface covered the floor.

At the corner of the room sat his back pack upside down in the water it had been closed tight by AM before hand and was dry inside. He dug out the Q pad and was greeted by a blank screen. He pressed the POWER button and waited, after three seconds alarm and dread filled his stomach as a bright fire engine red font message appeared. The words SYSTEM CRASH filled the screen over and over top to bottom, AM closed his eyes tightly his mind screaming with fear.

Upon opening his eyes though a short message in a dull colored font was on the screen. A sigh of relief escapes him as he read it.

PLEASE WAIT
RECALCULATING POSITION

It wasn't the first time he had seen this message, he would usually see it during electrical storms, but it would also happen during solar storms and during a rip in the 19th century while Haley's comet came by. Meteor showers would affect it sometimes as well, but most electronics are susceptible to all kinds of interference. In this case the interference was the sudden appearance of a wormhole sending him somewhere. A loud splash brought him out of his thoughts, he looked around the room but the water was rippling everywhere from his movement making him unable to locate a source.

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A loud beep brought his eyes back to the screen, a load bar appeared under the message on the screen and slowly began to fill. AM looked up at the ceiling to look at the hole again, with strings of moss hanging like green fingers, this hole had a natural round look to it but was too small to get through. Constant water flow had eroded the corners at the base of the dead clock tower.

If that was what he was looking at, the time of day was late and the little bit of day light still in the sky came through the hole, the view out was obscured by the moss and grass forming around the whole. He took off his hoody and squeezed out as much water as possible and double knotted the sleeves around his waist, AM hastily made his way through the doorway.

Moss hung across the top and looked like green fangs, AM ducked the mossy fangs, only a little scared of being caught in those green smelly strings like a puppet. The whole situation was forming in his mind. Something had been altered, that much he was certain but he was too anxious to get above ground to worry about it now, also it seems he made this rip alone, there was no sign of Dig.

Upon leaving the room he came across a large grayish orange rectangle, leaning drunkenly between a large oak that took up most of the hall way. The oak had grown big enough to push it self through the ceiling above it, a large black mosquito buzzed passed his ear and flew up towards the opening created by the tree.

The gray-orange rectangle was rusted metal. AM with an almost gentle swipe knocked over the rusted hulk. Water splashed up and nearly hit his face as the object collapsed in a heap of jagged rusty innards. One piece of steel worn and dirty but not rusty sat amongst it.

AM carefully picked it out and felt the letters etched in it, he used the water around him and his shirt to clear the grit and grime so he could read it.

Delaware Filing Cabinets.

Followed by a US patent number following that also etched in was:

PROPERTY OF THE WAR DEPARTMENT

That heavy feeling returns again filling his stomach like a dead weight the memory of the sweet whispers of that voice...her voice, comes back.

"Forget it." he said sternly, scolding himself for thinking about her.

The terms War Department and Secretary of War had been changed to Defense sometime between the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, AM recalled. He sloshed past the rusted hulk and around the green bearded tree to what was left of the next room. All four of the walls still stood, and had created a large square pond. Though the entire roof above looked to have fallen down decades ago, two cypress trees barely six feet high and just a few feet apart had branches that were intertwined like lovers arms creating a lattice like roof keeping most of the sun off the water.

The cypress' stood exactly where the reel to reels had once sat, AM reshouldered his pack as he made his way to where a set of stairs he hoped would still be there. Either a fish or large frog splashed far off in the corner of the room, startling him enough to cause him to slip. The hallway out of the pond had more cypress trees and large green brown vines that covered a tiny section of wall still standing. He looked around again as another splash this time closer wet the back of his neck.

He turned to see a bull frog sitting on the remains of either a radio or space heater on the floor, it looked at him with black eyes as if the sight of AM was slightly interesting. AM cringed when it made a loud croaking sound, he almost covered his ears when it did it again. He turned to go, but after a few steps he froze when the next croaked stopped with a watery squeal followed by a wet ripping sound. Looking back a desk obstructed his view, a red yellow cloudiness in the water came from behind it.

AM nervously turned, ahead large chunks of concrete rounded by the elements above was carpeted in moss as the ground inclined near where the steps behind the double doors had been. AM made his way up cautiously while his mind went back to the box. He activated it when he pressed the button a wormhole formed and sent him somewhere altered, he hoped that was the case.

Gritting his teeth, he climbed up the decaying remains of a wall that had once housed the stairs leading up to daylight. Only a fraction

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still stood like a rotten tooth, it was worn away into a crude narrow set of steps he would have to balance on with arms out like a circus performer. He tried to climb but slipped off his first try and landed on his rear in the water. He got up rubbing his back and that's when he saw it.

On what was most definitely once a couch was a rat bigger than a house cat at the end of the room. Its' eyes were black with thick green veins , its front incisors were width of a Popsicle stick but were short and jagged at the end, and looked menacing. AM took deep breathes as he stared at it, with an open mouth.

As a country boy that fished in the Schuylkill river as a child, he had seen plenty of river rats that were close to this size but had a mangy dog look to them, almost pathetic. This creature that sat on a ugly decayed couch from the 1940's wasn't scurrying around busy with its rat duties but instead seemed to be watching him closely. When AM picked up his arm, it eyes darted right to it as if waiting for him to make a move. It didn't look mangy or pathetic it looked intelligent.

Its whiskers had some yellow goo on them, a tongue that was black and red licked its chops. The rat, if that's what it was, reminded him of a movie he saw on MST3K, 'ATTACK OF THE KILLER SHREWS' the movie was as bad as they got, with over sized vermin genetically altered by a scientist that kill nearly everyone stuck on an island. AM laughed at the horribleness of the movie, but now felt terror of something so cheesy come to life.

He swung his arms in a warding off gesture, but the rat squeaked indignantly at him. AM leaned over and searched under the water with one hand while keeping his eyes on the gray haired vermin. He didn't find one right away and eventually looked down using both hands to find a rock, after a few seconds he found one the size of a softball that was green and slimy.

He rose to throw it but the rat was gone, he gripped it tightly in his wet digits feeling it sliminess coat his palm and wrist as it dripped. He was afraid but wasn't sure what was scaring him more, this rat or what caused south Philadelphia to be reclaimed by swamps. He turned and looked back up.

It seemed impossibly high, and the jagged steps were as narrow as a window ledge. As he stepped back to find a better footing a squeak loud and piercing with an undertone of a growl like a jungle cat

followed by a sound of cloth tearing. AM felt his leg being pulled back making him almost fall, the large rat was tearing at his pant leg like a small terrier, but it felt as strong as a pit bull.

"JEEZUS FUUU.." he stammered in shock.

He shook his leg more in panic than an attempt to remove it, but the black-green eyed creature was flung to the other side of the room, and hit the wall with a weak thump. In the panic of his leg swing AM fell backwards into the water, the sweat washed away by the cold smelly standing liquid. Revulsion filled him, making him forget his fear for a second.

"ah!!" he grunted as he got up on his elbows and saw the ugly mutated vermin watching him again.

It sat there, with a pinkish gray rubbery looking tail that seemed to move like a snake. It's eye's bore directly into him like it was sizing him up, they were the eyes of an animal much higher on the food chain and much more deadly in this universe. To AM the seconds were minutes long as he stared back, slowly realizing he may not live he gulped in air rather than inhaled it watching the tail, swish in the water causing little whirlpools, almost hypnotized by it when it suddenly stopped and twitched and the rat gave another one of its strange squeak growls and charged.

Dread filled him as he tried pushing him self back but the ground was wet and too slippery for a grip. He cringed when he realized he still had the rock, knowing he was not an athlete like Dig. His head began to pound like a beating heart and hurt to the point he though he would vomit. As the rat made it to the soles of his shoes he threw it with eyes half closed and manged to hit it directly , being so close it would have been hard to miss.

With all of the terrified strength he threw it with, the force made it fly backwards and hit the wall again with a loud thud. It fell straight to the ground like the rock that crushed it's skull. Falling on its side, body twitching like a dog dreaming, a small pool of blood as black as oil surrounded its body.

He got up quickly and stood looking down at it, hoping it wasn't playing possum despite the blood, after a few seconds the twitching stopped. He was completely soaked again and was shivering with fear

despite the heat, everything began replaying in his mind causing him to vomit a thick yellow bile. Before he could finish heaving stomach acid another squeak growl this one far but not very filled his ears. In a panic he ran straight for the narrow jagged steps that lead to the world above.

He went up the crumbling jagged steps in three leaps, barely taking time to balance himself before leaping the last foot up to the sod rimmed hole above. Bits of green vegetation and streaks of dirt covered his face and arms as he climbed through the hole too scared to look back. He spat out a few tiny bits of rock that fell into his mouth after pulling himself through the hole, AM stood up and breathed in the outside air. It felt refreshing to his scattered brain, he hadn't been that scared since his first rip.

He looked down into the whole that looked pitch black from the outside, like a gaping green mouth, he couldn't make anything out. The thought of being stuck in such blackness while night was coming made him cry with relief that he was out. AM wondered if it had something to do with alien artifacts he searched. Those murderous intelligent eyes, those green veins were the same color that glowed from the cubes and the box.

After a few sips from a bottle of water and ten minutes of deep controlled breathing to relax his pounding heart. He checked his leg for a bite mark or scratch but was unscathed. His pant leg had taken the worst of it.

AM took in all that was around him, which wasn't much. The clock tower was just a jagged wall that was only two or three feet high, the office buildings that had lined the whole area were gone . A few houses remained but were just shells, nothing but a few walls and tall grass hiding the rubble of the others that had eventually collapsed.

He had come out on the side of the complex facing towards the downtown. The steel poles and barbed wire still remained but were rusted and falling over, the wire fencing that they needed to cut was gone. He walked straight over a large lump where the glass booth once stood and looked back at the Depot. Its few remaining buildings that were not totally eclipsed by tall grass and decay might have to be shelter tonight he thought while watching the sun make its western descent.

He removed the Q pad and eyed the screen. The loading bar was three

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quarters filled, as the sun began to set. He made his way to one of the houses that still had a roof and stomped down the grass which was only knee high as he came up to the porch and walked in to the house which had no door.

He looked up and didn't see any holes in the ceiling, the floor was wooden and had not rotted too badly and was clear of rubble with a few pieces of furniture. Towards the back of the living room was a set of stairs that went up to the second floor, but when attempting to climb them a loud cracking and groaning sound filled the house and the staircase began swaying like a house of cards on a breezy day making him stop. The living room was spacious and for that he was grateful. He removed his wet socks and shoes and set them to dry on the porch, with his hoody.

He took a shirt from his pack and studiously wrapped it around his face as he moved furniture caked in dust, his mind still racing with questions. AM went outside as the blizzard of dust settled and looked in the direction of the residences and stores that were no longer there. If they had ever been there. The CVS, the Mosconi pool hall, and the few houses in between were replaced by a large wall of solid concrete that rose twenty or thirty feet. The wall cut behind the depot into the forest and went on seemingly forever in the opposite direction.

Many empires built walls for some purpose that was considered in that nations best interest. The Romans did it to keep there soldiers busy, The Chinese and the Russians had done it for defense, American politicians from the right were always suggesting the government build walls along the US Mexico border line to keep out illegal immigrants, but this wall had another purpose, AM was sure of it. A beep brought him out of his thoughts, and realized it was the Q pad

"1992, second universe." he said to no one.

The earth showed on the screen again, but this version had more wormholes mostly Stiffies.

"Maybe I wont be stuck to long." he said hopefully.

He went back to the house and went through his supplies grateful he had his pack with him. There was not very much, a half dozen granola bars and three sixteen ounce bottles of water, no more strips of

jerky, a pair of pants, a pair of socks and one shirt that doubled as a face mask. He was pretty sure Dig still had all the cash, but AM still had six gold coins.

He didn't have his Reynolds comforter, but the night was warm. He sat Buddha style on the floor in front of a fireplace that had logs still sitting in them rotted and unburnt. The Q pad cast a ghostly white glow on the whole living room making him feel more vulnerable than safe. The thought of the rat brought chills to his spine and made him long for his Reynolds comforter just so he could grip something other than his scrawny arms. Ignoring the shadows in the pale light and the other worldly buzz of insect coming from all around him, he turned off the light and brought up the Qcalc.

He had seen more than four or five wormholes most of them Stiffies and hoped for a quick return home, and was right. In six weeks or so, he would be able to rip back to 1993. He hoped Dig would keep searching and hopefully recover the cube in that time.

He wanted to believe he could but he had doubts, he wasn't ready to be out there by himself. This was only his second rip out, first if you wanted to count the rip to 1829 as practice. He brought up the Sir Doyle to see if he could track any cubes or possibly another box in this universe, but there was no signal of any kind.

The wall and the rats and were connected, were they connected to the cubes though? Had someone found it and done something with it. Maybe they made it to the 1950's before they attached one to an atomic bomb or a germ. Disease was the likely culprit, Nuclear war would have killed almost everything including the dirt but the area was teeming with various kinds of insect and plant life.

Everything seemed to have been left sitting around in the house he was taking shelter in. What disease was it and was he inside or outside the quarantine if that's what those walls were for. He didn't feel sick but that didn't mean anything. The rat hadn't bitten or scratched him, but were they the result of the disease or the cause.

He would have to try and send a message to Dig. Quake had only gotten two messages out of maybe thirty while ripping. How much of a difference would it make now that he was in a different dimension. Maybe sending the same message every couple of hours and hope he receives one?

"Not much choice,"

He taught Dig the Q pads basic functions and capabilities easily enough. He felt worried Dig would do something he shouldn't do. How discrete would he be in 1993? Though, Dig had done everything he could to help and was always trying to learn more, he even learned to use the Q pad faster than AM did.

Shouldn't he be allowed a few smart ass remarks, after being gofer to a man he could easily beat up with one hand tied behind his back. Quake had said to him often enough that he didn't seem to appreciate what others did for him. The few girlfriend AM had had said that as well, he had only worried about law school since the age of twelve. His hero was a lawyer portrayed by Spencer Tracy in old movie most people his age had never seen, he wanted to be a man of liberty and justice, not of laws, because some laws to him were unjust.

His A.C.L.U. membership , the debate club, preparing for law school were the most important things to him, until the cubes. He dumped his girlfriend, dropped all his classes and started purchasing books upon books of Pennsylvania from the past two hundred years. Reading every map of Philadelphia and the surrounding area as it evolved over the last two and a half centuries. He dragged Quake along seemingly with ease, he hadn't hit his social stride in college and was hardly fazed about alien cubes, his Autism made it hard to really shock or scare him.

After sending a message to Dig he pulled himself into a corner as the night grew late. The crickets had gone silent, or the rats are coming out of the holes to eat them, he thought. The size of the room seemed to grow over him as the darkness deepened. He drew his knees up and laid his head on them staring into the darkness, wondering if the rat's eyes would glow green.

He left a brick he wedged out of the fire place next to him in case there were any lurking. What ever had happened, had happened a long time ago. Everything looked as it did when he and Dig ripped to 1830 but the woods that were here now were not very and not yet the giants they would become if left to grow.

Fields of tall grass seemed to be growing everywhere at various heights. To AM the walls meant that if it was a disease and it lasted long enough that walls two stories high were used to quarantine because there was no other way to stop it. They had probably been

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built by the Army if the rest of America was walled up in sections. Far off an owl hooted into a cloudy night that covered the whole sky like a blanket.

The darkness made the wing back chair in the corner of the room look like a giant bat about to take flight, he could almost hear the leathery flap of its wings. He wished for the buzz of the crickets to return, but the night went on deathly quiet. He leaned his head back to the wall and closed his eyes as his mind raced with thoughts.

He hoped Dig was still searching for the cube, he stressed to him enough that no matter what he had to find them. All AM could do was wait until he would be able to return and help Dig if he hadn't recovered it yet, there was always the possibility it could be stuck in someone's home. If that were the case would Dig try and break in, and what would he do if he were caught by police if he tried? AM wouldn't have been able to help if they were arrested, the police would find all his twenty-first century gear in a world where cell phones were as rare as a shooting star and were as big as a football, and then there was the cube.

Despite all that had happened he felt exhaustion ebb at his fear just enough to doze into an uneasy sleep. He woke suddenly through out the night two or three times for seemingly no reason. He woke up close to dawn with a start after what felt like a bad dream, that he didn't remember and was happier not too as he wiped tears from his cheeks. He didn't feel scared after the dream, but a deep sadness that made him sick to the stomach.

He had stayed up the rest of the morning waiting for the rising sun which was a sight that lifted AM's spirits. He gathered his pack and put on his socks which were dry as long as he kept his shoes off, and tied his still damp hoody around his waste and left. The sky was blue and had the occasional cloud that was almost transparent slowly go across the sky.

He was anxious to find someone, the thought of him being the only man on Earth, like that Vincent Price movie, filled him with terror. He walked towards what had once been Oregon avenue and pushed through the tall grass and weeds that were taking over the area, once out of the depot the grass was only about knee high. He looked down the defunct avenue trying to decide which way to go, on the depot side were skeletal remains of buildings and trees and swamp.

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The opposite side was more of the same but with a large wall that he couldn't see an end or beginning to. Behind him in the direction of Porter the wall cut across the avenue and looked to continue south for miles. Seeing no other way to go he went east towards the Delaware river. The river would be a good place to get out of Dodge if a disease had stricken the entire country, he held on to the urge of trying to see the other side of the wall.

Mostly out of fear of getting sick, and the idea that it might look worse on the other side. There didn't seem to be anyway to get on top anyway. It's mystery though left him looking at the wall every few minutes wondering if anything like those rats were living in there. The Q pad, which had an app for reading outside temperatures, said seventy-two degrees when he started, as AM walked the depot side grew more dense with trees which began edging out closer to him .

That's when he saw the first signs of life, if it could be called that, on the opposite side were the wall sat. It was a mural that covered a section of the wall top to bottom. A hooded figure stood shrouded in a long black robe, arms out in a welcoming gesture, with sleeves that had strips of cloth ripped to look like pointy fingers. A face painted white but now faded gave it a ghostly look, two points of green, were its eyes.

Under it were words written in Latin, a language he could not read.

"semel omni generatione plauge cadet inter eos"

The walls looked to have been around for at least a generation, the mural looked only a few years old. He found another more encouraging sign when he finally escaped the mural's green eyed gaze. It was a beaten down foot path just a few feet wide that he would have missed if he hadn't gone for a closer look at the mural.

It went in the same direction he was going so he followed it, after a half mile he began tripping over chunks of what felt like rocks. He pulled one out of the ground and saw it was asphalt. AM tossed it away with out comment. Every so often he would come across a remnants of vehicles siting on axles, tires longs since rotted, colors faded to a rusty orange.

The day grew hotter as the sun climbed higher, the sweat began to drip down his spine like a leaky faucet when the path widened out some. The

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forest stopped edging closer, after a mile the trees began to edge away from him until it was mostly tall grass and the occasional sapling. Although he hadn't traveled very far, AM wanted to find a place to sit and take a drink, he walked towards what looked like a wide ladder only two or three feet high he had noticed a half-mile away.

As he got closer he saw three or four large metal tube on there side open at both ends, the ladder was actually steps attached to a flat curved slab of metal that had holes rusted through it, it took AM a minute to realize it was a slide. He stood in the remnants of either a playground or a park. Although he knew the geography of Philadelphia like the back of his hand, this alternate version of Philadelphia had no skyscrapers or any visible land marks to get any idea of were he was.

His best guess was that he was at Marconi park, which was in the direction he was walking, and by the distance he had so far traveled. He sat comfortably on the top step and looked around. He looked across to the wall and wondered what lay beyond.

He thought back to when he was eleven years old and saw "Night of the Living Dead" for the first time. It had scared him so bad he slept with his parents for a week, and it was months before he could turn the light off. In his mind even at that age, he knew death was the final thing, but being dead wasn't enough to escape though. He felt terrified those nights afterwards, afraid the minute he closed his eyes, zombies would come barging in ripping him to shreds and then feed.

He removed a water bottle from his pack and took small sips, his lips were like sandpaper and he relished the liquid despite its warmth. The memory caused his hands to shake a little as he fumbled the cap back on. He squinted his eyes close trying to force the memory out of his already scared mind. The thought of a zombie slowly, and quietly shambling towards him kept his head turning this way and that.

He took a deep breath and focused on the wall in front of him, but he could almost feel eyes watching him. The occasional twitter of birds was all that he could here, then in the silence the sound of someone taking short breathes. It was faint but he could hear it, making him sit up straight.

Maybe I'm scaring myself, he thought. He was quiet, not even breathing

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when he heard it more clearly this time. It didn't sound like an animal but that didn't mean it wasn't dangerous, he never brought weapons with him other than the time bomb but in this instance he saw they might be necessary in this alternate universe. Nothing to be done about it now, he thought as he slowly and quietly as possible got off the steps.

He looked at the tubes, knowing someone or something was hiding in one of them. He walked to closest one and stood a foot away from the open end. The breathing hurried, then stopped when AM stood in front of it, he bent down to look inside.

He saw a boy of six or seven years sitting the way AM had last night, wearing brown shorts and a colorless shirt that a poor child of a farmer from the nineteenth century might wear. His hair hung over his face that was sweaty and dirty. When he saw AM his eyes went wide with fright and he wrapped his arms around his legs as if hoping he could disappear into himself. AM stared back not sure what to say or do.

"Uh...hello." he said finally.

But the child kept silent, not even acknowledging he heard AM. Trying a different approach he took out a granola bar and showed it to the child.

"Are you hungry?" he said holding it out to him inside the tube, he looked at the shiny wrapping in wonder and looked at AM again still silent.

Remembering that trust was hard thing to come by he left the granola bar on the ground with a fresh bottle of water and walked a few feet away. He stood waiting for the child to retrieve the goods, after a minute or two his pale face emerged watching AM as he took them. AM tilted his bottle towards him.

"It's warm but it will make them go down easier."

The little boy showed a hint of a smile but it turned to a frown when he couldn't open the foil wrapper, he looked at AM sad and confused.

"I can open it if you like."

He looked up at him unsure, but held it up with a hand that shook like a leaf on a tree in late fall. AM peeled the foil off like a banana skin and held it out to the boy. The boy licked his lips sitting at the edge of the tube, as he took it from him, showing more hunger than fright.

He bit off three quarters of it and looked up at him with a bright smile as he tasted the chocolate chips. To AM they tasted like wood, but the boy seemed to enjoy them so he gave him another. He picked up the water bottle, feeling it and looking at the plastic bottle with awe but drank it greedily.

"Thanks."

"Sure, I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"Sister Eva says not to talk to strangers."

"Who's Sister Eva?"

"Danny says she's a penguin, but he don't call her that."

"Do you mean a nun?"

"None what?"

"Never mind. Are Sister Eva and Danny near by?"

At that question his eyes went glassy with tears.

"I...dunno..." he said between sobs " I got lost,"

His body shook with each sob, AM feeling on the verge of tears himself from all that had happened over the last twelve hours, got a handkerchief out of his pack.

"They'll be OK," he said soothingly as the boy refused the handkerchief and wiped his tears with his sleeve.

He didn't know if that was the right thing to say, they maybe in trouble like he was.

"How did you get here?" he asked after the boy settled down some.

"I was playing near the river and a boat came and there was people yellin at me, wantin stuff from me. Sister Eva said to stay away from the river cause I might drowned. They got off the boat and started to run after me when I said I didn't have nothin."

The boy was starting to tear up again, but there was still a lot AM didn't understand so he posed only one more question.

"Who were the people chasing you?"

The boy look at him with those wide frightened eyes and simply said:

"The bad people from the island."

AM was stuck with that description and didn't like it one bit, for small child bad could me all kinds of thing either real or imagined, though this boy was genuinely frightened. With history being so severely altered he decided to help the boy though he wondered what he would have done if the universe hadn't been altered would he still have wanted to preserve events as they should be despite the horribleness of them.

"What's your name."

"George, I'll be eight in October." he said holding up eight

fingers with a shining smile.

"I'm AM."

"Am? What kinda name is that?"

"There my initials, AM. It's what my friends call me."

"Is initials your last name?" he said curiously.

AM just laughed and said: "call me Abe"

"Oh is that how ya say it?"

AM chuckled again enjoying the brief moment of lightheartedness.

"I'll help you get back your friends. Do you remember which way you came from?"

"Can you really?" George said excitedly picking his head back up.

AM nodded.

Philadelphia had two major rivers, the Delaware ran between Pennsylvania and New Jersey, was in the direction he had been walking. The Schuylkill river was behind him in the direction of Porter his hometown but that direction was cut off by the walls. George looked to the east biting his lower lip as he slowly raised his finger and pointed towards New Jersey.

"Your sure, you didn't turn somewhere?"

George seemed to concentrate hard for a minute squeezing the water bottle before answering.

"yeah, I didn't turn I ran straight and came here yesterday."

"You've been here since yesterday?" he asked surprised

He nodded almost with shame. "I didn't mean to get lost, Sister is

gonna be mad at me." he said frowning but dry eyed.

"Maybe she'll be too worried to be mad, come on. I'll take you to the river and see what we can see."

It took them a few hours to get there, George was anxious at first but began to tire after a half hour. So AM wore his backpack on his front and gave George a piggy back ride most of the way. George talked the whole way, asking AM all kinds of questions. It was the shoes that had started it all off.

"Those are nice shoes, did ya make ' um?"

