

Corner Bar Magazine

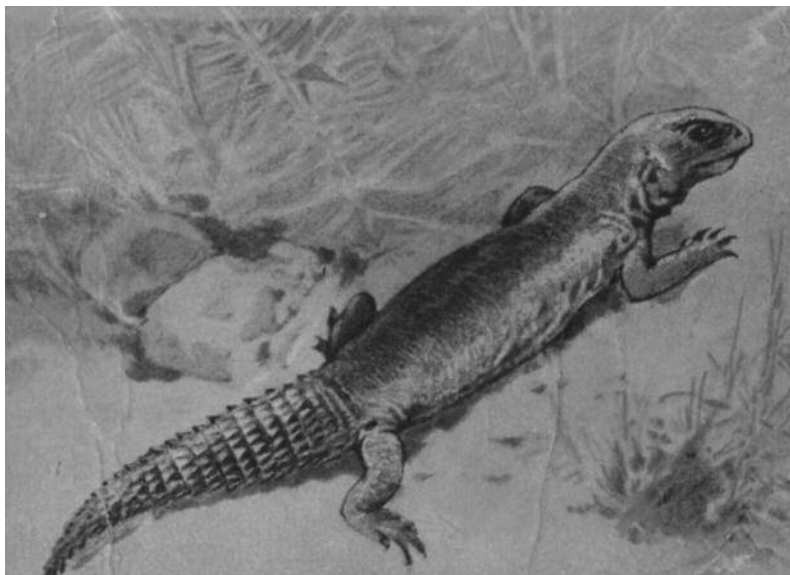
Volume 6 Number 8

Page 1 – BEE-YOND by John Baldwin. The author is an attorney and entrepreneur – now retired in Encinitas, CA. His professional writing had necessarily been fact-based and sterile. Presently, it has been satisfying to attempt writing imaginative fiction. He suspects that any of his four grandchildren would likely be better authors. Still, it has been gratifying to have had a number of his stories published and selected as story competition winners.

Page 13 – NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP by Edward Ahern. Mr. Ahern, of Fairfield CT, resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over three hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. Find him at <https://www.twitter.com/bottomstripper>

Page 18 – SIGMA 9 by Joseph Hurtgen. Joseph Hurtgen of Campbellsville, KY, has a Ph.D. in English Literature from Ball State University and teaches at Elizabethtown Community & Technical College. His books include *The Archive Incarnate*, *Tower Defender*, and *Sherman*. He writes about science fiction, literature, and culture at Rapid Transmission and New Rural.

Page 22 – JOE'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE by Nathan Gromotowicz. Mr. Gromotowicz is an unpublished Canadian writer who was inspired by the classic pulp tales of Robert E Howard to take up the pen and paper himself. He writes simply for the joy of the craft and hopes that those who read his yarns find them to be engrossing and entertaining



“BEE-YOND”

by JOHN BALDWIN

If you step on a butterfly, could it alter the world's future? That was the premise of Ray Bradbury's 1952 prized story. It told of a time traveler to prehistoric times who did exactly that. When he returned to his present, everything had changed – the language, the politics, the works. Serious considerations of this fictional event veered off into mind-bending theories of parallel universes and quantum theory.

Almost seventy years have passed since that story was published. Travelling to the *past* still isn't possible. But brace yourself for this... a person can view *the future!* Well, not any person...just me as of now. See, while working for my master's degree in physics, I had a part-time assistant's job with a hush-hush government project at the University. My modest responsibility was just to keep the lab supplied and close everything up at days' end. The project "Fareach" had the lofty, and likely unachievable, objective of contacting a future world. Renowned experts in many fields were participating, but as of the first anniversary, it had gone nowhere. I had a general idea of the scientific approaches being explored. My primary concern was just hoping it would continue as an easy gig for me.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed, as the lights flickered, and sockets oddly sparked.

It lasted just a few minutes. This had been happening on and off for several months.

"Hey Carl," one of the experts, Dr. Franken, called out. "Did you check with maintenance about the cause of this light show?"

"I asked, but they didn't have a clue. It hadn't affected any of the Project equipment, so they seemed unconcerned. Assured me smugly that it didn't signal the end of the world."

Dr. Franken replied cynically. "With all the terrible things happening – wars, a pandemic, terrorists – it might well end before long anyway. Just hope it doesn't before my lunch."

"Yeah, I'd like to live a while longer too."

I consider myself a pretty smart guy, though miles from the intellects of the twenty or so distinguished Fareach team members. For better, and sometimes worse, the key qualities I do possess are curiosity and impetuosity. I could never resist poking into things, whether or not forbidden, to see how and why they work. So as the last person in the lab one night around 9:00 p.m., I was playfully messing around with the computer programs and technical equipment.

Suddenly there appeared on the master

computer screen...my God...a streaming view of what appeared to be some world of the future! Brief, but unmistakably real. Could not be mistaken for some intrusive Netflix time travel movie. Then just as quickly, the scene ended, and a message filled the screen:

You are seeing the year 4000. Are you a citizen who cares about the preservation of mankind? Are you capable of keeping this contact a secret? If so, be prepared to meet through this portal tomorrow same time.

Then it blacked out. I was struck dumb but had the presence of mind to retrace my steps. I recorded the certain computer entries and equipment adjustments that had worked. After closing down the lab, I headed home in a rapturous state. *Oh, fucking A, I've done it!*

It's true that many extraordinary discoveries happened by accident: Penicillin, x-rays, radioactivity, say. But these came about fortuitously to dedicated researchers. By contrast, I am just an interloper. A modern Aladdin handed a magic lamp. This breakthrough should have been immediately reported to the project leaders. But the mysterious message had urged secrecy.

Besides that, though, this could be the most incredible discovery of *all time*. Yeah, pun intended. An accomplishment right up there with fire, the wheel, the computer maybe? Why couldn't I, you know, keep the formula to myself - start my own company, patent this discovery, and become an acclaimed genius and a billionaire? Would you blame me?

As a physics grad student, might you

guess that I'm a garden variety nerd? "Not that there's anything wrong with that.", as comedian Seinfeld might say. No, that wouldn't be me. I'm twenty-eight, personable, and someone who loves basketball pick-up games and beers with friends. Until now, I'd lived a quite balanced life.

Leaving the lab at midnight after my momentous discovery, that's what I returned to. My girlfriend Jill had stayed up to work on a presentation for her ad agency. She read me in an instant. "O.K. Carl, what's happened? You look like a kid waking up on Xmas."

No way could I keep this a secret from her. Love the girl. Beautiful, blonde, and exceedingly savvy about almost everything. She had complained recently about a lack of variety and adventure in our relationship...maybe that problem is now solved. With only a glancing kiss to her in greeting, I exclaimed. "O.K. Hear this and I'm not kidding. I was able to contact... *the... future...* at the lab! All by myself. No one else in the Project knows or could likely figure out how I did it." I described my impossible discovery. "Jill, this could be an opportunity beyond all others for fame and fortune."

Ignoring my grandiosity, she hammered me with the practical questions: "What does it mean? Can you personally travel into a future time? Return from there? Is there danger in breaking the laws of nature?"

"Don't barrage me, Jill. All I know so far is just what I briefly saw. Everything else remains to be seen... literally."

“It’s mind-blowing. Might you meet some distant relative? Don’t time travel stories warn us of the paradox? Isn’t it true that...?”

“Honey, slow down. I don’t know what it means. Let’s take a breather. Share a bottle of wine and enjoy dinner in our present world, shall we?”

During a lunch break next afternoon at the lab, Professor Gregory from the physics department sat down with me. “How is your part-time job working out, Carl?”

“It’s fine Professor. Thanks for setting it up. After all, I’m hardly the star student in your seminars.”

“True. Not the best student, but probably the most curious and imaginative one I’ve ever had. That counts for a lot. I must caution you, though, about relying on that income. If we don’t make major progress soon, Fareach will have to be abandoned. After all, reaching out to the future was the longest of long shots.”

“But suppose there is a breakthrough? What would happen?”

“Then the project would become the highest government and academic priority ever seen. Resources would be poured into it. Hell, everyone everywhere would have to fundamentally revise their beliefs. Everything would change.”

“For the better?”

“I wouldn’t count on that. Consider the taming of atomic energy. A source of power for humanity without environmental damage. Great, but countries continue to threaten the use of nuclear weapons. Just

imagine the conflicts over the control of time travel.”

That night alone in the lab, I repeated the steps previously taken to make contact. Bingo! Screen on, with another five-minute visit to the future. People on the streets wore unusual shimmering clothes and moved as though almost weightless. The architecture looked strange by use of unfamiliar materials and distinctive shapes. The modes of transportation... well, we couldn’t have dreamed them up. All in all, the year 4000 looked spectacularly different and amazing. The ambiance bore no resemblance to Hollywood’s grim depictions of the future in, say, *The Time Machine*, or *Blade Runner*. Still, the demeanor I observed of its people seemed to me rather austere and sad.

The sights ceased and were replaced on screen by a very tall, handsome, patrician gentleman. Though clearly advanced in years, his face was unlined. His ears and nose were somewhat sharper in shape from that of our people. His commanding presence was softened by a soulful look.

He spoke. “I can see you and offer welcome to my world. This bridge of time has never happened before. Know that this transmission portal is strictly limited in minutes by nature’s laws. So, I will quickly get to the point. You may call me Johan. I serve as Chief Minister of the Western Hemisphere, authorized to speak for the entire 4000 Year civilization. Our tongue varies greatly from the language you speak. My words are being converted to your ver-

nacular.”

I blurted out, “My name is Carl and I’m bedazzled. How and why would you be reaching back to this time... and to this specific place?”

“Patience please. I can imagine you feel overwhelmed by this experience. Almost twenty centuries separate us. You would naturally seek the fullest enlightenment about us and what has transpired in the historical interim? I regret that the narrow time portal won’t allow complete explanation.”

I muttered, “Uhhh, well...frankly, I’m thrilled to know there still is a civilization in your time.”

Johan smiled, “I can confirm there were numerous episodes in history which almost did end it. As to how we were able to make contact... even your era’s brilliant Einstein and Stephen Hawking would have difficulty comprehending this. I’ll say only that we utilized the cosmic strings in our universe to warp space and time. As for the targeting of your location... everything about your civilization that has ever been recorded is accessible to us. So, we knew from historical records that the Fareach Project was underway seeking to contact the future. It would be the perfect and perhaps only site where someone might receive our distress signal and be able to act upon it. We could only hope that some person there would have the scientific ability to... how would you say it?... hook up with us. Perhaps some electrical charges were experienced there from our earlier unsuccessful efforts.”

“Yeah, we felt that. So that was you. And I get it that you have a society

advanced in many ways beyond our comprehension. Recognizing that, what could you possibly need from us? And in what ways can we now interact?”

“Help is desperately needed from your time to avoid a calamity facing us. As for interacting, laws of physics prevent anything tangible from crossing this boundary between us – no persons, no objects of any kind. The communication of information is somewhat of an open question.”

I nodded, “The potential negative results of space travel have been described in our fiction as the ‘butterfly effects’.”

“We know for a fact that is true. Great care must be exercised. Before proceeding, I must express our admiration to you for solving the equation enabling our worlds to become synched. You must be an exceptional scientist for your time.”

“No, it isn’t like that. I was just tinkering with the components and that accidentally resulted in the hookup with your signal.”

“Well, how this came about is not the important thing. Circumstances dictate that you must be the savior we seek if there is to be one. Who are you, stated briefly please?”

“O.K. I’m a twenty-eight-year-old physics student. Working part-time at this Lab. A normal guy. Curious about everything and a bit of a risk-taker.

“That will have to do. I must ask you this: Would you be willing to do whatever might be necessary to save future civilizations? To take critical actions that cannot be made comprehensible to others. To perhaps become a hero to us but remain unknown as such in your own time.”

