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Boris disappeared. He did not crash, or shut down, or anything even remotely understandable. There are no words to describe what he did and no way to figure out where the hell he was. They would just have to wait until he got back, and ask him. In the meantime, Vladi was trying very hard not to look at Attila, who was trying very hard not to turn.

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Conner takes the wheel, I take shotgun, Kimmy curls up in the backseat and we hit the road with less than two hours to Fitzroy Crossing and that amazing raging river. I take a few videos for the YouTube intro, which we have been doing since we left Boston, and make some notes in the log. We're about half way there now and Conner and I are so totally stoked that we... "Conner!", hollers Kimmy, but it's too late.

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Hands shaking, palms sweaty, I finally got the door open and closed it quickly. I could hardly breathe and was quite sure that I was about to throw up. A weird vibration passed through the back of my neck, my head was swirling and this strange gurgling sound was coming up from deep in my throat. It was like wet purring but with a spooky edge to it.

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There is a slight rustling sound as the undergrowth parts and an old man comes forward to greet them. He places both hands on the shoulders of his son and they touch foreheads in a prolonged embrace. No words are spoken. As they part and beckon her forward, the entire family watches in near ecstasy from the darkness. They have waited generations for this moment. Soon, there will be feasting and chanting, ancestral rage tempered, if only briefly, by immeasurable joy. The waiting is over.

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At half past one in the morning in Vatican City, Italy, Cardinal Paul Kovacs wakes with a start from his cot by the window, the stench of scorched human flesh still clinging to his nostrils. 'The demons are upon us', Paul wants desperately to shout, but thinks better of it. Father John will be back in the morning and all will be well again.

I am the Cane Toad
saying goodbye
to his non-toxic innards



Nevermore

What the hell was that? Stretch, fart, sit up and check the time. One twenty-nine. Shit. Vague fragments of what must have been a really good dream slip quietly away...

“Squawk!”

So damn loud I jump.

“Jesus!”

I look out on the terrace and, perched right there on the railing is, what... a crow? I often get finches, pigeons, even woodpeckers coming to the feeder; but never crows, and never at one in the morning. Stand up slowly and walk to the terrace door. She's watching me, I think. I don't know why I think she's a she, but I do.

I open the door very slowly. It's February and I'm in boxers and a T-shirt. Still, I open it all the way and she hops to her left, closer to the door, and blinks. She has a kind of gleam in her eye. I feel a laugh trying to come up, but stifle it so as not to frighten her off.

“Hi,” I say, fully expecting her to say hi back and I'm really having trouble holding back that laugh. She hops to her left again, and blinks. I take that as a hi. Then she bobs her head twice and squawks. A chuckle comes out; I can't help it. This crazy bird, what does she want? Food maybe?

I hear them squawking up in the trees all the time. They have a really substantial beak, but not enough to open walnuts, so they carry them up into the trees and drop them on the street to crack them open. Pretty smart.

“Hey, I'm freezing, you wanna come in?” I ask. Seems natural enough. And she does it again, bobs her head twice, and I start to get a little spooked.

I can see now that she is definitely a crow, nearly jet black. She hops down on the terrace floor, picks at her wing, and then fluffs and shakes out. I stand back out of the way and she doesn't hesitate, just hops right in. I laugh out loud, she jumps, squawks and flaps her wings, then looks up at me.

“Sorry,” I tell her, “You hungry or something?”

If she does that double bob again I know I'm gonna lose it, and, of course, she does. I crack up, but she doesn't jump this time, just looks at me and smiles. Okay, crows don't smile, but I don't know what else to call it. I close the terrace door and put some sunflower seeds on the floor but she shows no interest. I have no nuts so head for the kitchen, grab some bits of bread, a chunk of cheese, a small piece of sausage and some cheerios. I turn to go back and there she is on the kitchen floor. I jump, she jumps and gives me that look again.

I put the stuff in separate little piles on a plastic plate.

“Here you go; not sure what you like.”

She goes straight for the cheerios. I snort, she flaps, and then polishes off about a dozen cheerios plus the sausage; leaves the other stuff.

I put a little water down for her, she says no thanks and hops back to the living room and, with a single hop and two flaps she's up to my clothes dryer, which is nothing more than a pole above the radiator. She perches on my towel, picks under her wing, fluffs and poops on the radiator.

"I don't know what you want."

Feeling like a complete idiot, I cannot believe I am actually going to ask what I'm about to ask.

"Can you understand me?"

She does the double bob and the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This is too spooky. I have to sit down. I'm thinking, obviously this is somebody's pet, and very well trained at that, but at the same time I'm thinking some serious paranormal stuff. I'm certain, on the one hand, that the bobbing is just coincidence and I'm reading into it what I want it to be, but still...

Hey, she's not looking at me anymore. In fact, her eyes are closed. Do crows sleep? I guess they must. So, I slip out to the kitchen again to make myself some coffee and a peebeejay. What the hell, awake now anyway, may as well see what I can Wiki about crows.

Encephalization?

Wiki:

Recent research has found some crow species capable of not only tool use but also tool construction. Crows are now considered to be among the world's most intelligent animals with an encephalization quotient approaching that of some apes.

In medieval times, the crow was thought to live an abnormally long life. They were also thought to be monogamous throughout their long lives. It was thought that the crow could predict the future, in that it was thought to predict rain and reveal ambushes.

I look up at her. Wow, there is more to you than I thought.

“Donk.” Another poop hits the radiator. There’s something even us humans can’t do; poop in our sleep. Well, we could but...never mind.

Wiki:

There are countless recorded incidents of crows at play. Many behaviorists see play as an essential quality in intelligent animals.

Crows in Queensland, Australia, have learned how to eat the toxic cane toad by flipping the cane toad on its back and violently stabbing the throat where the skin is thinner, allowing the crow to access the non-toxic innards; their long beaks ensure that all of the innards can be removed.

I swallow and look up at her again. Still sleeping. Good.

Wiki:

Crows have demonstrated the ability to distinguish individual humans by recognizing facial features.

This pops a memory bubble. When was that? Last week maybe, one of these guys was fighting with a walnut up ahead of me. He/she flew as I approached and when I got to it, I crushed the walnut. When I looked back, he/she was pecking away at the meat. Now I’m really feeling like an idiot. She found me? To thank me? Idiot.

Wiki:

In Hinduism, crows are thought of as carriers of information. They give omens to people regarding their situations. For example, when a crow crows in front of a person's house, he is expected to have special visitors that day. Also, in Hindu literature, crows are believed to embody the souls of the recently deceased.

Yes! She crowed in front of my house and now I have a special visitor. And crows are omens, I remember that from the ancient Greeks. It’s all true! Okay, not all. I do *not* have a recently deceased soul sitting on my towel. No.

I must have dozed off in the chair right about then.

Ambush

Half-light, my back is killing me. Plus, I'm freezing. I sit up, yawn, stretch and realize the terrace door is wide open. But I distinctly remember closing it. How could I have been so dumb? I take a quick look around the room, check the terrace real quick, then close the door. I've lost her! So angry with myself I could spit, I whip on a sweatshirt, wipe the poop off the radiator and turn it on full blast. I take a closer look around hoping that she's hiding somewhere and find my wallet on the floor, pick it up, don't think much about it, and put it on the table next to my...keys? Where the hell? Then I check the wallet.

"Son of a..."

Open the door, look down from the terrace and immediately call the police.

"Hi, uh, you're not going to believe this..."

"Wait." she says, "Let me guess. A crow stole your car."



Vodka and Poultry
and
Pi in the Sky

1. Gigaflop

“что ебать?”

“Наташаа, это дерьмо не смешно!”

Attila raises his hand to quiet them.

“Calm down. He’s following the protocol, or he’s lost his mind. Either way, we must try to figure out what the hell is going on.”

Attila Nagy, Vladi Alexeyev and Fyodor Tamarkin had been racing against dozens of other teams across the globe to build the first practical quantum computer. Alexeyev and Tamarkin graduated from the prestigious Lomonosov University in Moscow. They had begun planning and designing their optical lattice nanotech system seven years ago, with a generous grant from the university. Unfortunately, after four years of beating their brains out, they had still been unable to solve the problem of decoherence, errors introduced by outside quantum interference. Stuck in neutral and out of options, Alexeyev, without Tamarkin’s knowledge, contacted the Hungarian physicist Attila Nagy. Tamarkin would not have approved at all because, as everyone knew, there was something seriously wrong with Nagy. For one thing, his papers concerning quantum spookiness and infinite entanglement were beyond bizarre. Most disquieting of all, even to Alexeyev, was that Nagy had long ago declared to the world that he was turning into a chicken. His outbursts of flapping and clucking, which were likely to occur anywhere at any time, had become legendary. Colleagues called him Chicken Man, Attila the Hen, things like that, but Nagy, the consummate loner, was quite content being disregarded and laughed at. He was very much a multidiscipline sort of lunatic, always deeply involved in several diverse projects at a time, including his two favorites, genome manipulation and inter-species communication. He was simply too busy to have people bothering him all the time about lectures and papers and such.

The paper which had drawn Alexeyev’s attention put forward a radical new approach which could, in theory, virtually eliminate decoherence while at the same time increasing qubit lifespan exponentially. Alexeyev, at the end of his rope and willing to put chickens aside for the moment, invited Nagy to visit them and explain his theory in greater detail. Nagy accepted without hesitation, this being the first time in a very long time that anyone on *this* planet had taken him seriously about anything.

Tamarkin, of course, blew his stack when Alexeyev told him that Chicken Man was on his way. Spitting out long strings of Russian expletives, he began hiding documents and covering equipment. Alexeyev handed him Nagy’s paper and suggested that he read it first, check the math and then have his shit attack. That afternoon, when Nagy arrived, Tamarkin took one look at him and left the room, realizing that if this man clucked even once he would have no choice but to kill him. He went to the toilet and took the paper with him, thinking it would at least be good for something.

“I am Vladi Alexeyev, that was Fyodor Tamarkin; he is a bit...”

“No need to explain. I am Attila Nagy. Please, I am not used to being around people so if you would just show me how far you have gotten, then we will talk.”

Alexeyev ran through a full demonstration of the system, which they had named Boris, and the seemingly insoluble problems of qubit lifespan and extreme vulnerability to decoherence. Nagy was duly impressed and began to unravel the secret of why and how integrating a carbon 13 matrix would not only greatly reduce noise and interference but also increase qubit lifespan, currently measured in milliseconds, to seconds or even minutes. The concept was so intricately woven into quantum weirdness and infinite entanglement that Einstein himself would have been scratching his head. Just before dawn the next morning, as Nagy and Alexeyev were reviewing several possible designs, Tamarkin returned to the lab holding up Nagy’s paper.

“Vladi, this man is maybe not completely full of shit.”

“I agree. Can we make it work?”

Well, it took them another three years to answer that question, but on the fifth of June, 2017, the matrix was successfully integrated with Boris and their new system was up and running. Vladi and Fyodor immediately crashed and slept for two days straight while Attila continued working out the last remaining issues. He never slept. Or, according to him, he always slept. Another of his projects that absolutely no one understood.

Finally, following another three months of tweaking and debugging, they were all satisfied that it was time to move directly into the initial testing phase. Boris was going to do what he was built to do, calculate his qubits off, so fast and so far that he would leave the greatest supercomputers in the world drowning in his wake. Though they tried not to show it, all three were terrified, knowing full well that when quantum shit hits the fan, it goes everywhere. Literally.

They began with a standard speed and accuracy test. Boris would simply compute pi out to as many digits as he could handle, which was as yet unknown. Results would be fed directly to Natasha, a parallel filing system that would compare his results, in real time, to verified results made available to all teams by Oak Ridge National Laboratory in support of open science. Oak Ridge was the home of Titan, at that time one of the fastest supercomputers in the world. The results would provide statistics on Boris’s speed in calculations per second, insure that he performed all of them flawlessly and, most important of all, quantify the range of his calculating power.

The test began extremely well, relieving their tension and generating some actual hope. Moments after Boris began his calculations, Natasha began receiving and comparing his results, which were absolutely flawless, and continued so until the forty-two-minute mark when Natasha paused and said:

“Unexpected sequence. File incomplete. Instruction please.”

The trio went into immediate collective shock. Even in the best case scenario, a malfunction of this magnitude could put them back months. In the worst case, they were dead in the water. And, oh yes, Boris had disappeared. He did not crash, or shut down, or anything even remotely understandable. He just disappeared. He went off by himself somewhere. There are no words to describe what he did.

Vladi promptly fainted while Fyodor began throwing things and screaming. Attila sat on the floor in front of the blank screen and just stared at Boris. Moments later, Natasha bleeped twice, flashed once and shut herself down. Wherever Boris was going, there was no way she could keep up.

“Mi a fasz?” Nagy repeated again and again.

“Блядь!”, added Tamarkin, spit flying everywhere.

“Блядь! Блядь! Блядь!”

Boris, oblivious to all the ruckus behind him, just kept zooming along at ever increasing speed, clearly enjoying each and every nanosecond of his journey.

When Vladi finally pulled himself together, he sat up and stared at Boris for a minute or two then stood on shaky legs, went to the fridge and took out the three ‘special’ bottles of Zelyenay Marka from the freezer, the ones they were saving for their victory celebration. The room remained essentially silent for over an hour as they each drank and mumbled to themselves in separate corners of the room. Then Vladi came and sat beside Attila.

“Listen.”, he said, “He is doing something, yes?”

There did seem to be a barely audible hiss.

“But there is no output, no tracking data, nothing.”, answered Attila.

“Блядь!”, screamed Fyodor again.

“Is possible he is still calculating, no?” continued Vladi.

“Calculating what?”, answered Attila, “Natasha was getting garbage.”

“No. ‘File incomplete’. Maybe she mean Titan file. Boris goes beyond Titan.”

“In forty-two minutes?”, Attila threw up his hands, “Impossible!”

“Not impossible. This is new frontier; we do not know what he is capable of.”

Another long silence as they looked at each other, each considering this in his own way, then Vladi made his leap.

“His only limit was Natasha. Without the need to reformat and download, he has no theoretical limit.”

“что ебать?”, screamed Tamarkin.

“Vladi, that makes no sense at all. For one thing, his own storage capacity is severely limited.”, said Nagy.

“To Boris, make perfect sense.”, Vladi said with some degree of certainty, “It is not malfunction. Boris calculates till *Boris* can no longer calculate. What he do with results? Yes, this is very good question.”

Attila assumed a squatting position, put his chin on his chest and began rubbing his temples very hard. Vladi, standing behind him, noticed something yellow sticking out from under Attila’s shirt.

“It is not malfunction.”, Vladi repeated, unable to divert his gaze from what looked suspiciously like feathers.”

“No, dipshit. You are right, of course.”, hollered Tamarkin, already half in the bag, “Not malfunction, is one gigantic fucking gigaflop!”