They were a regular pair of black tennis shoes he had purchased at a Kmart for twenty dollars, but to George who wore sandals that were of cheap make, eyed them like he had never seen such a thing. They were still damp and a little dirty but hadn't been too badly damaged otherwise. He would try to get as generic with his clothing as possible, the few people he had encountered while ripping never noticed his clothes. Here though shoes and clothes were probably hard to come by.

"I bought them," he said hoping he wouldn't ask more about it.

"Where ya from?" he asked instead.

"Far from here." Which was true in its own way.

The sun was getting low as they finally reached the river. The water was flowing south and would eventually dump in to the Atlantic ocean miles away. Across the river lay New Jersey which looked swamped with trees and tall grass like its neighbor.

He put George down and asked "Is this where you were playing?" when they came to a crumbling embankment that had a large wooden pole that came out of the water, it was the last piece of a dock. It was gray and worn but stood straight up with out the least sign of moving in the running river, a piece of rope was tied near the top, George nodded.

"Are there lots of people living here, I mean besides you and your friends?"

"Uh-huh,"

"How many?"

"lots."

With that he probably got as close an answer to that as he could hope, he wondered if George could count but didn't want to ask. Instead he posed a question that would be easier.

"How many are there of you and your friends?"

"Um," he said and began to recite names at a whisper. "sixteen, I think. I just learned how to count to twenty but I'm pretty sure it's sixteen."

George began to lead, showing more energy than when they started, the path they walked was more of a road. It was dirt and mud with ruts and footprints, on each side were piles of rock, asphalt, rusted hulks of vehicles that made it look like an actual street made of rubble. AM had to jog to keep up with George. The road had a dip that went up a few feet, at the top George stopped suddenly and yelled.

"SISTER EVA!"

Not sure if his yelling was out of fear or joy, he ran. He reached the top of the dip and was relieved to see him embraced by a nun dressed in a habit and gown the color of eggshell. As he approached he could see her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

"Thank you, Lord, thank you." she said not seeing AM.

She was kneeling before him and held him out and brushed his hair with her hand in a motherly gesture AM remembered from his elementary school days when he had been bullied and sought his mother for comfort.

"Where..." she had finally seen AM and stood up quickly. In her hands were blue and white rosary beads, they clenched into a fist when she saw him, her fingers and knuckles were white. She was a handsome woman of fifty with iron gray hair that he could still see under her habit. She looked cautiously at him with steady eyes as she gently pushed George behind her, AM could see this woman would die to protect him.

"It's OK, sister. He's Abe Lincoln, he's my friend." George said coming front again.

She looked down at him caressing his cheek and looked back to AM with softer but still cautious eyes.

"Your name is Abe Lincoln?" she asked

"Yes, ma'am." he said with a smile.

"Everyone calls me, Sister Eva or just sister." she said evenly.

"I apologize, Sister." he said with an embarrassed smile. She nodded as she looked at his shoes and store made clothing, she was still undecided as to whether he was trustworthy.

"I'll should let you know I don't care to be lied too, so I think you should tell me your real name. I've read the few history books left and know who the man is." she said.

She knew who Abe Lincoln was, he wished he hadn't told George his last name. He was wearing clothes that looked bizarre to her, his name made him even stranger to her.

" Sister, my name is Abraham Mordecai Lincoln. I am a descendant of President Abraham Lincoln, I was named after him my middle name derives from Mordecai Lincoln, his great uncle which is my eight times great grandfather, one of the first of my kin to come to America." he said proudly seeming to grow tall as he said it.

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He could recite the entire family tree all the way back to there coming over to America hundreds of years before though that didn't prove he was related. George tried to walk over to him, but Sister Eva put her hand on his shoulder still not sure. He looked up at her with sad eyes.

"He helped me get back, he even give me granola bars." he said plaintively as he held up the chocolate chip treat still in its foil wrapper. She looked at it with the same wonder George had earlier.

"Did he?" she said with a perplexed look.

She looked about to say something but was interrupted by shouts.

"HEY GEORGIE PORGIE!!!" some one called happily from behind her.

A boy that was six feet tall and shoulders as broad as a football player with gingery hair and pasty skin dotted with freckles appeared behind Sister Eva, and picked the small child up and swung him around in circles. George screamed with glee, at least a dozen children of different ages came running from a building that was a short and square, it sat far back away from the river. The boys were dressed in similar clothing, the girl wore a type of dress the Amish would wear but were of poor quality.

A few of the older children looked at AM with curiosity, while hugging and kissing George, seeing that made him feel like crying again. When the tall red head put George down he walked over to him and spoke.

"So who might you be, your not very tall for a grown up but I can't hold it against ya." he said trying to sound sympathetic but smiling when he said it.

"I'm Danny."

AM shook his hands not taking offense to his obvious joke, Danny reminded him of Dig.

"Very nice to meet you, I'm Abe."

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Sister Eva gave up with her questions for the time being, grateful that George had returned unharmed thanks to this strangely dressed man. She thought of the miracles they spoke of in the good book, about fishes and loaves and water into wine, they were stories in an old book and thought that was were they existed. This man was a miracle to George, an answer from all her prayers last night when they had spent hours searching.

"Mr. Lincoln," she said and the exited chatter from the children stopped. "I thank you for bringing George home to us, the Lord says do unto others as I always tell the children. I invite you to break bread with us as thanks."

He could see that Sister Eva wouldn't take no for answer, though they could probably do with out another mouth to feed. Still he had not eaten since yesterday and the thought of something other than granola bars made his stomach gurgle with hunger.

"I don't want to impose."

"Impose, that's a fancy word. That's what you call bein caught with your trouser down." Danny said with smirk.

"Hush now, Daniel." Sister Eva said to him.

He put a finger to his lips with a sheepish grin. AM thinking of Dig hoped he had found the cube, he would have to send the message again before the day was done.

"Nonsense, Mr Lincoln. It wouldn't be Christ like to send you on your way with out a meal at least for bringing George back to us."

"That's very generous of you, sister."

She nodded with approval at the answer and turned to the children, and bent slightly to talk to a pretty girl maybe ten years old with brown skin and brown eyes.

"Missy tell Sister McDevitt George is home and to expect a guest for

supper."

The little black girl smiled and ran back to the square building, it was then that AM noticed the stone chimney with a curly cue of white smoke swirling up into the late afternoon breeze. He felt his stomach rumble again, as Sister Eva and the children led the way to their home. As he got closer AM saw a chapel with a wooden cross that stood upon a steeple, that sat next to the building they were entering. A swing set and a slide made of wood sat in front of a rickety fence that had a door barred with a length of wood.

AM assumed this was an orphanage, since George never once cried for a mom or dad. AM had never talked with a nun before. He knew enough about them from Quake who spent a few years at a Catholic school before moving from New Mexico. He always imagined a nun as fierce dragon lady with a silver crucifix in one hand and a yard stick in the other, ready to crack knuckles at any disrespectful child, Quake laughed when he told them that as children, telling him nun's didn't do those kinds of things anymore.

Sister Eva didn't seem the type to wail on the little hand of a child, she came off not fierce but gentle yet strong when she told Danny to be quiet. He wondered if Sister McDevitt was the same. Where the tiny playground sat still had asphalt but there were holes of grass and clusters of dandelions breaking through, he saw as they entered the square building.

Two dozen wooden desks sat in neat little rows in front of a black board with chunky sticks of chalk, at the top of the chalk board was the alphabet written in cursive. The wall on the right side was decorated with children's drawings and a framed picture of Jesus in a flowing white robe with a staff in hand while he tended a flock of sheep. He took one of the drawings off the wall that had George written in blue paint at the bottom, it was a person bearing a sword riding on either a cow or giraffe.

"An art lover are ya?" Danny said watching him with another smirk.

"Are you students?"

"Yeah, Sister Eva taught us numbers and letters and books, She like us to talk nice and stuff."

"Are they any parents around?"

Danny didn't smile and nodded his head in the negative.

"Mine died eleven years before from the Green Death."

AM nodded as if he knew what the Green Death was.

"What about George's parents? Are they still around?"

Danny shrugged in a I don't know gesture. They went through a door way in the back and came to a smaller homier room with two long wooden tables, a pair of thin white candles sat on the ends of the tables illuminating the whole room giving it a cozy feel. The back of this room had an actual door in its doorway with a crucifix above it, behind it the aroma of food filled the room. AM closed his eyes and sniffed, saliva filled his mouth, what ever it was it smelled heavenly.

"We don't have much meat, Mr Lincoln, but we have a garden with plenty of vegetables." Sister Eva said.

Sister Eva told Danny and a blond haired girl about the same age as him to help in the kitchen. Danny rolled his eyes, the girl got up with out comment.

"Hampton, take George up stairs and help him clean up, and show Mr Lincoln to the wash room on the way."

Hampton looked to be about twelve and was scrawny like George, he smiled and made a come on gesture with one hand while he took George by the other hand. They went through a second doorway and down a short hallway with two doors.

"You can wash up there, there's a tub of waters and a washcloth. It ain't hot but it ain't cold neither." he said pointing at the closest door.

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He thanked him and went into the room. The luke warm water sat in a large steel tub, he cleaned his body with a oblong brick of soap. It was as best as he could have hoped for and felt safe, he didn't want to spend another night out in the wilderness of a long ago Armageddon. Before leaving he resent the message with crossed fingers.

When they returned from the washroom the tables had been set and the older children were helping to bring out plates and bowls of white and yellow ceramic filled with steaming potatoes, broccoli, corn, carrots, peas and a stew with hunks of chicken and vegetables floating in a thick yellow gravy and a basket with tiny biscuits. At the center of the table was a chicken breast with golden brown skin.

"Children, come introduce yourselves to our guest."

The children lined up and from tallest to shortest, the boys (Virgil, Jeremy, and Hampton) shook hands with him and the girls (Penny, Nellie, Connie, Missy, Riley, Mary, Nancy, and Stacy) each gave a curtsy. They were anxious to meet this oddly dressed person who was a descendant of Abe Lincoln a man the sister's had said was one of civilizations greatest leaders. For them it was like meeting the Great Emancipator in the flesh.

"Sister McDevitt wanted to celebrate so we cooked extra for everybody, Mr Lincoln."

"My compliments to the chef." he said raising a glass filled with a minty tea.

"I helped too you know," said the blond girl Penny.

"My compliments to the pretty young miss as well then," he said with a slight bow.

The girl's face blushed as she smiled, she had never received such a compliment except sometimes from Danny.

"Hey Penny, your lookin like a strawberry." Danny said with laugh and half a biscuit in his hand.

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The door from the kitchen opened and out came Sister McDevitt. She looked to be almost eighty years old but looked spry, despite a noticeable limp. She had cane made of thick brown wood to support her. Faint white hair showed underneath her habit, her face was wrinkled but had grandmotherly smile on it.

"So is this the young man that brought George back to us?" she asked while fiddling with a cracked pair of bi-focals attached to string and limped a little closer.

She put them on and eyed him closely, not out of suspicion but to observe.

"Oh yes, Eva dear. He does look some like him in the eyes, much shorter but skinny like him too. May the Lord bless you for helping George, Mr Lincoln." she said placing a warm hand on his shoulder.

Danny helped Sister McDevitt to her chair as AM pulled it out for her. When she was settled in her chair she reached out and took AM's hand in her own which was wrinkled but soft.

"My grandfather met him once sonny, he described him as a man with sad eyes, but they would light up with a smile. I see sad eye's on you, Mr Lincoln. May the Lord bring you happier days. After what you have done for us, I'm sure you would have made President Lincoln proud."

Feeling embarrassed AM smiled and sat down.

"Hey Abe, now your all red."

"Hush Danny, and say grace." she said with a gentle poke from her cane.

He nodded dutifully with a smile and began. AM an atheist simply bowed his head shut his eyes, not wanting to offend his hosts.

"Rub a dub dub, Lord thanks for the grub."

The children laughed, Sister Eva looked about to say something but

Sister McDevitt said: "Good enough for me, lets eat."

The younger children sat at one table except George who sat next to AM, not wanting to leave his side. The chicken breast was tender and juicy, AM had two helpings of the of the stew. When they had there fill of chicken and vegetables, Penny brought out a bowl with bananas and oranges and red apples. AM wondered if they had grown the bananas and oranges too, which is extremely hard to cultivate so far north.

The younger children had taken there fruit and adjourned outside to the playground before it got too dark. When Danny and Penny finished clearing the table they went outside. When it was just he and the sisters, Sister Eva restarted her inquiry.

"Where did you find George, Mr Lincoln?"

"I was traveling east along the forest south of here, he was hiding in a park I just happened to be at the right place at the right time, I suppose."

"A miracle." Sister McDevitt said making the sign of the cross.

"You came from the forest?" she said.

He nodded.

"The green sickness and death lie there, you should take better care on your travels, Mr Lincoln. The walls keep in nothing" she said as Sister McDevitt made another sign of the cross.

Before they could ask questions about why he was traveling that way, he asked one of his own.

"Were are the children's parents?"

"Most were victims of the green death," Sister Eva said. "others were abandoned, George and Nancy and Missy were left here when still only babies, offspring of prostitutes that frequent the trade post near the river.

"George said he was chased by the bad people from the island. Who was he talking about?"

The sisters exchanged a look before Sister McDevitt answered.

"Corsairs," she said and this time Sister Eva made the sign of the cross.

"You mean pirates?"

"Yes," answered Sister Eva this time. "They reside on Petty's Island."

There was a Petty's Island back in his universe. It was almost three hundred square miles, and nearly three miles end to end. In the nineteenth century it was called "Shackamaxon Island" after the local Shackamaxon village of Lenni Lenape. It was also known as "Aquikanasara" named by Swedish explorer Peter Lindstrom in 1654, and "Treaty Island" likely after Penn Treaty by the Manderson Family who in 1852 bought most of the land.

It was bought from local chiefs by Elizabeth Kinsey, a Quaker who had fled persecution in England. William Penn owned the island after Kinsey; John Petty, its namesake, bought it in 1732. The island was a hotbed for gambling and dueling in the 18th and 19th centuries, and acquired a reputation for lawlessness and danger; adding to this danger was the large number of shipwrecks which occurred around the island.

Ralston Laird, an Irish immigrant, moved to Petty Island in 1851 and became a farm manager there, living on the island for nearly 60 years and eventually being proclaimed its "king". A real estate mogul bought it from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in 2010 with plans to build nightclubs and restaurants and possibly a casino, but they were still only plans as of 2011.

"George said they wanted things from him."

"They expect compensation for our residing here," Sister Eva said sadly.

"They control the merchants and the food growers and the flesh traders, fishing is not allowed nor bathing in the river. Fortunately we have a well near the garden we use for water. Even the children have their pockets turned out, I've seen them take children if they were not satisfied with what they had."

"Do they ever release them?"

Both the sisters were silent, the thought of civilization coming to such means made his full stomach lurch with anger and disgust. Danny then came in carrying George on his back, their laughs cut through the melancholy silence.

"Hey Abe, your lookin green about the gills. Is it the chicken?" he said putting George down.

"Will you push me on the swing Abe? Danny pushes me too high up." he said happily.

"It's time for you to come in now George, tell the others now." Sister McDevitt said.

"awwww," he complained but did it anyway.

"Danny, go make a bed for Mr. Lincoln." Sister McDevitt said.

"Awww how come, Missy makes up the beds?" he said in mock childish tones.

"For insulting my chicken, now go on." she said with a smile.

"That's alright, sister's, I can..." AM said before he was cut off by Sister Eva.

"No, there's plenty of room. You'll not be safe out in the night. Corsairs are not the only dangers here, Mr Lincoln. If you must continue your journey, it would be better to wait until morning."

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That was as close as they came to asking why he was here, as for his journey it was at a standstill. The history buff in him was curious as to exactly what had happened and when. After the children had gone to bed, AM went outside towards the river and looked up stream in the direction of the island. It sat a mile further up, in the total darkness all he could see were the flames from the bonfires they lit around the islands coast.

He heard hoarse laughter and shouts coming from the island carried by the wind. He jumped when he heard a gun shot, which was followed by a horrific scream then more hoarse laughter, the laughing frightened him more than the scream. He wondered if the children heard any of it and hoped they didn't. This place was like a dark fairy tale of monsters and pirates, and orphaned children and a disease called the Green Death.

AM placed a hand on his chest to slow his beating heart. He was startled again by approaching footsteps, turning he saw Sister Eva holding a kerosene lantern , her habit made her look ghostly in the light.

"I'm sorry to frighten you, Mr. Lincoln. I wanted to have a word with you."

He wondered if she would finally ask about his journey.

"Where did you learn to speak so well?"

He answered with what he hoped was with out hesitation.

"I was home schooled by my parents."

"Your parents had books?"

"Yes, we were fortunate enough to have a personal library, and they made sure I benefited from it. "

His parents did have a library back home, and he spent more than a few rainy days as a boy reading everything from Shakespeare to Steinbeck.

"As you can see, there is only myself to educate the children. Sister McDevitt has trouble seeing letters in the few books we have. She has trouble getting around and needs Penny to help her with cooking and cleaning. I'd like to ask you if you could stay and help me teach these children. You speak very well and I'm sure more well read than myself. If you do not wish to, I understand and would not wish to interfere in your travels."

AM didn't answer right away, but looked back up river at Petty's Island. More hoarse laughter found its way to his ears.

"I can stay only a short time, I have a friend waiting for me back home."

He hoped she wouldn't ask about it and was glad when she didn't, he hadn't lied this much in so short a time since...

"Are you alright?" Sister Eva asked concerned.

"Huh?" he said ignoring her sweet whispers that still stuck in his head.

"Your pale, are you not feeling well?"

"I...I'm fine. I just feel...tired actually."

She studied him for a moment.

"I would be glad to lend my services until I go."

She looked at him closely before saying anything.

"Well then, you should go to bed. We start class bright and early tomorrow morning. Good night, Mr Lincoln."

He watched her enter the building, and looked back up the river again. Whatever party they were having was just getting started, a dark figure on the beach was lighting more fires. When morning came he

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would have to get a better look, from this distance and time of night the island looked a distant fire on the water. Making his way to the short building AM wondered if Dig received one of his text messages.

Date: April 29th 1993 Universe:1

Dig stood at the corner of Snyder avenue and Juniper street, looking down the narrow lane of Juniper street, which was mostly apartment complexes and houses. He adjusted his headset and listened for the beeping which was almost a constant tone. It had been a few weeks since AM disappeared into a blue wormhole. With nothing but anxiety keeping him going he packed the alien box into his backpack and left the depot to continue the search, remembering what AM had told him.

"Find the cubes, no matter what happens."

He purchased a new headset and used the Sir Doyle to begin his search. The first few days were the scariest, he walked the streets slowly and methodically. He would try and concentrate on the beeps but he would keep bumping into people, they would give him looks that made him feel like a stranger in a strange lands. The lyrics to a Doors song filled his mind.

"People are strange, when your a stranger,
faces look ugly when your alone"

He could appreciate that song even more now, Spring was in full force so he put the Q pad in his backpack when it got too warm for a hoody. He walked down Juniper street as children were heading home from school, swinging back packs and lunch boxes, shouting joyously that another school day was at an end. He came to a defunct frame store when the beep became monotone. The door was glass with a push bar, a faded red sticker said push, but when he did the door didn't budge.

A for rent sign with a phone number sat in a window were dusty broken picture frames sat with pictures long since washed out by the sun. He thought about breaking in but thought it too risky. He went to a coffee shop that would be a McDonald's he and his friends would eat at the night the Phillies won the World Series in 2008. He drank three or four cups before figuring out what to do.

"I'll rent it." he said wanting to kick himself for not thinking of it sooner.

He looked at how much cash he had on hand, which was a little more than two thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills. He hadn't spent more than a few dollars since AM had disappeared, he hoped it would be enough, the place was big. He called the number and a man with an Italian accent answered.

"You the guy who owns the property on Juniper street? I wanna take a look at it."

Half an hour later a red Lincoln pulled up to the corner, and out came a short fat man with salt and pepper hair though he looked to be in his thirties. He showed Dig the first floor and the basement and quoted him the price to rent it.

"Thousand a month with security , plus I gotta to do credit and background check before I can give you a lease." he said with an accent that made him think of Rocky Balboa.

Dig hadn't thought about the paperwork and legalities involved in renting a place. He thought hurriedly about what to do then remembered the story AM told him while building the labyrinth.

"Look buddy, I got two thousand cash right here and I only plan on spending two months here cause I got a deadline to meet and every place else is either shitty or too expensive."

"What fuckin dead line?" the man said confused.

"...I'm a writer," he said not sure where he could go with this but going.

"Oh yeah? you write like scripts and shit?" he asked curiously.

"Plays actually, I wrote an off Broadway play called "Apples and Oranges"

"Get the fuck outta here. What's it about?" said the man with interest.

Dig just though of a big problem in America.

"Racism in the framing business." he said wondering if this was how AM did it, off the cuff or did he have stories already lined up for any possible tricky questions.

"No, shit? No wonder you need this place."

"So can we skip the paper work, I should've finished six months ago but you know how shit is," he asked with sympathy and a handful of cash.

The man eyed him closely but took the money.

"If I find out your some pervo druggie and cops start snoutin around, I don't know you, your some squatter. I could get in trouble doin this." he said taking the bills and counting them out with a grin.

He was shocked that it had worked so well, he only wished AM had been here to see it. He had been worried for weeks since he disappeared that he wouldn't be able to find it, or it would be out of his reach if he did. So far everything had gone perfect. The man gave him a set of keys with the agreement that in two months he would leave the keys in the mail box and keep there arrangement private.

He went back into the basement, it was dank and wet as any basement in south Philly and there was an underlying smell of mildew. He made his way toward the corner and there the wall was cracked and had a noticeable lump, as if something tried breaking through. He caressed the lump with his hand, it was like a pimple on a stone face, he hoped two months would be long enough to pop it.

It took over a month to get the box out and it was three quarters submerged. He spent many days and late nights chipping and brushing away flakes and small crumbs of concrete, he would keep at it until his hands would cramp from holding the small tools. Hand cramps that would take almost a whole day for him to work out if ignored for too long. It was mid May before he made a hole the size of his pinky.

"Christ, I feel it." he whispered as he touched it with his finger tip.

He was exhilarated that he had found it and was recovering it on his own, again he had wished AM had been here. He missed his friend, and despite all the success he was having he felt utterly alone. He found himself with too much free time between hand cramps. So he read, it was all he could do to forget about how lonely he felt.

He enjoyed it at first, he read 'The Lord Of The Rings' in just a few days. When he finished that he read a biography of Ben Franklin , then another about John Adams. It surprised him how much the two men disliked each other, even there biographers were the same, both would have the same event's but each would discredit the others account as to who was more important and who actually did what. Then he read another one about Thomas Jefferson, that's when he got annoyed with the founding fathers.

They were, to Dig, smart men, but no different than the politicians of today, uppity as AM might have said. One Friday night he read the 9/11 Commission report, when he saw how easily the attack could have been prevented he wanted to vomit, instead he tossed the Q pad on the bed and went outside. He could imagine what AM would say, but he felt stir crazy. The last person he talked to was the Italian man who rented him the store.

He walked out and felt the warm spring air on his face and let it blow away his depression. The night sky showed maybe a dozen stars in all, the city lights drowned the majority of them out, but he looked anyway. He could make out Orion's belt, and part of the Big Dipper.

Staring up into the sky it was a few minutes before he noticed people walking by in small groups to the other end of the block. So he followed, not even thinking about it. He came upon a line to a doorway, loud music and a plethora of lights shown down a long black staircase. A sign to the right of the doorway said: CLUB ENLIGHTENMENT

A man who looked to Dig like the actor who played Tony Soprano stood at the top of the steps checking Id's and taking money for the cover charge. The walls were black with black lights shining on drawings on the walls giving them a other worldly glow. On one side was a caricature of President Clinton with a joint in his mouth, with the caption Just Say Inhale written in graffiti style under it. The other

wall had music notes and block graffiti letters, much nicer and more cheerful than the one he saw at the hostel back when he first arrived.

A bar sat in the middle which was surrounded by tables and chairs, which were most of the people seemed to be enjoying themselves, there weren't many on the huge dance floor despite the music. He made his way to the bar and sat on a stool hoping they would have some kind of juice. The bartender was a young black girl in her early twenties with thick braids. She looked frazzled, a couple of guys were barking drink orders at her in an attempt to confuse her.

"Dicks." he said to himself.

After twenty minutes she finally managed to get to Dig.

"Cranberry juice, please."

She looked relieved at the simple order and held a finger up, she was back in less than a minute with a short glass of the deep red liquid. He handed her a five and told her to keep it, she smiled and went back to the other customers. The music filled the room and vibrated his whole body making him bob his head in step to the music, but most of the people didn't seem to want to dance. Above the dance floor was a catwalk that people used to get around big crowds, tonight it was just an empty bridge over a deserted dance floor.

In the corner next to dance floor was a DJ in a booth playing vinyl records, someone entered the booth and spoke in his ear. The person exited the booth and then the DJ began scratching a record with a deft hand.

"HEY MOTHER GOOSE, TURN IT UP! I SAID TURN IT UP!!!" a female voice cried musically over the club's loud speakers.

"Mother Goose?" he knew that name but couldn't remember from where.

A girl with long hair raven black with streaks of pink lying amongst it, which made her black hair look richer, headed to the catwalk. She wore a pair of jean shorts, and a black halter top that showed her midriff that was flat as a board but looked soft, upon her head was a hat the kind "The Cat in The Hat" wore but with black and purple

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stripes. Her olive colored skin looked like caramel in the darkness. She ran up the steps of the catwalk where a spot light fell on her, seeing her in the bright light, Dig felt his heart stir like he was on a roller coaster, right before the big plunge.