“I guess so. Well, yes, certainly. But I should bring others into this who are more capable than myself.”

“No. We will be testing the boundaries of the time continuum as it is. We cannot allow knowledge or interference with this mission – whether it be by your public, any government, or worst of all the military. All mankind would be threatened by such intervention. Although, I realize that you might need a few trusted others to accomplish the task.”

“Still, you haven’t told me what disaster is being faced.”

“Our time has elapsed for today. Tomorrow you can expect...” The screen went blank.

“So, Jill, that’s the whole of my talk with Johan last night. What do you think?”

“You seem to be starring in a real-life science fiction drama. If you accept this startling encounter as genuine, then so do I. You’re a no-nonsense guy. There is one bottom line thing I’d like to find out about that future world.”

“What would it be?”

“Is humanity still plagued by the hate and greed of some of its members?”

“I’ll add that to my list.”

The next afternoon, I steered Professor Gregory away from the project for a private conversation. “Doctor, do you consider me a level-headed person – someone without delusions who does not believe in conspiracy theories or fantasies?”

“I don’t know why you ask such a

thing, but yes, absolutely. You’re very grounded and practical, if perhaps impulsive at times.”

“Then I’ve got a whopper to tell you.” I proceeded to tell him everything.

He looked at me insightfully. “I was involved in the formation of the Fareach Project, so of course I thought time travel was theoretically possible. I have no reason to doubt you, Carl. But why tell me, given the warning to maintain secrecy?”

“Wherever this goes, it’s too big for me alone. I’d like to have your wisdom and advice to assist me. Big question, though. Could you be comfortable keeping this from everybody else?”

“I suppose so, even though it does pose a serious legal risk. Remember the warning given by the CIA official to all of us at the start of Fareach?”

‘As you all undertake this Project, be advised of your responsibilities. It is a top-secret program that will be funded by the U.S. government. Pursuant to various Sections of 18 U.S. Code you are prohibited from having contacts with any foreign country, agency, or representative regarding the work of Fareach. This is considered to be a national security issue. A violation would result in severe criminal penalties and a possible charge of treason. Is that understood?’

“I recall that all of us nodded our acknowledgment of the warning. And, after all, what could be more “foreign” than this future world we’re communicating with? Oh hell, Carl, count me in.”

“Thrilled to have you join me on this adventure Professor, whatever it turns out

to be. Maybe we'll share the same jail cell if this blows up."

Next evening at the lab, the briefest of views was given to the stunning life in year 4000, before Johan appeared on the screen.

He began solemnly. "Our society and its technology have evolved for the benefit of mankind. We have eliminated abject poverty. Beauty and harmony are prized in our lives above all. We revere nature in all respects. All animals, domestic and wild, insects even, are protected. Therein lies the problem. Back in your time, there was a serious concern at the loss of honeybees. The essential workers just never returned to the hive. The result was termed colony collapse disorder, or CCD. It threatened the balance of nature."

"Yes", I interjected. "I've a cousin in the country who raises bees. He's lectured me endlessly about their importance. I know that their pollination is vital. It provides the growth of essential crop species - fruits, nuts, vegetables and even animal feed."

Johan continued. "That's right. CCD in your day was caused by several factors, but most prominently the damaging pesticides in use. So, the plan was to genetically engineer the honeybee to tolerate this poison by adding the hardier qualities of the African killer bee. This seemed to solve the problem. However, over the long expanse of time, evolution had a ghastly effect. The modified bees took over to become fiercely aggressive, with deadly stings. These now pose a mortal threat to the survival of our world. Human deaths from this insect were

few in your time. Now they are commonplace and getting worse at an exponential rate. Watch this."

A video commenced showing an athletic young man in a garden. He was juggling objects that seemed to change form and playfully stall in midair. He began looking annoyed by the need to swat away some insects. Within moments the few became a blinding storm attacking him as he ran into the house shouting in pain. He collapsed inside as family rushed to swat away the remaining bees. A second scene showed him in the hospital with his entire body salvaged and bandaged.

"That was my son caught in the yard by this scourge. He recovered. Many do not."

"That's horrifying. I don't understand though. Surely, you'd have the means to exterminate this menace."

"True enough. However, that is precisely the dilemma. Destroying these dangerously adapted bees would eliminate almost all pollination of crops. Our food production would be drastically curtailed. Severe malnutrition, compromised health would follow. The extinction of all human life is projected... is certain, to occur. The best, and only solution to this dilemma, would be to prevent the genetic changes to honeybees when they began - in your time. *That* would be your mission on our behalf."

"I understand, but how can this be accomplished?"

"We are counting on you to somehow find a way. Can you do it, Carl? I would encourage you by saying may God be with you for this, but we no longer have such

beliefs. To make the best use of our minimal time, I'll open this portal three nights from now. That should give you time to formulate a plan of action."

Johan vanished from the screen, leaving streaming images of his world. Could it be that he intended this as additional stimulus for me to see just what needs saving?

First, I arranged for leave from my master's program. Then I quickly researched the subject. It was exactly as Johan had said. Advocates believed that by genetically altering the honeybee, the BCR problem would be remedied, with no need to change the poisonous pesticides. This research was being conducted by the agrochemical maker Manover Inc. Its widely used herbicide *GroundOn* already monopolized the agricultural market. The product was widely accused of poisoning people, in addition to critically impacting BCR. It was assumed that if Manover patented this bee genetic process, it would also similarly control the bee industry.

Too overwhelming a mission for just me. I needed to collaborate with my trusted smart friends.

Professor Gregory succinctly summarized the situation. "So, all we need to do to save later mankind is stop all R&D efforts to man-up honeybees to be like killer bees. Somehow convince the public, commercial interests, and the government that this development is wrong and dangerous. This, without disclosing that our only proof is a secret source some 2000 years in our future.

The largest opponent we'll be facing is the giant and reportedly ruthless Manover, Inc. Oh, yes, and accomplish all this without being convicted of a federal crime, or at a minimum being discharged by the University."

Jill perked up at that remark. "A crime? Jail time? That's a consequence I can do without."

I responded to her sarcastically, "The offense could be treason. Don't worry about imprisonment, though, because the crime calls for the death penalty. But it's not too likely to happen."

Jill poked me. "I promise not to call our life boring ever again."

I addressed the Professor: "You identified the obstacles perfectly. The task sounds impossible... but this just can't be. We must succeed. Whatever it takes. Jill, influencing people and changing minds is right up your alley. Here's a different kind of client and objective for your ad agency to handle."

Jill answered defiantly. "We'll need a hell-bent overpowering campaign. For starters, we should establish a non-profit organization to front this effort. Align with allies already opposing the bee enhancement. Sponsor scientific articles. Hit all forms of media hard to influence the public. Cultivate politicians to gain government support. Demonize Manover Inc. for its abuses."

The Professor responded to her. "Damn young lady, you are a modern-day Joan of Arc for our cause. Though the word "modern" seems quaint considering our Year 4000 client. I admire your fighting spirit, so

forgive me for being the naysayer. All those actions would seem worth taking *if we had the resources*. Jill, your other agency clients are prosperous and on this earth. They can pay for such services. Our client is essentially penniless and could not be less available.”

I piped in. “Clearly we’d need lots of money to accomplish this Don Quixote-sounding crusade. I don’t know your circumstances, Professor, but I’m pretty sure the three of us couldn’t muster up much capital. Hopeless? Hmm... well, I invite you both to join me in the contact with Johan tomorrow evening. I have a wild idea to propose.”

When the screen came up, the Professor and Jill had their first glances of the fascinating future world. Then Johan appeared.

I introduced the Professor and Jill. “These are the trusted friends I mentioned who will be needed.”

“Your participation is most welcome. It seems only cordial then to introduce you to my treasured daughter Vane.” She joined him on screen. An exceptionally tall and attractive teenager with the same somewhat different features from our own. She had long golden hair embroidered with tiny colored specks of sparkling material.

She spoke: “*Ral plasur for nows. Dift in our seeming, still plece to vision.*”

Johan broke our embarrassed silence: “I regret that Val is not on the translator. She just expressed satisfaction at meeting you. She found your different appearances quite

pleasing.” His daughter politely moved off screen. “I realize that you’ve seen only myself and now my daughter as a mere two out of the billions of our people. That amount of personal contact will have to do. I must be impatient. What progress have you made in these past few days?”

The three of us related the multiple approaches discussed for the mission.

“That is most encouraging. Have you begun to implement this plan?”

I answered. “We could not. All these activities will cost money that we don’t have. Not even close.”

Johan responded. “Oh, of course, I should have presumed this from the history. We have no use for money in our world, either for exchange or the accumulation of wealth. But I can comprehend your need. Will that deficiency stifle our cry for help?”

I answered him. “Here’s a possible solution that only you, Johan, could provide. You’ve advised that material things cannot pass between our civilizations. However, we’ve already communicated facts back and forth. You obviously did not expect adverse consequences from that. So, would it be possible to provide us with information about certain events to occur in our future that could aid our cause?”

He answered. “That’s a profound question. The not wholly satisfying answer is that information cannot be so communicated *unless its effect would be inconsequential to the future*. Which is to say, no butterfly effects. It would depend on the particulars. What did you have in mind?”

I continued. “We’ve estimated that

roughly a \$10 million investment would be needed to quickly and forcefully implement the plan. Probably even more later. We don't have the means. or enough time to raise other money. The only remaining prospect would be for us to somehow win it. Do you have competitions in your world that reward the winners?"

"We engage in sports and games of all kinds but consider participation to be its own reward."

"In our age we say this too, but don't really believe it. Our most popular events provide for the bettors to risk money on the outcomes. This is true for horseracing and other major sports and in a different way, our stock market. We call it gambling. I presume records of these events remain in your archives."

"Nothing has been lost. I do recall reading of these passions in your times. But how would that work?"

"We could identify different contests occurring shortly. Your people could examine records to inform us of who has won. We would place bets on these sure things to multiply our resources. Could this be done?"

"Oh, I don't see why not. It sounds merely like the redistribution of money your people use, without any meaningful negative effects on the future. This wouldn't violate natural laws."

"Wonderful! That's our answer then. A list of these soon to occur events will be ready for you tomorrow. We'll pool our limited funds for a start. No excessive amount will be bet in any one place which might

raise suspicions."

"Very resourceful. I'll have our Historical Research Director identify the answers you need. The funding issue will thus have been solved. So on with the mission."

Our team urgently scanned the media to identify events with promising odds. The list was passed on to Johan. It included several NFL playoff games and horseracing bets at different tracks. On the next online meeting, I was surprised to be met by Grenby, the Historical Research Director, who provided the results we needed.

We made our bets through several bookies the Professor admitted to knowing. I wouldn't have guessed this interest of his. We had in fact scratched together about \$100,000 of our own money for this. The sure-thing results multiplied this amount threefold. The next round increased it to \$1,000,000. Within just a month the \$10,000,000 objective was reached. We were off and running.

The first step was to associate with allies. We found there was a difference of opinion regarding genetic engineering of honeybees. In fact, there was considerable antagonism toward *any* kind of genetic changes whatsoever. I don't share that opinion, but it helps in support of our cause. A non-profit organization, Protect our Bees, was quickly established with well compensated experts serving on the Board of Directors.

Jill handled our advertising through her firm. The first TV ad hammered home the

message. A female beekeeper in the traditional garb was seen lovingly tending her colonies. She removed the mask, picked up some fruit and said:

We all love honeybees. They pollinate a huge percentage of the world's food crops including fruits and vegetables. But they are dying out in a scourge called "colony collapse disorder". The principal cause of this problem is the use of poisonous pesticides called 'neonics'. This could be mitigated, but a certain giant chemical company and others prefer the less costly alternative for them of genetically altering the honeybee to tolerate the poison. This to be done by adapting the tougher qualities of the killer bee. This is dangerous. You've heard of these little monsters. They can and have wounded and killed people. Viewers are invited to join us in the fight to protect our honeybees.