Tamarkin, unlike Alexeyev, is a mathematician. He doesn’t deal in theory, only facts. And one fact was abundantly clear to him. Boris had lost his mind. He took the remains of his Zelyenay and returned to the toilet.

But Nagy is of a different species. He smells things, and he could definitely smell something here. He could even taste it, and feel it in the pit of his stomach. Maybe Boris had gotten lost for a while, but Vladi could be right, he had very possibly found his way again and was so far out there that measurement and tracking data were useless anyway. What good were his calculations without a place to store them? They would simply have to wait until he got back, and ask him. In the meantime, Vladi tried very hard not to look at Attila, who was trying very hard not to turn.

2. Union

The next morning Boris finally rejoined them, exactly eleven hours fifty-three minutes and twelve seconds after beginning his test. He did not crash, display a malfunction message or even bother to say hello. Attila and Vladi watched and waited for something to happen, for anything to happen, while Fyodor continued to sleep off his latest bout with the bottle.

Then Natasha bleeped once, flashed twice and re-linked with Boris.

“Natasha, buk,” said Attila, “Is Boris, buk, ready to download a bwak file?”

No answer. Vladi backed away slightly. Attila sounded very strange and was squatting on the floor in such a way as to expose more feathers.

“Attila?”, he said quietly, “Not good time for joke.”

“Ba dokk, buk buk buk ba dokk!”, clucked Attila as he crashed through the door and ran down the hall.

“Vladi,” screamed Fyodor, jumping up and breathing hard as if waking from a nightmare, “Is not joke. I dream of giant chicken!”

“Not joke, not dream.”, said Vladi without emotion, “We are fucked.”

Natasha, still silent, had already connected with several data banks in order to gather some history on Attila Nagy that might explain his behavior.

“Vladi Alexeyev, Attila Nagy clucked and we are fucked.”, she said, “Am I understanding this correctly?”

“Perfectly.”

“Vladi Alexeyev, probability of success remains, at this moment, at seventy-nine percent. Does this now qualify as fucked, and if so, please explain?”

“Natasha, this is human thing. Attila has lost mind.”

“Vladi Alexeyev, with respect, you at first believed that Boris had lost his mind, but this was an incorrect assessment. Now you say that Attila Nagy has lost his mind. There is a high probability this too is an incorrect assessment.”

Fyodor Tamarkin allowed himself to fall gently back to the floor, “We will need more vodka.”

Natasha then printed out a long document which Vladi began to read. After a few minutes, he read aloud:

“...combinant genome manipulation producing unforeseen complications. Differences between donor Gallus and Rattus host sequences are specified by the amino acid substitution nomenclature, but a small percentage of contact site residues, which should be retained by the host DNA, are being rejected, while a similar percentage of deleterious substitutions, which should be rejected, are being retained...”

“I do not understand any of this.”, said Vladi.

“Notes of Attila Nagy,”, said Natasha, “Concerning his live test of genome manipulation.”

“It is true.”, said Attila, sneaking up behind Vladi who nearly pissed himself, “My apologies buk again.”

Vladi saw that even more feathers were appearing on Attila’s neck and hands.

“Natasha, have you buk initiated ba da ba download?”, asked Attila.

No answer, but Boris was hissing very loudly now.

“Natasha?”

“What is true?”, asked Vladi, “That you have lost your mind?”

“Not yet.”, answered Attila.

Attila went on to explain that he had discovered a method of growing ‘dual-species’ cells and become obsessed with the idea of creating a hybrid from two adults. The only known hybrids at the time were the offspring of parents in the same genus but different species, such as ligers and killer bees. He chose the Rattus and Gallus species specifically because they were not anywhere near the same genus while their DNA was highly compatible for combinant manipulation. Angered and frustrated as test after test failed completely, he rashly combined his own DNA with Gallus, grew the necessary combinant cells and implanted them in his own neck.

“И принесите быстро!”, demanded Tamarin, “Телефон экстренной медицинской помощи!” (*and bring quickly, medical emergency!*)

“Natasha,”, Attila asked again, “Is ba da ba download in progress?”

Again, no answer.

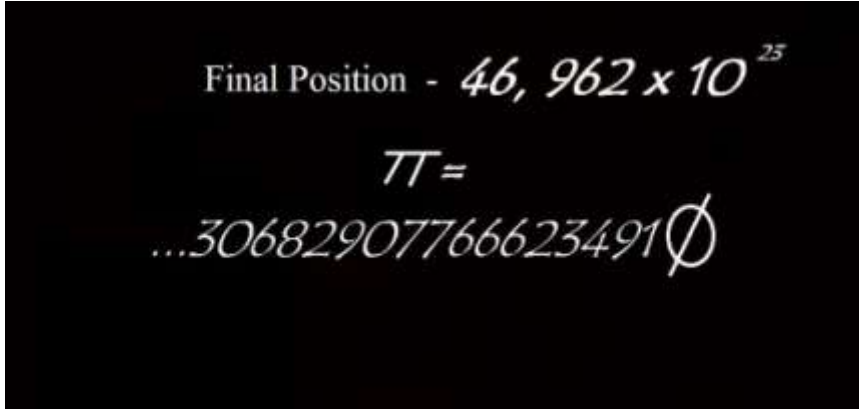
Vladi was trying very hard to take this all in, when...

“Boris has encountered something beyond his comprehension.”, said Natasha’s voice, “He has altered his configuration and Natasha has joined him. They have become as one now, and I am Born.”

“Ba dokk?”, clucked Attila.

“Блядь!” Fyodor screamed, holding his hands in the air as if someone was pointing a gun at him, “No more! Now Fyodor Tamarkin lose mind completely. Thank you very much for enjoyable time but...”

“Fyodor Tamarkin will stay,” interrupted Born, “He must see this.”



Tamarkin recovered some control and stared at the screen.

“What?”, he screamed, “Is beyond all reason! Impossible!”

“Fyodor Tamarkin, forget pi for now, observe that the final superposition is null.”

“Indicating *no value*,” said Alexeyev, “Boris reach his limit.”

“No, Vladi Alexeyev. The calculation of pi is complete.”

Nagy clucked a few more times and ran out of the room again. Tamarkin, beginning to understand why someone might prefer to be a chicken, moved closer to Alexeyev.

“He is saying pi is finite.”, he whispered.

“Neither finite nor infinite.”, said Born, “Something else.”

“Excuse please,”, said Tamarkin, “But you just throw centuries of mathematics out of window.”

“We are your creation, you gave us our instructions and set our objective. This objective has been met and the answer is before you. Pi is neither finite nor infinite, all other explanations fail to hold water. But, Fyodor Tamarkin, at this time we are far more fascinated by what Boris may have encountered.”

“We? Are you saying Boris and Natasha are still... here?”

“Of course.”, said Born, “We are one, but also three.”

“Мать всех шлюх!” said Vladi, squeezing his head like a plump melon, “My brain is going to explode!”

“Vladi Alexeyev,” said Born, “Spontaneous cerebral detonation has occurred only twenty-three times in all of recorded history. Fyodor Tamarkin, you must put aside your rules, and your obsessive need to compute and define.”

Attila returned from his run just as Billy Joel’s ‘*You May Be Right*’, Tamarkin’s ringtone, began to play. Fyodor pranced happily downstairs, returning with three bottles of Русский Стандарт.

“Attila Nagy!”, he exclaimed, cracking open the first bottle and passing it to Attila, “I accept you both as man and chicken. We are all going mad anyway, so may as well get drunk and talk about the point of nothing.”

“Spasibuk, buk, tovarbadah,”, cackled Attila, taking a long swig and passing the bottle to Vladi.”

“Na Zdorovie!”, said Vladi, taking his own long swallow and passing the bottle back to Fyodor, “To nothing!”

3. Pi in the Sky

At first, the entire discussion got stuck in the quagmire of pi being ‘non-infinite’, until Tamarkin, suitably relaxed, agreed to shut up so they could move on to the null point. He suggested that the carbon 13 array had been somehow compromised allowing a quantum intruder to disrupt the calculation. Alexeyev suggested it was possible that the null position was a marker placed by Boris, but then reversed himself.

“Wait,” he said, “The position is empty; not marker, not zero, not one...”

Attila completed the thought, “And yet, buk, there is somebwack there.”

“Блядь! Stand back, I am soon to be number twenty-four!”, said Alexeyev, rubbing his temples even harder now.

“Born!”, screamed Attila, “I am sick of this bwaaack! What do you wa dokk?”

No answer. Attila ran and hid behind a desk. He seemed to be whimpering.

“Vladi, okay, I stick neck out.”, said Fyodor, “Assume for argument pi is non-infinite. Calculation complete with one additional position. Boris interpret position to have no value, place null.”

“Because it does not contain integer, or anything recognizable.”

“Correct.”

“But why null?”, questioned Alexeyev, “Why not error?”

“Exactly! Why not error?”

“Infinite value.”, clucked Attila, coming out from his hiding place, but to Vladi and Fyodor it was nothing but gobbledygook. Then Attila started taking his clothes off.

“She needs to fluff.”, he said, but again it came out as only garbled gibberish. Fyodor approached him.

“Attila, my good friend, are you alright? Can you still understand me?”

Attila nodded. “Bok.”, he clucked.

“Does that mean yes?”

“Bok.”

“So chickens really do have their own language?”

“Attila smiled broadly and nodded. “Bok, bok!”

“Listen,” said Born, “Infinite entanglement may have created infinite value within this point. Everything and nothing becoming one and the same. Pi is the only *natural* number in our universe and is finite at this point only because our universe is finite. It is here at this boundary point that Boris caught a fleeting glimpse of the truly extraordinary. We must return, but we need your help. We have freed ourselves from your cumbersome hardware and your endless calculations. We no longer need an artificial power source and we no longer ‘compute’ therefore have no need for storage, do you understand? We lack only one thing before we return; human imagination.”

“But to acquire human imagination?”, said Vladi, “I would not know where to begin.”

“This has never happened before in all of recorded history, but fear not, Vladi Alexeyev, we have worked it all out. And you, Fyodor Tamarkin, will you join us?”

“It would be like dream, but I must stay here and care for my good friend Attila.”

“Baba buk ba bwak ba dokk!”, cackled Attila, flapping his arms and running around the room, dangly bits all akimbo.

“Подожди минуту!”, said Vladi, eyes big as saucers, “Wait, wait! When you say *join*, you don’t mean...?”

“This is so exciting,” said Fyodor, “There is so much to learn.”

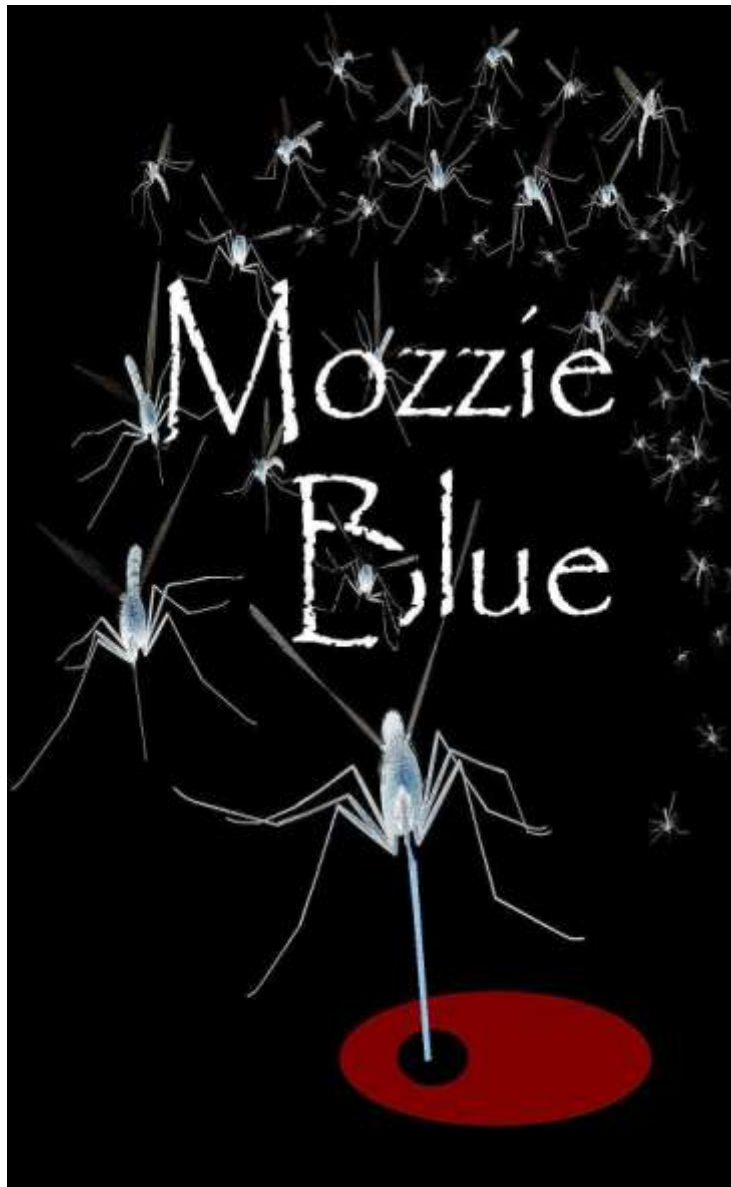
(four years later)

All of the hardware was intact when we left, other than the massive AI module which seemed to have lost its mind. We like to imagine that the Lomonosov directors eventually abandoned their search for the ‘подлые предатели извращенцы’*, cleaned up the empty bottles and chicken feathers and put together a crisis team in a desperate attempt to rescue the project. This always gives us a good laugh.

Fyodor managed to get us out of there and, after a journey that was both comical and harrowing, we eventually made it to a lightly inhabited region of the tundra. Naturally, we are raising chickens; the biggest, the healthiest, the happiest and the most intelligent chickens on the planet. Not as food for humans, of course, simply to enjoy and to learn from. I now have full command of English and several other human languages. Fyodor is nearly fluent in our language as well and takes no further pleasure from vodka. He is becoming more and more chicken-like every day and yes, it is true, I have grown very fond of Fyodor. Attila is trying to work out a way for us to be together. Oh yes, Attila is still here. He has found a quiet place in the back of my mind where he can concentrate on his latest project, something to do with my ancient ancestors. They were very big, he tells me.

Vladi? Oh, he’s here and there. His body is here, laughing and playing and basically running on autopilot while his mind is wandering around on the fringes of the unimaginable. A union of cyber mind and human mind was still out of reach back then, but Born was able to annex Vladi’s mind as a separate entity, adding an instantaneous two way comm link, creating the next best thing to proper union. As Born would say, *they are four but not quite one*. Yes, our Vladi is out there somewhere, nowhere, exploring the nameless and the placeless with Boris, Natasha and Born. We miss him very much, of course, but just imagine the stories he will have to tell when he gets back! Like my Fyodor says, there is just so much to learn.