She had the whole clubs attention, people got up from the bar and their tables to see what the girl would do, they were restraint but seemed to feel the building excitement the girl brought with her. The DJ stopped his scratching, and a low beat from the speakers pounded all around the club. The girl smiled a sexy smile down on everyone, men whistled and cheered not sure what to expect. When that stopped she said:

"They say love is good...they say love is the answer...

"love, love is the answer
when I think about love
I don't think about bright moons

twinklin stars red wine
silent whispers holding hands
secret love letters
I'm thinkin about pure sex
deep sex hard sex
rough sex...G0000!!!!

She tossed the mike and her hat away, the crowd was cheering as she started doing back flips across the cat walk, back and forth, finishing with a cartwheel at the center. Then with just bare feet she jumped up and stood on the narrow railing and started gyrating her hips in groove to a Salt n Peppa song, Dig hadn't heard in years. What he saw next kept his heart pounding another ten minutes afterwards. She crouched and flipped forward in the air and landed perfectly in a split on a pad one might see a gymnast use that had been taken out just a minute before.

The crowd ate it up, Dig stood up clapping and whistling. She took a bow as people made their way to the dance floor, her energy was contagious. The girl picked up her shoes from behind the bar and ran off somewhere.

Dig was worried about going out, but he forgot about that for now. He

enjoyed going to clubs, though he could hardly dance to save his life. He took in the colors that shone about like a living rainbow, blinking and twirling and turning from red to yellow to orange and back again. Other lights shining purple, blue, green, reflected off the mirrors that lined the wall behind the dance floor illuminating it, even the clothes people were wearing seemed bright and colorful.

It lifted his spirits to see it all, the music, the lights, the girl with back flips most of all, she looked so heart achingly beautiful. He was thinking about the black and pink haired girl when a shattering of glass brought him out of his thoughts.

"OWWW!!!" cried the bartender.

Dig looked over and saw the black girl holding her hand with a frown on her face, one of the customers had an arrogant smile on his face like he was bullying a child.

"You dropped my drink." he said with annoyance.

Dig pushed between him and the black girl with napkins already in hand.

"MOVE, ASSHOLE!!!" Dig shouted at the bully.

As a bartender he had plenty of accidents himself and could sympathize. He gently lifted the girl's hand and put the wad of napkins in her palm.

"Close your hand." he yelled over the music but she heard and squeezed.

It was then that the Tony Soprano look a like and the black and pink haired girl came over.

"Jesus, Maya! You OK?" the black and pink haired asked.

She did a double take at Dig before looking at Maya's hand.

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"That jerk off wouldn't let go of the glass when I tried to take it." she said wiping the tears away with her free hand.

"You want me to run her up to the hospital, Marisa?" Tony Soprano's twin asked.

"Then who's gonna watch the door, Joey? We can't even serve drinks now."

"I'm sorry, Marisa." she said wiping away more tears.

"It's not your fault, sweetie." Marisa said kindly

Marisa lifted the napkin which was a bloody mess, she grimaced and made Maya keep her hand up.

"I'll take her, Joey. Keep an an eye on the assholes."

"Yeah but whose gonna serve the drinks?"

With out thinking Dig said: "I know how to bar tend."

Joey and Marisa looked at him, unsure.

"I work at a bar back home in Porter, I've been doin it for years."

They looked at each other , still not sure what to do. Marisa grew up in south Philly, and you always had to be on your guard in the city. As if hearing her thoughts Dig said: "If I try to jip you, he can kick my ass." He pointed at Joey.

"He's right, Marisa. I could." he said with a nod.

"Can you work that kind of register?"

Dig looked behind the bar an saw the behemoth and wanted laugh. John

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McCully had the same kind even in 2011. He was cheap and bought this type about five years earlier and actually called it an upgrade.

"I was born and raised on those." he said with shining confidence.

"Go for it, the price list is under it."

With a wink that made her smile, he went behind the bar and went over to the group of guys that had given Maya a hard time. They leaned on the bar crying about the slow service when Dig came over. They were just punk kids still in college, Dig had served those type plenty of times.

"Shut the fuck up, get the fuck off my bar and get the fuck out of here!!!"

They looked shocked to be talked to that way.

"You gonna make us?" said the one who was the biggest but he sounded unsure.

"Me, no mother fucker. Tony Soprano." Dig said pointing over his shoulder at Joey.

The college guys looked around Dig and saw Joey cross his thick hairy forearms with a storm cloud on his face.

"Who's Tony Soprano?" the big one asked uneasily.

"The head of the New Jersey mob, now get down before you fall down." he said pushing the big guy off his bar.

They tried to look brave, but their courage faltered as Joey came over and made for the exit. Joey smiled and gave Dig a thumb's up, Dig shrugged his shoulders as if to say all in a day's work. It was hardly work though, he spent the rest of the night handling the crowd with ease.

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For the first time in a while he juggled liquor bottles to the delight of crowd when they weren't dancing, John would scold him for doing it back home, though Dig had never dropped a bottle. He actually had fun, it was like bar tending at McCully's but the music was hipper and louder the crowd younger. Before long Joey was tugging his elbow informing him it was last call.

"Already?" he asked amazed.

It was after two when the last person left, a drunk was being shoved out of the bathroom by Joey. The tip jar was overflowing with ones and fives, he planned on giving it all to Maya since she had been injured and probably wouldn't be bar tending anytime soon. While he counted the money, Marisa returned.

"How she doin'?" Joey asked

She sat at one of the empty tables with a sigh.

"Good, just two stitches and no tendons cut. I feel like such jerk, she said she couldn't and I practically forced her. How did... what's his name?"

"Good," Dig said coming around the bar towards them with the tip jar. "Tell Maya I worked hard for it and not to piss it all away on some guy." he said with a half smile.

"Wow, I don't think it's ever been that full." she said admiringly.

"Yeah, Marisa, this guy's a regular Tom Cruise behind the bar." he said Dig didn't know what Joey meant but figured it was a compliment.

"Really?" she said looking from Joey back to Dig.

Her gorgeous brown eyes made his heart stir again, he tried to ignore it.

"Yeah, he did a good job tonight." he said with a friendly punch in the shoulder "He told those college punks I was a singer from New

Jersey though."

Dig and Joey went about moping and sweeping while Marisa pushed in the chairs and cleared the tables when, she began taking out the trash Dig went over and helped her take it out side and put it in the dumpster behind the club. When they were finished she handed Dig a twenty dollar bill.

"You can let Maya have it,I just wanted to help."

"No you earned it. Maya doesn't really bartend she's my friend and I kind of forced her to help me. Please take it."

He didn't mind helping, but he was short on cash and if he needed another month to get the cube he might need every cent, so he relented. When the cleaning up was done, she unlocked the door to let him out but she asked him a question before he could go.

"So how did you learn to juggle?"

"Too many years on the bench in high school."

"What did you play?"

"Baseball, I couldn't hit for shit so I worked on my ball handling."

They booth looked at each other and laughed at the innuendo.

"Did you?" she said in a mock serious tone.

"Uh, yes but never in front of children."

She laughed again and he felt another fluttering of his heart. She was just so beautiful he couldn't stop smiling, he wanted to plunge his fingers into her hair and feel there texture. Stop it, he told himself, your not twelve.

"So how did you learn to do all the flips and stuff?"

"You saw me? I was a kinda of a jock myself, I took gymnastics when I was in high school and got a scholarship for it to pay my way in college. "

"You were awesome up there. Like those pros in the Olympics."

He meant it as well, she had energy and grace while she did the whole thing, and looked hardly fazed by the excitement she had generated. It was as simple for her as juggling was for him.

"Look, my bartender quit last week," she said "and I don't know anyone else that can do it. You wanna job?" she said with a bright smile.

Say no, his mind told him, AM wouldn't like this at all. He didn't answer right away.

"I mean I'd pay you, besides tips you seem to know who to draw a crowd."

"Oh well...I..." his head and heart were arguing what to do. He was low on money and might be here for months.

"Please..." she said with hopeful smile that radiated good cheer.

He was nodding his head up and down before answering.

"Yeah, yes. Yes, sure." he said.

Seeing her smile like that made him want to say yes.

"Great...oh thanks."

She touched his shoulder and felt a surge of electricity run all through his body like a raging fire.

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"Were open Friday and Saturday nights at eight so come by at seven tomorrow, Joey'll let you in."

"Seven," was all he could say.

"OK, see you tomorrow."

She smiled and closed the door, he wished he could have told her his name but figured she had more important

things on her mind, but before he could turn to leave the door opened again and she emerged smiling embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't even ask your name."

"That's OK, mystery is fun. I'm Dig."

They shook hands and Dig ignored the electricity this time.

"OK Dig, see you tomorrow."

It was almost four when he got back, but he had too much energy running through him to sleep so he turned up his

Q pad and played music while chipping away at the basement wall. He felt a little better, but warned himself not to get too close. The next night went just as smoothly, he juggled the bottles to the delight of the patrons. No college punks were there and the crowd was bigger and more eager to dance. At the end of the night the tip jar was overflowing again, and everyone left without Joey having to toss any drunks out. Marisa walked him to the door again when the cleaning up was done.

"You got great showmanship." she said opening the door for him.

He stepped out into the warm night, a breeze picked up and quickly died, far off a police siren wailed. It was a beautiful night.

"I guess, I just show off too much. One day a bottle of Jack is gonna land on my head."

"That'll probably be the day I finally miss the pad on the floor." she said laughing.

"Yeah, lets hope we wind up in the same hospital room."

She smiled at the thought and said: "OK, but you can't have my Jell-o."

They were quiet for a moment, enjoying the warm night in the comfortable silence.

"You know I really appreciate what your doing, you don't know me and you helped me out." she said with a softness in her voice. "I'll have to get another bartender so you can come here and get a drink."

He felt alarmed because she seemed to be flirting with him and he hadn't realized it. He couldn't get close but he hated lying, something that his mother had always done to him. Then he felt the truth would actually serve him best so he told her exactly that, what women would want a recovering drunk.

"You can't. I am an alcoholic. I've been sober for almost two years now." he said seriously but held his head up with out shame.

He watched as her hand went to her chest.

"Oh shit, Dig. I'm sorry I didn't mean to put you in this I..."

Dig held up his hand.

"No it's cool. I never stopped bar tending, just drinking. It's no big deal really."

"So...isn't it hard? To be around it and not drink."

"I do it because it's hard to do." he said with a small smile.

Her smile returned bigger and brighter, he didn't think that would happen.

"Your a regular John F. Kennedy."

"What do you mean?" he said with a confused smile.

"In the sixties Kennedy said we have to go to the moon not because it was easy but because it would be hard to do. Boy do I feel old I was two or three years old when he was killed."

The reality of it all hit again, she was around for the Kennedy assassination and he wouldn't be born until Reagan was in office. It was impossible for this moment to be happening and yet here they were, two thirty-something adults born nearly two decades apart flirting with each other at the tail end of the twentieth century. He couldn't let AM down, where ever he was, Dig wasn't about to consider him gone forever.

"I'll see you next week." he said suddenly.

"Oh...do you need a ride?"

"No,no. I'm just down the block."

"Is everything OK?"

He was halfway across the street walking backwards and smiling so as not to come off too weird. " Yeah fine,I have work and things to catch up on this week. I'll see ya Friday."

"Bye," she said unsure if he heard her.

He hurried to the frame store without looking back, feeling foolish for his abrupt departure. He wondered how AM handled the isolation day after day, he could spend only so much time reading and watching

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movies before the restlessness began tugging at him. He went down to the basement and felt the hole he made in the wall. He could fit his pinky and ring fingers in, but the hole was still too small to see inside.

He blew air through his lips with aggravation. He thought of his friend, hoping he would see him again. AM had put his faith in him, despite his short comings, he had to put Marisa out of his mind and get the cube then go home or to some other time to find the other cubes.

The next weekend Dig did all he could to avoid Marisa. He came late and cleaned at the end of the night like he was on speed, and had Joey let him out when Marisa went out to take the trash. Saturday night wasn't as busy so he had a harder time avoiding her. When the last of the customers left he tried to be more casual and not so abrupt.

"You know, I should be mad at you." she said with out looking mad.

He hadn't been mean to her when he avoided her and wondered what she meant.

"Why?" he said.

"Why didn't you tell me we're neighbors?"

"Oh," he said still doing all he could not to lie. "well I'm a private kinda person. Ya know, I've got another job and it just keeps me busy most of the time."

She stopped smiling and walked out of the door way to get closer to him.

"Oh, if your to busy to work here, I wont be upset. I know what it's like having two jobs." she said sincerely.

"No, I'm not I just get caught up with it and stuff like that." he said making a hair pulling gesture.

"What's your other job?" she said smiling again.

"I'm renovating the frame store down the block." he said cocking his thumb over his shoulder.

"Your opening a store?"

"No...just fixing it up." he said with a half smile.

He felt the sweat build on his forehead, he didn't think he could get anymore vague without lying out right to her. Fortunately Joey came out before she could ask anything else.

"Powers out again," he said. "you want me to check the fuses in the basement?"

"God damn it, I hate this place." she said morosely.

"Is it bad?" Dig asked

She waved her hand in the air.

"No, this happens almost every weekend."

"At least it didn't happen earlier, Maris." Joey said.

"I wish it wouldn't happen at all. I'll call PECO Monday and open a can a whoop ass on those frigging idiots." she said with folded arms.

Joey and Dig shared a look and laughed, after a minute Marisa began to laugh too, which was like music to his ears.

"Well I better get back to the store before you find the can opener. Night folks."

"You'll be back Friday night?" she asked giving him that heart aching

smile.

"Yeah, same time as always."

Dig left feeling relieved he didn't have to lie, but knew it might come to that eventually, then he got angry with himself. Why did it matter if he lied? His mind asked. He would be gone with out a word at some point, he couldn't pretend to be her friend forever. But he wasn't pretending, he honestly liked her which made lying all the more difficult.

He shook his head out of helplessness, he felt like he didn't have control over his emotions. He hadn't gotten to know her, he reminded himself. He just hadn't been with a someone in a long time and she was very attractive. She owned a business, sung like an angel, was better at sports then he could ever have wished for himself. He doubted they would have much in common anyway.

"I'm lonely." he said trying to convince himself.

His thoughts of Marisa were interrupted when he entered the basement. The Q pad sitting amongst the tools and dust was flashing an envelope on its screen. He stood on the bottom step, heart beating, when he saw it was two messages.

"Fuckin a, man I thought you were a goner." he said.

He tapped on the envelope and the screen displayed the message.

CONTINUE SEARCH FOR CUBE. DO NOT LOOK FOR ME.
I WILL COME BACK NOT SURE EXACT DATE YET.

The second message was the same, he wondered why then remembered what AM said about not being able to receive every message that was sent from a different time. So he wrote back telling him every thing was fine and that he had located the cube. He would have to send it over and over again hoping one of them got to AM.

He would have to keep the Q pad with him while at all times now, AM

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could return at any moment and he would be rightly pissed if he found the Q pad laying around while Dig was pouring drinks for club hoppers. The following Friday night, he came on time with his backpack.

"Going back to school?" Marisa asked when she let him in.

"No, just bringing my work to work with me." he said with a half smile.

It's was a busy night, Joey had more than a few drunks to toss, Marisa didn't need to do acrobats to get the people on the dance floor, the club vibrated with music and energy. A fight had broken out near the bar and Dig helped Joey throw out the guys involved and got his shirt torn off. Fortunately Marisa had an apartment upstairs and brought him a t-shirt, when he took it off there were female catcalls and whistles. She smiled when she saw how red faced he got.

Later on a girl who looked barely out of high school asked him for his number. Marisa was bringing in a case a soda for the mixed drinks when it happened. She raised an eyebrow at him and had a small smile.

"Sorry, I'm Amish. Were not allowed phones." he said nonchalantly.

Marisa laughed, and gave him a nudge. The girl mouthed whatever at him and stomped off to the dance floor. By one-thirty most of the people had gone. He had a great time and stuffed a wad of bills into his pocket. He was clearing the tables when someone began knocking on the door.

"I'll see who it is." Joey said expecting some drunk looking for his cigarettes or wallet.

But instead it was Maya, coming up the steps and gave Joey a hug, hand bandaged but all smiles.

"Hey, you big Italian galoot." she said to him warmly.

She saw Dig and ran over to give him a hug.

"Baby girl. How's the hand?" he said.

"Ugh, I cant brush my hair but it don't hurt so bad. Is Marisa around?"

"Hey girl." Marisa said coming out from the bathroom.

"I got the tickets." Maya said. "You takin, Brian?"

"Oh gag me, fuck that Mets fan."

"So we got an extra ticket?"

"Yeah, but so what?"

She got closer to Marisa so not to be overheard and nodded towards Dig.

"Oh, I dunno, maybe he's too busy." she said thinking about the younger, cuter girl who wanted his number and his rejecting her.

"Well why not girl." she said. " That boy is fly. Look at them arms, looks like he could crack walnuts with'em."

Marisa and Maya tittered like school girls, when Dig stopped sweeping and looked back at them with a shy smile.

"Well, I'll ask him. Hey Dig, you a Philllies fan?" she asked before Marisa could protest.

"Born and raised." he said proudly.

"We got tickets for a game tomorrow, you wanna come?"

He looked up from his sweeping and looked at them, saying no in his mind but the words wouldn't come out. He nodded his head up and down,

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when Marisa smiled, he felt his heart melt and said: "Absolutely." Stupid, he screamed in his head. Well how's going to a baseball game going to hurt the world he said to himself.

You might hurt her, his mind said, your getting too close. I'm fine, he said to himself when he was back in the basement of the frame store, a few hours of baseball and chit chat and it'll be over. It really wasn't that big of a deal he convinced himself.

When he woke up the next day he was hoping there would be rain, but it was a perfect Sunday in May. The sky was blue and free of clouds, birds chirping away in there nests. Maya and her date, a guy named Alan were waiting in front of club Enlightenment with Marisa.

They took the subway to old Veterans Stadium in subway car packed with fans excited that the Phillies were in first place for the first time in over a decade. They came out at the Broad and Pattison station to Veterans stadium, Dig was staring at it with a far away look. He watched the Vet, as it's affectionately called, get imploded in 2007. He couldn't believe he was seeing this cookie cutter of a ballpark again.

"You OK?" Marisa asked concerned.

"Yeah, why?"

"You look like you saw a ghost."

"I guess maybe I did." he said wide eyed.

She gave him a funny look and smiled but didn't say anything, and made there way inside along with sixty thousand other fans, a rag time band that wore pin stripe vests of maroon and bright white starch shirts played 'Take Me Out To The Ball Game' near the parking lot were dozens of people with Kodaks happily took pictures. The smell of peanuts and beer hit him square in the nose bringing him back to the days he would sometimes cut school to see the Phillies play. When they got to their seats Dig was smiling brightly and felt tears of joy sting his eyes watching the players from his childhood out on the field still in there prime. It felt like an illusion to him, but the smells and the roar of the crowd made him realize he was not reliving some long ago memory.

"I don't think I've ever seen you smile this much." Marisa said when they got to their seats, which were on the lower level and along the first base line.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, you always look like you've got the world on your shoulders."

"I haven't been here in long time," was all he could think to say.

They were playing the first place Giants, with Curt Shilling on the mound. It was expected to be a playoff preview if the Phillies could keep it together long enough. It was a tough couple of innings when the game started. The Giants were hitting all over the place, making the defense look incompetent to say the least. By the fifth inning the Giants had a two run lead and Manager Jim Fergosi sent Shilling to the showers to a standing ovation despite his poor outing. By the eighth inning the Phillies were down five to two.

"Do you think they'll ever win it all?" Marisa asked Dig when the Giants retired the side.

"Of course," he said. "not this year though."

When the bottom of the ninth came, the crowd began a wave when Lenny Dykstra got on first, Darren Daulton came up to bat next and singled. Dickey Thon struck out next, and the crowd began to jeer, some even began to leave. A pinch hitter batted for the relief pitcher and loaded the bases with a blooper between second base and the outfield that had people hurrying back to their seats. Dig didn't have a clue what would happen next, he didn't remember this game particularly from the dream season of 1993 so it was just as exciting for him.

Mariano Duncan was at bat, he was one of the Phillies better players and could probably drive in a few runs with a well placed hit. On the Phillies dugout was the Phillies mascot, the Phanatic, all green and furry, shimmying his hands at the pitcher in a Voodoo dance. The first pitch he didn't swing and went over the plate, the crowd hissed and hollered, but the batter looked as cool as ice, Dig envied him. The second and third pitch were outside, everyone was standing Marisa had a hand on Dig's shoulder but he hardly noticed.

The pitcher nodded, nodded again then threw the ball. Duncan swung and hit the ball with a deafening crack that sent it hurdling into the stands of left field like a rocket . A roar like an explosion ripped through the crowd, Dig and Marisa were screaming wildly as Duncan jumped on home plate to a mob of team mates. Maya in her excitement backed into Marisa, she fell forward into his arms bringing them face to face, so close Dig could smell her hair, a rich vanilla scent wafted into his nose.

They stopped celebrating and looked into each others eyes, her hand touched his shoulder again but he felt it this time. He could feel himself falling in love with her eyes, and smile that could melt Antarctica. Kiss her, Kiss her. No his mind screamed. He felt happy and sick at the same time. He put a hand to his head and felt the sweat forming on his head.

"Are you OK?" Marisa asked worried.

"I don't feel so good. Lets go home." he said.

Seeing how pale he got, she nodded and helped him get through the exiting crowd. When they got back, Dig was feeling better but was still white as a sheet. Marisa walked him to the frame store, and asked if she could do anything.

"No, I think those nachos didn't agree with me."

"Maybe you shouldn't work so much. You always look so tired, take tomorrow off from the renovating, I won't tell."

He had been sleeping poorly, he would feel too anxious to sleep most nights, and have bad dreams when he could sleep. One recurring dream he had was were he was digging himself out of the wall rather than the cube while his mother was telling him she would put him through the wall again if he didn't hurry. Another was of him with Cami, it was the night he saw her in bed with another man, she was holding a Q pad draped over the man he had caught her with watching Dig hit the line drive during the state championship, while the man continued to sleep.

She would look up at him with a hateful smile and say: "That was the

only thing you ever accomplished." She tapped the screen and it showed Marisa doing her back flips on the catwalk. "She's not into loser's Dig."

She would tap the screen again and AM would appear, lying on the ground with a bullet hole in his chest still smoking. "It's up to you, Dig." he said before dying.

The chorus from the song 'Black Hole Sun' was playing over and over again from the Q pad

"Black Hole Sun, won't ya come? Won't ya come?"

"The world is fucked." Cami said laughing hysterically while the man she was draped over continued to sleep.

"Black Hole Sun, won't ya come? Won't ya come?"

He would wake up then shaking with cold sweat soaking his body. He was hurrying to get the cube and to get out of here before things got worse. He wished he could just walk away from her, the club all of it and lock himself in the basement, but he couldn't stomach it. It's just physical, get to know each other and you'll see his mind told him.

"I guess I'll just hit the Shop Rite tomorrow for groceries tomorrow and sleep in."

"Yeah, I gotta go there tomorrow to get stuff for the club. Get some sleep and maybe we'll bump into each other."

She waved with a smile and headed back to her place. The idea of getting to know her actually made him feel better, once he saw they had very little in common he wouldn't feel so bad about disappearing on her. Yeah, he thought, she'll see what a waste I am and go back to Brad or Brain or whoever the hell he was. Go to Shop Rite, bump into her and she'll see what a loser you are, he heard Cami say in his head.

He woke up early the next morning and went to the store. He wondered

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around for a few hours, with an empty shopping cart hoping this was the Shop Rite she would visit he had walked to the one closest and hoped she would as well. He was absent minded looking through canned goods when he felt a tug on his shirt.

"Hey you, how's the tomato paste lookin'?"

She stood there with a half full cart, hair pulled back into a ponytail, except for the pink which hung to her face framing it, wearing a black t-shirt of Beavis and Buttthead in profile, under a bright red hoody and cargo shorts. Her easy going smile was making his heart beat rapidly.

"Good, not that I could do much with it. I stick to Ramen noodles usually."

"How you feelin today, you look better."

"Not bad, I think I need to avoid nachos from now on. "

"Well next game we go to you stick to the cotton candy, mister." she said sweetly.

They spent another half hour shopping together, talking about the Phillies dream season and the warm weather. Dig felt good opening up, he wanted to be completely honest with her, to just let his skeletons out of the closet hoping the truth might scare her from him. But when he told her about the excessive drinking, his drug addict of a mom, the untimely death of his father none of it seemed to bother her the way he thought it would.

When he told her about Cami, she said: "stuck up, cunt," which startled laughter out of both of them. An old woman near by heard her, and promptly turned her cart away eyeing them closely making them both laugh again. When they got over there laughing fit, she put a hand on his shoulder and said: "I'm sorry that happened to you."

He took his groceries to the frame store then helped her bring the soda's, napkins, cups and other things for the club inside. He found out she was a tomboy who loved going to a Phillies games and, preferred Star Wars and Tonka Trucks instead of Snow White and Barbies

growing up, like Dig she was an only child and was partial to Tolkien and grunge music as well as techno. She was raised by her mother who died a few years ago, her father left in the early seventies never to be seen or heard from again. She had worked as many as three jobs at once while in school.