A respected research laboratory was retained to examine the negative consequences of such genetic engineering (which we already knew). It reported that even a commingling of these two species had been disastrous. In a South American experiment, the killer bees had taken over and moved north into the U.S.

Jill, myself, and the Professor took turns appearing on news and talk shows to spread the word.

Ads were even shown on popular Children's TV programs. Tiny, cute bee figures were offered free to encourage children to tell their parents about this.

Our mission threatened some powerful interests. The response started with a fake

reporter visiting our office and inquiring about our motivations, what we expected to accomplish and who was funding this campaign. Jill sized him up and he was quickly dispatched. This was followed by a person acting as a job applicant who was seeking inside information. Later, cars conspicuously followed movements of the three of us. Who was behind this? It was clear enough.

We considered this to be further evidence that our message was getting across. However, though Manover Inc. was spearheading the genetic research, we soon realized that there were other labs around the world conducting similar research. We made efforts to influence the International Bee Research Association with members in almost all countries.

We contacted the U.S. Department of Agriculture and key members of congressional committees dealing with agriculture. Our cause was aided by substantial contributions made to their benefit. No strings tied. No stated expectations. But it was made clear that we had unlimited resources to pursue this mission.

Soon enough, Manover Inc. was alerted to an even higher degree. This TV ad for example:

"Manover Inc. is engaged in extensive litigation for the harm to humans suffered from its pesticide GroundOn. The Company is widely criticized for its monopolistic control of the pesticide market. This product is also the major cause for the declining population of honeybees – with disastrous consequences to production of our foods. Instead of replac-

ing the product, it is planning instead to genetically alter the honeybee to enable a tolerance to the poison. By patenting this process, Manover could also expect to monopolize the bee industry, as it has the rest of agriculture. We can't let this happen."

The Manover response was a familiar choice of large corporate bullies: A letter to our organization threatening to sue us for libel and demanding a retraction. We responded in kind:

The statements made were true and we stand by them. We will continue delivering this message until your Company, at the very least, discontinues the honeybee genetic alteration efforts.

At a top management meeting of Manover this situation was discussed. The Chairman demanded: "Something must be done. We're losing the media battle and mustn't let this slip. Stronger steps are needed to shut off this annoyance to our business interests."

The Vice President head of security, spoke out. "This would be the kind of defensive action my Department has provided in the past. I'll take this on myself and report back."

The pressure increased. First the phone calls to each of us. Forceful arguments were made to discourage our efforts. Failing this, vague threats were made to either back off from our campaign or suffer vague consequences. Finally, one evening a surly guy got into the passenger seat of Jill's car, as she

left work. A gun was visible in his pocket. They must have thought that Jill would be the best target for intimidation. After all, she was the person handling the media campaign and was probably a fragile female. Big mistake!

After threatening Jill's life, the unpleasant messenger left that encounter sure that he had succeeded. He was, of course, unaware that Jill had switched on the recorder in her purse capturing every word. She played it back for Carl and the Professor, before its sensational release to the media.

By this time, several now friendly politicians were proposing legislation to ban the genetic alteration of honeybees.

I reported our progress regularly to Johan in our evening sessions. However, the aggregate window of time for our meetings was winnowing down to just a few minutes, so exchanges with Johan had to be brief. Our mission had to be concluded before this link to the future ended for good.

To our surprise, the Chairman of Manover invited our team over to meet. We didn't know what to expect. Would he continue to take the hard line even after the scandalized intimidation efforts?

Introductions were made around the conference table. The Chairman spoke encouragingly. "Thanks for coming. We must begin with an apology for the bullish efforts taken by certain of our misguided employees to discourage your activities. They will be dealt with. I'm hoping we can

settle things amicably to everyone's satisfaction. Despite our mistakes, we are really not the villains you've portrayed us to be. We are capitalists, true enough, with our emphasis being on the bottom line. It so happens that your informed criticisms have managed to convince us. There would be unacceptable dangers in our continuing research to genetically change bees. That would be a bad business decision."

I reacted cordially, "We're pleased to hear that."

"Yes, but Manover, Inc. is not accustomed to losing battles, or losing face. We have an image to maintain and shareholders to satisfy. Here's what I propose: Manover will discontinue all such research and encourage others in our industry to do the same. We ask only that your non-profit join us in the effort to cure CCD by other means. For this to be a win/win, we would ask that you match us in this campaign by contributing \$5,000,000. Your funding source seems unlimited. What do you say?"

I looked at Jill and the Professor and we nodded affirmatively. "It's a deal Mr. Chairman. We embrace that solution."

We left the meeting feeling ecstatic. The Professor remarked: "Mission accomplished, though no one will know about it, so we won't be celebrated as heroes. Fortunately, that also means that we won't be arrested by the Feds or lose our University jobs."

I spoke for all of us. "Just can't wait to report our success to Johan."

There was one final exuberant conversation by the three of us with him. Residual

portal time was close to zero. As we said our goodbyes, Johan said he had a gift for us... to just watch and see.

"But you can't send anything to this world..." I uttered as the screen instantly flashed a list of factual events. Well, stated exactly, events that will occur in years to come. We hurriedly printed it. Here are just a few of the notable events with the odds noted*:

May 1, 2022. Kentucky Derby - "Running Fool" - at 10 to 1.

February 7, 2023. Super Bowl for NFL - Green Bay Packers over Los Angeles Rams - 4 to 1.

November 10, 2025. Stock price of Illuminate Inc. increases 400% in a day.

June 9, 2027. Heavyweight boxing championship - Montclair over Jackson- 3 to 1.

{Note: These secret details will be edited out of any publication of this story.}

Yes, these are results of numerous sporting matches and gambling events yet to occur in the next twenty years. It could make us as wealthy as we choose to be. Johan knew though that we would not be greedy in any way that might prejudice future time. In fact, the Professor, Jill, and myself vowed to use almost all of these resources to promote a positive future for all later civilizations. Save the environment...prevent needless wars...etc. Whatever it might take.

For that matter could it be that these intended good-hearted charitable efforts to be made by the three of us might already be locked into the future? Hmm...that's a mind-bending thought. ❖

“NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP”

by EDWARD AHERN

Charles Nestor woke up coughing and fighting to breathe. He cursed, knowing the coughs were death knells. Virility a past tenseness; agility and energy gone; he was a foundering hulk at thirty-six.

I'm not a thief or a murder or even a philanderer-why do I deserve to die of too much snot in my lungs? Cystic Fibrosis- they give it a name and close the file, no hope, sorry.

Angela knew his expire-by date, and had been patiently tending to him for months. Charles appreciated the care but somewhere inside resented that she was too nice, too quiet, too unwilling to discuss the looming lack of future events with him. He winced, realizing that what he really resented was her living on without him.

He dressed slowly, even that little effort leaving him short of breath. Force of habit made him check his phone for messages, although few people called him anymore. There was one voice message, from an unknown caller. His finger poised over the delete button, but his life was so empty of events that he was willing to take a long chance that the call wasn't offering him an extended warranty on his car.

“Mr. Nestor, my name is Somnussi. You were referred to us by Frederick Tudor, who we believe you are close friends with...

More acquaintance than friend, but any

way...

“Mr. Tudor, who you may call for references, feels that you could greatly benefit from a service that we offer. This is not end of life care, but life extension. If you have a half hour available, I can come to your home and briefly explain our treatment. Please call or text me back so I may stop by. There is, as they say in the commercials, no cost or obligation in listening.”

Charles snorted and did hit the delete button, but a minute later pulled the number up from the call log and hit redial.

“Hello Mr. Nestor, I appreciate your returning my call. Have you talked with Mr. Tudor?”

“Not yet, what's this all about?”

“It's something that can't be gone into over the phone, but I promise you that even if you decide not to use our service, you'll be interested in learning about it.”

“Sorry, but this sounds really flaky.”

“Mr. Nestor I'm going to offer you the opportunity to live much longer. Isn't that possibility worth a half-hour of your time?”

His talking made Charles cough, sputum splattering onto his cell phone, and he wiped it off with his sleeve.

“Okay, Mr. ...”

“Somnussi.”

“Mr. Somnussi, I have too much time

and not nearly enough. Can you be at my house at say 3:30?”

“Yes, I’ll make time for you Mr. Nestor, 3:30 it is. I know where you live, so no need to give me the address. One thing—we rely on strict confidentiality, should your wife ask, please tell her that we’ll be discussing estate planning. It’s true, in a way.”

Once he’d hung up, Charles pulled up Fred Tudor’s number and called him.

“Fred? Charles. Yeah, long time... No, no better... thanks. Listen, I was just talking with a Somnussi guy... Ah, you do. Is he legit?... Um. But why can’t you tell me specifics?... I see, so you really are sworn to secrecy?... You’re that strongly committed to him?... So he’s worth listening to? Okay thanks Fred. No there’s nothing you can do, but thanks for asking.”

Charles went down for a late breakfast.

He’d read that loss of appetite was a sign of impending death, but could only get down about half of his food before starting to gag. He slow stepped his way to the recliner in his study and dozed while CNN over explained political minutia.

Angela answered the doorbell at 3:30 and brought Somnussi into his study. Charles gaped. Somnussi was at least 6’5’, maybe close to seven feet, and linebacker bulky.

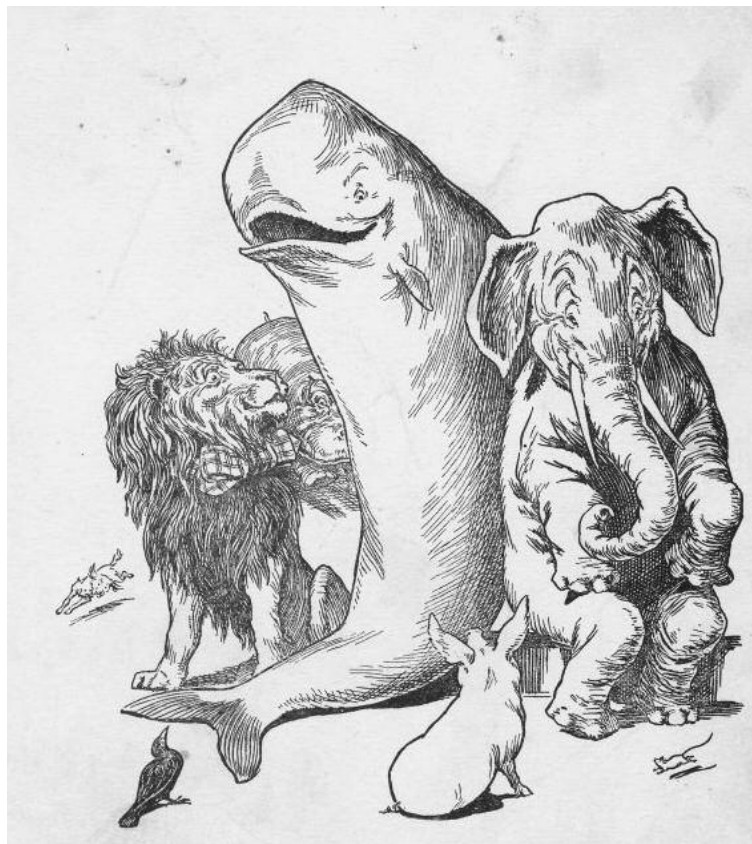
“Please, Mr. Nestor, don’t get up, I know it’s a strain.”

“Hello, Mr. Somnussi—do you have a first name?”

“I really just go by the one name.”

“Ah. What’s all this secrecy about?”