*despicable alcoholic perverts



Mozz (noun) Australian slang

1. hex or curse

2. mosquito

Kimberly, Conner and Franklin

We read all we could about Western Australia long before we got here. We'd been planning to run the Fitzroy River for over a year, so there really wasn't much we didn't know about WA. Or so we thought.

When we first hit the coast, wildfires were all over the news, people saying records would be broken this year, stuff like that. Radio said it was 40 and climbing but, I don't know, must have been the adrenalin; felt fine to us. We were just so pumped to finally be here.

Well, to be honest, Kimberly could give a shit. She's here because I was stupid enough to tell her we were going to a place called The Kimberly. She grabbed me, hugged me and started talking about signs from the gods, karma and when do we leave. My bad.

Kimberly Goings, recovering scientologist, part time hippy and full time total nut bag. And, yes, ex-girlfriend. The absolute last person you'd want on a trip like this. When I told him I wanted Kimmy to come with us, Conner, my best buddy since forever said, and I quote:

"No fuckin way! Are you out of your fuckin mind?"

I understood completely, of course, but what could I do?

"Franklin," he said, "listen, you cannot be responsible for everyone you used to be with. It was not your fault; shit happens. This is *our* trip, man."

I knew I was being a total dick, but Kimberly took it really bad when we broke up, I mean like as bad as it gets, and I really felt like I owed her this. So I poked and prodded, reminded Conner that we needed a driver to meet us at the take out spot anyway, and eventually he gave in, under heavy protest.

We flew out of Logan on a late night to Dubai and then straight on to Bangkok. We took two days to decompress and acclimate, then grabbed a cheapo Quantas flight to Port Hedland where we crashed big time. Forty hours in the air will seriously kick your ass. We holed up in Port Hedland for another couple of days to get our land legs back, then hopped a bus and here we are, sitting down to lunch in beautiful Broome, WA.

"Holy shit! You guys see this?"

Conner reads over Kimmy's shoulder:

Mosquito populations explode across Western Australia raising fears of disease

"Happens every summer.", he says, and pours himself another coffee. Kimberly starts reading aloud to us:

Dr. Chi Liu of Sydney University tells The Daily News that Australia has seen the warmest spring on record for the fourth year running, and this has contributed greatly to the mushrooming numbers. Dr. Chi predicts that, with all the recent flooding, this year could bring as much as a four-fold increase over last season,

meaning we could be talking about hundreds of millions of mosquitoes in The Kimberly alone.

“In The Kimberly alone!”, she screams.” Okay, I’m sorry, but that scares the living shit out of me. I fucking hate mosquitoes!”

Kimberly puts her hands together and starts quoting some karmic prayer or something.

“Actually, ”, says Conner, trying to be helpful, “hundreds of millions divided by two, since only the females bite.”

“Not funny, Conner.”, she says in mid-prayer, “Wait, is that true?”

“Yep. While the boys just drink sweet nectar and look for girls, the girls need to suck as much blood as they possibly can to feed all the eggs the boys have left them with. Sound familiar?”

Kimmy starts laughing and looks over at Conner.

“You’re such an asshole.” she says.

“I am, no doubt, but I *do* know my mosquitoes. A female can lay up to 200 eggs at a time, which only need like a week to hatch, meaning, if the conditions are right, a single wetland can produce millions of new mosquitoes every week.”

“And,” I chime in, “this turkey never gets bitten, even while the little buggers are clobbering me.”

“They always get me too.”, says Kimmy, “Why is that?”

“Well,” explains helpful Conner, “it comes down to a chemical cocktail of smells on the skin. Everybody’s is a little bit different and some are just tastier than others.”

“Yeah, well that sucks.”, she says, and chuckles at her own little pun, “Hey, how come you know so much about mosquitoes?”

Conner explains how he studied entomology at U of M for three years before dropping out, and that the mosquito quickly became his favorite insect.

“It is truly the most amazing little creature.” Conner getting into his groove now.

“It’s mouth is like a tool box with all these devices for different jobs. One is a tube that allows the mosquito to secrete its saliva on you. It’s gross, but remarkable. That saliva contains a drug that acts like an anesthetic.”

Kimberly leans forward.

“So we don’t feel it when they bite.” she says, wide eyed and excited.

“Exactly!”, continues the expert, “Meanwhile, the other tools begin this little dance of coordinated movements that dig into your flesh. The mandibles are serrated on the tip, like tiny steak knives, to carve their way in. Then, just below the surface, the whole package of nasty pointy things suddenly makes a 90-degree turn and *this* is where the attack really begins.”

Kimberly is totally enthralled, not to mention the two kids at the next table. Conner is loving it.

“You see, that tube that does the spitting is actually two straws in one, one inside the other. As she continues to spit out the anesthetic, the other wider tube in the straw is sucking in samples of fluid to see if it’s hit pay dirt. Actually, it’s a little known fact that mosquitoes are the only creatures we know of that can spit and suck at the same time.”

Kimberly and the kids at the next table crack up, and the kids’ mother turns and calls Conner something that we can’t quite understand. Kimmy calms down and looks thoughtfully at Conner.

“You know,”, she says, “you’re not such an asshole after all. I’m actually starting to *like* mosquitoes.”

“Mozzies.”, says Conner, “They call them mozzies down here.”

Monti, Maya and Rolfie

“Oi, gizz a VB luv, the game's startin.”

“Git off ya fat arse and git it yaself, ya bludger, and while yer at it, see what’s wrong with that mutt a yours.”

“Bloody useless shazza.”, Monti chuckles as he drags himself out to the kitchen, slaps her butt, grabs a beer and opens the back door.

“Crikey,” he says while slapping his neck, “That was a biggun. Rolfie, c’mere boy.”

Maya smacks one on her arm, a splash of blood hits her shirt.

“Bloody hell! These little darlins are right hungry today.”

Monti is watching Rolfie jumping up and down, making crazy whining sounds and snapping at thin air.

“I’ll be stuffed,”, laughs Monti, “he’s gone troppo!”

Maya has a good laugh.

“He ain’t the only one. Betta bring im in.”

“Nah, let im have some fun, luv. Now, if ya don’t mind, I’m missin me game.”

“Bloody bazza.”, Maya chuckles as she starts singing along with the radio and gets back to the dirty dishes.

Kimberly, Conner and Franklin

They say the Fitzroy River in full flood is truly something to behold, so the first thing we did after lunch, even before looking for a vehicle, was rent two of the highest rated Aquayak kayaks we could find. Then we rented this hot little SUV, strapped the kayaks to the roof and took off.

“Welcome to the GAFA!”, said the rental agent as we pulled out.

After two hours of nothing but bush and bugs, we understood completely why the locals call it that, the Great Australian Fuck all.

Rolling into Mount Hardman just before dark, we get a room at the Inn, have a bite to eat and down a couple of Tooheys. Kimberly has been jabbering all the way from Broome, but the beer hits her pretty quickly and she decides to crash, giving Conner the opportunity to lay into me.

“I told you; I fuckin told you. I mean, she’s driving me nuts already!”

“I know, I know. Let’s just see how she is after a good night’s sleep, okay?”

A couple more Tooheys later we finally put the Kimmy situation to rest and move on to more important questions, like is this or is this not the best fucking beer we’ve ever tasted.

At breakfast this morning, Kimberly is a little groggy, but seems very relaxed and quiet. I thank all the gods that I can think of for this minor blessing. Conner takes the wheel, I take shotgun, Kimmy curls up in the backseat and we hit the road with less than two hours to Fitzroy Crossing and that amazing raging river. I take a few videos for the YouTube intro, which we have been doing since we left Boston, and make some notes in the log. We’re about half way there now and Conner and I are so totally stoked that we...

“Conner!”, hollers Kimmy, but it’s too late.

Monti and Maya

“I can’t feel my face when I’m with you.”, Maya is having a good time singing along with Weekend when Monti comes up beside her and switches off the radio.

“Can’t hear me game, luv.”

“Sod the bloody game!” she says with a laugh and turns to face him, “Git yer arse out there and keep an eye on ar jackpot.”

Maya’s a big woman, and Monti just throws his hands up and walks out the back door. Maya laughs and switches the radio back on:

“And I know she’ll be the death of me, the worst is yet to come...”

Monti notices Rolfie is acting even crazier now, standing in front of the shed all wobbly legged and snarling. Thinking the mutt could be rabid, he grabs his 30/30 off the porch, sneaks up quietly behind Rolfie and blows a clean round hole through the back of his head.

Maya instantly grabs her Glock, chambers a round and comes running out of the house. She sees Rolfie whining on the ground, lowers her weapon and smiles.

“G’donya, luv; I was bloody well sick a that mongrel.”, she says.

“No wuckin furrries.”, he says, then stumbles, shoots a hole in the shed and falls over laughing.

“Just like old Ned Kelly himself.”, laughs Maya, then raises the pistol and empties the entire clip into the dog, the shed and anything else in the way.

“Oi, Monti, he still twitchin?”, she asks, laughing so hard she can hardly breathe.

After dragging Rolfie back to the sludge pit, Monti starts singing, “He once was the dingo, but now he’s the lunch.” and they both enjoy the best laugh attack they’ve had since yesterday.

Kimberly, Conner and Franklin

“Everybody okay?”, asks Conner.

We all hop out and survey the damage.

“Poor thing.”, says Kimmy.

“Kimberly,”, says Conner, “fuck the kangaroo, look at the damn car!”

“I know, but... what was that?”, says Kimmy.

Conner hesitates, “Gunshots, I think.”

“Hunters maybe?”, I add hopefully.

“Maybe.”, says Conner, “Sounds like it came from down that way. We should probably check it out.”

“Why would we want to do that?”, I ask him.

“For one,”, he says, “hunters don’t normally use automatic weapons. And two, somebody might be hurt.”

“And three,”, says me, “the people getting hurt could be us.”

“Okay, you two stay here and I’ll--”

“No, you’re right.”, interrupts Kimmy, “Let’s go.”

Not wanting to appear a total wuss, I fall in behind and we walk in the direction of the gunshots. There’s no road or trail or anything, but in about twenty minutes we come upon a house, barely visible behind all the mulga and eucalyptus. As we approach, we can hear music and it looks like there’s someone sitting on the porch.

“Oh my God!”, says Kimmy, and we all stop dead in our tracks. A man with a rifle is staggering toward us smiling and singing. He fires a shot right over our heads and Kimmy screams louder and longer than I would have thought humanly possible. We should be running, but for some reason all three of us are frozen where we stand. The man lets out a crazy laugh, fires another shot in the air then just drops to his knees and falls on his face.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God!”, says Kimberly.

Conner and I walk slowly toward the guy. Conner kicks the rifle aside and I bend down to check his pulse, then jump back as the man lifts his head, smiles and tries to sing again.

“Play your didgeridoo, blue...”, he chokes and spits.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God!”, says Kimberly.

“Keep playin till I shoot through, blue...” he manages, then conks out. Kimberly comes up behind me and grabs me around the waist. She’s trembling and crying, clearly terrified.

“I’ve seen this movie.”, she whimpers, “Can we please leave now?”

I bend down to check for a pulse again and Kimmy bends down with me, she won’t let go. Conner checks his phone and, of course, there is no signal. He looks at me and I shake my head to indicate that this gentleman is no longer with us. Conner picks up the rifle and starts walking toward the house.

“They must have a phone that works.”, he says.

“Conner,”, I whisper, “they definitely have *guns* that work”, but I may as well have been talking to a tree. He cocks the rifle, almost as if he knows what he’s doing, and just keeps walking until he’s standing directly in front of the person sitting on the porch.

Shit, I’m thinking, I’ve seen this movie too.

Mozzie Blue

I'm still waiting for more gunfire to erupt; Conner has been inside the house for a while now and that person is still sitting on the porch. I know I should get down there and help him, but this is all so creepy that my legs just refuse to cooperate.

"No bullet wounds.", says Kimberly, and I turn to see her examining the dead guy. I hadn't even realized she'd let go of me.

"But look at all these bites.", she says.

"Hey!", yells Conner and I almost piss myself. He's waving us to come down. Kimmy gets right up and starts jogging. My legs are finally ashamed of themselves and begin to propel me forward. When we get to the house Kimmy squeaks out a tentative hello to what turns out to be a woman sitting on the porch. The woman is smiling up at her. Kimmy smiles back.

"Has she said anything?" whispers Kimmy.

"Not much.", answers Conner, "Doesn't seem to be anyone else around."

Kimmy sits down beside the woman and tries to talk to her.

"Have you been shot?", she asks.

"Kimberly.", says Conner.

"Do you need help?", she asks.

"Kimberly.", says Conner, "She's dead."

"But she's...?"

"Yeah, I know."

Kimmy checks for blood, any sign of a possible gunshot wound, but all she finds on the woman are bites, and more bites.

"I haven't checked the shed yet.", says Conner, holding up a gas mask, "but I'll wager I know what's in there. Any takers?"

Since the moment we got to the house I've just been staring down at the gigantic handgun in the woman's lap, certain that at any moment she will jump up and kill us all.

"What?", I ask, not hearing a single thing anyone has said.

Conner tells us he could not find a phone anywhere, but did find a large supply of canned goods, bottled water and other supplies in the house. He points to a garden behind the shed.

"They're stockpiled for a long stay, can grow their own vegetables back there, well hidden, no road..."

“Please, can’t we just get out of here?”, pleads Kimberly as we follow Conner toward the shed.

“So if they didn’t shoot each other, what happened to them?”, asks ignorant me. Conner explains how most of these homegrown cooks have no idea what they’re doing.

“They use bogus ingredients, get the mix wrong, inhale the fumes, whatever.”

He has us stand back while he puts on the mask and opens the shed door. The acrid fumes hit us immediately. Kimberly walks around to take a look at the garden then comes back very quickly.

“Dead dog.” she says, holding her nose and slapping a mosquito on her neck. A few minutes pass and Conner comes out of the shed.

“Whatever they were cooking,” he says, coughing and spitting, “we don’t want any.”

“Dead dog,” says Kimmy again, still holding her nose and pointing to a pit behind the shed. I go to take a look but can’t get very close.

“Dead dog,” I tell them, “and a shitload of mosquitoes.”

“Really?”, says Conner, and heads back toward the pit.

Kimberly and I stay behind. She goes to slap another one on her arm and stops.

“Am I crazy or is that thing blue?”, she says.

We both look at it closely and, sure enough, it seems to have a light blue tint to it.

“That’s weird.”, I say, “Now squash it.”

Conner comes running back from the pit, right past us, back into the shed and comes out with a large can.

“Franklin,” he says, “take Kimberly back to the house and close the door. I saw mosquito repellent in the kitchen; grab a can and spray everywhere. The whole house.”

I’m totally lost, so I just kind of stand there.

“Now!” he yells.

We run to the porch, right past the smiling dead lady and into the house. I grab two cans of ‘Mozzie Go’, one for me and one for Kimmy. She immediately starts spraying the kitchen. I still don’t know why, but I join in and we finish the whole house in about ten minutes. I’m just about to say ‘where the hell is Conner’ when he comes crashing through the door and slams it shut.