"You look as tired as I did when I pulled all nighters during finals," she said.

She went to the Girard Academic Music Academy and played piano and guitar, did a Capella. Gymnastics was just an after school hobby for her, and although she was good she didn't like to call herself an athlete. Dig felt the same way about himself when he played baseball, to him guys like Curt Schilling or Ken Griffey Jr. were athletes. She went to Temple but dropped out to pursue a career in music.

"I wanna show you something." she said when they finished putting her groceries away.

They walked up a set of steps hidden by a door next to the DJ booth where her apartment lay. It was a spacious and had hardwood floors, with walls painted white, and had music lyrics from hundreds of songs written in long hand on one wall were a large bay window looked down on the neighborhood, the wall opposite that was lined with posters of different music acts, such as The Beatles, Rush, Velvet Underground, and others. Between a poster of Snoop Dog and The Grateful Dead was a framed 8x10 picture of three girls on guitars and male drummer in mid performance, printed on the picture was a name: THE POPSICLES, At the microphone was a younger Marisa, hair black and pink but much shorter.

"You were in a band? That's really cool. I feel bad for the drummer bein the only guy."

"yeah," she said with a look of distaste at the curly haired drummer.

"that's Brian. We use to go out but he was.... is a dick. We weren't very good together."

"You and him or the band?"

"Both, he's from New York and played in a hair band that was pretty

famous in the mid eighties, so I thought we would be good together. I was twenty-

two, still wet behind the ears."

"So you started a club, instead?"

She smiled but it wasn't the easy smile he had grown accustomed too, it was sad but still beautiful.

"No the club was his, he couldn't manage money and when our album fell through he decided to start a venue for up and coming artists. And since real estate is cheaper here than New York he bought this place."

"Why didn't it work out?"

"I caught him in the bathroom with my basest, but I forgave him and he did it again but with a customer who was a big fan he said, then an old girlfriend so I finally stopped forgiving him even after he sold me this place at a cheap price, but I think he sold it to me so cheap cause he knew what bitch this place is to run, you know, like he was trying to get back at me. I used to loved him, and it took me awhile to realize he didn't love me."

"You still talk to him," Dig said wishing he could wrap his hands around the guys neck.

"Not if I can help it. I told Joey not to let him in if I'm not around and to tell him piss off if I was around. At least during business hours."

"What happens if he comes around when Joey's not here?" he said crouching to looking at the picture, reading the names of the people in the picture. Marisa's last name was Damiono.

"I'll have you kick his ass." she said sounding serious.

"It would be a pleasure," he said with a smirk.

She looked at him, seeing that he would if she asked him too and smiled again at him. He stood up straight and looked into her eyes again. Kiss her! No, his mind challenged.

"What kind of band was it?" he asked trying to ignore the urge.

"I guess you could call it early alternative pop," she said looking at the picture now. "Not something you can dance too."

"That's okay, I can't dance anyway."

"You can't?" she said with a grin.

"No, I was born with a left and right foot but there backwards."

"Oh, come on." she said with a laugh.

"Seriously, the doctors call it ass backwards syndrome. Jerry Lewis has a telethon for it." he said playfully.

"Well then, lets cure you." she said taking him by the arm and leading him into the middle of the living room.

She pushed the sectional couch and a coffee table out of the way and put a tape in a boom box that sat on the TV in the corner of the room. She hit play and a fast electric music beat filled the room.

"No, I really can't. I might step on your toes and brake one of them, I have Frankenstein feet."

"Oh, you do not. Don't be shy." she smiled while dragging him closer to her. "Just move to the beat."

The beat slowed a little as she approached him, he looked down at his feet feeling awkward, she pushed his face up with her hand softly.

"Don't look down, don't think. Just listen to the beat and move to it."

She moved her body with such grace and femininity his heart felt like it was about to burst. Dancing was usually awkward for him, but her eagerness to teach him how, made him forget about his lack of real rhythm which he actually did have but was too self conscious to show, afraid he would look foolish.

"See you can dance."

He smiled as she moved closer to him, the music slowed down to a remix of a 'Four Non Blondes' song. He felt a wave of confidence as the music sped up again, their bodies touching as the song melted into another. A faster version of the Bel Biv Devo 'Poison' played next he watched as Marisa's body grooved to each emphasis on the word Poison with pert sexiness.

"Just don't think so much about it." she said giving him a look that made Dig want to grab her and kiss her like the guys in the old black and white movies did.

A song by Heavy D began to play as their bodies began to touch, Marisa placed her hands on his hips and held him close as their hips gyrated to the beats. Dig felt his stomach flutter and his heart race when he felt the gentle touch of her fingers mold to his body as she lowered her body down and looked up at him with a sexy smile.

It was then that the tape stopped and began to rewind itself, they were breathing heavily, staring at each other, like they had done something more adult. Dig felt his face turn red at the thought, Marisa who had noticed said teasingly: "If you can screw, you can dance."

Before anything more could happen a loud ringing filled the room startling him.

"It's just the phone," she said smiling at his reaction to it and went to answer it in the kitchen where it hung on the wall.

He had forgotten how loud phones used to be, he had used a cell phone

for years and never had a land line installed when he was on his own. The shrill ring of the phone went through his ears bringing him firmly back down in reality. He was from a place where phones were smaller than a calculator and as powerful as a PC. He thought she would run screaming from him and his problems, but she hadn't.

She came back from the kitchen and before she could say anything Dig said he needed to get back to his renovating.

"Oh? No rest for the weary."

"No, my friend AM needs me too start finishing up the store, before he gets back."

"AM?"

"He's my partner," he said heading downstairs. " he got called away suddenly on a rip...uh trip and I have to get the basement done before he gets back." he said heading down the steps two at a time trying to leave before he would have to lie to her.

"I'll see you Friday night," she called down to him.

"Friday!" he called back and left the building.

He went inside the store and kicked the door close, so angry he wanted to scream. They had more than a few things in common, that was painfully obvious. He didn't want to hurt her but it seemed like he was going to have to, the thought of that made him want to cry but still there were no tears.

He went down to the basement, staring at the hole in the wall now big enough to fit three fingers. It was two or three inches deep but he couldn't see its metallic face with out light. A month maybe less and it would be free, but still he would have to wait for AM.

And what would he say about all this, he wouldn't lie to him, he'd have to tell him about where he went and the things he did. He wondered if he would forgive him, then he thought about how he would have to ditch Marisa and thought maybe he didn't deserve forgiveness.

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He slid down the wall with eyes closed tight wishing he had never left the store.

The weekend came and Dig was there on time and juggled to the delight of the crowd, it was slower than last week, but Dig made good tips and there was no drunken brawling or shouting matches. Marisa was in and out of her apartment most of the night, Dig asked if something was wrong and she gave him the international hand signal for talking on the phone with her thumb and pinky. She would make good use of cell phones one day he thought sadly.

When the night came to an end, Marisa talked with him, Joey and Mother Goose about the phone calls.

"I have to close the club, I'm not sure for how long. The electric company said it is unsafe for occupancy and that a fire could occur if the wiring isn't redone." she said morosely.

Joey nodded his head as if he had been waiting for this, Mother Goose cursed loudly several times and complained about not being able to pay his tuition. Dig felt numb, he knew he had an excuse to leave Marisa with out a word and not feel too guilty about it. As if she read his mind she looked at him and sensed he might not come around anymore. It was going on three in the morning when Joey and Mother Goose left.

There wasn't much left for him to do so he took his time sweeping and removing trash, knowing he should leave but unable to go. Not that she was rushing him, she saw him looking at her and gave a half smile that was twisting his heart painfully. She kneeled down on the floor to pick up a bottle under a table when Dig noticed a black mark on her left shoulder partly obscured by the strap of her shirt.

"What's that?"

She looked up and saw him turning his head trying to see it. Dig saw it and thought it was his eyes playing a trick on him, but they weren't, the head was a lacrosse mask with a mouth made from a bowling pin, it was a tattoo of Crow T. Robot from Mystery Science Theater 3000 in silhouette.

"Your a Misty?" he asked with a smile that matched the one he had at the Phillies game.

She stood up her sadness gone for the moment, looking at him with those tender eyes, making his heart skip a few beats. She looked to her shoulder and back to him.

"You watch it, too." she said

"I watched it every Saturday morning when I was a kid...I mean I watch it every Saturday morning like a kid." he said.

"Well your staying to watch an episode with me."

"Is there one on this late?" he asked.

"I tape' em, don't you circulate the tapes?"

At the end of each show the credits would roll, where their was the request that fans keep circulating the tapes by taping the episode and sending it to people who had no other way to watch it, the show was borderline with copyright issues since the show's creators didn't own the rights to the movies they showed and couldn't sell the episodes to the home market until long after it had been canceled.

"No, I don't have a VCR," he didn't, not even when he was a kid.

He knew he should have said goodbye, but he would have just a hard a time putting a needle in his eye, so he stayed to watch his favorite show from childhood with a woman he was falling in love with. It was pointless to pretend otherwise, he was hurting because of it.

"Come on and put down your school books," she said taking his backpack, putting it at the far end of the bar.

They went up into her apartment, an air conditioner droned softly making the room cool, the bay window showed the coming morning and he wondered where his teenage self was right now. Asleep in a shitty trailer bedroom waiting for the school year to end he would have guessed.

"So, what's this weeks experiment?"

"The Crawling Hand," she said "So you prefer Crow to Tom Servo, huh, with such a smart mouth I'm not surprised." she said not unkindly.

"Yeah, my friend AM likes Tom."

"We should get together and watch one when he gets back," she said happily.

Dig remained silent and pretended he hadn't heard her. He felt the end coming and it gave him the kind of heartburn he hadn't felt since his drinking days. They talked while the episode played and laughed out loud when they gave it their full attention. Suddenly she asked: "I know you don't drink, but do you smoke. Weed, I mean?"

Dig had smoked occasionally, and was surprised to learn that AM had as well. He spent two or three hours one morning back in March toting the benefits of it to Dig. He gave him a laundry list of scientific studies from major universities advocating its use as a pain reliever for the terminally ill.

"Sometimes,"

She padded his knee and went to her kitchen, a few minutes later she returned with a cigarette roller and sandwich baggy that was bloated with a green leafy substance.

"Jesus, look at Tommy Chong." he said laughing.

"Shut up, and help me roll one." she said giving him a friendly poke in the ribs.

"You deal on the side or do you supply Cheech and he sells it?"

"No, Mother Goose owed me a hundred dollars and paid me back in weed. It's pretty good."

They smoked the whole joint as the morning sun rose over the city, it had a pungent odor that filled the room, the air conditioner swirled the smoke reminding Dig of the wormholes. Dig coughed when he breathed too deep, making Marisa giggle.

"Light weight," she said acting disappointed.

"Bite me," he said which had them both giggling.

After a few minutes he felt like he was floating on a cloud and found himself looking at Marisa with longing a few times only stopping because he was afraid she would notice. So he got up and spent ten minutes staring out her window and looking at the roof's of row homes and apartments that lined the street.

"Wow," he said in total awe." every roof has a ball on it. I think you neighbors could start a sporting goods store. Damn the people across the street have a tennis racket on there's."

She snorted laughter and got up to look. A yawn escaped his mouth, the pot was making him sleepy, he felt paranoid Marisa would make him leave to get some sleep so he fought it. She stood next to him looking out over the houses which looked identical from high up.

"I think I see a basket ball three houses over," Marisa said with wonder.

"What? That's not a basketball." he said with giddy laughter.

"Then what is it?"

"It's your brain on drugs." he said which made them both laugh like kids hearing a dirty joke for the first time.

Another yawn escaped his lips, he cut it off with a snap of his jaw. He could imagine how he looked, eyes red with purple bags and droopy lids, he was slowly getting tired but afraid to fall asleep. He sat back down on the couch they had been lounging on all morning, he felt like he was melting right into its softness. He didn't want to go to sleep, he wasn't ready to say goodbye he wasn't sure he would ever be.

"Did you ever watch the stars at night?" he asked trying to sound wide awake.

She turned and looked at him, the rising sun red as a cherry, shined through her hair giving her a pink halo.

"No, tell me about it."

"In Porter," another yawn " there's a bridge near Dark Hollow road, there's no streetlights and you can see thousands of them at night. I've been going there since I was a kid."

He yawned again, Marisa went behind the couch and took a fleece blanket out of a footlocker with dozens of travel stickers covering it. She draped it over his legs.

"Can you make out any constellations?" she asked sitting down next to him.

"Oh yeah." he said with unfocused eyes. "Orion's belt, the dipper, Draco,I can't remember anymore."

"Lay down." she said tenderly.

"I'm afraid," he said trying not to let his head sink down. "I don't want any more nightmares."

"It'll be OK," she said softly stroking his arm.

He wanted to hold her and kiss her, but he could barely lift his arms, she got up and gently laid him down on his side. He wanted to tell her everything, about the cubes and where AM really was but all that came out of his lips was unintelligible. She shushed him, and brought the blanket over his whole body, he was asleep in seconds.

He woke up with a start hours later, confused not recognizing his surroundings at first. The sun was still up, but on the other side of the apartment. He wasn't sure what had woken him, he looked around

remembering where he was.

"Marisa?" he called, but there was no answer, the apartment was empty.

He sat up and pushed the blanket off his body, his mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton so he went to the kitchen and turned on the cold water, cupping his hands and sucked it up greedily. After drying his hands on a dish towel he stood quietly trying to remember if he told Marisa anything he shouldn't have. That's when he heard her voice.

"do-doo do do-doo do"

He heard that before on the radio but couldn't place it, he followed the sounds and came to an open door towards the back of the apartment. A short staircase going to the roof was where the sound was coming from.

"I am sitting
in the morning
at the diner
on the corner

He walked up the steps following the music that was as sweet as honey. He came out to bright sunshine, and could see the city all around him. Marisa was crouched in front of some buckets still singing.

"I am waiting
at the counter
for the man
to pour the coffee
and he fills it
only halfway
and before
I even argue"

He was a few feet away before she noticed him.

"Afternoon, sleepy head." she said not sounding weirded out, apparently he kept his mouth shut.

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She stood up and he saw that the buckets were filled with dirt and each had a short stick in each of them, with tomato's hanging on them, but they were malformed and had rot marks.

"Not very good, I know."

He walked over and felt them rubbing its skin and smelling them.

"It's not that bad, you just have keep them high as possible, it's the only way they'll grow properly."

"I though you didn't know what to do with tomatoes?" she asked brushing some soil off her hands.

"Tomato paste, real tomatoes I can show you a thing or two. I have garden back home."

"Such a country boy," she said not unkindly.

She had a line of potted plants filled with roses that were blossoming nicely, he gave her a few ideas on how to maximize there life span.

"Where did you learn gardening?"

"Google." he said without thinking.

"Goo- what?"

"I mean the library," he said with an awkward grin. "so how'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Good. Did you know you talk in your sleep?"

Dig shuddered as he tried to remember if he had any bad dreams.

"Wh...what did I say?" he said trying not to look to anxious.

"You were talking about a geometry test, I think," she said with a laugh. "you kept saying you couldn't find any cubes."

"Oh."

He changed the subject by showing her how to better arrange the flowers when a distant buzz came from the apartment, she said someone was at the door and went to answer it leaving him alone on the roof. A breeze picked up making the roses shimmy. He stood up and looked towards downtown, something was missing from the skyline. It took him a few minutes to remember Comcast Tower was yet to be built, in 1993 Liberty 1 a building of mirrored blue glass was the cities tallest building.

He stared at the building that was not yet there, and felt the reality of the situation again, he had to leave. The longer he stayed, the harder it would be. He stayed up there a few more minutes waiting for Marisa to come back.

When she still hadn't come back, he went back inside, the apartment was empty so he went down stairs to the club. He heard shouting so he hurried down the steps. Near the door to the stairs leading out side Marisa was facing him but didn't see him. In front of her was someone Dig had seen before, it was Brian, who grabbed her arm as if to hit her, but she gave him a solid punch right in the head.

"Keep your fucking hands off me!" she shouted.

"YOU CRAZY BITCH!!!" he said with an open hand ready to strike her back.

Before he could swing, Dig was behind him and grabbed his hand and bent it backwards to the breaking point and used his other hand to grab a handful of his curly locks. He screamed with pain and fury, he was smaller than Dig but bigger than Marisa and Dig had a great dislike for bullies that AM could have testified to.

"Say your sorry," Dig said through grit teeth.

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He flapped his free arm like a bird caught in a net, Dig squeezed his fingers until he stopped.

"SAY IT!" he screamed in his ear pulling harder on his hair.

"SORRYSORRYSORRYSORRY," he said in a blubbering cry.

He kicked the door open downstairs and tossed him into a pile of garbage bags next store ripe with flies. A group of kids out on the street playing bounce ball stopped to watch the chaos. Brian got up slowly, too slowly for Dig.

"YOU COME BACK HERE, I'LL RIP YOUR FUCKIN HEART OUT!!!" he said charging Brian hoping he would fight back.

Without looking back he ran across the street face red and eyes pouring out tears. The kids laughed at him as he ran down the street tail between his legs like a beaten mutt. When he ran out of sight around the corner, Dig went back upstairs to check on Marisa.

She was behind the bar running cold water over her hand, eyes red and brimming with tears. He came around and gently held her hand which looked swollen.

"I think it's broke." she said with a quivering lip.

"Try and make a fist,"

She closed her hand and didn't cry out in pain, it wasn't broke. He had been in plenty of fights to know she gave him a wallop he would not soon forget.

"Does it hurt bad?"

She nodded that it didn't.

"No," she said with a deep breath " it was just all the excitement, I think."

"Next time, go for the chin." he said with a smirk.

Without thinking he kissed her hand hoping it would sooth her. She looked up at him, the hurt of her hand forgotten, as he looked back into her chocolate brown eyes brushing a few pink strands from her forehead. He pulled her close and kissed her, it was kiss he would remember for the rest of his life.

Her lips were soft and parted slightly, her arms wrapped around his body, hands rubbing the back of his neck. Dig pulled himself away when he realized what he was doing. She tried to kiss him again but he pulled away.

"No, ...don't"

She looked at him with wounded eyes, confused.

"Why?" she asked taking her arms off his shoulders.

"I just can't, please don't ask."

"Why, Dig? I want to know. You can't do something like that then walk away."

He would have to lie, it was all he could do to keep his real reason for being here a secret, but he couldn't speak.

"Are you married?" she asked but not believing that was his reason. "I know your not gay, I've seen the way you look at me." she said not in a stuck up way.

Smooth, he heard his mind say. He felt angry at him self for being so obvious, but he couldn't speak.

"Damn it, Dig! Tell me!" she said feeling hurt and angry.

"I'm a loser! OK? I'm a fuck up! I spent my whole life drinking,

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getting hurt by fuckin women cause I was never good enough for'em! I'm no good for you! Didn't you hear all the shit I told you? I'm no better than that fuck I just tossed out, Christ at least had a talent for music. I can't do anything except juggle bottles like a fuckin drunk monkey!" he shouted, heart thundering in his chest like he was running in the mountains back in Porter.

"I don't believe that." she said simply while tears ran down her face. "Your making excuses, everybody has a bad time in their lives, we've both have. And your strong, every bad thing that has happened to you... it just...it's like your bullet proof it all ricochets off you. You got through it. Your everything a man should be, Dig I love..."

"NO!" he yelled before she could finish. "Don't talk to me, I don't love you leave me alone!!!"

He grabbed for his backpack but it tumbled over behind the bar with a loud clatter, without looking he reached over and grabbed it and left. The kids playing bounce ball were gone, the street was deserted, he made a bee line for the frame store. He went down to the basement in a rage and threw a wooden chair at the hole in the wall, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

He sat on the ground staring at the cube in the wall for a long time, it was cool in the basement making him shiver. When nighttime came he went back upstairs to retrieve his backpack which held the tools and his Q pad He found the tools immediately, but as he went through it, he couldn't find the Q pad

Then a sickening feeling went through his whole body. The Q pad was gone. The clatter it made when it fell over echoed repeatedly in his ears.

The club was dark, all the electricity to the club was shut off. Marisa sat on a chair, in the corner feeling sad and confused. Wishing she hadn't bullied him.

"I didn't," she said to no one.

It was a legitimate question, it made her cry again when she thought about how he looked so scared when she tried to kiss him back, as if he was doing something horribly wrong. She got up to go to her

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apartment, more confused than she had ever felt in her life, when a blinking blueish light from behind the bar filled the room, startling her.

She went behind the bar thinking it was a flash light, and saw an object the size of book laying on the floor. She looked at it trying to understand what she was seeing. She thought of the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey" she had seen something just like it in that movie.

It was encased in plastic and had the letter Q etched in the back, it felt light as a feather. On top sat a small cube that was glowing green, she pulled on it but it didn't want to come off. On the screen an envelope with the word text message under it blinked repeatedly but made no sound.

She picked it up and accidentally grazed the screen with her thumb. A folder with the word movies opened up showing the names of all the movies listed there. For some reason it listed six "Star Wars" movies.

She had only known of three, she grazed the screen with a tentative finger when she realized that was how to navigate. She watched the first ten minutes of a 'Star Wars' movie that wouldn't be filmed for another five or six years her mind racing, telling her it was just a dream, a very vivid one. She selected a folder with the word e-reader and a long list of books appeared.

Some she had read, there were others she never heard of, one was called "The 9/11 Commission Report" As a little girl she remembered the Warren Commission for the JFK assassination, but had no clue as to what the 9/11 commission was. She pressed another icon and looked on in wonder.

After a half an hour Dig decided he had to go back for the Q pad, knowing AM would have despite all that happened. He hoped the door was unlocked, and felt relief when it opened with out protest. Upstairs all was dark and quiet, as he climbed the steps slowly.

Every creak seemed to bounce off the walls and echo through the whole building. It was too dark to see, but he had been here enough times to know his way around. He leaned over the bar and clicked on a pen light hoping he could make a quick grab and run but it wasn't there.

"It's right here." said a voice from behind him.

Dig stood up and turned around, Marisa sat at a table next to a window where the streetlight shined down on her through the window. She placed the Q pad on the table and stared at him. He realized she found it and had gone through it, he wasn't angry though. It was almost a relief.

"What is this, please don't lie. I've seen what's on there." she said staring at him with dry eyes.

"I'm from the future."

She nodded, she had figured that much out from the movie list, she had a hard time getting around the fact, even though it was right in front of her.

"So who are you, Marty McFly?"

"No, I could never get my hair to look that good." he said with a smirk.

It was a joke, but Marisa didn't laugh, she looked so sad but still absolutely beautiful to him.

"So where you lying, about the alcoholism? The stuff about your parents, and Cami?"

"No. AM, my partner and I we're both from the future but he got lost after we arrived."

He told her everything, about Roswell and the Q pads and the cubes they were searching for. He took her to the frame store's basement.

"I wanna show you something, now."

He turned the pen light on and pointed it at the hole, the light gleamed off the cube. She reached her hand in and touched its cold surface.

"But if it crashed in New Mexico, why's it here?"

"I guess it was like shrapnel that ripped through the fabric of time and space. That's how AM explained it anyway."

They went back to her apartment, the moon was a crescent in the sky, casting a faint blue over everything. They were quiet for a few minutes, Marisa finally spoke.

"So what happens to you now?" she said standing in the same place she had the other morning.

"I dig out the cube and wait for AM to get back."

"Then you leave." she said without looking at him, it wasn't a question.

"I don't want to leave you." he said.

"Dig this is important, I read the things AM wrote. He's right, this is more important than anything else. You know that too, you spend every night trying to get that thing out. I'm not angry with you anymore, I understand why you were so scared." she said still staring out the window.

"Your important, I lied once to you, when I said I didn't love you. I fell in love with you the moment I first saw you. I never believed in love at first sight, but a year ago I didn't believe in time travel either."

She finally turned from the window, fresh tears streaked her face, that sparkled in the faint moonlight. She walked to him slowly as she talked.

"I just want you to know, your not a loser. I never though you were, I meant what I said to you, but your friend needs you, Dig."

"Your right,I have to go help AM, but not without you."

"I...I can't...I don't know how I could..."

"Your smarter than me, and I'm doin it." he said.

"You want me to come with you? That's what your saying, right?"

"Yes,"

"What about AM? I don't want to be in the way..."

"You won't be, we need as much help as we can get if he's lost, just let me worry about him,"

She was standing a few inches from him now looking into his eyes, she didn't want the club for a long time now and didn't want to go through another attempt at a music career. She would miss Joey and Maya, and the thought of time travel was scary to say the least, but like Dig, she was not afraid of adventure.

"If you want me to come with you, then tell me you love me, and I'm not saying that to pressure you, I just think it would be wrong for me to come if you didn't love me."

He took her in his arms and lifted her head up slightly to look directly into her eyes like the guys did in those old movies.

"I love you, Marisa, I always will."

And he kissed her softly on her silky lips. She embraced him and opened her mouth and touched tongues. She gently pulled back from him as he caressed the tears away from her cheeks.

"Make love to me." she said tracing her finger down his spine.

He lifted her up like a bride over a threshold, which startled laughter out of her.

"Where's the bed?" he said feeling an intense heat build inside him, one he hadn't felt in a long time.

With a devilish smile she pointed behind him at a hallway where the bedroom lay at the other end. Within a minute they were naked under a soft down comforter. She cooed softly in his ear when he first entered her, when he tried to pull himself out she wrapped her legs around him to stop him.

"Stay inside me, please." she whispered in his ear while rubbing his shoulders and back, a sensation that drove him wild with lust.