“If I just explain it, you won’t believe me and might call the police. You need to experience it. First, I must ask you to swear



by that which you hold holy, to not reveal the content of this demonstration. I'm going to show you how you can live a great deal longer, and in return must ask for your silence. Is this acceptable?"

"Is what you're going to tell me illegal?"

"Oh no, not at all."

Charles mentally shrugged. "Okay, I swear."

"Excellent. I'd like you to take a five-minute nap, right now, in your recliner. When you awaken, we can talk."

"But I'm not sleepy."

"Actually, you are." Somnussi said nothing more, but Charles felt his mind fuzz, and his eyelids drooped. Seconds later he was fast asleep.

As he fell into sleep, Charles felt himself violently wrenched, like being thrown to one side on a roller coaster. When he refocused, someone else's memories had flooded in.

My God! I know this guy, everything, his good deeds, his secret little perversions, how he likes his sex. He's young, younger than me, and he hates himself. Hates so much that—oh!—he wants to be dead. Wife's bitchy, job sucks, but he doesn't think he can change that. Decent looking, needs a different haircut; My God, so strong. And fast. Years since I was like that.

Charles felt like he'd spent a day with the man- Phil Ritter- but when Somnussi woke him barely five minutes had passed.

"What the hell just happened? That was so real. Did you hypnotize me?"

"Encouraged you to sleep. The man you occupied is real, as real as you are. He wishes to leave us, but has religious hesitations

about suicide. We can assist him, leaving a perfectly good vehicle available for another renter. That could be you."

"You're insane, that's not possible."

Without asking, Somnussi sat in an easy chair across from Charles.

"Bear with me for a few more minutes, Mr. Nestor, while I explain. In early societies, and even some modern ones, there's a belief that when someone dreams of an outside experience his animus, his soul if you will, leaves his body. The soul could revel in a life outside itself, but if it wasn't careful it could be trapped outside his body and wander aimlessly.

"After millennia of merely passive facilitation, we realized that we weren't utilizing our one of our greatest potentials- the ability to change lives. In this case to exchange your and Phil's lives. For a fee of course."

"That's ridiculous."

"So it sounds to most people. But tens of thousands still believe it, and should. There's a kernel of fact in that belief. Think what you've just experienced. You became another person, one who will live a long life. Isn't that what you want?"

The memories of the other man's life still washed through Charles—so real seeming.

"But my family, the people I love are here."

"And our estimate is that you'll be leaving them in the next few weeks.

Charles pushed himself up from his recliner and shuffled over to Somnussi. He stared down at him.

"Get out of my house. I don't know

what sick bastard put you up to this, but if you don't leave right now, I am going to call the cops."

Somnussi grinned. "That's the common initial reaction. I didn't expect you to be convinced after one brief experience. But think about it. Call Mr. Tudor. Relive the experience you've just had. You have three days to call me back. If you do, I'll arrange for you and Phil to change places for a two day, no obligation trial, so you can get comfortable in a new environment."

"Leave now!"

"Of course. Thank you for your time, Mr. Nestor."

Somnussi stood, towering over Charles, and walked out without shaking hands.

Charles, wheezing, dropped back down into his chair. *Crazy, just crazy. But God, how good it felt to have a body that could run and a mind that could focus for more than a minute.*

That night was bad. Charles needed oxygen and even then couldn't sleep. Real pain mixed with imaginary aches, and he sweat his sheets into sodden wrinkles. His only relief was reexperiencing Phil, who hated himself and wanted to die. But Phil pulled in air like a race horse and moved at sprinter speed.

The next morning, Charles called Somnussi back.

"It's all crap, but tell me the details of this con you're trying to pull."

"It's quite simple. While you're both asleep, we arrange for you and Phil to trade places for two days. You live Phil's life completely and he yours. After two days, if you're both agreeable we make the change

permanent, charging a modest fifty-thousand-dollar fee each, really just shipping and handling."

"What?"

"Ah, sorry, my little joke. The memories of your prior life are purged and your spirit operates as Phil.

"That a terrible deal, he's suicidal."

"No, no it's your temperament, your personality, just his experiences. You make a new life as Phil; Phil is able to die in a loving family without going to his hell for committing suicide. Quite neat, actually."

Despite himself, Charles had been getting excited, and his breathing was ragged. Between coughs and gasps, he asked, "And of course you want the money up front."

"Of course not. That would be extortionate. We ask for the money after your two days in each other. However, once paid there are no refunds."

"What if I do report you to the cops?"

"That would be most unfortunate. For you. We would make your life, here and hereafter most unpleasant. And we would physically terminate you earlier than scheduled."

"Don't threaten me."

"That's not a threat, it's a condition. Secrecy is non-negotiable."

A remnant of Charles' analytical ability came into focus. In a sarcastic tone, he commented, "you would make a lot more money if you leap frogged these exchanges-replacing me with someone other than Phil, moving Phil onward onto to another, an endless chain."

Somnussi's tone was amused. "We've

thought of that of course. But it creates a Ponzi scheme of souls that would eventually crash. Just imagine how ugly it would get if everyone had to try and revert. No, we're content to just be matchmakers. Shall I make arrangements?"

"Phil is a twisted guy. How would I know he would treat my family lovingly in my, er, his last days?"

"Yes, Phil is an unhappy man. But he abuses himself, not others. Remember there is no commitment until after your two-day test drive- sorry, another of my little jokes. Phil has expressed his willingness, but you may certainly decline the free trial and we will find another to fulfill his need."

Charles could feel Phil, could feel the strength and speed. The urge to be that again, even briefly, was irresistible. "No, no, please make the arrangements for the trial."

"Of course. Those we ask always agree to the trial. Always."

The next Friday morning early, Somnussi returned and was brought into Charles' den.

"Should I be lying in bed?"

"Oh, no, you'll both be off and running quickly, sorry bad joke in your situation. Just relax in your recliner."

Charles did and in less than thirty seconds was in Phil's body. He jumped up and down, then ran outside and around the block. He returned to the house to see Phil's wife staring at him.

"Sorry dear, just excited."

He quick-stepped out to the kitchen, whipped up a three-egg western omelet and

downed it with strong black coffee. Then he drove off to a golf course, rented clubs and played a full round. That night, with guilty excitement, he made love to Phil's wife.

And then, too soon, he was back in his own body, coughing and retching. Somnussi had left a note. 'Will be back this afternoon to conclude matters.' Charles sat reabsorbing his chronic pain for four hours before Somnussi arrived.

"Well Mr. Nestor, would you like to make the change?"

Charles mulled lingering reservations. "It will take me a couple days to get the money. Would that be all right?"

"Of course." Somnussi handed Charles a slip of paper. "Here's the account it should be deposited to. We'll arrange the shift as soon as your deposit clears."

I'm volunteering for a suicide mission. But it's a sort of suicide if I don't.

"Okay. I'll transfer the money today. Tell me, Mr. Somnussi, how many people turn you down?"

Somnussi smiled. "Very few. Humans hate to say goodbye to themselves. We'll transfer you immediately after you transfer to us. Sorry, just my last little joke. Before the transfer, we would greatly appreciate your providing the names of three persons you feel might benefit from our service. We live and die by referrals."

As he left, Somnussi reflected that it was the unasked questions that trapped men. Charles had never delved into why Phil felt forced into suicide. He'd find out soon enough. And perhaps return to Somnussi for release. ❖

“SIGMA 9”

by JOSEPH HURTGEN

Jim Krevic barged through my office door, knocking Miss January off the wall. Not a big deal. I'd already committed her to memory: honey brown eyes, louche, obliging smile, solidly built.

“Guy, got some sheep in the front lot. Do your thing.”

I looked at Miss January, laying helpless at Jim's feet. “Yeah, sure, Jim. Sure.” Two steps out the door, I'd already regretted leaving my coat. But they'd seen me, a dark looking man and a woman that could have been Miss January's twin. It'd be a sure sign of weakness to turn back now. The customer can't be ignored if you want to sell. You go to them directly, make them feel like you're their long-lost friend, hang on every word.

“Name's Guy Goodman, what's yours, and what are you looking for today?”

““Uriel.” He was dark and tough looking: dark hair, dark eyes. He looked like an eastern European Brad Pitt. “Get the keys to this one. We'd like to drive it.”

I warmed up on the inside and spun on my heel to retrieve the keys and my coat.

I slapped the hood a couple times. “This is a solidly built machine. Engineered to withstand an EMP blast.”

Uriel frowned. “What makes you think I want to pay for that?”

I smiled, aiming for a knowing look, but he'd taken me off guard. I felt fairly certain I was coming off as phony. “You never can be too safe these days, Mac. Just think, if Pyongyang, Moscow, or Beijing blast an EMP over our heads, you'll still have your wheels.”

“Mac? My name is—”

The woman placed a hand on the dark man and smiled. I had a muted feeling that something was off. But her looks short-circuited my better judgment. She was a dead ringer for Miss January, after all: brown eyes, well built. She opened a door and bent over to look at the interior. The man caught my eyes tracing her leg shape.

“Take her for a ride?” said Uriel.

I smiled, genuinely now. “Sure.”

#

He insisted I drive. Miss January climbed in the seat beside me. Her elbow rubbed against mine for the faintest moment. A block away from Your Euro Import Warehouse, the man pushed something solid against my neck. “Take the freeway.”

I complied. I'd heard about this sort of thing, people stealing cars right off the lot. Miss January slid her hand in mine. It was moist. My heart rate climbed.

An hour of silence later, the man

directed me to turn down a dirt road.

“Are you going to kill me?” I couldn’t read his impassive look.

“No need, Alpha. You’re already dead. Show him, Sig.”

The girl took off her top, revealing a polycarbonate body, Sigma 9 written across her ample, though ersatz chest. Through the clear plastic, computer processors blinked green and blue.

“Well built, isn’t she?” said the man. “Now do him, Sig.”

I looked from the man to the girl. “Do me?”

Sigma 9 unbuttoned my shirt, feeling her way with her fingers; her large brown eyes stayed locked on mine. Shirt off, she ran a hand down my side and thumbed a spot level with my sternum. My chest swung open: no heart, no organs, only computer parts, lots of wires. The way my cooling fan was going, it was clear I was more than a little hot.

Sigma 9 pulled out an umbilical USB cord, plugged it into a USB port in my open chest.

“What’s all this about, Uriel? I pay my taxes.”

Uriel ignored me, concentrating on his phone.

“Relax,” said Sigma 9. “It helps to close your eyes.”

Eyes closed, a rush of memories appeared. Sigma 9 was beside me, walking through Red Square, smuggled reports of Russia’s nuclear program rolled tightly in a cavity in my glasses. She’s shot in the back, falls and turns, looks up at me with ember-

tine eyes. “Run,” she mouths. A pursuit through the dimly lit Moscow streets, sounds of shoes clicking against flagstones. A jujitsu fight with a burly comrade as snow falls at midnight. Two AM, sneaking onboard a military plane. Years later, in Munich, thrown into an unmarked van, a hypodermic needle depressed into my neck.

My eyes fluttered. I looked at the man with the Uzi. “Awaiting orders, Colonel Volkov.”

“You’re to burn this man on the seventh, so eight days hence.” Volkov held his phone out. I recognized the mark. Hard not to.

“Sigma 9 will assist you. If you’re discovered, you know what to do.”

An impression of turning a gun on myself passed through my imagination. I shuddered.

The man continued in earnest. “We’ll sew confusion leading up to it.” He laughed. “Funny that sewing confusion only means that we reveal the truth.”

“The truth?” I asked.

“This is not your concern. You focus on him.” Volkov pushed a briefcase into my hands. “Here.”

It snapped open easily enough. Atop stacks of hundred-dollar bills rested a plastic handgun and silencer. “Good luck, Comrades.”

Sigma 9 smiled at Volkov.