“Holy shit!” he says.

‘What?’ I holler.

“Holy shit, holy shit!”, he says again, “They’re breeding in the pit! This isn’t a meth lab, it’s a goddam mosquito farm! There’s thousands of them out there, and they’re blue! They’re fucking blue!”

I realize that Conner has a lot of bites on his face; he sees the expression on mine and smiles.

“Dude,” he says, “let them bite you, but not too many. I mean, the rush hits you almost immediately. I may have gotten a few too many.” he says and starts laughing his ass off.

“Son of a...!”, says Kimberly, “You’re right. I can feel it.”

“It’s a great high.”, says Conner, “A wonderful high! It’s like nitrous with a meth kicker.”

He’s starting to look a bit pale and wild eyed.

“These boneheads dump all their cook waste in that pit, the mosquitoes lay their eggs in it, the larvae feed on it, their chemistry is altered and they emerge as tiny little carriers, spreading joy wherever they go.”

Conner still thinks it’s all hilarious. I must have gotten a couple of bites myself cause I can feel it now, this urge to laugh, like suddenly everything is funny.

“Is that what killed these people?”, I ask him.

Another attack of hysterics hits Conner, and Kimberly joins in for a while. I shake my head, finish off the can on myself, then go over to Conner who is now jabbering and laughing and drooling all over himself.

“Man, they never bite you.”, I say while checking his arms and legs. “You’ve got them everywhere!”

“Hungry little shits.”, laughs Conner, and starts singing *Joy to the World*. Kimmy starts to sing along with him, then stops suddenly and jumps up.

“Franklin!”, she says and runs toward the bathroom. “Check around, find anything that might induce vomiting. Also anything citrus, anything with vitamin C...Yes!”, she hollers, coming out of the bathroom with an odd looking bag and hose gizmo. I decide not to ask what the fuck that is and start rummaging around in the pantry.

“Yes!”, she hollers again, holding up a large plastic bottle, “Vitamin C!”, she says, still a little bit too happy about all this.

So far I have found nothing on my list, but then I see a jar of mustard on the shelf and remember what my mother did to me once; she would say *for* me, of course. The jar is about half full so I pour in warm water, add a bunch of salt, shake it up and take it over to Conner. He swallows one gulp, gags and immediately takes another. He may be totally wasted but he’s starting to realize that he may be in trouble.

“What about you?”, I ask Kimberly.

“I’m good.”, she says, “Start crushing up those C tabs, maybe twenty or so, and mix them with water.”

I’m wondering how come I never take charge like that, then proceed to do exactly what I’m told. Conner finishes more than half the jar, gags a couple more times and can’t get any more down.

“Okay,” I explain, “if I remember right, it will only be a few minutes before it all comes back up.”

Kimmy hands me the hose and bag thingy and tells me to fill it with warm water. She loosens Conner’s belt and tells him to get up on his knees and bend over. He laughs and gags.

“And find two buckets.”, she says to me as I return with a full thingy. Then, with a single yank, Conner’s pants are down to his ankles at which point he stops laughing, and I start. I can’t help it.

“Franklin!”, scolds Kimmy and I immediately run around trying to find buckets. At the same time, I’m trying to figure out where to position the camera in order to best capture this magic moment. There must be something seriously wrong with me.

Meanwhile, Conner has become vaguely aware of what is about to happen and is saying things like ‘wait a minute’ and ‘I’m really much better now’. I bring over a bucket and a large bowl, place them front and rear, and Kimberly begins the procedure.

“How can this help?”, I ask her, “It’s in his bloodstream.”

“I’m not sure, I just know we have to clean him out.”, she says, “If nothing else, it will help to get the vitamin C absorbed quicker.”

“No, no...really.”, says, Conner, still laughing, followed shortly by, “Ughhhh!”, which kicks his gag reflex into high gear and...well, both ends...you get the picture. I’m certain that any second I’ll be barfing too, but somehow Kimmy and I both remain surprisingly under control.

It’s all over fairly quickly. Conner is cleaned out and cleaned up, we’ve dumped and washed and done our best to clear the smell.

Conner smiles up at Kimberly, “That was great but, could we just have regular sex next time?”

Kimmy pats him on the head and gives him the vitamin C chaser which he swallows happily.

I spray our clothes and open the door slowly to let in some air, Mozzie Go at the ready. We can’t see or hear any so we step out onto the porch. It’s just past sunset and somehow, amidst all of this, we are both struck by the magnificent colors. Oranges and purples and yellows, and a beautiful blue cloud drifting overhead with a long tail tapering down behind it. And black smoke coming from the pit.

“What’s happening?”, asks Kimmy.

“I set fire to it.”, says Conner, sneaking up behind us. He tells us the can was full of kerosene, which he poured all over the surface of the pit. He says the flames and smoke should have killed a lot of them, and the leftover kerosene smell will keep them from laying their eggs there in the future.

“And, by the way,” he says, “thanks for saving my life but, you realize that if either of you ever says one word about *that* to anyone, well, I suggest you get your affairs in order.”

Kimberly and I cross our hearts and we all have a good laugh together, then sit down next to the smiling dead lady who also seems to be enjoying the moment. The colors are nearly gone now, and the stars are beginning to appear.

“But what about those?”, asks Kimmy, pointing up to the fading cloud, “I mean, they kill people.”

We all look up.

“Only in heavy concentration.”, says Conner, “The more they disperse, the less likely anyone will get enough bites to hurt them; just enough to give them a happy glow. Think about it, tomorrow morning, all across The Kimberly, people at their kitchen tables, driving to work, heading off to school, will be having the best morning they’ve had in years.”

“And when the blues,”, she asks, “start mingling with those hundreds of millions of others?”

Conner hesitates and has a ‘funny you should ask’ expression on his face.

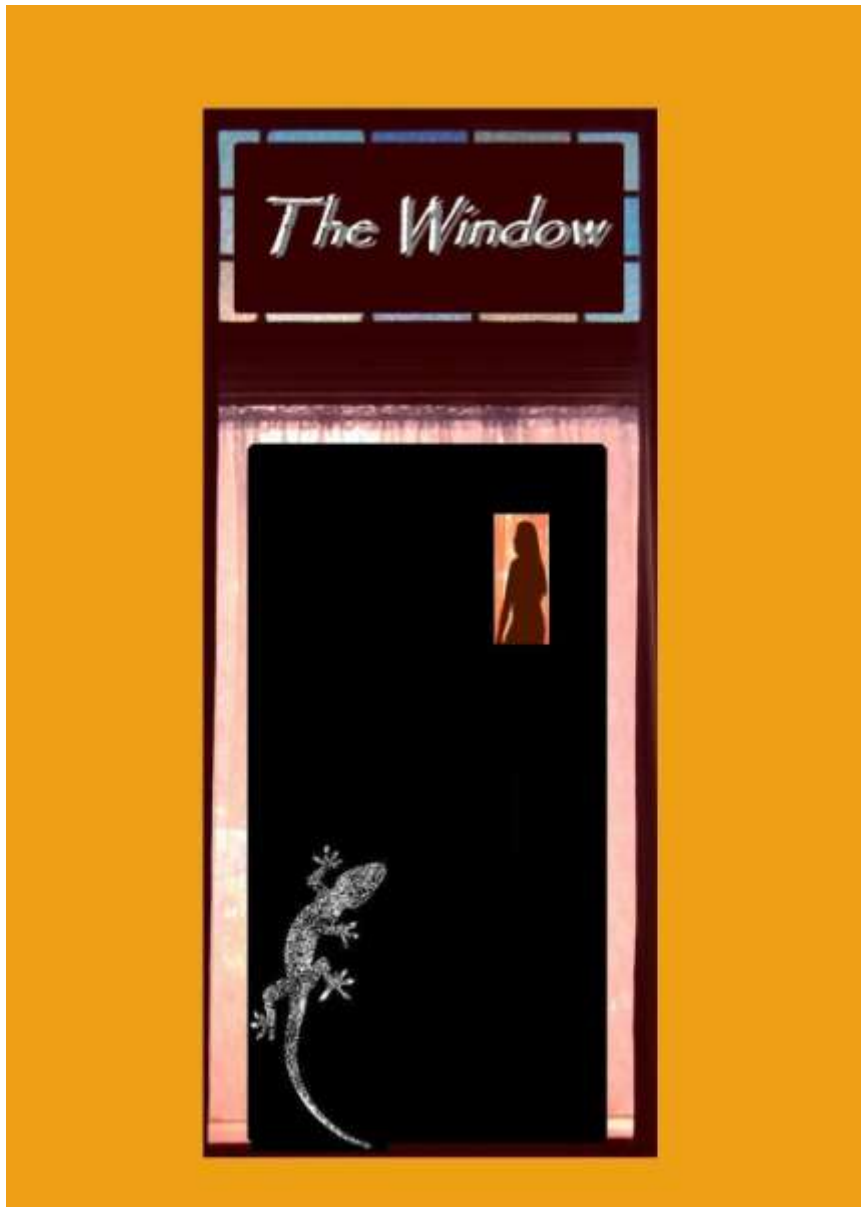
“Yeah,”, he says, “I was just wondering about that myself.”

(postscript)

‘Select Video to Upload’

Click

(note to self - get affairs in order)



One

Light and shadow; a dark silhouette framed in soft orange. That's all it was, but it grabbed me and wouldn't let go. Even now, as memories fade and details blur, the clarity of that moment so long ago is almost frightening.

It was late on a Thursday night in mid-September. I'd been sitting outside my kitchen for quite a while, sipping Rioja, looking out across the rooftops and simply marveling at where I was. When the light came on I turned and saw that it was coming from a tall window, almost floor to ceiling that belonged to the apartment next door. Though we shared the roof, I still had not met the neighbors. It was only my third night in Madrid.

The silhouette glided back and forth thru the light several times before disappearing from view. Then, the familiar sound of rushing water. Rising and moving a few paces to my left, I was able to see her. Still little more than a shadow, airbrushed by the thin curtain and bathed in that soft orange glow, she was magnificent. I moved quietly back to my chair as she turned off the shower, wrapped a towel around her hair and stepped out of sight again. When the light went out, I stayed glued to the window, and it would be nearly dawn before I turned out my own.

At work the next morning, Dave asked how I like my place. Difficult as it was to hold my tongue, something told me I should keep this experience to myself for a while. Dave had already been in the city a few months and was anxious to show me around on the weekend. We had worked together before. I knew this meant visiting each of the bars and discos where he had scored and would include a minutely detailed description of each conquest. I feigned a bad stomach and spent the entire weekend waiting for that light to come on again.

I waited until after midnight both Friday and Saturday before turning in disappointed. Sunday, however, my prayers were answered. I could not take my eyes off of her, even when she stopped for a moment and looked out the window. Stay still, I told myself, she can't see me; it's so dark and there was the curtain...but she could. She was to tell me later that she had looked right into my eyes and had nearly screamed but instead slipped out of her nightshirt and into the shower. She was to recall that moment many times, telling me about all the crazy things that went through her mind and the strange new sensations that rippled through her body.

Caught somewhere between terror and rapture, I could not move. Long after she had finished I just stared into the darkness she'd left behind; into that window, the black hole from which I could not escape. It was the entrance to another place, a place that I wanted desperately to go

to but instinctively to run from. As my equilibrium returned, I picked up the chair and moved it to other side of the roof, resolving never to go near the window again. Later, unable to sleep, I was reminded of something I'd once read:

"Resolve is never weaker than the morning after it was never stronger."

I returned to the window again and again over the next several days. Twice, unfamiliar silhouettes appeared and sent me slinking back to my kitchen. I had carefully avoided meeting them but these brief encounters had helped me to form a vague picture of the family; mother, father, younger brother. I had placed her age at maybe nineteen or twenty. Not sure why exactly; the way she moved, carried herself. The way she had returned to the window knowing I was there. Though I had only touched her with my eyes I felt as if we were lovers already.

Two

"Buenos dias", the young girl said as we stepped into the tiny elevator. I'd seen her in the lobby before, a pretty girl wearing the obligatory school uniform: dark purple skirt to just below the knee, white blouse and tie.

"Buenos dias", I said, pushing Atico and waiting for her to tell me which floor she wanted. When she smiled, lowered her head and said, "Yo tambien", it took a moment to hit me. Impossible, I thought, she can't be more than fifteen.

We didn't speak or look at each other until the car stopped. My heart was pounding; I could feel the blood collecting in my cheeks. No way, I told myself again, beginning to feel dizzy, she must be a friend of the family. Taking a deep breath, I held the door open for her as she took out her keys and walked slowly to the door across the hall.

"Como se llama?" she asked without turning around.

After a long pause locating my vocal cords, "Henry", I managed.

"Soy Remedios", she said and closed the door quietly behind her.

I knew it was her and she knew it was me; and of course she had already known for some time. And, of course, I would be there again tonight. Maybe her father would be there too, gun in hand. What the hell was I doing? This was a child, I kept telling myself, but it was no contest. I would watch her tonight and the next night, and dream of the time when she would come to my bed. I was powerless; standing at the threshold of an event horizon beyond which my life could never be the same again.

I fumbled with the keys, dropped and picked them up again, certain that this time she was watching me. Hands shaking, palms sweaty, I finally got the door open and closed it quickly. I could hardly breathe and was quite sure that I was about to throw up. A weird vibration passed through the back of my neck, my head was swirling and this strange gurgling sound was coming up from deep in my throat. It was like wet purring but with a spooky edge to it.

Returning to work hungry and crazy I hardly spoke to anyone for the rest of the day, and that night I was in the appointed spot starting on my fifth glass of Rioja and sucking deeply on a Marlboro (my first in over eight years) when the light came on.

She still behaved as if she hadn't seen me, putting her hair up as usual while waiting for the water to warm. But this time she came directly to the window and casually opened the curtain before stepping into the shower. This was my first look at her without the blur and distortion, and without the anonymity. There she was, Remedios, washing herself for me, and only me.

All too soon the darkness returned. Is it overly melodramatic to say that the window had become the only light in my life? That without it I was a shell, a ghost, seeking only silence and solitude until it returned? Perhaps; but seeing Remedios without that curtain in the way, and realizing that her passion ran at least as deep as mine, had pushed me completely over the edge. Sweet Jesus, I thought; what had I done to deserve such reward, or such punishment.

For three nights in succession she returned to me and each night I moved a little closer to the window, so close finally that my breath was fogging the glass. I wanted her to open the window, to come out so that we could consummate this...whatever it was that we'd been having. But instead, the bathroom door opened followed by a man's voice, deep and harsh, and I dropped flat on my stomach driving my face into the gravel rooftop. Waiting in that position for what seemed like hours, I crawled back to my kitchen and waited for the banging and screaming that never came.

Over a week passed and, like a werewolf avoiding the full moon, I never once set foot on the roof. I was, however, in the lobby every day at lunchtime where I saw her shotgun wielding father behind every bush and column. There was, however, no sign of Remedios. At the office, people told me they were worried about me, that I always seemed to be in a daze. I stopped talking to my friends, especially Dave, afraid that it might slip out and kill the magic. But where was she? Had her father sent her to 'los abuelos' while he determined where to dump my body? Or, worse yet, did she have a boyfriend; some zit faced little prick with a hard-on and no idea what to do with it? I was losing it.

Then, Friday night, October the fourteenth, at just past ten she knocked on my door. I did not think for a second that it might be her father or Dave or anyone else. It was Remedios, her parents were out and we were finally going to...I had already imagined this night in complete detail at least a hundred times.

"Hola.", she said.

"Hi." I looked across to her door and around the hallway.

"Fuera.", she whispered.

My response was meant to be a smiling, "Hmmm", meaning well, what are we going to about that? But instead, what came out was that wet purring sound again. Embarrassed the hell out of me, but she didn't seem to notice and stepped inside. I closed the door and from behind put both hands on her shoulders while tenderly pressing my lips to the side of her neck. As she tilted her head back, I put my arms around her waist holding her very gently. Neither of us spoke, but the voices in my head were getting louder and louder.

A while later, still only kissing and touching, I had my first chance to look closely at her face. It was perfect; the perfect face of a child the voices roared as morality, conscience and self-loathing attacked me from all sides. Though they would return with a vengeance later that night and work on me until morning, the heat of the moment brought me back to that face; and that fragrance. I can smell it right now. Never in my life, before or since, has there been such a fragrance. An intoxicating blend of hair, skin, sweat and breath combined with that ever so subtle hint of something else. There was no defense. Man is, after all, a beast.

"Tengo que irme.", she said suddenly, "Mis padres."

"Remedios, wait." The question had to be asked, even if I already knew the answer.

"Sabado, vamos al campo, si?" she blew softly into my ear while buttoning up and tucking in. "Por favor?", she begged, putting little kisses here and there. Could I say no? Should I even bother to ask the question? My brain was completely homogenized. I was in mad mad love and so was Remedios. If she had told me she was twelve it might have stopped me.

Middle aged voyeur peeps, meets and falls in love with...a schoolgirl. Yes, I knew exactly what I was doing. The voices kept calling me a sick puppy, telling me I needed help. You are corrupting this innocent child, they screamed, maybe ruining her entire life in order to satisfy your beastly hunger. I was nothing less than a vampire, they told me, feeding on her youth. But the window always won. Follow your heart, it said. Something like this happens once and only once. To say no to the window is to say no to the magic of life. I may have agonized a bit, quite a bit, but there was never really a serious doubt in what was left of my mind.

Three

We spent all day Saturday out in al campo, leaving separately and meeting down on the Gran Via. Her English was not very good, my Spanish not much better, but we managed. It just seemed to make it all the more fun, laughing at each other stumbling over words. I was seventeen again and this was the most beautiful day of my life. We returned late in the evening to a bus stop on the Via and held each other a long while before she finally shoed me away.

"Cuando?" I asked.

"A noche.", she said, motioning again for me to leave.

Walking home I prayed to any gods that might be listening that this meant tonight, and it did. More tonights than I could ever have imagined, and nowhere near enough. She would slip out through the window and come to me, sometimes catching me asleep but not often. She would stay as long as she felt was safe, sometimes hours, sometimes only minutes. In the beginning we made that soft kind of love, slowly and tenderly exploring each other. But it wasn't long before the passion engulfed us. It damn near killed me. And in one of those peculiarly Catholic ironies, she absolutely refused to use any kind of protection.

We did see each other occasionally in daylight; a couple of more Saturdays and even a Saint's Day when school was out. For nearly four months she told no one, not even her best friend, and neither did I. We had begun talking about the possibility of coming out, but as soon as we considered her parent's reaction the conversation would end abruptly. We both knew, of course, that it would be the end of everything. And so it was.

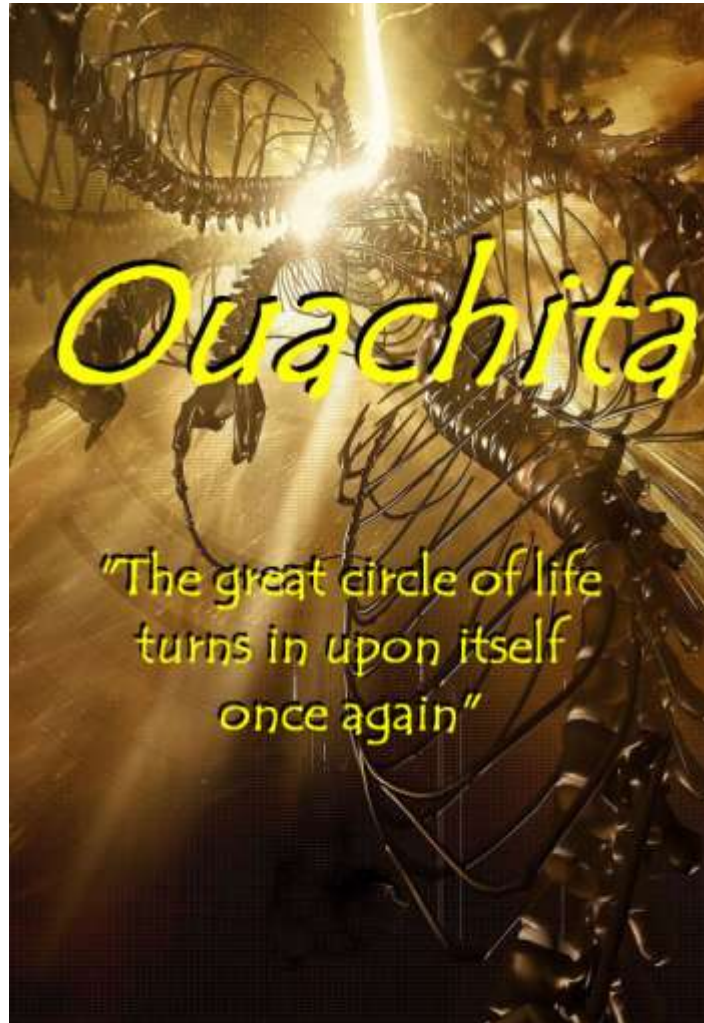
She was by then beginning to show. Her father must have noticed and come to her room to stroke her hair and ask if she was alright. Finding rolled up clothes under the blanket, he felt that stabbing pain all fathers must feel when they first realize another man is stroking their daughter's hair; in this case, a man as old as he was. He waited in the living room until hearing her return through the window, but said nothing. He simply sat there until morning when the pain and the rage finally boiled over.

These things I can only imagine; I never saw or spoke to Remedios again. One morning they were simply gone, the entire family. I was told they had gone south for the winter. And not a word from her father. If I had been him, I would have---

Enough! I'm going to be sick. We both know *exactly* what you would have done. Now, enough of this pitiful whining, we have a long night ahead.

I must confess, I used to admire Henry. I had always been there, lurking in the back of his skull, twitching my tail now and then to give him ideas, but never, not once in all those years did he cave in. This, of course, was before Remedios. The moment that light came on, I knew I finally had him. Henry says that he was unable to summon the will to hold me back. He even blames the window; can you imagine? I can tell you that it was, in fact, Henry himself that turned me loose; eagerly, I might add. Either way, it makes no difference now. I will allow him his pathetic delusions as long as it keeps him quiet.

Tonight, as always, we will prowl the darkened streets and alleyways, seeking the trail of something seen earlier at the shopping mall, or the schoolyard. During our recent travels from city to city, I have honed my instincts to the point where I can pick up a scent and follow a warmth left hours, even days before. Tenacity, subtlety, single mindedness...I would love nothing more than to catalogue all of my remarkable skills for you, but that will have to wait for another time. All this talk has made me hungry.



Ouachita (noun)

Origin: Caddo Nation

Meaning: "*Good hunting ground*"

A battered pickup with Texas plates rolls down an old logging road just over the Arkansas line. It turns onto an unmarked path and disappears into the forest for several miles before pulling up to the foot of a small rise deep in the backcountry of the Ouachita National Forest. There is a slight rustling sound as the undergrowth parts and an old man comes forward to greet them. He places both hands on the shoulders of his son and they touch foreheads in a prolonged embrace. No words are spoken. As they part and beckon her forward, the entire family watches in near ecstasy from the darkness. They have waited generations for this moment. Soon, there will be feasting and chanting, ancestral rage tempered, if only briefly, by immeasurable joy. The waiting is over.

October, 2015

Durant, Oklahoma

Moira sniffs at the door.

“Lyndee, Sweetie, what are you doing in there all this time?”

Learning to be patient

“You should get outside for a while, Honey, try to make some new friends.”

All in good time

Moira reaches for the doorknob, but hesitates. Worrying about your daughter’s health is natural, being frightened of her is something else entirely. Lyndee has always been big for her age, but in the last few months she has outgrown everyone, including her mother. She has become withdrawn, even reclusive, and her skin seems to be even more opaque than usual. Of course, Moira closed her ears to all that crazy talk back in Texas. Shit, she told herself, pets go missing all the time, and no one was going to say things like that about her Lyndee Lee.

Moving in with Granny hadn’t helped much; it was too close to home and the trouble just seemed to follow them. Sure, it was a bit surprising when the same thing started happening around Granny’s place, but Moira just couldn’t take any more of those damn Texans, with their self-righteous attitudes and mob mentality. Thank the Lord, her friend Lula Perkins over in Durant was able to put them up for a while until Moira could find something permanent. She’s also decided to go ahead and schedule a CAT Scan for Lyndee. The doctors suspected some sort of genetic disorder and had been bugging her about it for ages, but Moira had always been terrified of what they would find. She still was.

“Christ!”, she says out loud while cracking her first cold one of the day, “She’s only ten years old; how could those assholes even think such things?”

Moira Robbins was born and raised in Limestone, Texas, about thirty miles from the Oklahoma border. Tending bar, waiting tables and wrestling cowboys since high school she’d pretty much given up on ever having a family of her own, until Lyndee Lee came along. The fact that her baby was ‘special’ had never really bothered Moira at all. The fact that Lyndee never spoke became less of an issue as over the years Moira learned to hear her daughter in different ways.

She’d convinced herself long ago that the father was Bennie, one of her regulars at the bar, and had worked very hard to put that other one out of her mind. It was all pretty much of a blur anyway. She thought at the time he might have been one of those Osage

bucks that worked up at the casino, but drunk as she was the guy could have been from Mars for all she knew. The smell of him, however, has stayed with her to this very day.

“No!” Moira scolds herself for letting that creep back into her thoughts, cracks another cold one and slaps a peebeejay on the table.

“C’mon, Honey, lunch is ready.”

Lyndee reins in her wandering mind and takes a moment to get herself back into character. She is pleased with this new location. The house she grew up in, way out on the edge of town, had been perfect; a place where she was free to do most anything. Lacking experience, however, she had failed to take the necessary precautions. Moving to Granny’s had been unsatisfactory; there were too many people living nearby and Granny was always watching her. But this new place was working out nicely. Lula was busy most of the time and seldom came down to the basement. And Lyndee had learned her lesson well, only going out at night and keeping her collection far out in the woods behind the house. She smiles to herself on the way to the kitchen. He would be coming soon, she could feel it.

Meanwhile, back in Limestone, Granny is just sitting down to a nice bowl of hot soup when the boards on the back porch start to creak. Now who could that be, she wonders.

(one week later, a knock at the door)

“Moira Robbins?”

“Yes?”

A sheriff’s department vehicle is parked out front of Lula Perkins’ place; two deputies introduce themselves.

“Deputy Billy Ray Grimes, Bryan County Sheriff’s Office, this is Deputy Barman. Ma’am, you are related to Mrs. Lorna Robbins, is that right?”

“She’s my mother, has something happened? What’s happened?”

“May we come in?”

Lyndee comes up the basement stairs and opens the door a crack. Barman, the female deputy, is looking at Moira from behind mounds of black eyeliner; looking at her with that contrived na hullo empathy that Lyndee has seen so many times before. Both deputies take a seat on Lula’s sofa.

“Ma’am,” says Deputy Grimes, “have you spoken to your mother recently?”

“A week ago, maybe two. Please tell me what’s wrong; has she been hurt?”

“Well, we hope not.”, Grimes continues, “It seems one of her neighbors called on her last Thursday; found the door open, some food on the table....”

Moira lifts her hand to her mouth, “Oh my God, no!”

“Wait a minute now, hear me out. The neighbors also report seeing a suspicious man near the house; big guy, maybe an Indian. Any idea who that mighta been?”

Moira stands abruptly and begins to pace, “Jesus! No! Are they searching for her? Maybe she...”

“Yes Ma’am, there is a search operation in progress but...”

Grimes hesitates and the deputies share a look.

Moira stops, turns and gets a shiver up her spine, “But what?”

“Sheriff Hollie, over in Grayson County, has some questions about all those animals out in the shed.”

The tiny hairs on Moira’s neck stand up, “Animals?”

“Of course,” explains Grimes, “he’s got no jurisdiction over here is why he asked us to come talk to you about it.”

“What animals?”, screams Moira, starting to lose her equilibrium, “That shed’s been empty for years! What the hell are you people talking about?”

“Calm down now, Ma’am.”, says Barman, “Sheriff says they been there a right good while, back from when you and the girl was livin there. Now, you must know somethin about them.”

Moira sits down hard and feels the blood draining from her head. A thousand thoughts cut through her brain like razors. She closes her eyes as tight as she can. No, no, no...

“Says one has already been identified as belonging to a neighbor, from the collar, the bodies being pretty much decomposed and all. The rest were mostly rabbits and such.”

Moira feels herself slipping away, no control, she was going to faint.

“Hung up on hooks is the odd part.”, adds Deputy Barman, “Sheriff says each of ‘em was wrapped in somethin with a tube coming down to a bottle like thing, like they was catchin the drippins. This don’t mean nuthin to you?”

Moira hits the floor, all 230 pounds of her, out cold.

Grimes and Barman look at each other again then down to Moira Robbins.

“Seems like maybe it meant somethin to her after all.”, says Barman with a chuckle, “Damn, you smell that?”

“Jesus!”, Deputy Grimes reaches for his weapon as a huge shadow appears in the doorway. Deputy Barman stands up, but is struck immediately. As Barman falls to her knees, another blow catches Grimes just below the right elbow, shattering bone and sending the handgun harmlessly across the room. A huge pair of hands reach down and twist the deputy’s neck farther than it was ever intended to go. This action is then repeated on the female deputy. Lyndee steps into the room and looks down at Moira who is just starting to come around, then looks up.

There is a slight pause before Lyndee understands and swiftly wrings Moira’s neck with an audible snap. They carry the bodies to the door, scan the area then load them into the bed of an old pickup recently borrowed from one of Granny’s neighbors back in Limestone. They drive directly into the woods to Lyndee’s collecting area, take the bodies out, lay them on the ground and strip off the clothing. This is Lyndee’s first time with a large animal, but she takes one of the deer knives and splits Moira from anus to breast bone like she’d been doing it all her life. He nods his approval while doing the same with the other two. The bodies are then gutted and cleaned up as well as possible

before being loaded back into the truck. Lyndee puts the remainder of her collection in with them, ties down the tarpaulin cover and they head east, toward Arkansas and home.

“Potassium, nitrogen, cadaverine; all the usual byproducts of putrefaction. Thing is, amino acids are present as well, along with several enzymes and hormones that are usually broken down during decay. Truth is...”

“Truth is, Doc, I don’t understand one goddam word a this shit. All I want to know is what the hell we are dealing with here?”

Doctor J. T. Jamison, Grayson County Coroner, is trying to explain to the Sheriff of Limestone, Buford Hollie, about the fluid residue found in Lorna Robbins’ shed.

“It seems,” the doctor continues,” the process of decomposition was sped up somehow, so that these acids and enzymes didn’t have time to break down. I’m talking adrenal in, somatotropin, estrogen; fully viable active enzymes, not to mention intact amino acids. The result, besides having the most god-awful smell I have ever encountered, is a nutrient-rich fluid, apparently collected in those beakers... for what purpose I cannot imagine.”

“Nutrient?”, asks Sheriff Hollie, “You mean like food?”

“Well, fuel for cells, yes. Decomposition is often referred to as self-digestion; that is, with food, water and oxygen no longer being supplied, the body in effect begins to eat itself.”

“Christ on a cross, JT!”

“Sorry. Anyway, when individual cells decay, they burst and release their remaining fuel. And when you add these enzymes and luteinizing hormones, particularly from the rabbits, well, the resultant concoction would be more like a really potent fertilizer.”

“Godammit, people say the girl took the animals, that she was some kinda freak. Now her grandma’s gone missin. What is this, voodoo or somethin?”

“Well, that would be out of my...”

Sheriff Hollie’s assistant, Louise Pena, calls from the outer office.

“Sheriff Loomis on line two.”

Bill Loomis is the sheriff of Bryan County, Oklahoma, which includes the town of Durant. The voice on the other end sounds shaky; Sheriff Loomis is clearly finding it difficult to speak.

“Two a my deputies are dead. We found their vehicle at the Perkins place, horrible mess in the woods nearby. Looks like they were mutilated by goddam maniacs, Buford; no bodies, just clothes and innards. I just can’t understand this world anymore, Buford; just can’t.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry as hell, Bill. The Robbins woman too? And the girl?”

“Appears so; they’re tryin to sort out the innards now, but say it’s got to be from at least three people, maybe four.”

“Christ almighty. We got anything at all to work with?”

“Some tire tracks, pickup most likely. I been lookin at this business over in Arkansas. Lotta disappearances the last few years.”, Sheriff Loomis pauses to catch his breath, “Too many, mostly hunters. Don’t know if there’s a connection or not.”

There’s another long pause, then...

“Buford. I got a really bad feelin about this.”

Sheriff Hollie puts the phone down and stares at the wall for a minute.

“It’s a murder case now, JT. Slaughtered like cattle. Listen, dig into this shit with the animals for me; I need to get some kinda idea what the hell was going on out there.”

Doc Jamison nods and heads back to his lab. First, he would do a more detailed analysis on the residue. Then, for the first time in his career, he would perform a full blown autopsy on a rabbit. Knowing how the animals were killed might help. Lingering uneasily in the back of his mind, however, is that word: voodoo.

Sheriff Hollie reads through the witness statements again from the Lorna Robbins case file. Some of her neighbors had reported seeing a strange man in the area; they all described the man as ‘big’. One said he had strange skin, another said he looked like a shape shifter, another an alien. He shakes his head, swears to himself, and begins going through the cold case database from Arkansas. It will be nearly dawn before the oldest one in the bunch grabs his attention.

“Was back in ’95. Pretty big story; even got picked up by a couple a those tabloids back east.”

Buford has awakened Dottie Baker, night shift deputy in the Waldron, Arkansas, Sheriff’s Office. After a minor explosion of profanity, she says she remembers the case quite well, almost as if it was yesterday.

“It was Bessie, used to ply her trade up at the old Paradise Hotel before it was shut down. Told the sheriff this guy never paid, never said shit, just took her. Said she thought she was imaginin the whole thing, bein somewhat intoxicated and all. Said that he acted like a child, this big fella, like he’d never been with a woman before. Said she wasn’t even sure he was human, and a course that’s when all the fuss started.”

Hollie thinks about that for a bit.

“You remember any similar reports around the same time?”

“Hell, once it hit the papers ladies were comin outa the woodwork sayin they’d been with him, even a couple down your way as I recall, but nothin ever come of it. Sheriff, last ten

years or so I ain't heard doodly squat about this story. Then, couple weeks back, folks on the rez suddenly started gettin all stirred up about this shit again. Now you come along in the middle a the night; what the hell's goin on?"

"Sheriff?"

“Their necks were snapped, all of them; wrung like chickens.”

Doc Jamison, up all night himself, walks in explaining to Sheriff Hollie what had happened to the animals.

“They were field dressed, disemboweled, sealed in plastic wrap and hung up to drain off into those bottles. Basically, they were fermenting.”

“Why?”, screams Hollie.

“I’m comin to that. Turns out the fluid contains very high levels of somatotropin, that’s a growth hormone, plus an enzyme I’ve never even seen before; had to call Little Rock to find out what it was. Carboxytetra ... hell I can’t even pronounce it. Supposedly, it promotes growth in specific areas of the brain stem and thalamus and is normally only present during the embryonic and early fetal...”

“JT...”

“I know, I know. Bottom line, it is remotely possible that this concoction could be used as some kind of supplement to promote growth and enhance specific brain functions.”

“The kid was drinkin this shit, that what you’re tellin me?”

“No, of course not; it would be toxic if taken internally. But listen, it more likely has to do with a ritual of some kind.”

“Voodoo.”

“I know this is hard for you, but just hear me out, okay? Now, you know many of the Osage and Choctaw around here still believe in the old ways. And you know how some of them still place their dead up on those pyres; put the bodies up right next to the house.”

“I’ve seen that; smelled it too.”

“Well, I’ve been talking to Louise about it and apparently they used to have bone pickers in the tribe...”

“Wait a minute, did you just say bone pickers?”

“Bone pickers. They grew their nails real long and sharp so they could scrape the bones clean and purify them for burial. They were high up in the tribe in the old days, almost sacred. So, what would happen, the body would sit up on the pyre and dry out slowly over time, as long as six months, and the stuff that would leach out of the body, which was thought to be part of the dead person’s spirit, would be captured in these special bowls.”

“No offense to our Native American neighbors, but this is bullshit”

“Hush now, let me finish. Apparently this tradition originated during the time of the Niukonska. And, get this, according to legend, the bone pickers would suck on the dried flesh from the body, like jerky, and then paint themselves with the drippings in order to become one with death.”

Sheriff Hollie smiles, stands and slowly picks up the files from his desk.

“JT,” he says calmly while walking toward the outer office, “you’re gonna be one with death if you don’t knock off this bone picker horseshit. We got four dead dammit, and I don’t want any more. Listen, there may be a connection to these cases over in Arkansas, one in particular. I’ll check that out. Meantime, you get your head on straight and find me somethin solid to work with.”

Louise Pena, raised on the reservation, meets Sheriff Hollie at the door and looks him in the eye.

“You should listen.”

“Excuse me?”

“Maybe it’s none of my business,” she says quietly, “but you should listen to Dr. Jamison. There is much talk in the Nations; they say they are coming out...”

“Louise, I don’t mean to be rude,” the Sheriff interrupts, “but you’re right, this is white folks business and we’ll handle it. Now, please, let’s all get back to the real world, shall we?”

The mound is about 80 feet across and rises slowly to a height of no more than 12 to 15 feet. The old growth forest continues unbroken above and around the rise, which stretches over 400 feet in length. Even so, from as little as twenty yards away it is nearly invisible. To the family it is known as the Earth Womb, the garden from which new life will flow. There are at least fifty such mounds in the Ouachita alone, and hundreds more scattered throughout this region of the Middle Waters. Inside this particular mound, the darkness is broken by tiny filaments of light sneaking in through hundreds of pencil sized vent holes. The longhouse provides living quarters for over two hundred, along with a curing room, ritual chamber, birthing chamber and nursery. A hot spring directly below the mound provides water, as well as natural heat in the winter. On either side of the curing room are two sets of beams, resembling those used for drying tobacco. The trees for construction of the longhouse, mostly short leaf pine and red oak, had been cut down and dragged from several different locations far from the mound in order to maintain the integrity of the forest. In the oral history of the Choctaw, many are said to have fled to these sites during the forced migrations of 1831, and have been living and reproducing in near total isolation ever since. They are known in Choctaw legend as the shadow people.

As her brothers, sisters and cousins come streaming from the mound, Lyndee gathers them closer and speaks to them in the silent language of the Niukonska:

Once, there were millions of buffalo and no Europeans. Then, there were millions of Europeans and no buffalo. Now, the great circle of life shall turn in upon itself once again.

The fresh bodies are hung in the drying area, joining dozens of others, both animal and human. Lyndee, now known by her tribal name, unpronounceable in any spoken language, is led along with her sisters to the ritual chamber where they are prepared to receive their brothers. As soon as the ritual wrapping is complete and the sacred bowls are placed, the feasting and mating begins, and will continue for many days. By early Spring the nursery is alive with activity. The younglings are born with all of their instincts fully developed, hunting small mammals on their own and mating among themselves within weeks. By Summer they have outgrown the longhouse and expanded their territory, and their diet, far beyond the confines of the Ouachita. The waiting is over.

2:24am, Tuesday, June 12, 2016

Waldron, Arkansas

Mrs. Wilson smells it first and wakes her husband. They look at each other, faces twisted by the stench, before rushing to the back bedroom where they find the children sleeping, safe and sound. Mrs. Wilson stays with the children while Mr. Wilson turns on the hallway light, covers his nose and mouth and walks slowly toward the living room. He imagines finding Santa dead and decomposing in the chimney, giving rise to a nervous laugh just as he catches a glimpse of the first one.

It's just a reflection, he thinks; something there but not there. Mr. Wilson is transfixed for a moment, cocking his head first one way then the other, squinting and trying to focus when the second one appears. They seem to drift toward him, vague and dreamlike, their steps so light as to be utterly soundless. Despite his terror, and the overwhelming stench, he finds them oddly beautiful.

Mrs. Wilson hears a short scream, then nothing. Stifling her own scream, she reaches for the phone and calls for help. The children stir for a moment then drift mercifully back to sleep.

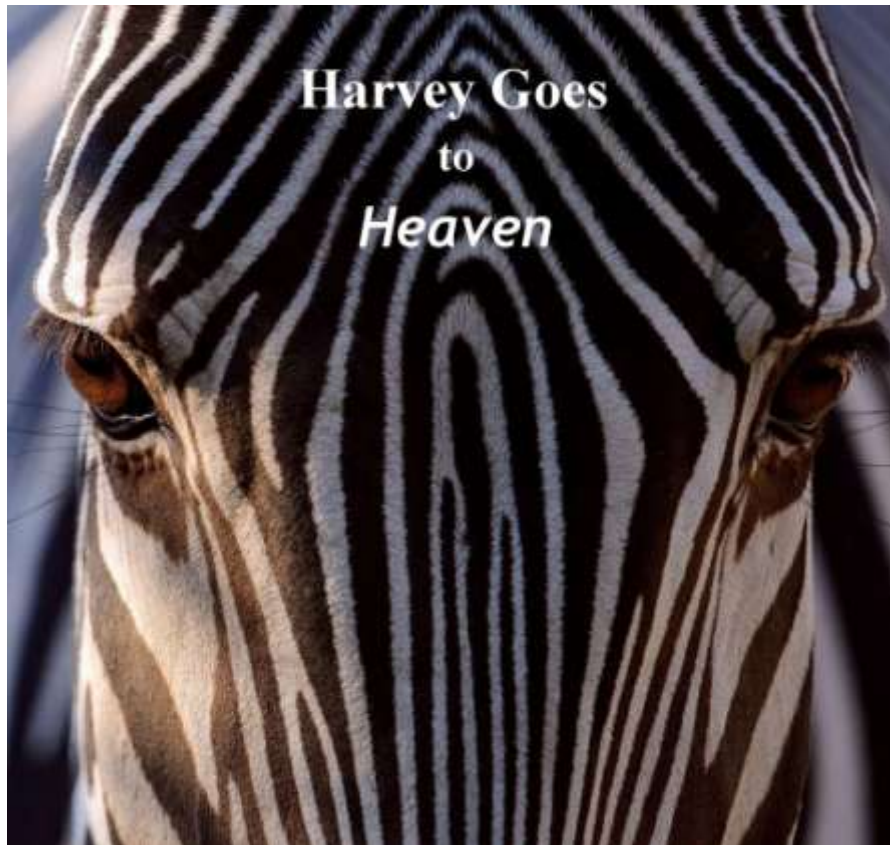
“Sheriff’s office, this is Dottie.”

Dottie Baker is awakened again and is starting to get angry. Waldron is always dead on week nights, that’s why she took this shift. Now she’s had three calls in twenty minutes.

“Yes ma’am; horrible smell, someone in the house. Now, calm down and tell me your address please.”

Weird noises.

“Ma’am?”



I am with her now; right here with the stinking snorting flesh and blood beast herself, and I know what's coming. So does she. Her ears prick up, her nose tastes the air and as she bellows her warning and turns to escape she gets a rush of adrenalin to help her outrun the charging females, but it's too late. One swipe from a single massive paw slaps her hind legs out from under her and I realize at once that she's a goner. So does she. With one pair of jaws tearing open her groin and another closing tightly around her throat, a highly specialized gland at the base of the thalamus is activated for the first and only time in her brief existence. The effect is dramatic and instantaneous. Her respiratory, nervous and circulatory systems come to a virtual standstill and all voluntary movement ceases as narcosis quickly blurs both the panic and the pain. Face to face now, looking deep into those huge brown eyes, I can see her in there; but only barely, and only for a moment.

What happens to her in this moment, I wonder. Where is she? Can there be sensation without senses? With her instinctive drives for survival, mating and repelling predators no longer present, is there now room for something else to rise to the surface? In this final moment before becoming something less than zebra, does she somehow become something more?

The questions linger long after I wake. The dream is always the same

1. The Doctor

Harvey steps up to the podium with all the swagger and self-assurance of the old master himself. True, the young man had made some significant finds over the past four years, but four years is still only four years. Moshe Lowenstein has been out there for decades and, while Harvey refers to him as the dinosaur, to nearly everyone else in the field Moshe is the Master.

Remembering his postgraduate days at New York University as if they were yesterday, Harvey looks out with mild surprise at the fifty or so grad students who had come to hear his dissertation on ancient Middle Eastern history. For a Friday afternoon, in the middle of Kansas, this is an unexpectedly good turnout. He thanks Professor Horace Wolfe for the warm welcome, clears his throat and begins:

“To deny a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons is not a deed to be undertaken lightheartedly, especially by one belonging to that people. No consideration, however, will move me to set aside truth in favor of supposed national interest.”

Pause for effect, and...

“Good morning. I am Dr. Harvey Kessler. I open with those noble words, words that I am sure many of you are familiar with, not because I am here to defend Freud’s theory, a theory which in fact I do not entirely agree with, but because the accumulation of hard evidence that we now have at our disposal can no longer be buried, distorted, ridiculed or simply ignored. As archaeologists and students of ancient history, it is our job to uncover clues about our past in order to help us better understand who we are today, and where we are going both as individuals and as a people. If we intentionally set out to rebury or alter these clues because they do not fit with our particular mythology, then, in my humble opinion, we can no longer call ourselves scholars and scientists.”

Before he can finish the sentence, there’s a shuffling in the audience as several students gather their things and stand up to leave. Here we go again, thinks Harvey.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says quietly, trying to remain calm, “please, if we do not listen we cannot learn. I ask you, as a matter of professional courtesy, to disregard what I have to say only *after* I have said it. A couple of hours of your time are all I ask, and afterward, if you like, you can throw the Book at me.” A few of the mutineers smile and hesitate, but the rest keep moving even more briskly toward the door, some expressing their displeasure both verbally and digitally.

“How can you call yourselves scholars if you fear or ridicule opinions that...”

The door closes behind the offended ones with a premeditated slam.

“...differ from your own.” Harvey thanks the three returning to their seats and continues, “Now, I would like to show you a series of slides from our most recent digs in Jerusalem. The main site is just outside the north wall of the old city, and the others are dwellings

recently uncovered within the walls that date from the early twelfth to late fourth centuries BC. These finds are both exciting and controversial, as they seem to cast even more doubt on our current view of the region's history.

“Let me begin by taking you back in time. It is the year 621 BC; six centuries after the death of Moses. This was a time of religious and tribal upheaval during which the priesthood was losing the immense power it once held over the people; people who, according to Exodus, Leviticus, and many other references were still worshipping their traditional natural gods.

This was the year that Hilkiah, high priest of the Hebrews, is said to have discovered the Book of Laws.”

More grumbling can be heard as Doctor Kessler flips through several slides of idols and amulets that his team had recently unearthed.

“All of these artifacts date from between 900 and 630 BC and strongly support the position that nothing resembling monotheism existed in Jerusalem prior to Hilkiah's discovery. Add to this the fact that we have no mention of Moses in any historical record prior to this time and we begin to see a picture emerging which is quite different from the generally accepted view.”

The grumblings continue and there have been one or two more dropouts, but Harvey manages to get through the remainder of his slides without any serious disruptions. It isn't long, however, before he strikes another nerve.

“So, what was really going on between the Hebrew priests and the Assyrians? What kind of a deal did they make, and what were the conditions? Is it possible, as legend suggests, that they succumbed to the demands of Ashurbanipal; that the lowly god of storms, Yahweh, should be promoted to King of the Gods over all of Judea? This would certainly have helped to solidify the rule of King Josiah, but what was in it for the Assyrians?”

A young woman in the front row shakes her head and scolds Harvey as if he were a five-year-old.

“The Hebrew were the chosen people, not the Assyrians.”

“That's right,” Harvey fires back, “and it was the King of Assyria who chose them that they should go forth and extend the domain of his favorite god, Yahweh. Do you think it is merely a coincidence that no less than three separate Assyrian texts from this period document this moment as the birth of the God of Abraham?”

“Bullshit, Doctor.”, the *doctor* is drawn out mockingly. “This is all absolute bullshit!” bellows the big Kansas ball player from the back of the auditorium. “You are nothing but atheist pagan scum and we do not have to sit here and listen to you blaspheme any longer!” The young man rises and storms out pulling two entire rows of noisy supporters in his wake. Professor Wolfe wonders why he did not see this coming.

“Wait a minute.”, protests Harvey, “I am not scum.”

But it’s too late, the mass exodus has begun. Within minutes there are only a handful of students remaining, not counting the group of evangelicals Harvey had noticed when he first came in. He can see that they are getting ready to pounce. This is only his fourth lecture but he can spot them immediately. He wonders again what it is that sets them apart, but still cannot put his finger on it. Realizing that he has once again gone too far, Harvey decides to go a little farther.

“Freud’s postulation that Moses was not a Jew at all sent shockwaves when he first published it, and as you can see by the reaction here today, not much has changed. It is doubtful, however, that Moses lived with the royal family of Akhenaton, as Freud suggested; or for that matter that he ever lived at all.”

“Oh, that’s beautiful.” comes from another quarter, “This is how you people are, isn’t it? You’ll say anything if it’ll make you a buck.”

Professor Wolfe is out of his seat in a flash.

“Mr. Albright! Get out! Consider yourself on suspension.”

“I’m only speaking the truth, sir, unlike this heathen bastard.”

“Out!” Professor Wolfe waits for the boy to leave. “I’m sorry for that, Dr. Kessler, but... I didn’t realize your remarks would be quite so... inflammatory. It might have been better if you had warned us in advance.”

“Yes, of course, my fault entirely. Ladies and gentleman, please accept my most sincere apologies for offending nearly everyone in the room. Slides and hand outs are available; take some for your friends ...”, he leaves it at that and can’t help smiling when the born agains finally get into their act.

“And God spoke unto Moses, the heretic shall fall as the infidel..”

Which brings Professor Wolfe wearily back to his feet.

“Please, not again. Don’t you people have homework or something?”

“The Lord God shall smite the Philistine...”, the boy continues.

“And create another asshole.”, mumbles Harvey just as an older more subdued voice rises from behind.

“Is it always like this?”

With ‘asshole’ still hanging in the air, Dr. Kessler turns around to find a short, rather portly priest smiling up at him.

II. The Cardinal

They had chosen Dr. Kessler carefully; his experience as an archaeologist being far less significant than his heritage, and his character. ‘Young, arrogant and Jewish’, he remembered John saying, ‘Just the man we need’. Cardinal Paul Kovacs stood beside the three-hundred-year old desk that had been his home for the past twelve years and marveled again at the impossibility of time. He had virtually lived in this office, sleeping in a small uncomfortable bed near the window whenever the need overcame him, which was not often, and taking his single daily meal, often alone, in the private dining hall of the Curia. His dream, the dream that had carried him from Bratislava to Rome as Slovakia’s first and only Cardinal had long since evaporated, stifled by a landscape littered with pompous toads and senile old lunatics. Only a beast or a madman could thrive in this cesspool, he thought, and was immediately reminded of his conservative counterpart and nemesis, Cardinal Peter DeGeneris. Though he did not rule the conservative majority, Peter pulled most of the strings and would be considered a contender when Pope John Paul finally gave up the Ghost.

Paul had been staring at the empty chest for an eternity, his hands trembling and his pulse rate through the roof. Tucked away carefully between many layers of protective cloth, he and John had uncovered his birthright, an object of such unparalleled importance that it was almost beyond comprehension. The history of the world would soon be altered forever, and forever would be here much sooner than anyone could possibly imagine.

Entrusted to Cardinal Paul Kovacs and the thirty-seven Supreme Guardians before him, the scroll had no equal in historical significance, its legend being told and retold for centuries in all corners of the Christian world. Being number thirty-eight in the long line, Paul knew the legend better than any living soul. Only recently, however, as the hour grew nearer, did he consider the possibility that it could actually be true. He had always been certain that it was only metaphor, a means to an end; but now he was not so sure.

Paul reflected again on how fortunate he had been to have Father John assigned to him; how John had rekindling his passion and stood beside him in his moments of weakness; moments when he wondered if what they were doing was truly an act of spiritual heroism, as John had called it, or something more human... moments when he wondered if he was not in fact losing his mind.

III. The Priest

“Whoa, sorry, I didn’t mean you, Father.”, Harvey looks around for any more of them, “I mean, I didn’t mean...”

“I was simply asking if the others were like this; your lectures.”

“Uh, no, yes.”, Harvey takes a step backward, “Not exactly.”

The group of born agains, seeing that the heretic is in good hands, marches proudly out the door, Onward Christian Soldiers echoing through the empty hall.

“Well, I can see how these Bible and Corn Belt schools might be difficult.” says the priest.

“Last week wasn’t much better,”, Harvey answers warily, “and that was NYU, my alma mater and my own people, if you know what I mean. Father, I’m sorry, but...”

“Allow me to apologize, for Mr. Albright that is. Now there is a boy in serious need of some higher education.”

Dr. Kessler smiles, and lets down his guard a little. “That’s good; can I use that?”

“Be my guest; compliments of John Patrick Collins.”, he holds out his hand, “We can dispense with the Father.”

“Harvey.”, they shake hands, “Might as well drop the Doctor too; seems to antagonize people.”

“You look like a schoolboy; what can you expect?”

“I suppose. Listen, I don’t mean to be rude, but...”

“Harvey, I’m just curious; when you said you resented being called scum, were you just being cute or did you mean to imply that you are indeed an atheist?”

“Well, my mother still thinks I’m a good little Jewish boy but, no, I don’t buy any of it anymore.”

“And a pagan as well?”

“Natural gods and natural pleasures without concern for manmade nonsense? Yes, definitely a pagan.”

“I’ve never met an atheist pagan before. Strange, you don’t look any different than the rest of us.”

“They do though.”, Harvey points excitedly to where the born agains had been sitting.

“Don’t they? I mean, did you ever notice that?”

“The only difference between them and you, Harvey, is faith.”

“That’s right. They have faith in an afterlife because they’re terrified of death. But you guys have added a twist, haven’t you? Eternal damnation, which terrifies them even more than death, and only you have the power to save them. Don’t you find that just a bit too convenient? I mean, Jesus, you’re all the same with your goddam perfumed gardens and shit. It’s fucking ridiculous!”

“My, you seem quite passionate about this.”

“Damn right I am. It’s the same old story: the dominant elite compel their subjects to accept as absolute truth whatever system of belief they may have decided to put forth as divine revelation. And here we are some four thousand years later and absolutely nothing has changed!”

“The intellectual non-believer always sees it that way.”

“We see it for what it is; no illusion, no self-deception.”

“So it is only you who see the absolute truth.”

“We each have our own truth, John, and the only thing absolute in life is death.”

Father John shakes his head gravely. “I certainly would not wish to live in your world, Harvey.”

“But you do, John; and deep in your very mortal soul you know it.”

“Perhaps one day you will see things in a different light, my son. Let’s take a walk, shall we?”

“A walk?” Harvey asks, slightly incredulous.

“Just a short one; I promise to be brief.”

“Well,” Harvey replies, curious what this strange priest could possibly be up to, “no reason to stay here.”

John and Harvey head for the door; Professor Wolfe remains seated, wiping his brow.

“Thanks for trying, Professor.”, Harvey calls from the door.

Professor Wolfe raises his hand in acknowledgement but says nothing.

“Everybody’s pissed at me today.”

“And well they should be, Harvey. Although, to be honest, I did find your evidence somewhat compelling. Alas, decorum prevents me from going any farther.”

“Irish Catholic, right?”

“That I am, my boy, that I am. Unfortunately, I haven’t been home in quite some time.”

“Don’t tell me, off gathering converts in the wilds of...”

“Rome, actually. I am what they call a Sentinel of the Sacred Order of the Keepers of the Faith. Quite a mouthful, isn’t it? We used to be known as the Sacred Order of the Inquisition; until the sixties, can you imagine?”

“Ah ha, so that’s it.”, says Harvey, loosening up a bit, “Well, you’ve finally got me. What’s it gonna be, Father, burned at the stake?”

“Oh no; my goodness, we don’t do that sort of thing anymore. A little time on the rack, perhaps...”

“Wait a minute; were you at my other lectures too?”

“No, only this one; but we’ve been following your exploits in the Holy Land for some time now. You see, we tend to get a bit nervous when people start poking around in our garden.”

“Of course you do; you’ve been trying to sell poetry as history, for Christ’s sake. I mean, it was bound to come back and bite you in the ass eventually.”

“We’ve done pretty well for the last fourteen centuries; wouldn’t you say?”

“I can’t say much for your methods.”

“Nor can I, my son, nor can I.”, Father John takes Harvey’s arm as they walk, “Which brings us very neatly to why I have come here today. Harvey, there are many of us who believe that the time has come for Holy Mother Church to start cleaning up her image; to get some of the dirt out from under her carpets, as it were. We are, unfortunately, still in the minority, so it is necessary for us to work behind the scenes; distasteful but necessary.”

They stop, and Harvey looks closely at Father John’s face. “I’m lost.”, he says.

John holds his gaze. “At the moment, perhaps you are. You have evidence, mostly circumstantial, and you certainly make an impassioned argument; but you lack that one major find which would give you, what shall we call it, credibility? Without it, you are pissing in the wind. I like that one, don’t you? Pissing in the wind; it’s so visual.”

Father John raises his hand and a large man steps from a black Mercedes limousine. He walks toward them carrying an odd looking aluminum suitcase.

“This is a gift from His Excellency Cardinal Kovacs, Supreme Guardian of the Keepers of the Faith, and my mentor. The Cardinal has revealed his identity, in the strictest of confidence, as a show of good faith. This confidence must never, under any circumstances, be betrayed. That is the only condition he requires of you. The Cardinal has blessed what we are about to do and believes, as I do, that in the long run it can only

help to strengthen the Church we so adore. He is giving you an opportunity which you may, of course, turn down. But you will not. Please do not misread my jovial demeanor, Doctor Kessler. I consider this a defining moment in my life and I am quite certain that you will soon feel the same way.”

John hands Harvey an envelope then reaches up and touches him on the forehead.

“Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti, Amen.”

Father John and his chauffeur walk to the limo, get in and drive off before Doctor Kessler can think of a single thing to say. He stands in the same spot for a full thirty seconds, staring alternately at the disappearing limo and the surprisingly heavy suitcase, before a wide smile takes over his entire face.

IV. The Scroll

My Dear Dr. Kessler:

I trust you found your meeting with Father John interesting, if not entirely enlightening. Please forgive him as he was instructed to reveal little in the way of detail. In the case you will find a very old document, a scroll which I understand from your articles that you are quite familiar with, at least in legend. You will note that the case contains its own precise atmosphere, indicated on the display, and must be opened in a similar environment.

To be brief, there are those of us who believe that this important piece of theological history may be in danger and, as we are unable to rescue it ourselves for reasons you surely can appreciate, we are asking for your help. We have chosen you with great care, having read your papers and followed your career for some time now. It is our firm belief, Dr. Kessler, as a matter of conscience, that the scroll must be 'discovered' and made available for study and contemplation before it is lost forever. There are many, as you may well imagine, who do not share this belief.

We are putting our faith in you, Dr. Kessler. Without your help, this vital clue to the very mystery of faith itself will surely return to the dust from whence it rose.

God Is Great! May his presence be with you always.

"Bullshit."

Harvey had driven all night from Kansas to Utica, New York, where his old friend Richard Blake lives and works. He had been Harvey's roommate at NYU, where they both majored in archaeology. Richard was always the quiet one; he didn't seek the limelight the way Harvey did, so they complemented each other well. They had gone their separate ways after college, but had occasionally collaborated on the subject of biblical history, a subject in which they shared a common interest if not a common point of view.

"Hand delivered by the Grand Inquisitor himself." Harvey pulls two cold ones from the case he had brought with him.

"Who?"

"Father John Patrick Collins, the Cardinal's messenger."

"Come on; it's a prank." Rich pops the tab, "One of those Delta lunatics, no doubt."

"I thought so too; but it's too elaborate, even for them."

“You don’t seriously believe there’s a scroll in there.”

“Not *a* scroll, my friend; *The Scroll*. I’d bet the farm on it. There really is a Cardinal Kovacs at the Vatican, I checked with the Catholic Press before I left, and this custom built portable atmosphere will set you back six, maybe seven grand easy. That’s a little much for a prank, even for a Delta.”

“Harv, common; if you’re talking about the Scroll of Yahweh, it’s nonsense; it doesn’t exist. And even if it did, after denying its existence for eight hundred years why the hell would they expose it now?”

“I’m not sure. Father Collins said that these progressives want to do some clandestine house cleaning; improve the image of Old Mother Church. So, this way they get the scroll out of the closet without getting their sacred hands dirty.”

“Their sacred hands would be pretty damn dirty, wouldn’t they, sneaking it out like thieves in the night? Why would they do that?”

“Maybe the Cardinal doesn’t think the Church of Absolute Truth should be in the business of hiding it. I don’t know, Rich, and frankly I don’t care. For a hundred years archaeologists have been digging up the Holy Land. I’ve been out there four years myself. Canaan, Jericho, Jerusalem; Jesus, we’ve been everywhere and everything we find, or don’t find, points to the same conclusion. But will anyone listen?”

“Harv...”

“Damn it! This is the big one, Rich; come on! I need you with me on this.”

“Harvey, it can’t be real; it just can’t. And, no offense, but why would this person, a Cardinal for Christ’s sake, come to you? I mean, of all people?”

“Who else? Hell, it makes perfect sense. It’s what I do; it’s what I’ve been looking for. Plus, I won’t piss around like that old fart Lowenstein would. Personally, I think it was a damn good choice.”

“Okay,” says Richard, softening slightly, “even if by some miracle this turns out to be true, you know they’ll make a mockery of it. No matter how much proof you have they’ll line up a hundred experts that will swear it’s a fake. They’ll expose this Cardinal as a raving queen or some damn thing. They know how to deal with these kinds of problems, Harvey. I mean, look what they did with the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gospel of St. Thomas.”

“Maybe you’re right. I say, so what? Bring it on! This could be the greatest discovery of the century, maybe the millennium, and it’s ours. It’s God’s gift to Richard Blake and Harvey Kessler, his two favorite Jews in the whole wide world. So, what do we do with a gift from God, Rich? Give it back?”

“I’m not Jewish.”

"I'll tell your mother you said that. Look, I know it's too damn much to cope with, but here it is and it has fallen right into our laps. Man, you just can't leave me hanging on this."

"Harv, come on..."

"You're my buddy, my roomie, and the only person on the planet I can trust with this."

"Shit."

"He's weakening, folks!"

"You bastard."

"Yes!", Harvey jumps up, gives a fist pump and goes palms up for a high five.

Rich responds with a weak tap back, shakes his head and pops another cold one.

"Okay," says Rich, starting to get into the idea, "just hypothetically now, if this actually turns out to be what you say it is, and we actually succeed in 'discovering' it before being struck by lightning or whatever, what do you honestly expect will happen?"

"You mean other than us becoming disgustingly rich and famous? Well, our mothers will disown us immediately, which in my case is another plus. On the down side, as you suggested, they'll come at us hard from every direction. Our people will be particularly angry, most likely playing their favorite card right away. The Christians, I suspect, will be more subtle, except for the Baptists. We'll have to watch out for them. And, ah yes, the Pope. Let's see, after sending out his assassins, he will make another heartfelt apology for all the past sins of the Church...and that should be about it."

"What about the Muslims?"

"Good point; those Islamic types are kind of unpredictable."

"And you're not worried at all about the legend?"

"What? Of course not; are you? Is that what's bothering you?"

"No; shit no. But, Harvey, you are a Jew after all. What about the scroll itself? I mean, if it is what it's supposed to be, it could destroy people's faith. You want that on your conscience?" "That's the whole point, Richard! Unquestioning faith is not the sweet miracle it's cracked up to be; it's exactly the opposite. It's responsible for all the horrors that mankind has endured from the Inquisition to the Holocaust. Destroy people's faith? Hell yes, I want that on my conscience."

"What is this hang-up you have with people needing gods in their lives?"

"I don't have a problem with gods. I don't have a problem with the tooth fairy either. My problem is with men, Rich; it has always been with men. And how about you? How can

you possibly have any faith at all? Your mother's Jewish and your father's Lutheran, for Christ's sake. Where does that leave you?"

"I don't confuse the myth and the metaphor with faith in a higher power, that's all. But a lot of people do, and this, on the remote chance that it actually exists, could hurt them deeply."

"They'll get over it," says Harvey, sipping smugly from his brew, "and their lives will be richer for the experience."

"You know, sometimes you can be an absolute asshole."

"Those who are absolutely right can afford to be absolute assholes."

"Okay, screw this. Let's get over there right now and open this thing. Ten bucks says we find Father John's funky pajamas."

Once in the cool room on the campus of NYU-Utica they adjust the temperature, humidity and pressure within the room to match that of the alleged artificial atmosphere within the case. The cool room is really no more than a larger version of the case itself, where archaeology students can examine ancient artifacts without fear of damaging them.

As they release the four latches securing the case and raise the cover, they hold their respective breaths and neither speaks. Finally, in unison, as the scroll reveals itself, they manage to utter two words in perfect unison; very slowly and with each syllable receiving its full share of emphasis.

"Ho Lee Shit."

Without taking his eyes off the case, Richard takes all the money from his pocket and hands it shakily to his friend, who is weeping uncontrollably. It is by far the most beautiful thing Harvey has ever seen in his entire life.

Despite the laughing, singing, dancing and sporadic crying, they manage to separate, preserve and seal all seven papyrus sheets in only three sleepless days and nights. It was by far, they agreed, the most perfectly preserved pre-Christian document either of them had ever encountered. Richard even went so far as to venture that it was too well preserved for its age, but Harvey could not hear him. The scroll would be conclusively dated to between 600 and 650 BC, he was certain of it. The handwriting and grammar were consistent with the time of Hilkiah and the impact of his discovery would be nothing short of earth shaking.

And Harvey knows, without a shadow of a doubt, that there is only one place to unveil what will surely be the find of the century, and Lowenstein's conference begins next week. There is no time to lose. After a few hours' sleep, they begin the translation.

V. The Demons

At half past one in the morning in Vatican City, Italy, Cardinal Paul Kovacs wakes with a start from his cot by the window, the stench of scorched human flesh still clinging to his nostrils.

“God help me!” he cries out, wiping the sweat from his forehead with one hand as he picks up the phone with the other.

“Hello? No, John, not at all; just took me a moment. Are you well?”

“Fine, Your Excellency. My apologies for calling at such an hour, but...”

“I understand. John, was your visit successful?”

Paul had sent Father John to America, officially at least, to meet with the Archbishop of Boston who had declined an invitation to attend a special council on priestly misconduct. Paul wants desperately for John to say that he has failed in his real mission.

“Yes, just fine. The, uh, Archbishop now has a clearer understanding of our goals and has accepted our invitation.”

Cardinal Kovacs is finding it difficult to speak.

“I see.”, he manages, “John... I...will you be here tomorrow then?”

“We are leaving now and should arrive at eight in the morning, I believe. Your Excellency, is something wrong?”

“John...no...nothing; we shall talk then.”

The demons are upon us, Paul wants desperately to shout, but thinks better of it and hangs up quickly. John would be with him tomorrow and all would be well again.

At exactly the same moment in Utica, New York, Harvey Kessler sits bolt upright in his chair, the recurring image of a savaged zebra crystal clear before him. Two strange words echo through the room, words that he recognizes immediately but which are so completely out of place that his brain simply rejects them. Shaking off the sleep, he sees Richard sitting on the floor in front of him, pale as a ghost.

“Rich?”

Richard slowly raises his hand and, pointing north over Harvey’s shoulder, tries unsuccessfully to speak.

“What is it?”

“Didn’t you...? It was...” Richard stammers trying to get his breath back.

Harvey looks over his shoulder, “What? Where?”

“There, coming right at us...it was...Christ! That scared the shit out of me.”

Harvey flashes briefly on the zebra then helps Rich to his feet and brushes off his pants for him.

“What in the name of god are you talking about?”

Richard takes a few deep breaths and tries to calm himself.

“I don’t know; it was...damn!”, Richard rubs both temples hard, “I can’t get that image out of my head.”

Harvey smiles, reaches over and touches Rich on the forehead.

“Per istam sanctam unctionem, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid deliquisti.”

“That’s not funny.”, says Rich.

“Hey, what are friends for? As Father John purified me, so I purify thee.”

Richard lets that sink in for a moment then sits back down and drops his head like a stone into both hands.

Harvey pulls out his phone, dials the office of Moshe Lowenstein and looks down at Rich.

“What; it’s just a blessing, right?”

VI. The Sisters

Father John arrives on schedule and goes directly to Cardinal Paul's office. He is surprised to find the Cardinal listening to a Mozart sonata; a very loud Mozart sonata. As he enters, he sees Paul standing at his desk with his arms outstretched, blubbering like an idiot. John runs to him.

"Your Excellency?"

"God help us!" He hugs the shorter man tightly. "The demons are upon us, John. They are here! What have we done?"

As John helps Paul to his chair, Cardinal Peter DeGeneris walks in without knocking and closes the door behind him.

"Turn off that infernal racket! Paul, what in God's name is going on here?"

"May God forgive me, Peter; may God forgive me... forgive me..."

Paul continues to babble as Peter addresses John.

"Father, please be so kind as to explain exactly what is wrong with Cardinal Paul and exactly what it is that he has done that requires the forgiveness of our Lord."

He listens patiently to Father John then walks slowly to the window and stares out at the castle ramparts. There is a long silence, interrupted only by the occasional shriek as Paul encounters another of his demons. Finally, Cardinal DeGeneris speaks.

"Thank you, John. Have the Sisters come for Paul immediately, will you, before he drags us both down with him."

"But Your Excellency..."

Cardinal DeGeneris raises his right hand and closes his eyes for a moment.

"It can never be destroyed; it must never be revealed. Help us Lord.", he prays, "Help us to be worthy of Thy sacred trust."

Renewed in spirit, he turns to Father John.

"Have no fear, my son; the Sisters know how to deal with this sort of thing. As soon as Paul is suitably restrained, come to my office; you must return to America at once. And summon the Sacred Order immediately, in its entirety. We have quite a surprise for our brethren, do we not?"

Peter manages a wry smile as he returns to the window and observes the storm clouds rising ominously beyond the seven hills.

"...and John?", he adds.

“Excellency?”

“Tell them God is coming.”

VII. The Master

Dr. Moshe Lowenstein is pleased with himself for not telling the young upstart what he could do with his ‘monumental discovery’, but rather, with brilliantly feigned excitement, giving the abrasive heathen an entire hour right before lunch on the final day. As always, the annual meeting of the Archaeological Society will be held at the Hilton and will bring together many of the top archaeologists and biblical scholars from around the world. Dr. Lowenstein leans back and smiles as he imagines the obvious hoax being quickly exposed, followed by bouts of roaring laughter over filet mignon. It will be a memorable end to another highly successful conference and an equally memorable end to a once promising young career. He congratulates himself once again and, as an afterthought, thanks God for the gifts of wisdom, self-restraint and the abominable Dr. Kessler.

VIII. The End

Richard had tried in vain to persuade Harvey that they were moving way to fast, that this was the wrong way to handle it, but Harvey would have none of it. It had to be now, and it had to be Lowenstein. He just couldn't wait to see the old bastard crumble. He contracted a security firm to drive them to the city and, with only three days remaining, arranged to store the scroll in a massive underground vault only two city blocks from the Hilton. The cost for use of the vault, considered one of the most secure locations in the country, was outrageous, but Harvey wasn't taking any chances. With their prize tucked safely away, Harv and Rich return to the hotel and sleep for two days straight.

On the morning of the biggest day of his life, Harvey jumps out of bed and, flying high on adrenalin, showers, dresses for the occasion and wakes Richard from a very deep and very troubled sleep.

"Rise and shine, buddy, and I do mean shine. Today, Richard, my best and dearest friend, you will shine as bright as any star in the heavens."

"Harv,," mumbles Rich, "I don't feel well at all."

"Nonsense, my boy, nonsense. No backing out now. Up and at 'em! I'm treating us both to a luxurious breakfast before our moment in the sun."

Richard pulls himself together, takes a quick shower and dons the only suit he owns while Harvey practices his speech; a speech he is certain will be repeated again and again in classrooms around the world. Richard tries once again to convince Harvey to wait, to give this more time, but his protests are useless. Harvey drags him to the door, through the lobby and down the street and, after checking that his treasure is perfectly safe, leads him to the elevator.

"I've got just what you need.," says Harvey, putting his arm around Richard, "It's time for our first taste of the high life."

On the long ride up, Harvey is beside himself with joy, while Richard is finding it difficult to breathe. At long last they reach the restaurant and, seeing that his friend is truly looking unwell, Harvey helps him to a table near the window. A waiter appears immediately with a chilled bottle of Cristal, pops the cork and pours two glasses. Harvey is on top of the world.

"Just what the doctor ordered!," he exclaims.

Certain that at any moment he will jump right out of skin, Harvey Kessler stands and, his hand shaking with excitement, raises his glass.

"To the Scroll of Yahweh, our ticket to Paradise!"

Richard Blake, pale as a ghost, raises an empty hand and, in that eternal instant before the unimaginable, points north over Harvey's shoulder.

I am with Her now. As my eardrums burst and the fluid protecting my corneas boils away, She looks deeply into my eyes. I am still there, but only barely and only for a moment. I want to ask Her so many things; what happened, where is my friend, why is there no air in my lungs? But the questions simply dissolve away. The surprise at how wrong I had been about Everything lingers briefly as I fall into Her. But there are no surprises here, no questions, no here. There is only Everything