He was barely moving before her hips began to buck with an orgasm that shot through her like a bullet. He held her tight as she moaned lustily, kissing every inch of her body, taking in every curve and crevice touching her with lips and finger tips. He had never known love making this wonderful. The sun was rising by the time they finished, he had made love to her over and over again, not trying to impress her, but simply giving as much physical love as he could to her.

She fell asleep nuzzling his chest, he stayed awake for a little feeling at ease for the first time, listening to her snore softly in the dawning morning while he played with her hair, letting the pink and black strands fall through his fingers enjoying the smell and feel of each strand tickling his palm. After a little while he slept with out bad dreams, he awoke hours later to her kissing and nibbling his chest. They made love again, it wasn't as long but was still wonderful.

"What's the future like?" she said tracing her nails along his chest when they had finished.

"About the same I guess, except everyone has a cell phone and reality TV is popular. Oh and the president is half black."

"The president is half black?"

"Yeah,"

"What's reality TV." she said rubbing his chest.

He thought for a second before answering: "Shit."

"Are their hover boards in 2011?"

"No, Steven Spielberg lied to us." he said with a laugh. "How did you find the Q pad?"

"Oh shit," she said with a start.

"What?"

"There was a message, or text I guess, it was blinking."

He got up, still undressed and went back into the living room.

"Don't look at my ass," he called over his shoulder.

She snorted laughter and slapped his butt when he climbed back into bed.

"Hey sexual harassment, lady, I'm an employee." he said with a smirk.

He tapped the envelope at the top of the screen to reveal the message.

WILL RETURN JUNE 18 1993
MEET ME AT WOLF STREET
AT THE DEL. RIVER 1-3:00 pm

At the end of the message was latitude and longitude to let Dig know what direction to expect AM to appear from.

"What day is it?"

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She reached over him and reached for her alarm clock.

"The ninth. He's coming back then?"

He nodded, remembering that the cube was not free from its concrete prison. The next couple of days passed uneventfully, Marisa closed the club and told Joey and Maya, she and Dig were going on a long trip. He would go to her apartment to sleep at night when he couldn't hold the tools anymore and she would stop over during the day while he dug bringing him lunch.

"Your gonna spoil me with all this food." he said with a full smile.

"You deserve to be spoiled, besides you give good head." she said with a twinkle in her eyes.

Despite the long hours in the basement Dig couldn't recall ever being so happy. On the seventeenth Marisa fell asleep in the basement while Dig excavated, she woke up as he was brushing off the dust from the cube.

"I got it."

When the eighteenth arrived she drove them to the river near Wolf street, which sat under I-95. Summer traffic roared over head, but below all was empty and quiet, the area was littered with trash and the occasional shopping cart and bald car tire. Stagnant puddles with oily rainbow water spotted the whole area. It was isolated from prying eyes, the Delaware river lay in front of them, the nearest building was a factory that made detergent five blocks away that emitted a smell that reminded him of moldy bread.

He didn't know how soon he would have to leave once AM got back so he had both the cube and the box in his backpack and had Marisa pack a few items for herself just in case. He hoped three of them could rip out of here with only two Q pads He felt a heaviness in his stomach when he thought of what AM might say as the minutes slowly passed as they sat in her Toyota facing a large concrete pillar that rose all the way up to the interstate.

When two o'clock came and went with no sign of him, Dig began to feel

worried for another reason. Marisa could see the worry in his eyes and tried to reassure him.

"Maybe it miss calculated, and he was wrong about the date. Didn't you say it messed up before?"

"Yeah, but AM said it wouldn't happen again. He knows his stuff, so does Quake."

She leaned on him and he placed an arm around her while they waited but as three o'clock came and went with no sign of AM, he was anxious. Five o'clock and still nothing.

"I think he's in trouble." he said rubbing his forehead.

Marisa looked scared herself but said nothing, Dig thought of what to do. He had an idea what AM might have done but tried not to think about it, remembering what AM told him that cold night, nothing is more important than the cubes. But was he right about that? How could he abandon AM, he couldn't ditch Marisa so why would he AM. And what if AM was in an alternate

universe where the Soviets win the Cold War or Hitler with nukes. He had to find his friend, but he would have to go himself. How? He had no idea when or where he was. He grabbed his backpack and took out the alien box with its cube-like button. If he pushed he could be hurtled any place, not necessarily to AM's when but didn't see any other possible way of finding him. He turned to Marisa and held her face with his hands, she looked at him with love and sadness.

"I have to find him, I want to you to stay for now. I don't know why, but I think he's in real danger."

She nodded but looked ready to cry so he kissed her full on the lips.

"I'm coming back for you,"

"I know. Should I wait here?"

"No, it might be days before I return, weeks even. Stay at your place until I come get you, OK."

She answered with a kiss, and brushed his shaggy hair from his ear and whispered.

"Please be careful."

Without a word he opened the car door and got out with the box firmly in hand, Marisa got out as well.

"Keep back a few feet, the wormhole might suck you up too,"

He shouldered his pack and folded his arms around the box to keep it with him when he left. He turned and mouthed I love you to Marisa, she smiled and mouthed it back to him. He brought a finger over the button, with eyes closed tight he pressed the button.

Marisa watched open mouthed as blue swirls shot out of the box's edges, his body rose a half foot and became transparent. She had an urge to run and grab him so she could go too but the wormhole left her dazzled beyond words. Then like a light switch he disappeared, were he stood the ground swirled like water down a drain.

After a few minutes it stopped. She walked over to the spot and pressed her foot down, thinking she would sink in, but it was solid asphalt. She wiped a lone tear from her eye, and drove home with the radio turned up.

So far spring had been horrible for T, after his run in with those gringo bitches his genitals were a swollen blue and purple mess. Only one person knew about it but not how. Angel, a Spanish girl with the sweetest ass and tits he couldn't keep his hands off of who he would fuck as often as possible.

She had a hunger for cock that he happily supplied, until those two honky fuckers. She would touch him down there but it was too painful to keep it up. Not that a doctor couldn't have helped him, he was simply too embarrassed to reveal what had happened.

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She would beg him to fuck her, and she was a wild cat that wasn't afraid to bite and scratch. He loved sitting her on his lap while she bounced, screaming his name over and over again, telling him he had the biggest cock in the city. He confided in her, but her sympathy was short lived.

"Limp noodle dick, I need a man." she said after another night going without.

That pushed him over the edge, he grabbed her by her hair and smashed her head into the wall a dozen times or so until the wall was a red mess. He stood naked with his deformed genitals watching her lifeless body collapse to the ground. She looked to be smiling at him when he turned on the light and looked down on her broken face. He stomped on it until it was mush.

That was weeks ago, he still couldn't take a leak without moaning in pain. He strangled a prostitute to death a week ago when she laughed as he walked by, she was talking on a pay phone not even looking at him but her laugh set something off inside him. He was a walking time bomb, with a constant lust for murder when he couldn't get it up anymore.

Then he saw one of the white boys walking down Broad street one day. He almost ran into a parked car when he turned back to look at him. He didn't see shorty, but it was definitely the tall mother fucker with the bimbo hair.

He made a sudden u-turn but lost sight of him when he got to the other lane, drivers were honking and waving their middle fingers at him but he ignored them. He drove up and down the street for hours but he didn't see him again. He made a daily pilgrimage to Broad street hoping he might get lucky and spot him again, after a month he did.

It was late afternoon , traffic was light so he could follow him at a safe distance in his car. His palms grew sweaty as he watched the honky turn down a small street with houses and a club he had never been too, which is where he went. He drove by as he walked in, he had a chrome revolver now, he didn't know the .38 was thrown into the sewer by AM but still blamed them for its disappearance. He could have shot him right there in the back, but that would have been too easy.

He couldn't remember which had kicked him in the balls but he didn't

care, all he cared about was watching at least one of them die slowly. He parked at the corner and waited for him to come out, when he did with him was some slut with pink hair. Maybe he could make her watch him die, the though put a ghastly smile on his face, as they got into a car and drove off. When they were gone he made a quick trip to his corner to bring along Jude, who had raped a few bitches in his time, maybe he would make the honky watch before killing them both.

"Yo, T where that Angel girl been? Her ass is all dat and a bag a chips." he said while T drove.

T glared at him but was silent.

"Hey blood, it's cool." he said feeling unsettled by T's eyes.

Jude noticed how T would jump on anybody that even breathed the wrong way. His eyes always looked on fire and his hands were constantly trembling and sweaty.

"So who be this mofo, T? He owe you green?"

"He ripped me off."

Which he felt was true enough and wasn't about to tell him anymore. They sat for most of the afternoon waiting for them to come back. When six o'clock came the little blue car returned but the pink haired bitch was alone. He watched her get out of the car and go into the club.

"Come on," he said absently.

"Yeah boy, pussy huntin season be on!!" Jude said jumping out the car.

They walked slowly over, not taking there time but not rushing either. The sun was still setting as they walked down the empty street. On the door was a sign that said the club would be closed until further notice.

If the door was locked he had a crow bar in his trunk, along with

some other toys. If he couldn't get blondie, he would be just as happy with his hoe. The door opened easily.

"Dumb bitches need to be lockin their doors yo, or they get a new boyfriend." Jude said with authority.

"Get the fuck in," T said distantly.

Seeing the far away look in his eyes, Jude thought of his daddy who served in army. He came back from some country called Nam with that same look. They went up the steps quietly, and came to the club which was dark but had plenty of sunlight coming from the windows.

"Yo homey, check out the booze. I need a drink." Jude said making his way to the bar.

T ignored him and wondered where the slut went, the building was three stories and they were on the second floor. He looked for a door that should have another set of steps, but near the dance floor there were no windows and it was pitch black. Jude was behind the bar trying to open the register, he punched it in frustration when the drawer wouldn't open.

"Be quiet or I'll cut you," T said "wait here."

Jude put his hands up as T left to get a flash light from his car. His body shook with anticipation, he was going to go to town on this whore. He opened the trunk of his car looking around but saw no one, still he felt like someone was watching.

He came back with a gym bag filled with all kinds of sharp blades and blunt objects. He dreamed of getting back at those honky fuckers for months, he wanted to cut off their cocks and feed it to them. He was disappointed it would be one at a time, but the pink haired bitch was a bonus he planned on making the most of.

He went back in the club, Jude still stood behind the bar, swigging a bottle of J&B and fiddling with an object he found in the sink. It had a number pad and some stuff that felt like silly putty with wires sticking out of it at crazy angles, he looked up from his new found toy and nodded at T.

"Yo dawg, what the fuck is this?" he said pushing random buttons.

T walked over and squinted at the tiny yellow print and saw C-4 written on the gray silly putty. It took a second for his brain to understand what he was looking at.

"FUCK MAN STOP..." T shouted a second too late.

The explosion shook the entire block, neighbors came rushing out as a fireball engulfed Club Enlightenment and the two houses sitting on both sides of it. Smoke and orange flames filled the sky, as the explosion sent Marisa's car across the street crashing it into a house. After a few minutes another explosion rocked the club and the house to its left, causing them to collapse sending a tsunami of hot ash and smoke every which way.

People screamed and ran in panic as it chased them. Within twenty minutes half the fire houses and a third of the city's police were on the scene. News helicopters were there taking video of the conflagration, and the people being evacuated from the entire block, the smoke was seen for miles around many of the cars sitting on Juniper street caught fire and exploded sending more shrapnel everywhere injuring firefighters and a few police officers.

The firefighters who were on Juniper street that day would remember it when they watched terrified New Yorkers running from the smoke and ash of the Twin Towers eight years later. The faces of those on Juniper street was similar to the ones they saw on TV. After a few hours the fire had been stopped, many people had been rescued, but Marisa was not among them

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AM never considered being a teacher even when Dig said something about it, he'd seen what the teachers in high school went through and did not envy them. But these children had made him think it was not so bad, he enjoyed it, mostly because they were eager to learn. He taught the older ones history, at least history that was still relevant, and gave elocution lessons to the younger ones.

He assumed that societies demise happened during the thirties, he

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asked Danny and Penny if they had ever heard of Nazi's or The Great Depression, they hadn't, but they had heard of The Great War and the Volstead Act which started prohibition. Books and paper were valued almost as highly as gold, the trade post was literally that, there was no money so everything was done on a bartering system. The sisters used the few books and paper they had to trade for the bananas and oranges and a few other niceties for the children.

The trade post was located where William Penn, the man that founded Pennsylvania, had first arrived in 1682, which the locals back in AM's universe called Penn's landing. The pirates brought goods from all over the east coast. More like raiding from what AM had seen so far, they had yet to come near the orphanage but he had seen them come over from the island to take from the people trying to survive.

Petty's Island was a fortress, surrounding it on all sides were wrecks of ships that were visible during the low tide. The beach around the island was fortified with steel hulls of ships welded together all around the island, built like the walls that were surrounding the city. At every half mile a tower made from wooden beams stood, each had a guard with a machine gun.

There was only one entrance that he had seen. They even had a working truck that would back out of it when the pirates brought in heavy stuff from their ships which varied from tug boats, row boats, to a steam paddle ship called The Spirit of Philadelphia. They didn't leave the island very often except to raid the merchants and food growers, but it was never more than a two or three. Sister Eva said there were probably twenty to thirty of them, but she seemed to ignore him when he asked more about them.

This morning he was teaching the older kids about the founding fathers, it was a beautiful day and though they enjoyed class, they were anxious to go outside.

"Why did the founding fathers allow slavery to continue?" AM asked.

"They forgot," Danny said which had gotten laughs from the everyone.

"No, but they might as well have." said Missy.

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"Well that's almost correct. The reason was because the southern states wouldn't join the rebellion if they had to give up slavery. The leaders from the north would have had a hard time removing slavery and have a revolution. Even President Washington was a slave holder."

"Did England have slaves?" asked Missy.

"No they had done away with it already, they even offered slaves freedom if they fought for the king. OK, judging by Danny's fidgets I think class is dismissed, I want you to read something from the library."

"What should we read?" asked Penny.

"Doesn't matter, just read something and come up with questions for any of it that doesn't make sense to you and we'll discuss it next time."

He wanted to give them something particular to read, but the orphanage had less than two dozen books, and that would become less if any of the children got hurt or sick or if food ran low. During winter they had to trade half of their collection to get coals for a furnace that was older than Sister McDevitt. It was the best he could do for them with such limited material. He had a half dozen gold coins still, and considered buying them the fuel and books they would need, the gold wouldn't help him here and besides he had buckets full of gold coins back home.

When everyone had gone outside he took out his Q pad and sent another message, he had been sending them every eight to twelve hours for the last two weeks but had yet to hear from Dig. He sat quietly for a while thinking about the cubes absent mindedly pulling a thread from a shirt Penny has sewn for him, when he heard a commotion out in the playground, he got up and ran to the window that over looked the whole playground. The children were scattering to the four corners away from the wooden fence that guarded the chicken coup.

He ran outside in the direction of the fence and saw the door was wide open, in the coup was a black and brown German-Shepard that looked half crazed and starving. It was tearing a chicken to pieces, feathers and blood were everywhere the stench of chicken shit was thick in the air. AM removed a knife from a worn leather scabbard attached to his belt he traded Danny for granola bars, some of the children walked

back to where AM stood.

"Get back!!" he cried to them.

The dog, teeth foamy and covered in blood, picked its head up from its meal and looked at AM, it gave low throaty growl, and slowly walked out of the coup approaching him. He held up the knife knowing he could never out run it, hoping he could kill it quickly. In the background whimpers from the children echoed loudly in his ears, as the dog stopped and let out another angry growl. His palms were slick with sweat, he imagined himself dropping the knife because of it and squeezed the handle tighter.

The dog stared and let out a bark, before AM could react, a shot rang out from beside him. Sister Eva stood next to him the whole time toting a Springfield 30-06. The left side of the dog's chest caved in from the bullet and brought the beast down as it let out a final yelp. Without a word she walked by the mongrel and looked in the chicken coup.

AM followed her in, the four chickens they had were all dead. It was the primary source of their food, the goat they kept for milk had run off somewhere, the vegetable garden was untouched. Danny came up behind him and blew air through his lips.

"That was a hell of a shot, sister."

"Language, Daniel." Sister Eva said quietly.

"How did it get in?" AM asked.

"I'm sorry, it was our fault." said George who was standing right behind Danny shamefully, next to him was Hampton who looked red in the face. "Me and Hampton were playing hide and seek yesterday and I hid in the chicken coup. I think I forgot to put the wood back on the door."

Sister Eva looked at him sadly.

"Stay away from the chicken coup, George. It's not for you to play in,

someone could have been hurt."

George's lips quivered but he remained silent. Hampton mumbled sorry and kicked at the ground. Chickens were a rare commodity, and would require a good trade for four more. If anyone was willing to trade theirs away.

"Daniel, take this creature and dump it in the river. When your done, gather some books and the blank writing papers in the classroom and try to find someone with chickens."

Before Danny could complain AM offered to go with him.

"I have things that might interest the traders."

"I couldn't ask you to do that, Mr Lincoln. This was not your fault."

"Yes, but I believe your...the Bible says do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is only fare to return your hospitality."

She looked at him and Danny then back into the chicken coup, she sighed heavily.

"Very well. George, have Hampton take you into the wash room and get wash water. Have him remove the chickens and you'll both clean out this mess as penance."

She walked back to the school with the high powered rifle over her shoulder like a gunslinger. AM helped Danny pick up the dog and drop it into the river. They walked a half mile toward the remnants of the Ben Franklin Bridge which had either not been completed being built or was destroyed at some point, all that stood were towers that had been rusted an eaten away by time and the elements. AM had seen people walking along the river occasionally, but when they came to the trading post a few blocks away, he was shocked to see so many people.

There were more than a few dozen people walking around seeing what was to be had, they all had the same kind of clothes and looked desperate. AM fingered the hilt of his knife hoping that he wouldn't have to wield it again. The traders all seemed to be of Chinese lineage, they walked by merchants yelling out the goods they had in broken English.

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"DEER, GOOD MEAT!" shouted a Chinese man with a sun burnt scalp.

There were more than a few children running around, looking malnourished and sick. A group of preteen boys were harassing an old Chinese man who had pastries laid out.

"Come on you cheap yellow fucker, lemme get one more cookie just one."

The man waved his arms angrily at them.

"FUCK DA COOKIE!" he shouted and threw one at them.

The children laughed and ran away when a younger Chinese man came out waving a sword that looked old but deadly. If the man had cookies to throw out, perhaps he would have chickens to sell.

"Lets see what that man has to offer." he said to Danny.

It was a tin shack with a burlap canvas covering a rickety porch made of wood and a car seat, he stood behind a makeshift wall of wooden crates were his pastries and other items sat. The old man patted the younger man on his back and said something in his own language, he nodded and went inside. He noticed AM and Danny and turned his hostility on them.

"What you want?" he said with a distrustful look.

"Do you have chickens to sell?" AM said with a hospitable smile. "I have money."

"Trade only!" he shouted ignoring his smile.

AM pulled a gold coin out and let the sunlight bounce off it, the old mans beady eyes were on it. He said something in his language, AM shrugged, the man shouted over his shoulder behind him. The young man came back out with out his sword. He spoke quickly to the man and pointed a finger at AM.

"My grandfather want to know if it real." he said with his hand out.

AM was unsure but handed it to the younger man. He lit a candle and held the coin over the flame for about a minute, until its one side was blackened. He took it off the flame and licked his fingers, and put it over the burnt area. His fingers took the black smudge off the coin and he handed it back to AM and said a word to his grandfather and instantly the old man was smiling.

"We got chicken! We got goat meat! We got good cookies, have taste." the old man said excitedly.

"Do you have books?" AM asked.

The old man furrowed his brow, the younger man said another word in Chinese. He nodded enthusiastically, and waved them inside. Danny grabbed a few cookies as they walked in. The shack was just one room with two beds, crowded with stacks of books and magazines, in one corner was a brass trombone and pipes from an organ. Near the back was a broken record player with a pile of vinyl records

sitting on top. The place smelled musty with an over lying scent of baked cookies which wafted out of a stone oven that sat out back. The old man spoke to his grandson again in his language and pointed again at AM.

"Grandfather say, you may buy any thing you like."

AM grabbed as many books and sheaths of paper as they could both carry along with five chickens for the price of three gold coins. People gave them envious looks as they made their way back.

"Lets hurry, I think we may be attracting too much attention." AM said while being eyed by a group of ruff looking men.

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Danny said without any smart comments to follow up with.

When they got back the children were outside singing hymns and playing

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with happy faces, the incident with the dog already forgotten. They looked over and saw Danny and AM coming and ran over to them to see all the items they were carrying. Sister McDevitt was sitting in the shade on the steps of the school house with Penny sewing.

"What's all the hub bub, Penny?" she said trying to see through her cracked spectacles.

"Danny and Abe are back, their carrying all sorts of things." she said with wide eyes.

Sister Eva came out with a rosary in hand, a look of serenity came across her face when she saw the chickens and the books that Danny was handing out.

"Thank you Lord, for bringing us Abraham Lincoln." she said.

Joe Hazelwood sat watching a young girl dancing to a song on an old record player, while holding a chipped glass with whiskey that had been taken from a farm in the Carolinas. The girl no more than fifteen wore a grimy white negligee. She had been taken when the farmer refused to give up any more hooch, they killed him and burned his home to the ground.

The girl looked self conscious and pale with fright. The crewmen of Petty's Island were hooting and hollering at her bashfulness, Joe could hardly see the girl, the rich brown liquid was burning his insides like a fire and blurred his sight. Fortunately they were back for the summer and wouldn't be leaving any time soon.

"Show yer backside!" cried one of the men with drunken lust.

The girl shook terribly but bent over as demanded, they made use of her on the journey back and she lost some of her apprehension. Not that she had a choice, thought Joe, who had grown up in the middle of the epidemic near the Georgia coast, just him and his daddy, who was a ship captain in the navy during the last war the world ever had. He showed him everything he knew about piloting a ship. They used an old fishing boat to ferry people across rivers, trading for anything to get a safe passage to quieter places.

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The girl yelled loudly as one of the crew slapped her fanny, and laughed when she began to cry, Joe swallowed the rest of his drink with a grimace and left the men to their show. He climbed up a ladder from a hole that was dug in the middle of the island, it made a formidable shelter during the winter. He came out to a glaring sun that made him dizzy.

He looked up at one of the guard towers with a sentry shooting into the water from boredom, they had plenty of ammunition to waste. Each tower had sixty millimeter mortars to bombard the coast should the need arrive, but it had been long years since they had to do that. Joe watched as men and a few women did their assigned duties, most of which was keeping an eye on one another and keeping the island habitable. That was the captain's idea, Joe was not the captain, just a pilot, his drinking, which was his only vice, kept him from ever being more than their ship's pilot.

He joined up with them years ago, during a summer like this one while out on his boat. The ship's previous pilot had run aground near the Georgia coast and when unable to get it back on the water, he was beheaded by Darkstar. A fierce man with long black hair that was bone straight, who came from the American mid-west and knew nothing of life on the sea. He had gone sailing by at a good speed, and without a thought made for shore.

It would have been suicide any other time, but he was drunk and lonely and they were stuck. They probably would have killed him if they were in a better position. He made his way over waving a white shirt.

"I can help you get her out," he called out.

Darkstar was breathing fire and belting out orders to his crew between swears. They had the ship, more like an over sized boat out within a few hours.

"Ya sail do ya?" asked Darkstar whose gray eyes contrasted with his black hair.

"Yes, sir, captain." he said trying to sound humble when they decided to bring him along.

Darkstar laughed like a hyena, captain sounded nice to him, from then

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on he was called captain, though he couldn't tell you anything about ships or sailing. No one dared say that to him, he would cut your tongue out if he felt you ran your mouth too much. He had seen him cut the hand off a small boy who had stolen a pair of sandals, he held it up as warning to anyone who thought about taking from him.

He demanded respect and would get it with pure brute violence, anyone who defied him would be thrown into the river with a rock tied around the neck, or tossed over the city walls to either succumb to the Green Death or food for the animals with green eyes that wandered there. Joe went to the steam paddle ship that was anchored next to the beach of the island. The sentry waved to him and continued shooting at the water.

A few people were still on board, smoking tobacco that had been found at a farm in Kentucky, it was too harsh for him to smoke though. He went top deck and looked upon the coast of Philadelphia, with eyes still blurry from drinking all morning. The sun kept him from lifting his head too high, he felt like he could have fallen asleep standing there.

"Joe, you drunk bastard." said a man with a weather beaten face that was deeply grooved with wrinkles. He was the only man who could rival the captain in brutality, he would rub Joe's head like a genie lamp or would pull roughly on his scraggy beard when he was in a good mood, or bad.

Joe hated being called that and hated being treated like fool, but he was a drunk who was only around because he could pilot there ships. He nodded his head dutifully, Ivan was no one to anger either. He relished his nickname Ivan the terrible, given to him by the folks on the waterfront. He was over sixty and short with stubby salt and pepper hair with thick muscular arms from years of logging when still a young man.

Darkstar tried to have Joe teach some of his crew how to sail but that didn't work out very well, most couldn't read and had a hard enough time counting provisions. But that wasn't so bad for Joe, it made him more valuable to the captain and he would get special privileges. He was allowed first choice of any women and booze they acquired, after the captain of course, but he just took alcohol, he hadn't been able to get an erection for years because of all the drinking, whiskey dick was what the prostitutes called it.