“What about the car?” I asked.

“This?” the man sneered with disdain at the interior. “Who cares?”

“Jim Krevic at Your Eur—”

“You’ve got money. Buy it.”

#

Sigma 9 and I shared a luxurious suite at the Willard. She bathed regularly. A couple of times a day steam poured out of the half-shut bathroom door and the rooms filled with the smell of the hotel's lavender soap. I worried that she would short circuit.

"Here," she said, handing me press credentials and a gun as clear as her body. "You're scheduled to meet with the president tomorrow. We've arranged for you to meet alone. Don't miss."

Sigma 9 and I turned on a podcast operated by Volkov. We took a vodka shot every time one of the speakers claimed something that rang false: Democrats in bed with Pakistani insurgents, a deep state mind control conspiracy involving solar panels, outer space as a myth constructed to control the population. We were drunk fast. In the boozy excitement of the next day's events, we fell on the bed together. I was surprised that her polycarbonate breasts felt so heavy and fleshy in my hands.

I didn't go into sleep mode that night. I visualized every move, pulling the trigger, watching my mark fall to the floor. I remembered a hundred assassinations, generals in South America, demagogues in central Africa, CEOs in the Eurozone. But the kidnapping and the hiatus from my spy work didn't compute. What had possessed me to start selling used cars in Maryland? Sure, it could have been a move to establish deep cover. But a rare killing machine like me, why had I been left in a dead-end job for eleven years? How many android assassins did Volkov have wandering around out

here living the middle American dream, waiting for activation?

#

White House security looked over my press credentials. Somebody in mother Russia's graphic design department must have had quite the sense of humor, since my picture came complete with a walrus moustache, providing a decidedly Stalinist look. Somehow, looking like a comrade didn't trip any alarm bells. A beefy looking guy ran a wand down my legs and arms, went down my front and back. Satisfied, he motioned me forward and I was a wolf walking the White House's tight corridors.

I stepped into the Oval Office. The president presided behind his desk, a hulking bulldog, a wall of flesh and power. He looked at me with bloodshot eyes. "You're with Apparatchik Daily, that's right?"

"Yes."

"You gonna record? They usually record."

"Yes, I'm, uh, already recording."

He eyed me with fleeting suspicion, shrugged.

"And this is Russian only. No English translation? No American readers? Circulated only in the government?"

"That's right."

"Tell them the game's up."

"What's that?"

The president unscrewed his head, tossed it up into the air and caught it, screwed it back on. "The United States won't allow itself to turn into a puppet government. We got rid of your man three months into the term."

I drew my polycarbonate gun and fired, hit him square in the chest. The bullet ricocheted off and lodged in the wall.

“Because I’m nice, I’m letting you walk out of here. Go get a shower. Have a whisky. Call your mother. The Secret Service will pick you up in an hour. Don’t try to run.”

#

I walked back into the hotel suite, feeling tired, feeling human. I looked in the mirror at my haggard face. I ran a thumb along my side and pressed at a level with my sternum. Nothing opened.

Sigma 9 walked into the room behind me. “Is it done?”

“Done? Yeah. Sig, I want to see my insides again.”

“Sorry, there’s nothing in there, nothing unusual.”

“Huh?”

“We gave you a psychotropic drug, engineered to respond only to your particular genetic makeup.”

“I don’t und—”

“It knocked you out and gave you memories.”

I looked at myself in the mirror again. “I’m not a robot?”

She smirked. “Not a mechanical one anyway.”

“And you?”

“You need a bath, and I suggest you leave American soil fast.” Sigma 9 shouldered a backpack.

“Where are you going?”

“The Land of Rus, where else?”

“We were American double agents

there?”

Sigma 9 ran a hand through a healthy head of hair. “You’re all mixed up, Guy. But, hey, if you’re ever in Moscow, look me up.” She turned and left.

#

I took my first shower in a week. I looked out a window while toweling off. Agents swarmed the building on the street outside. In minutes they would come, and I would go with them.

I got a knife and cut out the lining of Volkov’s briefcase: no passport, no Russian papers. I looked around the suite, rifling through drawers and closets. Sigma 9 hadn’t left a thing. I had a memory of her brown eyes and louche smile. I had memories that sprawled across continents and spanned decades. ❖



“JOE’S BIZARRE ADVENTURE”

by NATHAN GROMOTOWICZ

“Damn—not again!” Suddenly without warning, darkness encompasses Joe. Not an inch in front of his nose is visible to him.

Already twice this week, Joe has replaced the lonely basement bulb; something in the old frame house’s wiring causes them to burn out erratically. And the one he screwed in three days ago, had to burn out while he is in the basement dumping dirty clothing into the washing machine.

“Becky! Open the door to the basement, the lights burned out again, and I can’t see!” Silence calls back. He figures she is either in the bathroom, or on the second floor of the house; where no matter how loud he hollers, it would not be audible to her. He is not going to loiter in the dark waiting for her to finish bathing, or whatever else it is that she is preoccupied with.

Joe consistently finds that he is alone in times of need, whether diminutive or gargantuan, Becky is never there to lend a helping hand, or support of any kind.

Deciding upon groping his way out as the best course of action; all together, not the easiest task to accomplish; as the basement is very spacious, and the space has been filled with all the junk a couple typically would accumulate overtime.

He begins to grope around in the dark. Everything seems foreign to Joe without the

accompaniment of light. There is not one item he can recognize by feel.

“Hey Becky! Are you up there? I need a little assistance—IF—that isn’t too much to ask of you?” He shouts to no avail. “Shoot!” He whistles through bared teeth.

Joe opts to crawl on all fours to circumvent the chance of tripping over trash that has piled up over the years.

After what seems like twenty minutes of fumbling around in the dark; he has failed to locate the staircase, and he has not bumped into any of the basement walls either! Panic creeps over him. He starts to sweat profusely. How can this be, Joe frets!

He apprehends without reservation that what is transpiring is utterly erroneous. Yet his mind seeks not for an explanation to the illogicality which manifests itself in his presence. Oddly enough, his musings drift ever further from his current corporeal conundrum; Into a tumultuous blizzard of wistfulness for his wife Becky, or to put it more precisely, the woman he had once loved. An entirely different individual from her modern incarnation.

Becky’s transformation begun two years ago; immediately after moving into this home Joe had bought for them. She had become volcanic in character and pitifully petulant. She underwent corporal alter-

ations as well; gaining a repulsively undesirable amount of weight the moment her feet stepped over the threshold to their new home. Mustering up the green stuff became a burden he carried solely upon his back. He could not, in the past, have fathomed that these characteristic alterations would have had such longevity. He had wished that Becky's apathy and capricious moods were a product of her being fired from work a year ago, and that she would revert to normalcy soon enough.

But she only grew more foul with the passing of time—astronomically fouler! All she does now is nag and belittle him. Her singular purpose in life, is seemingly to torment him with her wildly vicious behavior. He is the reciprocal for her distraught anger and nothing more in the current condition of their relationship.

It is good, Joe muses, that neither of them particularly cared for any legal linkage. Although a positive point, his eyes sting and throat tighten when he thinks of such matters.

He attempted, at first, to console Becky to the utmost of his abilities. For his efforts, he was always bestowed with a bouquet of reproachful words as a reward. To Becky's eyes, he consistently remained imperturbable; this regularly soured her perpetually sour humor to an even fouler caliber.

"Enough of this pensive whining!" He bellows to himself. Joe is not one to dwell on negativity, yet he cannot cut free of the sticky webs that engulf his mind presently. The abhorrent strands cling unceasingly,

cutting into flesh that has festered with disdain for many years. The liberation of the indignation he has kept clandestinely is cathartic on a subliminal level—but unwanted at this moment. Pragmatism is the key to this dungeon. Not unhinged emotion that will do little to aid him now. He must suppress the anger and frustration; lock it away, for a later time and different place.

Joe frustratedly slams his clenched fist onto the cement floor in an attempt to bring his focus back to the material world with pain. Much to his astonishment, he does not strike a cement floor, but instead a fleshy surface that jiggles from the impact. Somewhat reluctantly, he gropes the surface; it is not the most pleasant sensation, it being repulsively slimy and reacting with convulsive palpitations at Joe's most minute touch. Joe brings the right side of his head nearer the meaty surface (whilst dreadfully avoiding direct physical contact) he harkens to its thudding pulsations attentively. His skin crawls with every audible beat. The short hairs on the nap of his neck stand erect. Each rhythmic pulsation sends shivers through his body. There is something deeply disconcerting about every thump—something eerie. What is it that Joe hears?

It matters not, for he wishes to no longer listen to the ghastly beat; and yet, he finds he is incapable of pulling away. Invisible-iron-like grips hold him in place. He cannot pull away, and the beat gradually pulls him nearer the revolting floor. Every muscle in his body strains in revolt against the iron grasp that threatens to bring him

to an unbidden embrace with the mushy floor. Sweat beads Joe's forehead, his spine creaks, and cracks under the pressure of the opposing force. Gradually he rises, not a single muscle unused, each one tensed up, nearly bursting from exertion. Teeth clench tightly, sweat pours profusely from Joe in his desperate struggle. Better to endeavor, than to submit pitifully to life's capricious disposition; like his partner has done Joe surmises determinedly! Images of Becky hurling expletives flash through his mind like lightning strikes; feeding fuel to a seething anger that supplies him with the necessary strength.

"That bitch!" He hisses between clenched teeth.

Slowly, inch by inch, he tears himself farther away; and as he does so, the hypnotic spell of the lethal beat wanes until he is standing erect. The beat barely audible now and innocuously throbs. Joe stands drenched in sweat, trembling from physical exhaustion. Free from the ill intention-ed grasp of an invisible opponent.

This victory causes confidence to swell within him. Never has he shied away from taking swings at a punching bag since his early teens. Never allowing idleness to infect his mind with its soothing lyrical whispers. He has always been relatively fit because of this inclination.

In every respect, Joe is the opposite of the current rendition of Becky. Who now exclusively partakes in the activate known as physical movement when driven by thirst for liquor to a store which supplies such beverages. Or to seek Joe out, so he may be

utilized as an outlet for expressing a new complaint.

Out of nowhere, a light pierces the interminable darkness. An intense light that rotates in the distance somewhere on an indistinguishable horizon. It draws Joe's attention away from his molten ruminations. Light washes over him at consistent intervals. With nothing else to spot in any direction, he forges for the beacon.

It is a brief trip to the source of the light, yet a tiring one. The slippery convulsing ground proved to be rather tiresome to traverse. But traverse it he does and reach his goal.

He stands now at the base of a massive lighthouse. Joe Peers up at the large rotating lamp casting its piercing beam of light into the nonexistent world that encompasses it. Red and white stripes spiral up to the lantern room; vertically stabbing into nothingness.

He catches his breath, and a calmness sweeps over him. Being within such proximity to the lighthouse gives Joe a sense of safety. A falsehood he appreciates greatly.

Gargantuan cobblestone steps, too big to have been constructed for the use of humans lead to an entrance at the base of the lighthouse. Tentatively, he ascends the cobblestone steps which connect to the lighthouse's portal. Pensively he muses upon what has transpired within what he guesses has been the past hour.

He asks inwardly, have I died? Have I entered a foreign world? Am I laying on the

basement floor with my skull split in twain, blood flowing unhesitatingly from the crack? Did my wife do the deed? Is this all the construct of a fleeting mind? My transient existence coming to its inexorable finale! Spending my last few minutes among the living in a world of my own creation? For what else could this all be, if not a nightmare of parting? Such fanciful notions, mattering not if one, or none are actuality.

Joe ascends the steps; and he stands with his gaze fixated on the lighthouse's door.

The lighthouse's main entrance is a colossal circular copper door with gargantuan hinges of the same metal connecting it to a frame also consisting of copper. Five meters tall and at least two meters wide, he conjectures.