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Ivan continued on his way to finish whatever he was doing not bothering to rub his bald pate or pull his beard, Joe felt relieved. He didn't shout like the captain but he had an unsettling voice and a way of talking that made his blood run cold. He took great pleasure in it, Ivan was the type to grab a woman over his shoulder and burn a village, like a viking from long ago.

Joe sometimes wished he had kept on sailing that day, he had planned to just go out to sea and die on his boat in the middle of the ocean. He had lost the joy he felt being out on the water long before he joined this rough neck crew, trying to survive the loneliness after his daddy died. He looked down at the river, wondering if he would sink to the bottom before anyone noticed he jumped. He grew up with the same faith as his father, were suicide was a mortal sin and he left those dark thoughts in the back of his mind.

"Ivan!" cried the captain from his quarters deep under the island.

"IVAN!!" he shouted sitting behind an old desk on a chair of cracked leather nursing a bottle of wine made from grapes and apples.

Some of the women on the island would make liquor from the fruit they had, most were just for the men to ravage. Though he had a man on his crew once named John Wayne who had his dick cut off by one of the hookers after playing too rough. They laughed when he blubbered like a fool and shot him when his wailing started giving the captain a headache. The hooker had gotten his crew's respect for her savagery and had taken John Wayne's place on the island.

Ivan came finally with a sack of potatoes over his shoulder, his skin like leather glistened with sweat, panting and coughing loudly. He quickly covered his mouth with a callused hand, the captain was afraid of getting sick and was known to break the hands of anyone who didn't cover their mouths when coughing or sneezing. He watched his whole family succumb to the plague and had no intentions of suffering the same fate.

"Sorry, cap." he said with hitching breath.

He waved it off as if he had not been angry.

"What's the count?" he said with calm.

It was of no difference to Darkstar though, if they were short they could raid the merchants but he liked to keep on top of everybody, keeping them busy. If their too busy with work, they would be to busy to scheme against him.

"Good captain, we got lots of almost everything. But we're short on meat, the men bagged a deer from the other side of the river."

He nodded, but was pissed they were so low on meat. He knew it wasn't being stolen, so he kept his anger to its usual level.

"Fucker! One deer?" he said through rotted teeth.

"Aye, captain."

He thought for a minute, the island was full of vegetables but the men wanted meat and a hungry crew would be a dangerous one.

"Go to the shore and find some meat, make sure it's not green meat. If there's another out break, I'll put your head on a fuckin pole." he said pointing a finger at him.

Ivan kept the anger out of his voice when he spoke, he had been tricked into trading a dozen cuts of cow beef by a half mongrel woman who had claimed the beef was clean. The cook should have noticed but he hadn't, his head was one of many that was removed that day. The mongrel woman was put behind the city walls to die.

"Aye, captain."

Darkstar watched him closely as he picked up his sack and left, he would have to keep an eye on Ivan. He was loyal but that meant little to him, he saw the fire in those eyes he had seen them in his own reflection in his mirror. He leaned back in his chair and sipped from his bottle and picked up a hand mirror lying on his desk and looked into it. Wrinkles were forming around his mouth and eyes he had to be content with that, but at least he could pluck the grey hairs from his head he, thought.

Ivan came out into the room where the young girl was still dancing to a scratched vinyl. She was clad in just panties now being groped by Bartelby a chubby man with back hair that looked like pubes, and whose breath always smelled of fish and rancid milk.

"Barty, come on. Time to shop."

"Not just now, Ivan. I've got a pretty cunny to lick."

"Now." he said giving him a look that stopped Bartelby from arguing further.

"Aye!" he said with a small voice.

He gave the girls naked shoulder a lick that made her grimace with revulsion, he picked up his ten gallon stetson that covered his greasy hair that grew in patches like crab grass and followed Ivan. They brought Joe along to row them across the river and made him stay with the tiny boat.

"What's the captain lookin for?"

"Meat you numb skull. " he said with rage. "The captain ain't satisfied with one buck, lets find the gook with the sweets."

"Aye, he got a lot a chickens. He got him some good picture of little cunnys I stole from him last I was here."

Ivan grunted as the crowd parted from them, knowing who they were and avoiding eye contact. The old man was moving things off his table when he saw them come towards his shack. He smiled and bowed repeatedly as they approached.

"Picture? Cookie? Many sweets!"

They pushed him aside and tossed his crates aside, his grandson came out with sword in hand.

"You'll put that down, sonny or I'll make you my new cunny." said Bartelby with a horrible smile.

He lowered it and bowed to them as they made their way inside, towards the door out back where he kept his chickens and oven. He had six last month, but all the cages were empty save for feathers and chicken shit.

"Where's the chickens!?" Ivan shouted as he stomped back into the shack.

The old man was walking towards him hands up plaintively, speaking too quickly in his own language. Ivan struck him with a back hand, letting out a shrill cry as he fell to the floor. His grandson went to pick him up, but Bartelby pushed him away and removed a Colt revolver from a holster under his shirt and pointed it at him.

"You didn't answer my friend gook, where's the chickens? You had six last time."

"We sold five, and ate the other." he said fearfully.

"Ha! Bullshit, who?." he said fingering the trigger.

"Short man and boy! Never seen before."

"All five? What did he trade you for so many?" asked Ivan thinking they were lying.

"No trade! Sell!" and he pointed to a cabinet hanging on a wall.

Bartelby was rummaging through a cabinet with empty cans and glass jars, tossing them over his shoulder, the old man winced each time a glass jar broke. In the way back was a rusty tin can that jingled musically when he grabbed it.

"Here, here. What treasures you got here old man?" Bartelby asked licking his lips.

"Lets see it," Ivan said with his hand out.

He dumped the can and out came three shiny gold coins that looked freshly minted. Ivan and Bartelby stared in wonder at the coins, they had heard of gold but never seen it outside of a picture book. Ivan handed it back to Bartelby and bent down to pick up the old man by his shirt.

"Who gave you the gold?" he said with burning eyes.

"We never seen them before. Big boy red hair, and skinny man, short." said the young man nervously.

The old man wept quietly, which was good, Ivan hated to here people moaning and crying loudly, it grated on his ears like nails to a chalkboard. He saw the fear in their eyes an decided they were telling the truth. He dropped the old man to the floor and approached the younger man.

"If I find yer lying, I'll fillet yer foreskin. Ya hear me?" the younger man bowed low and went to his grandfather.

"Barty go get Joe, take what you can carry to the boat, not too much or will be swimmin back. I need to find me a set of eyes."

He went out side again, people went about there business, pretending not to see Ivan the terrible. He went over to a another merchant offering trade in women. Ivan knew the mans first name he was an old Chinamen with a long mustache that went passed his chin and was braided at the ends, and would give him fair trade for women,it was important to have a friend among the merchants. He could have just taken the women for nothing but he was smart enough to know you catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

"Ah, Mr. Terrible! Come, I have red head! Old but good!" he said in broken English stroking his mustache.

He had a larger home than most thanks to Ivan, with two spare rooms and a couch that sat behind the house crowded by trees were a curtain was strung up if you wanted to do it outside. He like being called Mr. Terrible but would have liked the title captain better.

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"Not today, Charlie. I'm lookin for two people. Ones a tall boy with red hair, he was traveling with a short scrawny man. He bought out the other gooks chickens, you seen em?"

He ignored the racial slur and thought for a few seconds before answering.

"Big boy with little man, yeah. Yeah. They here a few days ago went south with arm load."

He made a gesture like he was going to give him a big hug, Ivan nodded.

"Did anyone else see them?" he asked.

But he shrugged unsure.

"Lot a customer come by, maybe one of them seen em but who knows."

He nodded and told him to keep an eye open for them and went back to the boat, which was filled with everything but what they needed most, though the captain would be happy to see gold coins.

"Ya gone to Charlies? Why didn't ya bring me a present?"

"Shut up and help the lush row."

He and Bartelby went back to the captains room on the island, the door was closed so he knocked.

"Come!" he barked.

They walked in, the captain had a bare chested brunette with Asian features on his lap, she was giggling as he tickled her breasts with his long hair. Seeing who it was, he pushed the girl off and slapped her playfully on the buttocks. She giggled again and left, blowing a kiss to Bartelby that made him want to chase after her.

"And?" he said

"No meat."

He saw the captain's eyes narrow down on Ivan, but when he took his hand out of his pocket his eyes went wide at the gold. He got up and took a coin from his hand and bit down on it.

"It's real cap. Two people bought a mess a chickens from one of the gooks over there." Ivan said.

He eyed the coins, rubbing his fingers on the eagle that adorned it. He licked his lips, he hadn't seen gold in years. He looked back at both of them eyes narrow again ready to unleash hell if they told him anything he didn't like.

"What two people?"

"I asked around but they never seen em before. Ones a young boy tall with red hair, and a man short and scrawny, they bought chickens and books and other shit with these."

Darkstar smiled to himself, Ivan had done as well as he could. Some people who came by were travelers from other places along the coast, it was busy even during the winter months. The fact he got an actual description of the men was a pleasant surprise to him. He sat back at his desk and opened a drawer and took out three shot glasses and a bottle of brandy he had been holding on too for years, he poured it and a rich scent filled the room.

"Have a drink Ivan the Terrible. Ya earned it, you too you ugly prick."

"Salud," they chorused.

The liquor warmed their bodies and left a pleasant after taste.

"What's the order captain?" Ivan asked. "Should we mortar them? We

might smoke em out, not to many redheads round here."

He pushed his hair back behind his shoulders thinking.

"No," he said finally " You have eyes over there?"

"Aye, the flesh trader. He's trustful enough to keep an eye open and tell me what he sees."

"Good, keep checkin on him, if he sees them again tell him to follow. I don't care how he does it, tell him he has the captains protection if he finds out where their from."

"Aye, captain." Ivan said.

AM bought nearly a dozen books for the children to use, but one he kept to himself. It was more like a manuscript, similar to his Uncle Howdy's manuscript, the pages were handwritten and had pictures pasted on it with a smelly adhesive. The title was "The Green Plague by Dr. Wane Fay Gunks M.D."

He studied the book, which had a plethora of information about the plague, it had most answers but not all. The rats as well as dogs and cats, were killed outright except those with rabies which made them more aggressive and a bite from one would give you the blood born version of the disease resulting in death within a few hours. The other was airborne, like the flu and took longer to kill sometimes as long as three weeks, but was only transmitted through human contact.

As for what caused it, Dr. Gunks theorized it was caused by an environmental disaster common in America. There was a black and white photo taken circa 1926 of the Cuyahoga river in Ohio, which was on fire. The caption explained that the flames were green as well as the smoke. A few days later the first official case of the Green Death was reported at a hospital in Canton, Ohio.

AM guessed that a cube or box had landed in the river during a fire and was destroyed, river fires were a common occurrence in the northeastern states after the Civil War and would continue until the 1970's when the EPA was established. There were pictures of people suffering from both

versions of it, the blood born would cause green scab-like protrusions to form on the skin and sometimes inside the body. The airborne would slowly destroy the respiratory system, causing the victim to cough up green bile and bright green mucus.

A patter of feet came running towards the classroom, AM closed his book and put it in a drawer. It was George and Danny out of breath but happy.

"Abe, It's Sunday. Are you gonna come to church?" George said hopefully.

"No, I'd prefer not to." he said

"Ya see, I told ya." Danny said with a wink at AM.

"But ya gotta, Jesus died for our sins ya know." George said with a scholarly tone.

Seeing he wouldn't come along, George slumped away Danny rolled his eyes with a smile and left. AM got up and left the school house while the children ran to the tiny chapel next door. They called over to him to join them but he shook his head and walked behind the school house.

There was a porch with a swing chair that he enjoyed to sit in while reading, today he just wanted to watch the sunset. He had trouble sleeping since he found that book, usually dreaming that he was eleven again and was being chased by zombies with green eyes.

The sun dipped behind the horizon, changing from yellow, to orange, then finally red as it disappeared from the sky. He felt himself drifting off to sleep but didn't fight it, watching the sun set had made his eyes tired. He didn't sleep very long, which was just as well he was having a frightful dream about the plague when Danny shook him awake.

"Sorry to wake you, but I need a favor."

He sat up and wiped the sleep out of his eyes, his heart was beating a mile a minute from his dream.

"What is it? I'm out of granola bars if that's what you want." he said with a yawn.

He crouched down and looked over his shoulder, making sure he wasn't being overheard.

"It's actually about Penny. See next week's her birthday, and I wanted to know if I could trade you for a coin. I saw a brush and pink beret at the shop were we got the chickens. I thought maybe you would go for me so she wont suspect nothin."

"A trade for a coin?" he asked happy to help him with his predicament.

He didn't make him trade for the coin, instead made him promise to read more after he was gone. That put a glum look on his face that could have rivaled George, but he promised with out complaint. He did his best not to grow to fond of the children, he wasn't mean to them but tried to not let his heart open. Love was a dangerous thing in this place, or any place when the world was at stake.

He wondered if helping Danny was a good idea, none of the children had fathers. Motherly love came from the sisters' but a boy seeking advice about women went to a father figure which AM was to Danny and the other boys as well, especially George. The next day he went back to the trading post alone after class.

It was a damp chilly afternoon, the sky was gray with clouds, so he donned his hoody before setting out. He made his way through the crowds that wandered aimlessly, some with children tagging along with hungry vacant looks in their eyes. He went to the tin shack were the old man selling the chickens lived, but the front porch was empty. No crates or items were laid out, he went up the porch but before he could knock on the door, the grandson came out.

"Go! No more for you!" he shouted.

AM walked down the porch backwards, hoping the man wouldn't pull out his sword. People stopped and watched the exchange closely.

"What is it." he asked flabbergasted. "I have more..."

"No! Leave! We no want your coin!" he shouted and went inside shutting the door with a slam.

AM left hoping the man wasn't going for his sword. People went about there business, but AM could feel their eyes. He passed another old man who looked older than Sister McDevitt with a Fu-Manchu mustache who asked in broken English if he wanted to trade for a girl.

"She give you love, big bed inside." he said with a smile.

A woman with brown hair and bright red lips who looked no older than Penny stepped out wearing a robe, the old man reached in and exposed one of her breasts to him with a lecherous wink. AM grimaced and walked away feeling sick to his stomach. The old mans ugly smile disappeared from his face when AM left and whispered in the girls ear. AM went to another porch run by a black women who was singing a hymn he heard the children sing many times while at mass.

She had dread locks that went down passed her shoulders, and wore a green, black, and red robe that looked too heavy even for a dreary summer day, but she seemed comfortable wearing it. She smiled pleasantly at him and judging by her accent was Jamaican. She had a beret that was purple but no brush so he took a Kewpie doll instead. He handed her a coin and she looked at him with wide eyes and took his hand so suddenly AM was frightened she would bite him but she held it gently.

"Lord, please protect this man who has fed my family for the next six months. I beg you Lord." she said with a heavy accent.

He didn't know why but he wanted to cry, he was doing so much by just being decent to everyone. It was something his parents had always told him to do, he got his merit badges by doing these ordinary things. And yet they met so much to these people, he smiled and thanked her and made his way back to the orphanage. He was out of the crowds and walking slowly along the river when he heard a noise behind him, it was a child that looked about George's age.

He looked hungry but AM had nothing to give except another coin which

the child would probably have been robbed of, so he spoke to him.

"I'm sorry, I don't have food."

Maybe he could take him to the sisters, they would feed him.

"Would you like a meal, the sisters could feed you."

The boy stared as if he didn't understand him.

"Food," AM said making the eating gesture with his hand.

He stood silent, then turned and ran away in the direction of the trading post, unsettling AM enough for him to start walking a little faster, he made himself a promise not to go back to the trading post unless necessary. Whatever happened to the old man was because of him and his spending. He had always been careful to not attract attention to himself, here that was impossible. Everything about him screamed odd man out, everyone looked desperate and sickly, wearing hand made clothes and shoes made with wooden board and string.

When he got back, Danny ran up and looked at his purchase.

"What about the brush?"

"Sold out." he said and handed him Penny's birthday presents.

"Oh well, she likes dolls too. Thanks, Abe."

AM went to his room to read more about the plague, absorbing all the information it had, when a light flashed from his backpack, he got his legs caught in a blanket and almost fell over trying to get up. He dug out the Q pad and touched the envelope on the screen.

FOUND CUBE STUCK
IN WALL, ALLS WELL HERE.

He sighed with relief, he would have to start calculating for an exact date and location for them to meet, he had been here almost six weeks already. The area were labyrinth was sat miles behind the quarantine wall. He brought up his Qcalc and began punching in figures when George suddenly burst in shouting gleefully, causing AM to drop the Q pad, making him angry.

"Damn it, George!" he said sharply. "Don't come barging in here I'm busy."

His smile vanished and his bottom lip quivered as he turned and ran, Sister Eva came in a few seconds later.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Lincoln?" she asked with a neutral tone.

"I liked some privacy please." he said in a steady voice.

She nodded and closed the door, without another word. He rubbed his forehead and picked up the Q pad, which landed on his backpack saving it from the hard floor, and brought up the Qcalc again. After twenty minutes he got a date and a time to send Dig, he knew a good place in his home universe that was void of too many people close by and not in the quarantine zone.

He went outside and made his way through the empty playground, it was so quiet he almost shouted when Sister Eva called his name out. She walked out from the school house with a look of sadness.

"I'd like to speak with you a moment." she said approaching him.

AM thought it would be about his shouting at George.

"I suppose you'll be leaving soon?" she said walking past him and up a hill that went high enough to view New Jersey across the river.

AM followed her up and took in the view.

"Yes."

"I know you don't have faith, Mr. Lincoln. The Great Emancipator had trouble with his faith as well."

"Sister I..."

She held up her hand.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" she asked him.

"I don't know what you mean."

She turned from the river and looked at him.

"You've hurt George, but you hurt yourself more. If you must leave then you must, but don't break your own heart because of it."

He looked back over the river into the wilds of New Jersey, he didn't have faith in God that was obvious, but he was cold to the people who were important to him. He hurt who he did to protect the world.

"I don't..."

"What was her name?" she asked simply.

He turned back from the river and looked at Sister Eva shocked, he could lie very easily but remained silent.

"The sadness in your eyes tell a story, Mr. Lincoln."

"Angie Jensen." he said turning back to New Jersey.

"Why couldn't you love her? What's so important you had to leave her?" she asked not unkindly.

"I can't explain." he said trying not to get angry. "It doesn't

matter, I had to leave."

"You must open your heart even if..."

"EVEN IF IT COULD DESTROY THE WORLD!!!" he shouted.

She looked at him with compassion not upset or angry.

"Love can't destroy the world, Mr. Lincoln." she said softly.

"How can you know that?" he said trembling with adrenaline and a little shame.

"Do you think I was born with this habit? "

He stared at her, trying to see her as a young girl in love but couldn't quite picture it.

"What was his name?"

"Jan," she said with a far away look in her eyes. "We came here many years ago, I was with child. We lived in a shack that was near the river."

"What happened?" he asked.

She nodded towards Petty's Island

"Jan and some of the other men were fed up with them and started fighting back. We didn't know they had so many weapons, all we had were a few rifles and pitchforks. Our baby was only a year old when they came and took her and Jan. They knew Jan had led the uprising and gave me a choice, either Jan or the baby.

Jan pleaded with me to take the baby, but I couldn't speak. When the one of them shot a gun in the air I asked for the baby. They shot Jan, and tossed our daughter into the river. I couldn't swim but I tried to

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jump in after her, they held me back laughing. It was there laughter that got me angry enough to bite the one who held me and broke free of them, but she had been swept away by the river.

I just wanted to let the river wash me away, hoping I would drown. Sister McDevitt found me a few miles away, I was fortunate enough to be washed to shore rather than out into the ocean. I swore I would never love again. But eventually I did Mr. Lincoln, if I hadn't the world for George and Danny and the rest would have been destroyed."

AM breathed deeply forgetting his anger, letting the story sink in, feeling a deep regret over how he had acted towards his parents, Quake, Dig, and Angie. It all hit him like a ton of bricks and he broke down in tears, stomach twisted into a knot.

"I...I didn't...want...too...I..." he fell upon his knees sobbing.

Sister Eva came over and held him for a long time. When regained himself he stood up and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief mumbling an apology.

"Never apologize for having a heart, Mr. Lincoln." she said giving him a look that was maternal.

He nodded and tried to smile and took a long walk by himself. He returned later after sending his message to Dig a few more times. Everyone was on the playground, George was catching fireflies when AM ran up to him and began swinging him in circles. George giggled happily when he did, AM put him down and kneeled to face him.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"It's OK, Danny said it was your time of the month."

Even the sisters laughed at that, and he gave George a big hug.

"Is it true your leavin in a few days?" Danny said when they went inside.

"Tomorrow night."

He nodded and patted him on the shoulder with a small smile. He planned on just leaving with out a word, but after his talk with Sister Eva he decided to make sure he said goodbye. He sat up after dark thinking about Angie for the first time in a while.

The next day started sunny and hot, AM woke early and let the children skip class for the day. He counted the hours until he would have to say goodbye, feeling sad but anxious to get back to Dig and finish searching for the cubes. With one more, the location of the last cube in his universe would be revealed.

He stayed with them all day, giving George a push on the swings, square dancing with Penny, Danny, and Missy as Hampton and Virgil played out a tune with spoons banging on their thighs. Teaching them how to shoot marbles, it was a game he and Quake learned from Uncle Howdy when he would visit them in New Mexico, and took great pleasure in passing it on to them.

When the sun began to set Sister McDevitt made a large feast similar to his arrival but with more chicken and vegetables. She and Penny even baked a loaf of bread, it was wonderful meal but quiet, everyone waited for AM to announce his leaving. AM felt horrible to leave them to their fate, but they had survived this far he told himself when the time to leave had drawn closer.

They were halfway finished their meal when gun fire erupted in the playground, everyone jumped in fright. AM ran to the window drawing out his knife. There were six of them standing side by side holding torches and machine guns. A short brawny man with stubbly hair was shouting for them to come out, the others shouted inarticulately, punctuating each shout with a gun shot.

"GET OUT HERE, OR I BURN THE LITTLE FUCKERS!!!" said the short man with grenades hanging off his belt.

"Filthy devil's" said Sister McDevitt getting up with more gusto the AM had ever seen.

"Sister, wait!" cried Penny.

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Sister McDevitt despite her limp and advanced age had no fear and went outside in a huff, they laughed as she approached swinging her walking stick menacingly at them.

"Fuckin gray bearded penguin, I bet she got plenty of use for that stick!" said one with a Stetson cowboy hat.

"Watch yer mouths' you filthy corsair's!"

"Quiet you dry snatch!" laughed the cowboy.

Sister McDevitt looked in his direction and approached him, and gave him a hard loud slap across the face. The men erupted with harsh laughter, as the cowboy stared in disbelief, with a snarl he pulled out his revolver and shot her in the face. Screams from inside echoed through the schoolhouse. She fell down slowly, her face was marred and unrecognizable.

"COME OUT YA LITTLE CUNNY'S!!!" the cowboy said putting another bullet in Sister McDevitt.

AM told the the children and Sister Eva to wait as he ran upstairs and grabbed the time bomb. He thought frantically

about what to do. He could wait until they were all out there and kill them all to spare the children from these inhuman monsters but felt sick at the idea.

"COME ON, WE AIN'T GOT ALL NIGHT!!" the cowboy screamed waving his torch.

He stuffed the bomb in his back pocket, removed his knife and gathered the children and Sister Eva, and told them to keep their hands up and not to say a word to them, he glared at Danny who was pale faced but nodded. The children walked out quietly with hands raised trying not to look at the dead sister. Everyone was quiet, the short brawny man stepped forward pulling the little boy AM had seen the other day by the collar of his shirt.

"Which one?" he asked.

The boy pointed to AM and looked at the short man with a hollow grin filled with jagged teeth. He pushed the boy away and approached AM nonchalantly, looking back at his crew then turned back quickly with a punch to AM's gut that doubled him over. Before he could catch his breath the man grabbed him by the neck with one hand and picked him up. He placed the barrel of his machine gun in his mouth, the taste of oil and smoke was acrid and hot.

"My little friend here says ya got some gold, that so?"

AM looked into the mans eyes seeing he would kill him if he lied, so he nodded his head, the gun barrel banged his teeth when he did.

"Where might it be?" he asked calmly.

AM's eyes looked down and shook his left leg, hoping the man understood. He let go of his neck to rummage in his pants pocket, and pulled out the few coins he had left.

"This is it?" he said not removing the gun from his mouth.

He nodded and the man pushed him to the ground.

"How much do he got, Ivan?" asked the cowboy.

"Not enough, Barty. Lets have us a cook out."

The men cheered as they made their way to the buildings, AM, between coughs, shouted.

"Stop... (cough)I know where to...(cough) find more!" he said still hacking out the taste of gun oil.

Ivan held his hand up and they all stopped moving, he crouched down to AM and pulled him by the hair to get him eye to eye.

"Do ya say so?"

"Yes, this city has a mint. It's south from here, near the forest."

The man laughed with merriment but the others were quiet, he pulled on his hair more forcefully, AM let out a pain filled cry.

"I'm sorry but I ain't as well learned as ya can guess," he said with mock humility. " but I know mint is a plant so ya better make sense quick before I cut off your pecker and feed it to the fishes in the river." Ivan said with smile that filled AM's stomach with acid.

He let go of AM's hair and let him catch his breath.

"A mint is were the government made it coins, it's miles south of here, I came through their to get here."

"The forest, them walls cut through there. He's lyin Ivan." said Barty.