"Intimidating." An adequate way to describe the ginormous door.

A closer inspection of the door reveals uncanny visages engraved into it. Joe blanches and his stomach knots, the countenances are those of his tempestuous wife. Hundreds of them! Each locked into an individualistic expression of contempt. Faces he is too well antiquated with. Hesitant to approach the ghastly portal. Doggedly he keeps sickening revulsion at bay, his gaze is fastened to the dreadful visages. Their leers have minute significance for him beyond initial disgust and shock, he advances unheeding of the rancorous gazes cast upon him.

"Nothing I haven't seen countless times before!"

His right hand reaches for the door's handle. With a considerable mighty effort, the door ponderously gives way, metal scrapes against the cobblestone threshold and the hinges squeal like pigs. Once fully open, he is struck by a setting that evokes familiarity. Recognition blooms fully.

He sees his wife sitting on an oaken chair, at an oaken table in the kitchen of their home.

Becky sits with a cigarette butt planted between her middle and index finger; her glazed eyes stare fixedly at the ash accumulating on the table in a pile. He does not appreciate her irreverence of the table. Smoke trails dance seductively, pursing lips and not shying away from displaying their curves to Joe, who has abstained from the vice for more than a decade. More than three thirds of the cigarette are ash, she must have assumed full immobility immediately after lighting the fag, Joe theorizes. Joe has not stepped over the threshold yet, he stands before the door with his right hand upon the doorknob, intently watching her. She takes no notice of him, seemingly in a trance like state.

She is not alone; two wine bottles accompany her, one empty, the other half full. No wine glasses.

"Drank straight from the bottle, no surer sign of a genuine wino." Joe says quietly to himself. Not desiring for her to take notice of him yet or hear what he had just uttered.

She sits akin to a doll whose batteries have been drained. Accumulating dust till

someone reanimates her with a fresh pair.

“Damn,” Joe whispers to himself.

“Becky’s really gone off the deep end—she nuts!”

No point in delaying that which is inexorable—a confrontation. So, he places one foot over the threshold and then the other; his ass complies, following the example set by his feet. The door behind him dematerializes. He does not peer over his shoulder to confirm its nonexistence. He just knows it is no longer there. There is no escape now.

Life springs back into Becky as he enters; her eyes lock with his, a dispassionate look resides on her physiognomy. Neither of them speaks. And Joe perceives every passing second as an eternity.

He knows she is keen to speak first, so he exercises patience in the rising tension.

Languidly closing her eyes prior to dropping the charred corpse of the erstwhile fag onto the table irreverently. Becky takes a deep breath, exhales and speaks: “You were gone a long time, I was worried—did you find what you were searching for, Joe?”

He is hesitant to respond. Adding to his hesitancy is what sounded like a true note of concern in Becky’s voice. He knows her for a poor actress. She is not capable of feigning her emotions, he tells himself.

“I wasn’t looking for anything. I was throwing dirty laundry into the washing machine. What was I supposed to be searching for?”

A slight trace of indignation crosses Becky’s face and her brow furrows. Her lips

press tightly together and turn pale as death itself. He is mystified by her, which is not unusual. Becky is not an easy book to interpret. But Joe senses a violent current in the air about him; If chance is on his side, the common volcanic buffet of verbal assault he is accustomed to will not come to fruition.

Joe reels suddenly without warning! His head is like a ship out on a stormy sea. He Uses the countertop to his side as a support. And shoots Becky an aloof glance.

The perseverance required to contend with Becky is not something he currently has at his disposal, exhausted by the rather recent and unforeseen bizarre journey he has survived. He will have to tread his words cautiously if he wishes to escape this confrontation unscathed. Forcing a more genial expression to form on his physiognomy to fabricate an opaque mask that would conceal any overt antipathy.

“Becky, I don’t know what you think I’m looking for but, I’m indescribably exhausted now. And I...can’t explain why right now. I have no clue what’s pestering you, and I do not even want to pretend to know. You are a disarranged puzzle that I cannot piece back together. I’m going to be candid and blunt with you. All I want right now is to grab a cold beer from that fridge right there next to you and lay down on the couch in the living room, sipping that beer for an hour or two.” Joe is finished. He has nothing more to say. He awaits her response, resolutely prepared to take it stoically.

Time passes and Becky says nothing. She does not move. Her bosom does not

rise and fall. She does not appear to be breathing. All but unnerving silence has left the scene.

Normally Becky is not one to keep quiet. But then again, her behavior has been abnormal since Joe spied on her through that (now non-existent) portal before entering the kitchen.

I wish you'd speak Becky, Joe says inwardly. Get it over with faster. Why toy with your prey, Becky? Damn, out of juice again—well, there's nothing I can do if you won't talk to me. I'll just slip by and grab that beer I mentioned that I so sweetly desire.

Joe forages for the refrigerator, passing the immobile statue known as Becky. His right hand firmly grabs the handle of the refrigerator. He opens the fridge. Its light basks him in its chilly warmth.

Ah, the can of beer, it is where he expected it to be. No surprises-good! He has had enough of them for one day.

As his fingers close around the cold can of beer, he feels two hands grip him, lift him up into the air and toss him with such ferocity and speed that he does not comprehend what transpires. He only registers a second of immense pain before all fades to darkness.

The can of beer lays on the tile floor with a fatal gnash in its torso, liquid bread gushes forth, uncontrollably pooling with a crimson liquid.

Joe does not rise. Crimson liquid trickles from a nasty gash on his temple. As if striving to wake from a nightmare, he rocks back and forth delicately. Alas, he fails to

rise. The floor tiles release and he drifts gently into oblivion.

Becky stands staring at her defeated opponent, her face void of any sympathy towards the recumbent man before her. No warning betrays the caustic cackle she produces, her eyes beam with unchained malevolence. Becky draws her hands over her face, spreads her fingers and stabs each finger into her countenance simultaneously. Her razor-sharp nails pierce the yielding flesh of her features with ease; blood oozes along her arms and pours onto her heaving bosom. Literal meat hooks haul at her countenance till it commences to wrench free! The disguise of flesh rips loose with a clearly audible slurp! *IT* lets the organic mask slip to the floor unceremoniously. The *THING'S* physiognomy obscurely favors that of a human, but is more akin to a mockery of it. Pitiless black eyes with no irises and an absence of a sclera. A pallor that has never bathed in the warm embrace of sun. Smooth, texture-less skin, with a blanket of colorless oozing slim accumulating on the protuberant chin before slithering off to the tiled floor. A lipless slit as a substitute for a mouth. Atop its noggin is a crown constructed of its own flesh.

There are no more pretenses, only exposure. But where is the audience?

Why, laying on the floor senseless. Of course, this suits the creature well enough. It is accustomed to indirect methods of dispatch on unsuspecting prey. Is even partial to such tactics.

It advances to the immobile body laying prone on a wet floor of freely mingling liq-

uids.

Joe perceives water encompassing him. Although he does not feel wet. He cannot apprehend whether he is floating or sinking, and he describes nothing but darkness. How he has come to be here is a mystery to him. One that he considers not a worthwhile pursuit.

Such contentedness, such as the fulfillment he now experiences, is a rare luxury, why misspend it inquiring pointlessly? His mind is blank. Only the sound of waves lapping against his body echoes through his head. There are no objects here for words to cage. Corporeality was never forged here-until henceforth.

A golden fish with vividly gold locks of straight hair that trail its motions swims tranquilly about, purposelessly. Or so it seems to Joe initially. Incrementally it makes its way to him, tarnishing all the time it wishes to. This does not bother Joe in the slightest, as he feels he has no other place he will ever need to be.

The fish's golden locks trail behind it elegantly, as it makes no swift turns or sudden movements. This is no fish; Joe realizes as it nears him-but a woman of golden complexion! How foolishly his eyes have played him.

He stares in awe at her numbing allure as she approaches him unhurriedly. She is naked, her body is comprised of pristine gold. Naught else. She giggles teasingly as she approaches him; he cannot resist smiling.

Her giggles summarily come to an end.

She drifts before him coyly; he reaches out his hand lustily for her. She keeps her distance, dodging his grasp teasingly. Grasping for her futile, only managing to hold a fist full of thin air.

She smiles and giggles sweetly.

"You don't know who I am," she asks in a flirtatious voice, "do you?"

"No," replies Joe, "I don't."

"Hmph....oh well...I guess it doesn't really *matter*." That last word has a sorrowful venomous sting to it.

His thoughts are scattered marbles. He tries to reach for one and his clumsy fingers push it away. His jaw is unyielding rigid, but the desire to speak slackens it.

"You do stir some sense of familiarity, but I can't place it", unabashedly his eyes bath in her nakedness.

"You can't! —Well evidently you aren't putting enough effort into recalling who I am than." A minuscule giggle slips through her sinuous lips. "And I can surmise that my nakedness is making your already hazy head even more steamy." A melancholy residing in her eyes belies her teasing and cheerful nature. This sadness dissuades Joe's charnel lust for her psychical appearance as his eyes lock with hers.

"I am sorry, I don't know who you are." He says regretfully.

The golden lady slaps Joe faster than he can register. He tastes blood. Her right hand ascends again. He is struck once more and equally as hard. Her right hand rises upward for another strike, and he closes his eyes instinctually while putting up his hands before his face in self-defense.

“Waken Joe!” Her fist makes contact. “It’s going to murder you!” He receives another blow. “She—is going to destroy you!”

The ugly monster with a crown of meat on its head looms over Joe with a mordant leer on the orifice that resembles a mouth. It bends down rapidly reaching an appendage for Joe’s throat! Joe’s eyes open abruptly, and his hands strike out like vipers to stay the creature’s claws. He releases a yell of terror as he gazes at the horrid thing that reaches for him. With a power supplied by fear, Joe rapidly places his feet against the hideous things chest and pushes it from himself. He dizzily scrambles to his feet, precariously he stands; marginally steering clear of the blood that paints the floor. The monster is fully recuperated from its tumble. It emits no cries or snarls. No words or threats. Only a deep seeded lust for flesh shines from its bottomless black eyes. Prepared to pounce, it stands in a half crouch. The inexpressive visage belies an earnest mirth at the prospect of food with the capability of defense. Malignant Joy wells within the creature; if it were capable of smiling—it would do so now. Innately an animal of furtive habits, but when stealth fails it, a more direct method is a rare delicacy worth savoring. A speedy glance informs Joe of a kitchen knife atop the kitchen counter. He darts for the knife, slipping on a tile freshly coated with crimson. Tumbling and scrambling to obtain the knife in lieu of a well-coordinated move. He fails to regain his balance; slamming into the counter, his ribs make initial introduc-

tions! He winches in anguish, only permitting a minute silver of time for pain to be felt ere snatching at the knife hastily.

The knife spins like a spin top. Evading Joe’s frantically clutching hands as they unintentionally give fuel to the knives rotations. He slams his open palm down, stopping the knife from preforming further evasions. Joe obtains the knife he desperately requires. He wheels to discover that the monster is nearly upon him!

The monster takes hold of him by the throat, lifting him off his feet. Joe raises the knife and with no reservations thrusts it downward, plunging it deeply into that hideous mockery of a human’s countenance. Protruding from the creature’s left eye socket is the knife’s handle.

What should be a fatal wound, does not hinder the creature’s immense vitality and strength.

Its grip does not loosen on his already sore throat. How disturbing it is to witness a living thing injured to a degree that would render it lifeless, only to witness it continue living in full force.

No—it is dead! Only its abnormal instinctually powered body permitted it a few fleeting seconds of automatic life.

It releases Joe, he slips to the floor with a loud thud. The creature collapses brokenly upon itself. He can hardly keep in pace with the need of air his body’s lungs demand. Joe stays recumbent, lustily gulping air.

Drops of liquid land on Joe’s forehead. In his dazed state it does not evoke an immediate reaction. He lifts the shutters

from his eyes after six drops land on his visage. What he descries is the ceiling of his home melting. He sits up to stare at the prostrate monstrosity a few feet before him to discover that it has almost fully decomposed into a red ooze. He observes that the house is following suit.

The tiled floor beneath him turns squishy and malleable. The house and all objects that occupy a space within, slowly but surely, turn to a red Play-doh.

Joe sinks a hand into the yielding floor, pulling out a fistful of it. He gives the material a good squeeze, and watches it trickle through the cervices of his clenched fist. He notices the ceiling sag and the walls warp.

He stands and bolts for the front door, with every step he takes his feet sink into the puttie floor. Just within reach of the door, the floor swallows him up to his hips, he cannot pull free of the engulfing floor. He struggles desperately and then throws his body weight at the door; he passes right through as if it were made of a thick liquid. Joe crashes onto a grasses wet surface and passes out from exhaustion instantly.

Torrential rain falls, the heavy thud wakens Joe. The rain washes the muck and blood from his wounds as he stares in dismay as his house is in its final stages of collapse.

He is disconcerted by the new backdrop.

“Where the hell am I!?” Joe cries.

Encompassed by a dark gloomy forest consisting of tall pines and furs. With no respite the rain pours down heavily. The

dark clouds that birth the rain allow little to no illumination passage.

The rain cools his blood and slows the pace of his heart. He peers about himself much more calmly; observing the new vicinity he unbiddenly has been relocated to. There are no roads or trails, just this clearing where once had stood the physical culmination of his life’s work—his home!

Joe gazes about himself seeking anything that is akin to a marker. But the dark woods are an undistinguishable mass. He identifies no bearing to latch onto. He is lost. The fog of the forest drifts into his mind, clouding his thoughts.

Part 2

There are more prudent things to focus on, but I cannot help focusing on the only thing left to me—my name. Joe. A given name seems to be all I have. I rack my brain for any tiny bit of information that may be lurking in the dark dusty corners, only to find naught. I am a blank piece of paper. A man with no treaded path. I have an untrodden future that will begin with the first step I take, but I have no history to look backwards upon that I can ask for advice. I have no choice but to place my faith wholeheartedly with my intuition and wits; they will compensate for a lack of memorized knowledge—or so I hope.

My attention is brought back to the material world that I stand in as the cold rain begins to chill my bones. The air I breath is unbelievable cool, and fresh; it helps placate my throbbing head. The

throbbing is caused by a laceration I sense on my forehead. I perceive chilly raindrops accumulating in the wound. My arms and legs are going numb from the cold.

Inactivate will be the death of me. Since all I see in any direction I peer are tall pine trees, I choose my path arbitrarily. And begin treading that chosen path with a swift gait, hoping that the pace will chase the cold out of my bones without making the sadistic kid living in my head play the drums any louder.

The ground I walk upon has not one mottle of soil exposed. All is covered by forest moss that drinks continually of the torrential rains. The rain, it is the only thing I can hear; constantly it falls. Blocking all else that would be audible, except for the squelching sound manufactured by the moss when I place a foot upon it.

The freshness of the air energizes me, and my body has warmed from the exercise, but my head feels no better. I keep walking with no pauses.

It all blends to be interminable the same. There are no different trees, and the moss is ubiquitous on the forest floor. There is no perceptible change in the terrain either. Nothing alters, it all appears the same to me: a flat forest of giant looming pines. It is somewhat oppressive when I focus on the trees. And it does not help when I look up and only descry gloomy skies through the foliage of the pines that loom over me.

I ponder what time of day it could be; it is impossible for me to gleam that information from the lighting. Since beginning

my hike, the condition of the lighting has not altered. So, I presume this place is exempt from change, therefore time will be useless here.

My feet walk themselves mindlessly, and my head minds its own business. Until I spot something in the corner of my eye. Then my head stops minding its own business and interrupts my legs thoughtless strife.

I spy a short, extremely portly man in a tuxedo, wearing an overtly large sombrero for his diminutive deminer.

He throws a gesture resembling that of a Nazi salute. I halt mid step—flabbergasted! I walk on over to the tiny fella. He politely offers me a cup with a steaming liquid which appears to be black coffee.

I refuse his offer impolitely, unintentionally. My intention was not to be rude, but my refusals accidental execution was curt and antisocial. It does not phase the ugly short guy; his smile even broadens, in a genuine type of way. He saw right through me as if I were transparent. He knows I meant him no ignominies.

I smile back at him uneasily, not sure what to make of this chance encounter.

“Greetings good sir. Is the weather not fine for a relaxing stroll such as the one you now partake in?” He says this as more of a statement, than a inquire.

“Yes, I suppose so. If you were to consider being drenched in freezing cold rain pleasing.” My response is not to subtly sarcastic, but not by any measure mean spirited. The little man’s smile enlarges until he decides to speak again.

“Hm...well, perhaps sir you would like to step out of the chilling rain and come under the dry canopies of the bazaar? Of which, I should enlighten you, I am the *gatekeeper!*”

“What sort of bazaar?” I ask.

“There are innumerable vendors at the bazaar, I cannot realistically inform you who sells or performs what, as there are far too many sellers. And there are new vendors arriving every minute, while others pack up their goods and depart regularly. Alas, I can offer no great certainty of what will be available. But I can wholeheartedly promise you that the single thing you will not leave the bazaar with is disappointment! Now, I will not strive to persuade you any farther. Do you wish to enter?”

“I don’t know; I’m lost—and to be frank, all I want right now is to find my way home. Maybe instead of the bazaar, you could just tell me where we are?”

“That is information I am incapable of bestowing you with. As I am never fully knowing of the place I inhabit. I am itinerant with the bazaar.” He stops there, awaiting my decision.

“Maybe—alright—fine! I’ve got no better place to be anyway.”

“Then please follow me sir.”

He turns his back to me and starts away at a brisk pace. I follow him. I do not descry anything resembling an outdoor bazaar. And the fog thickens to a point where I need to stay within a meter of the midget, or I’d lose sight of him utterly.

I place my trust in this stranger because I have nowhere else to place it. Let him

guide me.

I have no other place to be, no other options. Besides, this bazaar he informed me of intrigues me. Perhaps I will gather some direction in my so far aimless wanderings.

The small fellow’s oversized sombrero functions as his umbrella. Water cascades off its rim, creating a miniature water fall that encircles the tiny man.

Lights up ahead of us garner my attention. My guide turns to look at me over his shoulder and says: “We have arrived sir. Follow the lights, they will direct you the rest of the way. Farwell sir.”

He sets of the way we had come at quick trot. Passing me, I say to his postern: “Thank you!”

The lights are disembodied, they appear as floating orbs. I head to them.

The clamor that is associated with a bazaar is audible to me now. A cacophony of sounds. Yelling, argumentative bartering, children shouting and the clangor of goods swapping hands. The typical auditory assault one would experience at a flea market.

Now I descry the psychical aspect of the bazaar. Pole tents with outstretched awnings protecting buyers from the interminable rain. Items laid out on wooden tables. Bountiful torches with blue flames cast a pleasant, yet effective light.

Nobody takes notice of me as I enter the throng. Almost everybody bumps into me. The place is packed tight. Not with humans thought. The things that bump into me rudely are silhouettes in business

suits, each caring a very individualistic suit-case and wearing a unique tie. Their exposed hands and faces are starry skies on a cloudless night.

One of these things wearing a bright red tie with white strips has a shooting star blaze across its countenance. The same one has a twinkling star where a left eye would be for a human. What's more, it has black leather gloves covering its hands.

It, unlike the others that pass me, is staring directly at me. I cannot perceive if it is staring at me or in my general direction. It stands beside a bazaar stall, away from the traffic. Hard to tell where a creature with no eyes could be directing its gaze for sure.

I start for the thing in a suit with a solar system for a face. It raises its hand to wave me over, I reciprocate the wave. The crowd is difficult to slice through; no one bothers trying to avoid me, and everyone bumps straight into me. As if they are trying sweep me off my feet and take me downstream with the current. I am fighting an up-stream battle and the current is too great for me to bear. I am getting carried further away by the will of the throng. I register elbows jabbing me painfully in the ribs. And shoulders harshly colliding against mine. No doubt, I will be mottled with bruises after this beating.

But I am stubbornly compelled by curiosity to resist, to discover what the thing with a twinkling star for an eye wants with me. It might know the things I would like to know.

I swell with indignation as the stream rocks me about wildly, not in synchroniza-

tion with my volition. I am being assimilated by the mass. They will not let me go in a direction they do not choose.

They will tire me out, exhaust me, then I will beg for them to allow me to be carried away by them witlessly. I make negative progress, I am receding.

My stamina dwindles speedily in this strife. My breath is short. And a thick, sticky substance trickles down my face, originating from the wound on my head. And that wound currently throbs unbearable with pain.

Violence is the only logical key in this scenario.

I push myself off the thing in front of me (using my left hand) and in an action born of desperation, swing a punch at the things star riddled visage. It topples backwards into its comrades; like a domino, many of them trip over one another and fall to the ground. A path to the one with a twinkling left eye is made clear. Now I have the opening I require! There will be no second chances once they collect themselves. My ass needs to get into sixth gear.

I try to be a considerate, avoiding their supine bodies if possible. But there are exceptions to my courtesy; the ones that attempt to rise, I utilize their faces as steppingstones to spring from.

I make it to the one with a twinkling star for an eye that waved at me earlier with an absence of any farther hindrances. Its tie draws my attention instantly—it is a *red tie with white strips*. Sparks flicker in my head, not enough light to illuminate an image, but close.

We stand to the side of the traffic, near a seller's stall. While I catch my breath, he proffers me a hand to shake. I extend my appendage to shake the one he presented me. I nod amicably during the cordial greeting. It informs me of its name: "My title is the Businessman." His voice is masculine and confident, yet relaxed and at ease. "That mob would have rended you limb from limb, had you not torn free from their grasps. Additionally, you've an impressive right hook! I cannot help speculating why they desired to detain you from me?" The creature pauses in its musings.

"By the way, I am your guide and bodyguard. I have been informed by my employer, who has chosen to remain anonymous to both you and me, that you are a foreigner. Thus, you are obviously unfamiliar with this land, its workings, and customs. I was also imbued with the knowledge that you may be generally disoriented due to an injury you sustained to your head. And indeed, even a cursory inspection reveals that you have sustained an injury." He takes a moment of silence, "If you do not mind me insisting, I recommend that you get that nasty gash looked at by a medic. I know the whereabouts of one in this bazaar?" He pauses again.

I could not perceive any alterations upon his countenance as he spoke. His voice did the expressionism instead. And while expressive, it additionally sounded very controlled. Could not a creature of this manner be the master of its outward expression. The eyes and the face are usually the snitches who belie an animal's true inten-

tions. But his face is a void, Servile to the utmost extent because of its inability to express.

The thought of seeking ministrations for the laceration my noggin had been bestowed with had not occurred to me earlier. I paid minute heed to the wound whenever it had previously pestered me with its pleas for attention because I did not have the luxury to attend to its pleas. Regardless of whether I can confide in this Businessman, I have not another person to turn to for aid of any kind.

"Okay than, take me to a doctor," I say to him.

"Let us be on our way then." He turns and gestures with a hand to follow. And I do just that.

We make our path vertically through the bazaar, our pace is brisk. It proves to be a little too onerous for myself, especially with the condition that I am in.

"Hey!" I holler to the Businessman through the unyielding sounds of the bazaar, "Why don't we slow down? I won't be able to keep up with you for very long if we continue to jog."