"I am not! The wall cuts behind the forest to the the river!" he shouted defiantly.

"What river?" asked Ivan eying him closely, he knew the area better than most people here did.

"The Schuylkill."

Ivan stood up and looked at his crew, he thought for a minute before deciding what to do.

"Alright, you'll take us."

"No." he said deliberately.

Ivan did a double take and placed a finger behind his ear making sure he heard him.

"What's that, I'm afraid my ears are as old as the rest of me."

"Let everyone go, I'll take you and you can do whatever you want with me. Just let them go."

Ivan pulled out a large cutlass it reflected the torch light into his eyes blinding AM momentary.

"Ya got a lot of balls to be makin demands, I could crush your skull wit my bare hand."

"Of that I have no doubt, but the way in is hidden. With out me you'll never find it, shoot me if you don't believe me. I'll be dead but you'll still be poor."

"Listen ta him with the fancy talk." laughed Barty.

He grabbed AM by the arm and pulled him up roughly then nodded to Bartelby to come over.

"You an two others gather up the penguin and the kids take'em and lock'em up on the island. Not the oafy lookin red head, he's comin with the rest off us we might need the extra hands."

"Ya not gonna listen..."

Ivan glared at him and Bartelby stopped talking and started to gather up the children and Sister Eva. He gave Penny a squeeze on the butt that made Danny's face turn red with anger. AM placed hand on his shoulder to keep him calm.

"You bring me some gold," Ivan said turning his attention back to AM. "I'll let your penguin and the kiddies free. Take it or leave. If you like you could say I'm bein uh...diplomatic. If your lyin, well...I bet them young girlies would make a fitting prize just the same. There's a sayin where I'm from, the younger the berry the sweeter the juice." he said with a smirk that was more of a scowl.

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AM saw he didn't have much choice, they would do what they wanted either way, but he grasped at any chance he had to keep them alive. When the sun started to rise the next morning, they had already started their journey to the forest. Danny and AM were out in front with Ivan and two others following close behind with machine guns raised.

"I hope you got a plan, Abe." Danny said in a low whisper.

"Shut yer fuckin hole, " said one of the pirates.

AM winked at him, but Danny looked unsure. AM was unsure as well, he knew where he was taking them but would they recognize it for what it really was? A trap. He had only been there once, no one else had in a long time, which gave him a small advantage. He could use the bomb still, they hadn't bothered checking any other pockets.

The sun was at its highest point, when an idea began to form in his mind. It would be dark down there, even during the day it was dark down there. They would need those torches, he would need to divide them up, they assumed he was telling the truth and would go with him blindly in search of gold. It was afternoon by the time they were at the edge of the forest, the tall grass slowly began to over take the foot path.

"How much further?" said Ivan looking at the quarantine walls that were edging them on the other side.

"Just a half mile or so."

They passed the mural of the shrouded figure that watched them with unmoving green eyes.

"Look at that." said one of the pirates in awe.

"Mother of God," Danny mumbled looking at the ghostly figure.

They finally reached the depot in the late afternoon, mosquitoes began to buzz and bite them when they passed the defunct gate.

"That building is the mint, there's gold and silver coins underneath the building, you'll need light."

"Shut up. Wally, you and Percy take him down the hole and bring a torch."

"Ha, Percy!! Funny name." laughed Danny.

The man called Percy turned and struck him in the face with an open hand, that sounded like a pop of a champagne bottle being uncorked. He was shorter and weighed less than Danny. He expected him to fall down and start crying, but a fury appeared behind those adolescent eyes, Percy looked nervous and cocked a revolver with a shaky hand.

"Knock it off." Ivan said with calm. "Go, I'll keep an eye on this freckled fucker."

Wally and Percy lit there torches with a wooden match and pushed AM ahead, he slowly climbed down into the darkness, that smelled worse than he remembered. He went down landing on the ground with a slip almost falling into the smelly water.

"Hey Percy, smells like your sisters cunt." said Wally peering in.

"Fuck you, you bastard. Ya can go first since ya like ta eat smelly pussy." he said with a black tooth grin.

Wally handed AM his torch and jumped down the hole, sending water all over AM and the torch.

"Careful ya fuck! Don't be dowsing the light." he said to AM as if he were the one splashing around.

Percy climbed down slowly and took his torch from AM wiping the sweat from his forehead and coughing like a man who smoked a pack of cigarettes twice a day.

"To much of the brown weed, ya sound like ya got the green cough."

"Watch what ya say, theys probably got green vermin runnin round here. Which way?"

AM looked down the hall both ways and tried to think of how to get away from them. He pointed in the direction were he originally arrived. They climbed over the rusted hulk of the filing cabinet, and under the large tree with moss covered bark, and led them through the square pond and to the short hallway with five doors.

"The room at the end of the hall, I think has some bars of gold."

He started to head in the direction, but was forcefully yanked back by Wally.

"Ya think I was born yesterday? Ya go running off in the dark leaving us to look like a couple ninny's. Percy stay here an I'll go see what's down there."

He let go of AM and started toward the room, but Percy grabbed him by the arm pulling him back roughly.

"Ya not goin ya sneaky fucker." Percy said vehemently.

"Why ain't I?" Wally asked hotly.

"Cause yer a dirty thief! Stealin from Darkstar is what ya plannin. Let's see ya fuck my sister without yer cock, he'll cut if off for ya."

"Ivan's runnin the show here, he wouldn't give a flyin fuck if I pocket me some shinny coin." he turned from Percy to start for the room when Percy grabbed him by the arm again.

"Ya not..." Percy said pulling out his revolver.

"Ya wanna play Billy the Kid, I'll show ya how to ya black toothed bastard!" he said pulling out his pistol from behind his back.

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"Ya believe this dirty fuck." Percy laughed and turned around to ask AM if he believed it, but he was gone.

They both looked up and down the hall but AM had gone while they argued about who would go in first.

"Oh cocksucker! Ivan'll peel our skin off, where'd he go, Wally?" he said in a whiny tone.

"Shut it." Wally said peering behind Percy. "What's that?"

Percy turned and saw a moldy couch behind them, sitting on one of the moss covered cushions was a small square object with wires sticking out of it. They approached it with wonder like children finding a shiny new toy and saw their reflections in its tiny black glass screen with red numbers counting down, there was three seconds left.

"What's this..." Percy tried to ask before being consumed by the explosion.

Ivan sat above ground chewing on a twig from a birch tree, the sweetness reminded him of a soda he had at a drug store when still a child. The red head sat across from him looking down between his knees with a scowl.

"Not ta worry, yer little blond peach'll be fine if yer friend gives us what we want."

He might do that too, he was in a good mood today, the gold would be just the beginning, he had plans. Wally and Barty were aware of what he was planning, Percy though was the captains lap dog. He brought him along so as not to arouse the captains suspicion, but he would have an accident on the way back, him and the short man called Abe. He was going to take most of the gold for himself, and use it to build his alliances once Darkstar was out of the way.

They weren't the only raiders, Manhattan Island corsairs had more men and bigger ships with bigger guns. Darkstar was only worried about his own backyard, Ivan wanted the whole east coast, he was the one who led the raids into the military forts years earlier, most times short handed, having long bloody battles with defunct soldiers from an older

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generation that still saluted a flag. He returned from all the battles bloodied and bruised but victorious, and every time with a booty of guns and ammunition, enough to have a second Great War.

All they did was raid farms and merchants anymore, then spend all winter counting everything until they were blue in the face and freezing. He smiled thinking about having the eastern sea board for himself, the Republic of Ivan the Terrible. A cold smile touched his lips, he looked and saw the red head cringing at that smile. He would make, before he could finish his thought an explosion shook the ground under them.

"WHAT THE FUCK!!" Ivan shouted trying to stand.

Smoke and dust and bog water shot through the hole like a geyser, showering both of them in putrid water. The trees and nearby houses shook as the ground started to collapse under them, the hole AM led the pirates down began to widen. Ivan ran in the direction of the forest, forgetting about the gold and his republic. Danny ran back to where they entered the depot in the opposite direction, looking over his shoulder watching the earth crack open like an egg shell and swallow everything in its path.

Danny felt the ground under his feet shake like windows during a storm, he kept running until he reached the quarantine wall. He turned around and watched as the depot collapsed into the swamp below sending more smoke and water high into the air and covered his ears from the deafening roars of concrete and steel grinding and pulverizing itself into the water below.

Ivan was in grass knee high, running as fast as he could which was not fast enough, he could feel the ground shimmying under him like he was drunk. He ran for a elm tree that grew a few yards away hoping it would be strong enough to stay up. The grass and dirt around it sunk revealing its gnarled roots, the tree slowly began to lean over as he climbed higher, he lost his grip when it finally broke free of the ground and landed in the water deep underground, rolling away from the tree before it could crush him.

"TRICKY LITTE SHIT!!!" he shouted as loud as he could with a mouthful of blood.

A branch he had been holding before he fell broke from the tree and he

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landed on it, puncturing a lung through his rib cage, he wanted to gag from the smell of the water but it hurt to talk or breath. He turned over and pulled the branch out of him with a gurgled scream. His leg was twisted in a strange position with a shard of bone sticking through. He tried to pull himself away from the tree but the ground was too slippery to support his good leg, he sat up against a wall looking left or right for his machine gun but it was gone, his pistol and grenades were still there, though they were soaked from the water he now sat in.

Blood squirted out of the gory hole in his body when he coughed, making the water all around him red. The rest of the ground collapsed around him in a mighty roar that made his ears hurt. After a few minutes the ground stopped moving and the only sounds were from popping and snapping of flames somewhere close by. He turned his head every which way looking for a way to crawl out when he heard a squeak-growl.

The smoke and fire had driven the rats out of their nests, three approached him slowly, teeth bared their rubbery tails swishing like frisky cats. He pulled out his revolver and put it to his head, but when he pulled the trigger the bullet didn't fire. With a hideous smile he tossed the gun at them and pulled out a knife.

"Come ta me you green eyed fuckers!"

Danny stood still, waiting for the noise and shaking to stop, when it did he walked back but froze when a scream pierced his ears. He hoped it wasn't Abe. When the screaming stopped, he began approaching cautiously, in the distance a fire was smoldering sending clouds of gray smoke high into the air . The hole was hundreds of feet wide now, the trees and few houses that were still standing when they arrived had sunk down into the swamp, he got to the poles before he had to stop to keep from falling in.

"Abe! Abe!!" he cried but heard no response.

Not knowing what else to do he dropped to his knees and prayed.

"St. Anthony, patron saint of the lost. Ya helped Abe find George, help me find Abe." he said with closed eyes.

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Before he could finish his prayer he heard a wet sloshing sound as a putrid stink filled his nostrils. He looked up and there stood AM, soaking wet with a shallow cut on his head. He was quiet just watching him pray, Danny got up and picked AM up like he was George in a bear hug.

"Abe!! Your alive, Jesus Christ, thank you!" he shouted. "Ugh, you stink like a fish." he said putting him back down.

"Yes, barely. You OK?" he asked rubbing the cut on his head.

"Yeah, but what the hell happened? It was like the end times."

"They got to arguing so I set off a bomb and walked as quickly and quietly as I could. I thought thirty seconds would be long enough for me to get out, I guess a minute would have been better."

"A bomb? How did ya get a bomb?" he said with wonder.

"Enough questions. We have to get back to the others."

"How? Their not just gonna let us walk in with out there friends and give back our friends."

He was right, he was lucky those two had started arguing. If they hadn't he might have been killed when they didn't find gold in that room. If they started back now it would be dark when they returned, they could use that to their benefit.

"I'm not sure, I think better on my feet, come on."

Joe walked along the river with a bottle of vodka in his hand, he didn't know where he was going. He had drunk a whole bottle when he decided to take a boat and go to the trading post and traded half loaf of bread for another bottle. He looked at all the people that were around him, they had a hunted look he had seen when still helping his daddy ferry people back in Georgia. His daddy always took them over, even when they didn't have much, his daddy was a good man.

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He left the trading post and passed the orphanage they raided last night, where he tied his boat nearby. Darkstar was furious they didn't come right back, Barty was getting all of the captains fury. He didn't trust either one of them and was sure something was up. Joe laughed without feeling the humor, none of them trusted each other, they trusted him, but only because he was a lush who could pilot a ship, they had to trust him or freeze to death on the island when winter came.

He took a piece of bread from his pocket and took a bite, it was white and flavorless leaving a filmy after taste, so he tossed it away, a seagull swooped down and grabbed it quickly then flew off before any others could claim it. He followed the rivers eternal path for hours. When the sun was red and slipping below his sight line he came across a large fence that had fallen to the ground years ago. It was knotted up in weeds and vines, the smell of salt and oil was thick in the air.

He lifted up the fence, on it was a sign that was faded but still legible.

PHILADELPHIA NAVY YARD

He walked passed a building that was missing its face, making it look like a concrete jack o' lantern with too many eyes. The salt in the air had eaten at the building after many years.

"Salty air can eat anything" he said before taking a long swallow from his bottle.

He passed the building and many others like it that were crumbling away to nothing and came to a pier which held a ghost fleet of ships still anchored, as if waiting for orders that would never come. His eyes opened wide at the sight of so many boats.

"No, ships." he slurred.

Yes, these were ships, a dozen maybe more sitting in the water taller than anything he had ever seen, their paint was a muted gray, he knew the difference between them from the pictures his daddy showed him when a boy. He wished he could pilot one of these monsters, but you needed more than one person to make it go and years of training he didn't have. He walked passed them eyeing them respectfully taking a

few minutes to study each one, there was no way to get in them, the gangways had long since washed away.

He swallowed another mouthful as he passed a ship that was not part of the ghost fleet. His daddy had a picture of one just like it, they were called tankers. It was as long as one of the battleships but not as high and adorned with barnacles on its hull that was a rusty color.

"You see, son" his daddy told him when Joe was still in short pants. "they carry oil, millions of gallons. It's big but you need only one man to pilot her."

"Can you pilot it daddy?" he asked with wide eyed wonder.

"Even you could my boy." he said ruffling his hair.

He looked at the huge ship, its hull was still intact despite its ugliness, the words United States were still visible near the top of the hull just below the deck . It was close enough to the pier for him to touch it, its steel felt warm from the sun. He walked along it hand outstretched, his daddy said he could pilot it. That would make his daddy proud of him, to pilot a real ship.

"Captain, a real ship." he said feeling a little better.

AM and Danny were walking along the river when AM spied something floating in the water.

"Is that a boat?" AM asked pointing to the pole he had first seen when he brought George home.

They walked over and tied to a length of rope was a gunmetal colored row boat with two paddles.

"Looks it, what ya got in mind?"

"Maybe a raid of our own."

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It was dark when AM and Danny returned to the orphanage, a wild dog was pulling at Sister McDevitt's arm. Danny shouted at it swinging a burned out torch left behind by the pirates.

"Go ya dirty mutt!!" he shouted picking up a rock and finally scaring the dog away.

His eye's were welling up while he shouted at it, he took a few deep breaths to regain control, as he covered her body with a blanket while AM went to the washroom to wash off the smelly water, still thinking of a plan. If he had another bomb he might be able to cause a distraction or at least fuck up their day, as Dig might have said. Dig had one, he hoped Dig wouldn't have to use it, the idea of blowing them up seemed like a good idea, but from what he had learned from the book about the plague that was the worst thing he could have done.

He looked out the window at Danny who had moved the sister's body out behind the chapel and was kneeling over her praying with tears in his eyes. They didn't have much time, soon the crew on the island would become curious why their friends weren't back yet. He left the wash room and went to the kitchen to find a quick bite for him and Danny, he sniffed at the lingering scent of bread Sister McDevitt and Penny had baked, making him frown.

They did pretty good without having a cookbook, he thought. He thought about that word, cookbook. It flew around his mind like a helium balloon that got untied. Cookbook, what did Quake say about a cookbook that made it stick in his brain. His thoughts were racing too fast they were in chaos, his mind was in total...

"Anarchy. The Anarchist Cookbook." he said.

Of course, it was a bomb making manual, Quake used it to build the time bombs. He took out the Q pad and selected books. It was there among the collection, he didn't like the idea of having it on his Q pad it would seem suspicious to say the least, but he made sure to thank Quake about it when he saw him again, if he saw him again.

There was a list of all kinds of bombs to make, but he wasn't sure what ingredients he had on hand, most could be made with a few everyday things from the kitchen or with cleaning supplies. He looked for something simple but big, he scanned each page quickly until he

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came across something called Poor Mans C-4. It was just a few items mixed with a little bit of water and gun powder, but the book promised a big explosion. Danny came in as dark purple clouds rolled in from the east, his eye were red but dry.

"So what now?" he asked looking tired and dirty.

"I try and make a bomb, where does Sister Eva keep the rifle?"

"In the chapel, it's locked but I know where she keeps the key."

He brought him the rifle and a box of shells, he emptied the shells with a Swiss army knife from his backpack.

"That's a funny little tool you got their." he said.

"We live through this you can have it, you'll never know how you lived with out one."

Thunder rolled outside, startling them both. He was going out on the water and hoped the storm would blow over. He spent an hour making the c-4 and the wick to ignite, it was the size of his palm and felt like clay when he was finished.

"Is that a bomb?" Danny said looking doubtful. "I just looks like a lump a dough."

AM went back into his room and took out a pack of matches, put them and the c-4 , in a plastic baggy he used to hold his granola bars. They went to the river where the boat sat, AM got in an tossed out a bottle that smelled like a rotten potato , while Danny untied the rope from the pole.

"Here you go," he said tossing him rope.

A bolt of lightning crashed down on the river a mile away, it was purple and bright enough to hurt their eyes, a roar of thunder followed a half second later, rain slowly began to fall as if on cue.

"At least they wont have any bon fire's." Danny said looking pastier then usual.

AM nodded but didn't say anything, the lightning would be the least of his worries tonight. He felt anxious to be off but waited for a minute to gather his wits and put the baggy deep in his pocket, wondering if he should have taken the knife, he wanted to try and sneak over and get everyone out under the cover of darkness. He wasn't sure he could kill someone no matter how badly they might deserve it.

"Abe," Danny called to him. "let me go with you I was the one who asked you to get Penny her birthday gift. And meanin no offense, but I could get us their faster."

"No, I'm to blame for this. None of this is your fault, I could have said no. Besides I don't think more than eight or nine could fit in this thing at once. Wish me luck." he said and began the mile long journey to Petty's Island.

"Hey!"

AM looked back at him standing their looking mature in body but he sounded as scared as George.

"Be careful, Mr. Lincoln." he said with as much courage as he could muster.

He gave Danny a quick nod and started paddling again, his stomach filled with butterflies at the thought of this crazy idea, wishing he could have taken Danny with him, but AM was the adult and could no more take him than he would George. It was hard going, the current tried to send him south, the river was strong, the rain, still only a light patter was soaking him. A breeze picked up making him shake like a rattle, as he got closer to the island, the darkness would make it hard for anyone to see him on the water, he hoped.

He was playing it all by ear, their looked to be only one entrance and it was always in use during the day. He wanted to try and find a different way in, but was afraid of taking too long and decided to forgo looking for a back entrance. They might not hear him with the thunder pounding loudly and rain putting out any fires, but he was

afraid his luck would run out before the night was over.

After what felt like hours, he came to sunken tug boat that was covered in coral. It was slanted enough for him to grab and hold on to one of its rails. He quickly uncoiled the rope and tied the row boat to one of the rails, when it was secured he sat in the row boat to catch his breath, his arms felt like they were on fire and were about to fall off.

It was another five or ten yards to the beach the water was low enough so that he could walk. He got to dry land and looked up at the tower closest to him, he couldn't see the sentry, but he could here shouts from above him. He ran quickly to the wall and stayed close as possible to it while he made for the front entrance, still afraid to spend all night in the dark looking for a back entrance that may not exist.

Weak firelight was coming from the front, he got with a few feet when he heard a voice. He pushed himself against the wall as a pirate wearing Sister Eva's habit came out in a drunken stupor, he shouted in AM's direction making him freeze.

"Hey, you!"

AM was about to run when the sentry in the tower above him answered..

"What ya gabbin on about now you ugly fuck?" said the sentry.

"I told ya I'd get that funny hat of hers, now gimme a bottle."

A hoarse laughter rang out from above, AM watched as the man put his hands up in the air as if to catch a baseball. The pirate had look of joy on his face, as the bottle landed squarely on his head but amazingly didn't shatter, he fell down with a thud and didn't get back up, more hoarse laughter came from above. AM waited but the pirate didn't move, but let out an extremely loud fart, laughter started to bubble up his throat, he didn't usually laugh at that kind of thing but the nervous energy rolling through him made him want to laugh hysterically, but stifled it.

He crept up to the opening and peaked inside, a few fires were burning

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but their didn't look to be anybody else around. No they wouldn't expect anyone to sneak in, he was probably the only person ever to do it. Afraid the guards might spot him, he turned to the drunken pirate still laying on the ground.

He crawled over to him, keeping an eye on the tower, another bolt of lightning hit lighting up the entire beach, he froze waiting for the sentry to start shooting, but all was still quiet. He saw it was the one called Barty, his face was serene as blood dripped from his ear and scalp, he was out cold. He pulled the drunk pirate by his feet and drug him closer to the wall, and removed his own shirt and put on Barty's, which smelled like his gym socks from his high school days , and tried not to breath to deeply while wearing it, then he put on the habit he had been wearing.

He had a Colt Peacemaker, and a short broad sword that was as big as he was, but felt reluctant to take either one. With his stolen shirt and the habit on his head, he entered the island.

"Gonna try an fuck the penguin again, Barty?" said the sentry who threw the bottle.

Feeling to angry for words, AM extended his middle finger back over his shoulder to the guard above.

"Ha! Pussy got your tongue do it?" he laughed, but said no more.

He stood still, pretending to be drunk and wander around aimlessly. No one else was nearby and there appeared to be nothing but dirt and tin shacks that were not in use. The few fires burning were being put out by the rain which was coming faster. A hatch a few hundred yard down was glowing with light, AM made his way to it slowly trying not to draw attention to himself.

He got closer and heard laughing and screams, he had to keep himself from running as his stomach went into more knots that felt like fire. He came to the hatch and waited, but no one came out, the voices were fading. He stuck his head through, two men were walking away from him down a narrow hallway lined with sandbags and pillars of wood, the other direction was more of the same, he jumped down and went in the direction the two men had come from. It went straight for a a few hundred feet, he kept an ear open for voices or cries but heard none.

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The hall turned to the right and stopped at a T junction, an old wooden door that belonged on an out house was at one end, at the other end was a door that was also wood but looked stouter. He ran to the outhouse door placed his ear against it, and heard hushed voices coming from behind it and what sounded like Penny crying. In the outhouse was where they kept prisoners apparently.

"Probably their idea of a joke." he thought with disgust.

He pulled at it, but it wouldn't budge, they weren't completely stupid unfortunately. Danny or Dig could have ripped it off with ease, but AM's arms felt like rubber bands that were wound up to many times. He would need to pry it open, he made his way in the other direction, cursing himself for not bringing his knife, tossing the habit aside. He passed the rusty ladder and continued down the hallway.

After twenty feet it cantered to the right and came upon an open door with bright light, peaking in he caught sight of a stone fireplace and a wooden floor, a vintage record player was playing a scratchy jazz tune, there were a half dozen pirates sitting on chairs with rickety tables of various styles and size. A brunette woman and a red head who looked old enough to be a grandmother danced to the delight of the men.

Seeing he couldn't go that way, he went back to the ladder and up it. The rain was coming on like a downpour, he checked his pocket to make sure the baggy was still closed, then searched frantically on the ground in darkness for something to open the door, rotten fruit and broken bottles were everywhere.

Then he remembered Barty's sword, it would do the trick. All the fires had gone out making it easier for him to sneak out unobserved. Barty still laid where he was, his tongue sticking out like a dog's, AM picking up the sword, had the urge to stab the pirate, hearing Penny cry melted away any apprehension he once had for killing someone, but he held back.

"If you've hurt them, I may change my mind." he said to the snoring pirate.

He picked up the sword with both hands and nearly fell over from its weight as he ran back to the hatch in the ground. He listened before going down, not hearing any voices he climbed in and ran as fast as he

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could back to the outhouse door, lungs burning he took a deep breath and put the blade between the door and the jam, startled cries came from behind the door when he pushed. He had very little strength left, but pushed as hard as he could.

He felt every muscle in his body cry in protest, he gritted his teeth and ignored it, and kept pushing. He almost gave up until he heard the door groan, and grunted using all the strength he could muster when he heard a cracking sound and then felt the door opening like it had been kicked, causing him to fall to the floor inside the room.

Everyone cried out in fright, and stared at the pirate face down on the ground. When he stood up, their pale faces of fear changed to joy and relief. The room was lit with one candle burning pathetically in the corner, the smell of piss and shit made everyone green about the gills as Danny might have said.

"Where's Danny?" Penny asked her blouse had been torn open, her eyes swollen with tears, she was being held on

one side by Sister Eva and Missy on the other, but she looked unharmed. "Is he..."

"He's fine. I have a boat." he went and closed the door before anyone came. "There's one problem. It may only fit so many of us, which means two trips."

Penny smiled with relief and gave him a kiss on the lips making him blush like a school boy.

"No, Mr. Lincoln," said Sister Eva. " there's a dock on the New Jersey side of the island they brought us in that way, they have three or four row boats."

Seeing her without her habit, he could finally picture her as a young girl in love.

"Damn it, I knew I should've checked for a back door. Excuse, my language sister." AM said with an awkward smile.

"I've heard worse today, Mr. Lincoln. Lead the way."

They made their way up and out of the hole, the rain was curtain of water turning the ground into a muddy quagmire.

"Where did they take you in at?"

Sister Eva pointed in the opposite direction he came from, it was completely dark on the island, the rain had doused all the fires.

"Can you make your way in the dark, sister?"

"Yes, aren't you coming?"

"Go and I'll meet you their."

Cries of no fell from everyone's lips, Sister Eva tried to stop him.

"Mr. Lincoln..."

"Go, I have to do something before we go stay against the wall."

He went back down the hatch and to the thick door opposite the outhouse door, and opened it to a room that was lit by a kerosene lantern hanging on the ceiling, rows of crates stacked knee high filled the room. With no ledgable markings he went back to the outhouse and grabbed the sword to pry one open, what he saw made him inhale sharply, they were filled with sixty MM mortar rounds of World War two vintage, he had seen from the many books he read on the subject. Without a second thought he removed the c-4 and stuck it to one of the crates, his body filled with too much adrenaline to hear Bartelby approaching.

"What the fuck, is this my blade?" Bartelby asked with drunken humor.

He didn't know it was AM, so he gave what he hoped was a mischievous laugh.

"Aye, my buckoo. Just a little fun." he said with strained enthusiasm.

He placed his hand on AM's shoulder to turn him, when he turned he balled his hand up and with his last bit of arm strength punched Barty. He was too drunk to withstand it and went down with a loud cry. He fumbled out the matches and lit the short wick and ran for the door, the drunk pirate grabbed his ankle not realizing what AM did.

AM pulled frantically and ran without looking back when Barty lost his grip, despite his drunkenness he was up in a flash, AM could feel his fingers pulling at his shirt. When he reached the ladder, a deep roar and a gust of hot wind came behind them knocking them both down. The whole island shook with each explosion, above ground sirens that belonged in a World War Two movie began to wail.

The captain of Petty's Island sat at his chair in his quarters attempting to stand a gold coin on end, but his hand shook with rage making it impossible. He didn't trust Ivan, he could see his intentions written on his face. He had the same look himself years ago when he took over the island, poisoning the previous captain's bottle with a toxin from a dark green starfish earning his moniker Darkstar.

He spent the last few hours drinking, and screwing an old red head who despite her age rode him like a twenty year old, helping him to forget his rage for a little while. When his anger returned, he sent Barty to guard the penguin and her bastards. Not that they need to be guarded, but he wanted to punish Barty.

No, but he didn't trust Barty anymore than Ivan. He finally stood a coin up when barking laughter from down the hall startled him out of his thoughts making him knock it over.

"SHUT YER FUCKIN HOLES!!" he shouted vehemently.

They quieted down but their laughs could still be heard. He could have gone out there and broke that god damn scratchy music player. He could have shot the prisoners too.

"So why don't I?" he asked himself.

He felt his grip on his crew slipping, even that drunken pilot of his

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had gone off with out a word. He never took prisoners, but when Ivan told the men to lock them up, they did it with out question. He'd have to take some heads to remind them who called the shots.

Oh yes, heads would fucking roll if they tried anything, he took a swallow from a glass filled with brown liquid that was supposed to be whiskey but tasted like acid. The heat of it burned his stomach and sent a raging fire to his heart that made him cringe. He had men that were still loyal, like Percy, who had gone on the treasure hunting party.

He picked up a large samurai sword he took from the same gook that brought him the red head, he thumbed the blade enjoying its sharpness. He didn't trust him either, Charlie, he was pretty sure that was his name, was too chummy with Ivan for his liking. A trickle of blood came from his thumb, he licked it enjoying its saltiness.

He could take those little bastards heads off with one swipe of this thing, he used one similar to it to take the hand off a boy who had stolen sandals. Not that it was a a major loss, he did it to send a message to his crew and those on the coast. Yes, another message might be in order, a message with heads nailed to the walls along the island.

A smile touched his lips, he would start with the penguin and her little bastards, he got up and kicked his chair back. He came into the room with the scratchy music, the red head he had earlier was passed out on a couch as old as her. The men went quite as he stormed through with sword in hand. He got as far as the end of the room when a tremendous explosion pushed him down like a gusty wind, a few of the men sitting down were pushed off their chairs.

"FUCK ME!! " Darkstar shouted before another explosion drowned him out.

The tables and chairs shook as glasses and bottles fell and broke into shards on the ground. Darkstar got up but another gust of hot air pushed him down.

"TOPSIDE!!!" he shouted when the wail of sirens began, he looked over at the red head an saw she hadn't awoken from the blast and it made him even angrier than he already was.

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The men got up and headed for the hatch, farther down the hall were the prisoners were being kept as well as their mortars was an inferno. The hallway felt like the sun, flames were crawling their way towards them along the walls and ceiling. More men were racing by in a panic, he grabbed one of them and ordered him to fill some buckets in the river to put out the fire, but ignored him in fear of being cooked alive. He went up the hatch burning himself on the ladder that was absorbing the heat like a sponge, the rain cooled his skin but not his temper.

"Kill'em, it's the little man, kill'em!!" shouted Barty somewhere in the darkness.

Machine gun fire opened up on all sides of him, kicking water and mud all around, another explosion from the bowels of the island knocked him down again. He got up and ran under one of the sentry towers and climbed up the ladder to the post above.

"Captain, what the fuck..." his question was cut short by another rumble underneath them.

"Mortar the coast!!! I want it burnt to the fuckin ground!!! Spare no one!!!"

The sentry immediately armed the mortar and sent off a round, it went high and landed near the shacks that were lined along the river, bringing them down like a house of cards in a fiery explosion.

"MORTARS!!!" the captain shouted towards the others who heard him despite the rumble underneath and immediately began sending rounds into the air.

AM charged though the island with his knees at his chest as he made for the back exit, a heavy stitch burned in his side like he had been stabbed with a hot knife. A flash of lightning showed him the way, but heavy gunfire made him zig zag and fall in the mud numerous times, getting up was getting harder and harder to do. He made it to the dock when the first mortar landed, turning the night sky a bright orange.

Sister Eva was getting the children on the boat as AM came out in stupor.

"No Lord, not again." she said as the coast began to catch fire.

"Go sister, I'll get the others" AM said breathing heavily, his face and body drenched in mud weighing him down.

She nodded and took the paddles in hand, and pushed the boat off after Hampton untied it. Penny, Hampton, Missy and Virgil got on the other boat as AM tried to untie it with hands that shook uncontrollably. He began swearing when he thought after going through so much, he would be undone by a stubborn not.

"Here let me try, Abe." said Penny. "I'm good with knots." she said with an utter calm that helped relax AM.

Within a few seconds the not unraveled like magic, and they got on the boat. AM pushed off and rowed but too tired to get them moving very fast as more explosions rocked the island every few seconds. Seeing the exhaustion on his face, Hampton and Virgil each took a paddle from him. AM too tired to protest leaned over the side of the boat and splashed water in his face to keep from passing out.

"Is it safe to go back?" asked Penny, who had covered herself with a shirt given to her by Virgil.

"We'll have to chance it, we can't stay on the water all night." AM said hoping he was right.

The rain began to slow as they made it to the halfway point, the other boat was too far ahead to see. Most of the mortars were aimed at the coast, an occasional one landed in the water but too far from them to be of concern. They had gone unnoticed in the confusion, but the coast was paying for it dearly.

"Hey, what's that?" asked Hampton pointing farther south.

"It looks like a ghost ship." said Missy in wide eyed wonder.

AM looked and saw a large oil tanker that was mostly dark except at its tower where a captain would sit but it was too far up to see anyone inside. It was coming fast, it looked like it was gliding on the water the way a bird glided on the air in flight, but they were

passed its direct path.

Joe stood at the ships wheel, with one arm three inches longer than other hanging uselessly at his side. He had managed to find a ladder that was almost high enough to get on board, but when he got to the last rung it was a half foot short. With drunken courage he jumped the last six inches and grabbed the rail of the deck.

He hung precariously above the water, legs pushing on the last rung of the ladder, accidentally sending it down. He began losing his grip, in a panic he pulled him self up putting most of the weight on his shoulder dislocating it as he threw himself up and over on to the deck. He didn't care though, it hardly hurt now and besides it was full of oil, enough for the island to survive a thousand winters.

Darkstar would surely be pleased with such an offering, maybe allowing him the title of captain, well maybe co-captain. He saw the fires and the mortars flying through the air, and laughed remembering the fire works he had seen as a child during the summer when there was still reason for celebration.

He watched them in awe not seeing how close he was to the island, and rammed a sunken ship's hull high above the river surface throwing him down to floor hitting his head with a loud thump rendering him unconscious as thousands of gallons of oil spilled onto the beach and into the Delaware river. The tanker went over the broken hull with a inhuman screech and slammed into one of the island walls finally stopping it.

Darkstar stood on the tower watching as the coast burned, he could see to his delight, people running frantically every which way as death rained upon them. Explosions still shook the island but sporadically, the women of the island and a few men were taking buckets and filling them in the river and were going down the hatch to fight the fire.

Darkstar planned on leading a party over at sunrise to kill whoever was left. He hoped to kill the scrawny man, who had destroyed his island, he relished the idea of burning him alive like he had burned his island. The night of the fires, they would never forget it.

"Captain, there's a ship!" said the sentry pointing south.

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Darkstar turned and saw a behemoth of a ship racing towards them, oblivious of the island in its path. It cantered and skidded over a sunken vessel with an otherworldly screech spilling black liquid and broke through the wall before finally stopping. A tower just to the left of it began to fall over as a mortar round from it went off going straight up into the air and came back down on the broken hull of the ship.

The explosion ripped the ship wide open sending liquid fire everywhere, half of the walls at the southern end of the island fell as screams of pain and horror were now coming from Darkstar's crew. The fire was spreading quickly, now that the rain had stopped, unfired mortar rounds that fell into the oily inferno began going off in every direction.

More walls began to fall over as the explosions shook the island like an earthquake, guard towers fell as the flames began lighting up their wooden bases. Darkstar got down from the tower taking the sentry's machine gun and began firing at anyone who ran away in panic.

"PUSSIES!! MAN UP!!" he screamed but was ignored.

The guard tower he had been in a few minutes ago started to fall over as flames raced up it with lightning speed. He kept shooting at the deserters oblivious to it until it was too late, and was crushed to death by the fiery wreckage.

AM was getting everyone out of the boat when the ship blew sending shrapnel and flaming gobs of oil everywhere.

"Get away from the river!!!" AM shouted.

They all ran south along the river, people from the trading post were doing like wise in a panic. The storm clouds in the night sky had blown away, but had been replaced with black clouds of smoke as fire slowly consumed Petty's Island. Most of them though looked on with fascination at the great inferno, some getting on their knees in prayer, some crying hallelujah with arms to the sky.

When morning came, the island was nothing but a blacken rock on the water, smoke rose slowly from the ground like a volcano that had finished spewing lava. The tanker was a twisted mess, one of the

explosions knocked it on its side, flames were still burning in the opened hull which looked like a mouth with jagged teeth. The few walls that still stood there, were warped and misshapen from the fire. A few of the pirates had made it to the coast, but had been killed by the people on the coast who had survived the bombardment.

They went back to the schoolhouse where Danny was still waiting, to everyone's relief. The schoolhouse was still standing but the chapel had gotten a direct hit and burned down.

"I tried to get water to it but it was too damn hot, sister, sorry." he said sadly.

"Hush now, Daniel" Sister Eva said giving him a hug, ignoring his language. "Everyone is safe now."

The first thing they did was give Sister McDevitt a proper burial behind the schoolhouse, Danny had used the cross from the steeple of the chapel for a grave marker. It was very emotional, AM stood quietly while Sister Eva prayed. Afterwards she sent the younger children to bed, Sister Eva had Penny stay close by them in case they had bad dreams. AM knew he probably would.

"Maybe, you should too Mr. Lincoln." Sister Eva said with concern.

"No, I'm fine." he said feeling anything but, he was hot but felt chilled to the bone.

He hadn't slept in two days and felt like the years he didn't age had finally caught up to him. He wanted to collapse and not get up, but refused too. Instead he walked to the river and looked at the smoldering ruins of Petty's Island, it was over, and he wouldn't have to worry so much when he did leave, and he could spend the next few weeks helping to rebuild the chapel, until the worm hole returned to his position.

He wondered if Dig had gone on to look for more of the cubes, which AM had told him to do if something happened to him. He would have told him something different when he saw him again. He would do a lot of...

"Hey ya scrawny cunt." said the hoarse voice of Bartelby.

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AM turned and saw him standing there, his face scalded and hair singed, his scalp red and blistered. He had a revolver in his hand with a horrible smile. They stood face to face, just the two of them.

"Looks like I'm captain now." he said cocking back on the gun.

"Ivan?!" AM said looking over his shoulder with a look of shock.

He took the bait and half turned, AM lunged for his gun, but was too weak to be able to take it from him but held on to it all the same. Bartelby's horrible breath filled AM's nostrils as he tried to take the revolver, a shot went off, AM felt the wind of it pass his head. The shot was heard by Danny who came charging like a defensive end and hit Bartelby with all his weight knocking all three of them to the ground, sending the gun skittering into the river, Danny was up in a flash and began to pummel Barty with repeated blows in a hate filled rage.

AM got up slowly and felt an immediate head rush that made him want to vomit, he stumbled backwards and tripped over his feet, falling into the river, hitting his head on one of the row boats tied to the pole. He slipped into unconsciousness, as the water embraced his body, dreaming of Angie's whispers.

He never believed in an afterlife, he believed when you died it was like a light switch and you would know no more when the lights went out. But he was sure he had died and gone to hell for all the people he had hurt, he kept hearing Barty's coarse laughter that was drowned out by explosions that were green, not orange. He would turn and see Barty, burned much worse, skin bubbled and peeling like the zombies he dreamed of as a child, his eyes were black with green veins.

"Looks like I'm captain now," he said through melted teeth. "and the captains hungry."

He lunged at AM who screamed and tried to fight him off but not before biting into his neck, then the darkness returned. He dreamed of the children and Sister Eva still stuck on the island as the green fire burned, hearing them scream in agony, then slipping into the dark place again where the silence he hoped would be eternal. Sister Eva and Penny were at his bedside for the last few days, as AM fought a high fever. They had given him the

few medicines they could find on the coast, which wasn't very much. And at first the outcome looked grim, he had kept screaming through out the night grabbing and pushing at nothing, it was three days before his fever broke, he began to awake on that afternoon with a pounding headache.

Sister Eva who was fingering the beads of a rosary, nodded at Penny who immediately left the room. AM opened his eyes slowly and turned his head weakly towards her and gave as best a smile as he could manage and reached out to her with a hand that was still shaky.

"Welcome back, Mr. Lincoln." she said taking his hand in both of hers.

"Where did I go?" he asked, the last thing he remembered was Barty.

He sat up quickly in a panic as a jolt of pain came from the back of his head.

"Where's Barty, did he..."

"He's dead," she said gently holding him down. "you fell into the river and nearly drowned."

He rubbed the back of his head that had a lump which hurt to touch, he remembered bits and pieces of what happened before falling into the river.

"Was it Danny who saved me? I didn't think he knew how to swim."

"He can't, none of us can." she said with a smile.

"Then who?"

"Me," said Dig.

He stood at the doorway, dressed in clothes that probably belonged to Danny, with a cocksure grin on his face. AM sat up ignoring the pain

in his head.

"How...uh...,tell me later." he said when Danny and George came in.

Danny put a companionable arm around Dig's shoulder smiling.

"Weren't for this big lug you'd be out in the Atlantic by now."

"Big lug," Dig said with a full smile. "I'll remember that carrot top."

"Carrot top?" he said tasting the name. "I like that."

George came up to his bedside and gave him a gentle hug.

"I drew you a picture." he said handing it too him.

It was a stick figure drawing of the two of them in the classroom, the one of AM stood pointing at a green chalkboard holding a red book. George sitting in a desk a few feet off the ground with a hand raised underneath

were the words get well soon scrawled in pencil and had been signed by all the children. It made AM smile despite the way his head felt.

"Thanks Georgie Porgie, I love it." he said giving him another hug.

"OK, you two. I think Abe would like to speak to his friend and get some more rest."

They left and closed the door behind them, leaving them alone.

"How did you get here, how did you know to come here?"

Dig went and sat in a chair were Sister Eva had sat.

"Well when you didn't come back I got worried and used the box to get here. I was surprised it worked, I was waiting to end up in an episode of the Twilight Zone to be honest. I walked up the river for a while, then I heard the shot and ran. I came right when you fell into the water, which was good because no one else saw you go in."

"You got the cube?"

"Oh yeah, It took a few weeks but it's in your backpack."

"Good job, Dig." he said shaking his hand. " I want to tell you..." he stopped mid sentence and tilted his head.

"what's that?"

Dig sat up straight with a guilty look.

"What?"

"On your neck...is...is that a hickey?" he said.

"Oh," he said rubbing at the small love bite on his neck.
"yeah...uh...we need to talk."

So he told AM about Marisa, the club, her accidentally finding the Q pad He waiting for AM to become angry, but he was quiet, looking out a window near his bed at a hill nearby. When he finished he still didn't say anything, after a few minutes he finally spoke.

"OK." he said looking at the hill.

"OK?" he said surprised by his answer.

He looked at Dig and nodded.

"Your not scared I might have screwed up the world?"

"You remember the night we found the cube, when I kicked that hoodlum?" he said simply.

"Yeah, of course."

"I told you that no matter what, the cubes come first even if one of us got hurt or killed. That was wrong, Dig. I guess what I mean is, if humanity is in risk, which I no longer have any doubt of after what I've seen here, then we must be humane. The worlds already screwed up, watch the news some night when we get home, what were doing I don't believe could make it worse."

Dig looked at him with an eyebrow raised and said: "Did you find Jesus or something?"

"No," he said with a heartfelt laugh. "what I found was a friend who ignored what I said and it saved my life."

"Hey man, it's like I keep sayin, us Misties gotta stick together." he said with a smirk.

AM shook his hand again, but it was a handshake of friendship.

"You love her? And she loves you?"

"Yes." Dig said without hesitation.

"Then we'll bring her along. But were stuck here for awhile until a wormhole gets closer to us in a few weeks."

"Forget that, lets try the box. If it brought me to the same place as you then maybe it will send us back from where we left."

AM thought for a moment about arguing, but he knew what it was like to be in love. Besides the worst that could happen is they end up in a universe where a cube might be.

"OK, I guess we do it your way. I owe you one."

They left two days later donning their 90's clothing again, it was a sad goodbye that made Dig miss Marisa even more. George cried and asked if he would ever see him again, AM didn't answer he just gave him a big hug and told him to keep an eye on Danny which made him smile. Danny gave him a heartfelt hand shake and said: "Take care of yourself, Abe."

"Take care of Penny." he said and gave him his Swiss army knife. Penny came and gave him a kiss on the cheek that brought a sad smile to his lips.

"Thank you for saving us, Abe."

Sister Eva came last, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know where your going, but I am sure it will be to greater things Mr. Lincoln, as long as you keep your heart open. Never forget that."

"I won't, sister." he promised.

They walked a few miles in silence, the sun shone high in the air. Dig looked at one of the quarantine walls with caution.

"You sure it's safe to be this close?"

"I've been right up to them and I'm still here. Though I wouldn't venture beyond them, the real thing that worries me are the rats."

Dig had seen plenty of rats growing up in the country, but the ones AM described left him feeling nervous. He looked at the book AM had purchased, his breath caught when he saw the picture of the rat.

"Crazy man, and you killed one?" Dig said in awe.

"I was lucky, it nearly ripped my face off." he said with a shudder. "What made me really afraid was that it was cat and mouse, and I was the mouse."

"Talk about down with the sickness." Dig said looking at the pictures of the sick people with green scabs.

"The cubes did this?" Dig asked handing over the book back to him.

"It must have, river fires don't turn green and cause this kind of illness. I only hope this is the only universe that suffered such a fate."

Dig told AM more about Marisa as they came to the place Dig had arrived a few days before. AM took the box out of his pack.

"You want to do the honors?" he asked Dig.

"No, it's your turn. Stand close to me."

They stood shoulder to shoulder as AM pressed the button, immediately they felt weightlessness as the wormhole appeared and began to lift them slowly up in the air.

"Here we go!" said AM as they ripped back to 1993.

Date: June 30th 1993 Universe: 1

They fell in a heap at two in the morning under I-95. It was humid and hot, the highway above was quiet, an occasional car or truck droned over them.

"Ha! I was right! It took us back to 93!" Dig said with a smile that AM returned. "Come on!"

Dig got up and began jogging at a fast pace, AM had to hurry to catch up. It was a few miles to Juniper street, Dig kept getting farther ahead but would slow down when he remembered AM, who was panting after just a few blocks. Dig was clearly anxious to get back, so AM waved him on.

"Go. I know were to find it."

"Your sure?" he said running backwards.

He nodded and began to walk at a brisk pace, he didn't feel a hundred percent, his head still felt like it had a bowling ball dropped on it, but the lump had diminished in size. As he walked he wondered what Marisa was like in person, though Dig told him a few things about her. He was excited for him, knowing that feeling love gives to a person, Dig had a hard life were love was practically non existent.

AM walked for what seemed like hours but only an hour had passed, as he came within a few blocks of Juniper street which ran parallel to Broad were he now walked, he turned on Snyder avenue and stopped a few feet from the corner of Juniper. A yellow police tape was tied to two orange and white saw horses with blinking yellow lights flashing every couple of seconds. The words fire department were stenciled in bold black paint on them.

He ducked under the tape and climbed over chunks of broken concrete and asphalt that had been piled high. A distant streetlight at the end of the block was the only light. His heart began to pound when he saw the empty space between the houses, were only piles of jagged bricks and broken stonework lay. As he got closer he could see Dig kneeling in front of the rubble that had once been Club Enlightenment.

Another police tape was draped across the now empty lot, under it was a line of various crosses and a few stuffed animals with many sympathy cards. Dig's face was obscured in the darkness, in one of his hands was a newspaper that was a week old.

"My bomb is missing," Dig said and handed AM the newspaper.

It was the Daily News worn out a little but still readable, on its cover was a picture of a fire taken probably from a helicopter. It was Juniper street, lit up with bright orange flame billowing up in the shape of a mushroom. The word Inferno screamed across the top of the picture in big bold white letters. At the bottom corner was a picture of a woman with black and pink hair with a perky smile, under her picture were the words three dead, dozens hurt in italics.

AM rifled through the paper with numb fingers and saw another picture, this of the other two victims, one of them made him gasp. It was the hoodlum he had kicked in the balls, the picture was his mug shot, provided by the police department, the caption said. He had been

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arrested for assault the previous year and was awaiting trial, and was a suspect in a unsolved murder the article stated. Terrorism was suspected at first, but the police were convinced it was a drug deal gone bad.

"My God." was all AM could say.

She hadn't suffered according to the corner, she had died of smoke inhalation while in the buildings basement. To AM, that assessment was a crock. The other two had to be identified through dental records. Dig turned and looked at AM, with eyes that threatened tears and said: "I want to go home."

Date: August 1 st 2011 Universe: 1

AM and Quake were in the safe room, Dig had left when they ripped back without a word, AM didn't try to stop him. He told Quake about what happened to them. Quake, who usually couldn't sit still for more than a few minutes unless at his computer, was immobile while AM talked.

"Fuck a duck, maybe he should have kept a lower profile." Quake said with out much sympathy when AM finished

"Fuck you, Quake." AM said sharply.

"Me? Fuck me?" he said removing his glasses and wiping the lenses on his shirt roughly. " Mr. Abraham nothing is more important than the fuckin cubes Lincoln, fuck me? You told him..."

"Yes well, I was wrong! And you have no right to be so callus to him, neither do I. I'd be dead if not for him. If he comes back you give him the same God damn respect you gave Uncle Howdy!" he said pointing at him with a steady finger.

AM grabbed one of Quake's tall cans of energy drink and swallowed half of it, he grimaced at its strange bubble gum like flavor.

"How do you drink this shit?!" he said slamming the can down feeling disgusted with himself and the situation.

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"It's an acquired taste. Do you think he'll come back?" he asked putting his glasses back on.

"Would you?" AM asked but not unkindly leaning forward arms on his knees, feeling old and helpless.

"I'm sorry for bein an asshole." Quake said tracing the buttons of his keyboard with his finger tips.

"We both were," he said with a heavy sigh. " I'm going to take a few days to rethink our options, if I have to I'll go alone. This box created wormhole's instantly, I may not need a partner anymore to go with me if you can figure it out."

"Yeah, it can't be too much different than the cubes." Quake said giving the box a long look.

AM stood up and put a hand on Quakes shoulder and gave him a smile that barely touched his lips.

"If you want out, it's okay."

Quake gave a smile of his own and nodded.

"Agwa, man. I'm in this with you."

AM let the safe room and made his way outside through the steel door that brought him behind the Mifflin street station, to a sky littered with storm clouds. People, walking in all different directions busy with their own lives, didn't notice him, it was just another day for everybody else. AM thought of Angie and her hair that was like threads of gold, he missed her, but she was still alive despite his leaving her, and Marisa was gone forever which made him feel worse. A fat cold rain drop landed on his neck and raced down his spine, making him shiver, with a heavy heart he put up his hood and headed home.

TO BE CONTINUED