"Oh, I apologize for the rush. But it would be wise if we were to move quickly. And do not worry, I will not lose sight of you, I can see all around me. All *three-hundred and sixty degrees* are visible to me. So, there is no probability that you will escape my sight—even if you tried! As you are likely aware, I never once so far have peered over my shoulder to check if you still follow." He pauses for the length of a breath to pass.

“The physician is not much further, so please, if you can, let us persist at this hasty tempo. It is after all, for your wellbeing solely. There may be more mingled into the crowd who would obstruct you! It is only a little further; preserve my colleague—preserve!” he says, encouragingly.

He is not lying. Two minutes later we halt in front of a tent with canvas walls, erected between two bazaar stalls. Atop the entrance flap hangs a sign with a painted illustration depicting a buxom nurse riding a giant syringe as if it were a witch’s broom stick.

The Businessman courteously pushes the canvas flap to the side with an arm and asks me to enter the dusky gloom within. I comply.

Inside there is an old man sitting criss-cross with his back turned to us. He has a low work bench in front of him. He is pre-occupied with something on the work bench.

The Businessman strides to the old man’s side; places a gloved hand on his left shoulder and whispers into the old man’s ear. The old man nods several times whilst mumbling. He rises; all his joints creak as he stands. He rotates to face me and shuffles to me like a bipedal turtle.

He stops in front of me, scrutinizes me with his frosty blue eyes which are magnified by inch thick spectacles. Once finished appraising me, his gaze settles on the reason for me coming here.

I appraise him while he peers into the depths of the hole on my forehead. I postulate that he is in his mid-seventies, fit for

his age thought. I can see muscles bountiful with sinewy ripple beneath the buttoned-up flannel shirt he wears.

“Come, have a seat over here,” he says; waving a hand curtly at a low stool near the diminutive work desk he had been occupied at when me and the Businessman entered. Speaking of the Businessman, he stands vigilantly next to the entrance with his gloved hands clasped in front of him.

I position myself on the stool he indicates. He sits opposite of me, across the worktable. Curiously, I glance at the table to see what he had been fixated on when we had entered, crudely incised on the surface are the words: *eat shit and die!* Huh? While I speculate as to the reason that these words are carved into the old doctor’s worktable, the muscular geezer procures a minuscule vial from a drawer on his side of the table, additionally he withdraws a cotton swab. He removes the cork from the vial. And wets the swab in the vial’s liquid contents. He tells me lean in close. I do. He applies the wetted swab to my forehead. While staring fixedly at the area being treated.

“It’s not fatal, but you’ve lost a lot.” He speaks.

“Blood?” I inquire, concealing concern.

“No, not blood. But a lot of everything else,” he replies indifferently.

“What then?” I ask, apprehensive of the answer.

“You are the one who once held that knowledge. But like I have already told you, what’s lost is gone in your case.” He says this uncaringly.

He finishes with the swab. And withdraws a needle and thread. And begins to sow the scar on my forehead.

“I am ceasing the escape of more. But I am no magician, what’s been lost will likely stay lost.”

“I can live with losses.” I match his dispassion on the topic at hand, even though it should concern me greatly.

“If you knew what you have lost—you’d withhold your tongue from letting such silly things slip upon its surface!” He is visibly angered at my response and attitude.

“Is there any way I may retrieve what I’ve lost?” I feign interest. But I should not have to fake engrossment, this is my business. My problem.

“No, probably not,” he says sorrowfully; finally permitting a mote of sympathy to penetrate his seemingly uncaring demeanor.

I abstain from further conversation. He does not say anymore until his work is finished.

“My handywork is complete!”, he announces proudly, “I have an innate gift for this line of work. the work I’ve done on you is art. Once it heals, there won’t be nonthin to show for it.”

He stars at me while putting away his things automatically. “What have your services cost me?” I inquire, realizing that I carry no money and if I did, it would not likely be an acceptable currency.

“For you, free of charge. You’ve got nothing to give. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to work.” There is a tinge of masked pain in his voice. “So, get out of my shop.” He dismisses me and looks down at

the insulting words someone had carved onto the surface of his worktable.

I stand and run a finger feelingly over the doctor’s labor and say my thanks. Me and my tour guide depart from the doctor’s stall.

“Where to now?” I inquire of the Businessman.

“To the employer who paid for my services,” he answers.

“Let’s get on with it then!” I say enthusiastically. Swelling curiosity gnaws at my cogitations; I would like to meet this person who anticipated my arrival in this place.

“Good, I’ve never fancied tarnishing time. Come along,” he replies.

We exit the bazaar peaceably with no obstructions. We do not exit the way I had entered, through the miserable woods which I had traversed; but instead, we board a subway train situated at the fringe of the bazaar. We are among few in our cart.

The train begins to move sluggishly. Methodically gaining speed. Until all through the windows blurs; the view transforms into starry skies. The Businessman who sits across from me blends into the backdrop flawlessly. All I descry of him is a suit-nothing more! Stars and solar systems drift by where his head should be. But his twinkling left eye is stationary. I watch all this keenly, fascinated, and in awe at the spectacle of the scene transpiring.

The train’s speakers switch on with a startling crackle to announce something in a tongue I do not fathom. The Businessman translates the announcement

for me. He tells me that at the upcoming stop we will depart from the train. Additionally, he informs me that it will be quite a while before we reach it.

I have had a multitude of questions floating around in my cogitations since waking in that miserable forest. Maybe it is time I asked questions and received some enlightenment. Now I have the time to spare and the tranquility to ask them. Plus, someone to actually ask.

As I ready myself to speech, the rhythmic sway and hum of the train dissuades me, it makes me drowsy; unbearably so-in fact. The questioning I was to heap upon the Businessman will surely halt the closure of my heavying eyelids. I try to open my mouth, but it is already too late; I am descending into sleep. And now, I have fallen into dreamless slumber devoid of tribulations.

A distinct lack of motion stirs me from my slumber. The train is not moving. We have arrived I quickly realize. I groggily stare at the Businessman; he nods to me. I rise and we depart the confines of the train.

Once the Businessman and I are side by side, we step off the train car unto the outer world where we are greeted by the view of an old countryside frame home. Not ostentatious. But not exactly humble. There is tall green grass as far as the human eye can see. The sun is past its zenith. Its rays of warmth are pleasant. I do not remember the last time the sun had shined on me, because I literally do not recall when that was. I only know that sun exists. There is an ancient looking willow tree next

to the home and a stream that swerves by it sensuously. The frame home is two stories tall. It has recently had a fresh coat of gentle white paint applied to it. There is a spacious front porch and a single front door that is luridly red—like a drop of blood on a spotless white shirt.

“My employer awaits you inside,” says the Businessman. “I have been given strict instructions that dictate that you are to enter alone. I apologize; but you must proceed alone.”

“That’s fine,” is my response. “I appreciate you taking me this far, even if it’s just because you’ve been commissioned to. Anyway, there’s no need for you to be holding my hand all the time. We’ll talk again after I say hello to your employer.”

“I’m positive that we will. I’ll wait for you here.”

I turn away from him to the house, ascend the porch steps—stop, facing the door. Skittishness descends and a heaviness slows me from touching the door nob. An unbearable emotional weight reclines on my shoulders of a sudden. It is ambiguous; but I know well enough that it is fear of the unknown that grips me. The fear of an anticlimactic outcome. What lies beyond the red door I now face? Who is the employer?

I overcome my trepidations; grab the red door by the handle and swing it open.

Familiarity coupled with nostalgia intoxicates me. The visuals spur an extreme exultation I cannot explain. I stand in a foyer that leads to what appears to be a kitchen with a table in the center. Atop the table is a wild assortment of steaming food.

I see mountains of pancakes, bacon, eggs, and hash browns too. All this I can see from the start of the foyer.

My mouth salivates at the sight. Earlier it had not occurred to me how hungry I was until this delicious display was thrust before my eyes, reminding my amnesia-stricken mind what sharp pangs of pain from within are an indication of.

I run to the table with no deliberation; driven recklessly by my hunger for sustenance. I seat myself with haste; my attention entrapped by the food steaming before me. I begin to eat lustily, devouring mouthfuls with abandon.

I down a couple of mouthfuls before incidentally taking note of a young blonde woman silently reclining against the kitchen counter. She has been observing me mutely. She smiles a very tiny furtive smile.

“Don’t mind me—go on—eat!” she says giddily, “I’ll not pester you.”

I am ambivalent about discovering her. I assume she is the employer.

“Why don’t you have a seat? I wouldn’t mind the company,” I say to her.

“Oh, why thank you!” The quantity of energy she exudes is almost unendurable “I believe I will.”

She walks on over and sits on the opposite side of the table, facing me. I proceed to eat, at a slower pace; she monitors my every move unblinkingly, her attentiveness is distracting and unsettling. I cannot eat under such intensive scrutiny. She does not even blink! Uneasiness proliferates speedily as she stares at me while abstaining from the natural process of blinking. That never

fading, petite smile; it is pleasant but unhelpful in dissuading the uncomfortable atmosphere she creates!

I smile back, “You want to take a bite out of some of this stuff? Or are just going watch me eat!?!...There’s more than enough for the both of us.” I say agitatedly.

She takes a fork from the tabletop into her left hand, a very delicate hand, with measured movements. No excessive energy is used. With that fork she severs a chunk of pancake from its wholeness and eats it. “Mmm...it’s good, but I am not hungry. I’ll sit and watch you eat it instead.”

She stabs the fork into mutilated pancake and reclines in her chair. I refrain from taking another bite.

“Are you the employer?” I implore of her.

“Yes, I am,” she answers with a jolly smile. And that is all she seems intent on telling me. So, I probe a little.

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me; the tour guide and this excellent meal, it’s nice to have someone looking out for you when you’re in need of help. Especially in my case. I don’t know who I am, besides my first name. Everything else is a blank to me. I am not aware of how I arrived here or where exactly it is that I am. And I no nothing of you beyond an alias. You must know something about me because you knew where I would be. I demand illumination, before proceeding further with any conversation or consumption of food.” I put my fork down and recline against my chair copycatting her.

She produces a sweet laugh and smiles

a little broader than is usual for her. “Speaking candidly, nobody knows where *this* is!” She speaks sweetly, but there is an undertone of anger. “For some inexplicable reason people appear here without warning. The one consistence with these people is that their heads are empty, no exception among them has ever been reported. Nor am I an exception, excluding a single divergence.” Her smile is fading. “The others like you and myself have identical questions. Interminably they will wander. Until one day, they’ve drained the well of their will dry, and than they stop caring about anything.” She grants herself a breather. “You see”, she says with pathos in her voice, “these wretches keep it up till they hollow themselves out. Striving to attain something concrete. You see Joe, they latch onto this fictional premise that there is illumination for every dark corner in existence. And this drive morphs into a torment. What do you do Joe when your tormentor inhabits your head? There’s no where you can outrun your self.

“I refuse to proffer you with your identity. It would inexorably spring into motion your self orchestrated demise.” Her sunny

demeanour is on vacation. There is a lot happening in those hazel eyes of hers, but she tries her darndest to keep a cool exterior. Not much of it is legible to me. A whole lotta conflict beneath an apathetic veneer. She knows that I can see it.

“I know who you are Joe,” she says with deliberation. “I won’t acquaint you with your former self. Me doing so would spring into motion an eternal want for more. But you’ll never get enough pieces to form a whole.” She pauses and leans forward onto the table with her elbows, she exhales loudly. “I offer you a preposition—forget about it! Stay here with me instead?”

Her answer is not informative and leaves me with more questions than I originally contained. And her proposal overwhelms me. I am stupefied and ambivalent regarding her offer. What will I be if I turn my back on her: a lost soul, a wandering stranger in a stranger land. I have no place to be or purpose here.

I can only think of a simple response, yet one that I think will not harbor regret. It is a single simple word: “Okay.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION