

## MARIENBAD MY LOVE - PART 1

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Sincerely,

**Mark Leach**

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Again I advance across the tragic beaches of this deserted island, footsteps upon sand so profound, so deep, that one perceives no step. Mute beaches, where footsteps are lost. Mute, deserted – footsteps upon sand over which I advance once again. To find you.

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This morning I saw a porpoise not 30 yards from here. At first I caught only a passing sideways glimpse of the dorsal fin, and I panicked that it was a shark. But no – that’s surely wrong, I told myself. There are no sharks here. Only memories – memories, deities and ghosts.

I’m leaving today, driving right off this island. You look doubtful, but it’s true. I have found the old reef road! The wooden marker posts of pioneer days are long gone, but I don’t need them to know I’ve found the spot. The water barely covers my ankles.

The reef road shouldn’t be here, but at North Beach on the other side of Corpus Christi Bay. And yet, here it is – my salvation. The oyster shells make a solid road bed, so I should have no trouble. At low tide I’ll drive across the Laguna Madre and back to dry land, carrying my Incredible Revelation – my reality-altering, conclusion-of-time vision – into the waking world of commonplace art and conventional theologies. A short trip across the public beach, and I’ll disappear into the anonymous traffic of Shoreline Drive, past the beachfront mansions.

Look, you can see them from here. Are they not beautiful, these vast and magnificent homes? Here is one worth noting, a tragic mansion of an earlier time. Notice how the grounds are in the Uruguayan style and yet without shrubbery, blossoms or vegetation of any kind. Here we find a past of Carrara marble, a past carved in stone – intersecting lines, reserved, ripe with inscrutability. Upon initial viewing it appears impossible to get lost here along the linear walkways between the unassailable statues and marble embellishments. And yet I am, even now, losing myself forever – losing myself in my own prophetic utterances, alone in my Patmosian exile. Alone without you.

Luh? She is fine. However, she will not be accompanying me on my trip. This time I will be traveling solo.

So what occurred with Luh?

Picture me flying, rocketing through the sky like Christopher Reeve in Superman, my right fist thrust before me. I am flying over a parking lot, heading for a landing next to a woman who is pregnant with my son. There is a complication: This woman is not my wife. I have not spoken with her at all during her pregnancy, and she’s already in her second trimester. It’s definitely time to pay her some attention.

Next, we are in a sort of cave, except most of the ceiling is missing, open to the sky. I think of a movie I am making, that I have already scripted. It's called "Next Year at Marienbad." As I look around at the walls of the cave, it occurs to me that I could become trapped. Always there are walls, everywhere around me. Mute, deserted – walls of baroque embellishments, mahogany veneer, Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, Carrara marble. Dark glass, obscure illustrations, Romanesque columns, sculptured thresholds, lines of doors, colonnades, oblique hallways leading to deserted meeting rooms paneled in the baroque embellishments of an earlier time. Mute rooms, where footsteps are lost. Sculpted berber so profound, so deep that one perceives no step. The walls are everywhere, enclosing me.

But I don't panic. I tell myself that this place needn't be safe all the time, just during this short time I am here. I won't be trapped. If I can just set aside my neuroses and free-floating anxieties for a bit, I may even enjoy it.

The cave is a pretty place, with pools of still water and patches of rye grass and moss. I talk to the woman who will bear my child. She is Luh. Or maybe Cinnamon. Or maybe you.

I tell her I am not sure if I should tell my two sons about the baby. I would have to admit to extramarital sex. (I don't mention that my wife might not appreciate this admission, either.) On the other hand, I think the boys should know about their half brother. After all, this new divine entity will grow up to create "Next Year at Marienbad," the movie that will bring about the End of the World – and the beginning of the New Religion.

Luh is incredibly supportive. She tells me I should do whatever I think is best. I shouldn't worry over the details. Her family is rich. (Her father was one of the medical professionals who treated the fatally wounded JFK in Dallas.) And she assures me that as far as they are concerned, "there are no strings attached" to any financial or other support.

I tell her it is so impressive that our son will grow up to do great things. "He'll go to Yale," I say. Luh corrects me. She tells me it is a different school, one I've never heard of. It is a hyphenated name with Yale as the first part, "Yale-Henning" or something like that. So that's it. He'll be part of an advanced and alien world, one I know nothing about.

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Charlie: Attention Mark Leach. David Lynch is holding on the red phone. He wants to lend you his embalmed calf fetus for the baby scenes.

Elmo: In case you're just joining us here on "Blast" – it's the End of the World in "Next Year at Marienbad."

Charlie: B-movie sci-fi filmmakers have a long heritage of mining the various veins of the Apocalyptic genre, but few have tunneled as deep –

Elmo: And come up as lacking --

Charlie: -- as Mark Leach. "Next Year at Marienbad" is arguably the worst end-of-the-world film ever made. The concept alone is one of the most bizarre in the history of film – a science fiction-themed tribute to "Last Year at Marienbad," the 1960s movie that defined the French New Wave.

Elmo: While it is the on-again/off-again odd darling of the midnight movie and science fiction convention crowds, "Marienbad" has otherwise generated almost universal disdain among casual moviegoers as well as serious cinemaphiles, including those of us here at "Blast." The onbeam world is rife with vitriolic reviews and caustic

academic essays. Many of the comments are so vitriolic and caustic they cannot be repeated in a public broadcast; however, we have managed to sanitize a few for your enjoyment. “The incoherent ramblings of an insane mind ... I am not sure there is even a classification for this one ... long stretches of surrealism, where we are in this character's head and not grounded in any recognizable reality...What was that?! Was this person using drugs or what? ... I decided to be generous and give you a one, rather than a zero ... I am so completely confused. I have no idea what's going on, what's real and what the narrator is imagining ... It's terrible.”

Charlie: This movie even offended the protagonist, who recently broke down the fourth wall to post his own objections in the onbeam world: “Congratulations, Mark Leach. I read today that ‘Next Year at Marienbad’ has been declared one of the worst films ever made. And still you smile, that clueless, William Hung smile. Why so pleased? If you really wanted to create a noteworthy science fiction/fantasy film, then why no swords or elves? Why no Roman centurions? No, you thought you were too good. Only a hack would write genre, right? Instead of straight science fiction, you decided to employ the ‘conventions’ of SF. ‘It's all for EFFECT,’ you explain. And why did you have to make me so perverse? After all, I am an autobiographical character. What do my perversions say about you, the filmmaker? ‘You are only an exaggerated version of me,’ you say, ‘exaggerated for comic effect.’ Fine. Here is what I say: I hate this, being a fictional creation trapped in this abomination of a movie. Experimental? Stream of consciousness? Metafilm? How about ‘crap’? Now that ‘Next Year at Marienbad’ has been unleashed on the world, surely the Apocalypse is not far behind.”

Elmo: Indeed, the New York Agenda recently published a story about an Apocalyptic religion called Marienbadism. Inspired by scenes from the movie, a group of dedicated Marienbadists are planning to show the film in a special, yet-to-be-built drive-in theater in Tibet, an action Mark Leach has stated will bring about the death of the world and the birth of the new religion.

Charlie: And of course there are still the pending murder charges.

Elmo: Though in all fairness it is hard to see how one person can be blamed for the destruction of an entire town. But we digress. How did such a film ever come to be made at all? How did such a filmmaker ever come to be born?

Charlie: Yes, what is going on in the unconscious mind of this offender of humanity, this embracer of iniquity, this self-diagnosed sufferer of Post-Modern Prophet Disorder –

Elmo: This prototype of the two-bodied man.

Charlie: Steve Harrison, business editor of the Tarrant County Register and Leach’s former boss, is here to shed some light on this strange and abhorrent being. Welcome Steve.

Steve: Thank you. It’s a pleasure to be on “Blast.”

Charlie: Mark has called “Next Year at Marienbad” his Incredible Revelation. Did he often incorporate so-called prophetic or visionary content into his work as real estate editor?

Steve: Mark was not real estate editor at the Register.

Elmo: Oh. But I thought –

Steve: He may have put it on his resume, but that doesn’t make it true. Mark was a reporter, mostly daily assignments on local businesses.

Elmo: A revealing exaggeration, yet another example of this filmmaker's all-encompassing configuration of ostentation – in imagination if not conduct – and general air of narcissism, a quality we often see in corporate CEOs as well as the criminally insane.

Charlie: And in fact, this particular insane criminal –

Elmo: Also the CEO of his own movie.

Charlie: -- yes, we'll call him Chairman of the Board. He does show an overarching theme of hoped-for recognition as a superior life form. Or God.

Elmo: Unfortunately, Mark feels he is entitled to superiority without correspondingly superior achievements. Not good.

Charlie: At the risk of overusing an almost-trite example, I must say that at times his work reminds me of the schlock director from Texas, Ward E. Timber Jr.

Elmo: Exactly. "Next Year at Marienbad" comes off almost like a hymn to "Let Me Love You." To paraphrase the DVD dust jacket comments of the distributor, Wade Williams -- a sincerely unique, yet utterly flawed tribute from Ward to himself and everyone else who has ever attempted to construct something clever and significant and yet botched it wretchedly at every turn.

Charlie: You can almost see the strings and cardboard tombstones!

Elmo: Steve, did you see signs of this misplaced grandiosity and self-deification in Mark's work at the Register?

Steve: No, I wouldn't say that. Mark was quiet, a nose-to-the-grindstone kind of reporter. I'd characterize him as a journeyman. To be sure, he was a reliable worker. He met the expectations on his assignments, which were many and varied. I told him he was our utility infielder. But, uh --

Charlie: Ah yes, a jack of all trades, a master of none.

Steve: I'm afraid he never had much style as a journalist.

Charlie: Or a movie director.

Elmo: And that points to one of the central problems of "Next Year at Marienbad." Mark has a nice touch at the micro level. Lots of stunning metaphorical imagery, especially dealing with the central theme of the eruption of the inner dreamscape into waking reality. The inexplicable scent of roses, mystic icons weeping blood, statues of the Saints moving of their own accord – this film is truly a story of the unconscious invading the waking world. But Mark just doesn't pull it all together into a single cohesive narrative.

Charlie: What you just said about the "micro level" – this is absolutely on target. "Marienbad" is intermittently victorious. But as a whole – well, even Mark's biggest fans must admit that his talent shines brightest at the level of the individual scene.

Elmo: Let's roll the clip.

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Here's one way the world ends: I am standing on the backyard patio of my boyhood home, looking up at the eastern heavens. It is an incredible sight – a white clock dial is bleeding through the thin cobalt sky. The psychic contrail is suspended in the high, thin stratosphere, an icy cirrus cloud of time. Somehow I understand that the government knows all about it, but has been keeping it a secret. Now that the Clock in the Air has been de-cloaked, there is no denying its existence. Is it an alien spaceship? Perhaps – or it could be something far more significant: A sign from the Deity. In fact, this may be the

divine pocket watch, His timepiece. But time for what? Strange to be here, so out of my own time. My parents sold this house years ago.

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Elmo: Pretty.

Charlie: Agreed. We should be fair. “Next Year at Marienbad” is in no way a total embarrassment. Mark is comfortable behind the camera, even if he doesn’t have much rapport with it.

Elmo: And the camera clearly loves him. In scenes like this, “Next Year at Marienbad” certainly reminds one of the great Apocalyptic films of the Hydrocarbon Age, epics like “The Revolution of Zion,” “The Clockscan Conspiracy” or anything from “The Abandoned Ones” series.

Charlie: But unlike those drive-in classics, Mark’s movie simply fails to generate its own animating personality. It never fully succeeds in the terms of the genre.

Elmo: So often during “Marienbad” I reflected upon how much better everything must have functioned inside Mark’s head.

Steve: Honestly, it was the same way with Mark’s longer, more in-depth news features.

Charlie: Do tell.

Steve: He struggled to make the jump from brain to computer keyboard. He could rarely establish the proper tension.

Elmo: Fascinating. How do you mean?

Steve: It’s like I tell my young reporters. Good writing is like a turnbuckle. Not too tight, not too loose.

Charlie: A turn what?

Steve: A turnbuckle. It’s the little metal adjustor they used to put on wooden screen doors. Set it too loose and the door would drag. Too tight and the door would warp.

Charlie: Your anecdote tires me, a languid blood bath waltz of insipid storytelling, a dog humping the silky femur, poorly sculpted fluff. Yawn.

Elmo: Any Mark Leach examples come to mind?

Steve: I remember one time Mark brought us a story about a rash of new hotels slated to break ground in Tarrant County. At the time we were underserved in the lodging industry, so it was big news. But it wasn’t big enough for Mark. No, he said his research had revealed that there were so many projects in the works that if they were all constructed we’d be overbuilt.

Elmo: The hotel market would crash.

Steve: So he claimed. That’s the story he wanted to write. Mark was actually going to have us overbuilt before anybody even broke ground. So sad. I had to explain it to him. “Mark, you’re too clever by half.”

Charlie: But in fact he was right, yes? They did overbuild.

Steve: That’s hardly the point.

Elmo: You could say it’s the same way with “Next Year at Marienbad.” Mark’s cleverness is quite engaging, but not engaging enough to sustain narrative tension for two or more hours on a 50-foot drive-in movie screen.

Charlie: Yes, he almost fails to suck.

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Welcome to my island.

Pull up a deck chair, help yourself to the tanning oil. But watch out for the brain crabs – they bite!

May I offer you a festive beverage, perhaps with a paper umbrella? No? I understand. You are unsure, filled with doubt. You have purchased your ticket, acquired your soft drink and bucket of popcorn and taken your seat. And yet still you wonder: A Rapture movie without a Rapture? Is this really for you? Or perhaps you worry it is rather too much for you. That is to say, too much Mark Leach. (I'm told a little of me goes quite a ways.)

I hope you're not here to console me. Such an action is clearly not documented in the script.

I am happy, snug in my antebellum "bachelor's pad." The slave-made bricks are beginning to crumble, but the walls are still strong and thick. Imagine it: three feet of solid masonry! Cool in the summer, warm in the winter. Dry, too. The old slate roof is like a sheet of iron. Nothing gets through. The accommodations are quite luxurious. A leather sofa, a Sears-O-Pedic king mattress, a fully stocked wine cellar. I even have my old 1970 Cutlass convertible. You remember it, don't you?

My island. It's nothing like a prison.

Did you know I dreamed this place? And I don't mean onbeam, either. I'm talking about a genuine, naturally-occurring Incredible Revelation. Again you look doubtful, betrayed by the old, familiar smile. I know what you're thinking: We studied this building in Mrs. Wilson's 7th grade Texas History class, the section on the Civil War. What can I say? I'm a native Texan; I know my state history. I have filled a mayonnaise jar with Minieballs pried out of the bricks and unearthed from the beach. But here, such concrete evidence is inadmissible; this place does not belong to the waking world.

This place, this beach over which I advance once again, sand so profound, so deep that one perceives no step. This mournful island of another era, encrusted with the artifacts of another time. This magnificent island, where beaches without end follow upon beaches, the sand beneath my feet so profound, so deep. The beaches are deserted now, void of the still, mute, possibly long-dead people of my exile. One perceives no step in this prison, this perjury.

Do you know I never hear anyone raise his voice in this place? No one. Conversation flows in a void apparently meaningless or, at any rate, not meant to mean anything. A phrase hangs in midair, as though frozen, though doubtless taken up again later. No matter. The same conversations are always repeated by the same prosaic voices.

No, this place does not belong to the waking world. We now put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.

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I am part of a travel group on the Texas Gulf Coast, enjoying a boat tour.

The man at the helm – our captain and guide – takes us on a fast ride. We zip past little islands, some just big enough to stand on, all the while heading toward the biggest link in the chain: Marienbad.

This main island is dominated by an old brick structure. It has no windows. An arch-type design element is set into the brickwork. Perhaps it has a flat roof; I cannot say

for sure. Later, it will occur to me that the structure reminds me of Fort Sumter, the place where Confederate troops fired the first shots of the Civil War.

As we near the island, the captain brings us around on the ocean side for a closer look. On the beach I notice giant, root-like structures. They lie on top of the sand, spread out like thick vines or cables, their surfaces resembling the rough, fibrous husk of a coconut. As we pass the island, I see that we are now heading back toward the beach, as if we have been in a harbor rather than the open sea. I ask our guide about the purpose of the old building.

“It was a hospital,” he replies. But he does not sound certain, and I am not convinced he is correct.

“Why is the building on an island, separated from the land?” I ask. Without waiting for an answer, I immediately volunteer my theory.

“Maybe the building was once on the mainland but the shoreline has changed over the years, cutting it off from the rest of the world.”

The guide does not respond.

Then our boat is suddenly a car, and our guide is driving us along a road that parallels the shore.

“Next, we will see the original downtown of Corpus Christi,” he says.

Corpus Christi. The Body of Christ. I am excited because we will see the real town, the one where the locals go -- not the theological illusion that is maintained for the pilgrims and tourists.

The road and shoreline depart, and soon we reach the historic central business district. No high rise hotels or floating seafood restaurant here. This Corpus Christi appears to be a typical rural Texas town, a few blocks of old buildings crowded together along an empty street. (You should go check it out before you leave. Very picturesque.)

We approach on a two-lane highway that skirts the edge of the downtown. The first portion, roughly half the land area, consists of old corrugated metal warehouse buildings. The cross street is marked by a sort of entry gate made out of the sheet metal, obviously a new creation intended to play off the old buildings. On the sign there is a multi-word name, but I do not recall it -- perhaps something that uses the word “market” or “marketplace.” I realize that some developer has created this marketing concept in hopes of revitalizing and reusing the old buildings, a not-too-clever rip off of a similar re-development concept in Strangers Rest. The sign is colorful yet muted -- a perfect match for the weathered, oxidized metal.

A block later we reach the retail area. As we pass, I glance back over my shoulder for a better look. There is some revitalization here, too. The Body of Christ now has three or four new businesses. One is an ice cream parlor. Another is a restaurant with a front sign in neon of a cartoon-like pig face, perhaps some Carolina-style barbecue.

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The Minieballs sit on a high, narrow shelf alongside stacks of gray steel film canisters and random entries from the sanctioned psychic manifest, nightmare metaphors of violent purple twilight and unfulfilled judgments and dreams.

Welcome to my broken world.

Here I wander through an obscene territory of winged demons, aerial creatures bearing branded vials of amputated ghost parts, decaying metallic reek of bankrupt snake skins, corroded iron shadows of cicada exoskeletons, troubled mirrors reproducing

endless spectral relations, hopeless erotic cries echoing across vast plains of repressed desire. Here in the thin gray light I pour over the sacred texts of communal disaster, breathe in the double helix of lilac smoke suspended in a porcelain cobalt heaven, view the golden coronas of uneven and prepared genetic amplifiers, walk uselessly through the neurotic oily winds, listen to the rasping wings of hysterical tidal birds, feel the sluggish tropic flames burning through anxious gaunt smirks. (Yes, we're on the Pathway now!)

A shower of glittering emerald flakes descending unhurried through a tarnished sea of fluid screams, painfully abrupt stench of damp waste, giant mounds of smoldering linen mummy casings, a broken stone indicator of the final extinguished horse thief of Strangers Rest (Gone but not Forgotten, a murder by pittance rage), an image of the horned creature automobile with a factory-installed means of listening to the Deity. And that's just the opening credits.

For the soundtrack, I have commissioned an orchestra of reluctantly castrated violinists to perform my compositions, disconsolate tunes of homicidal alien bewilderment, of old coins and fermented blood, of desiccated cats and threadbare Egyptians, of heretical transformations occurring behind jagged DNA dream codes and splotted sallow screens of rancid ectoplasm, surging penetration of –

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Forgive me. I am an odious being.

This sort of thing happens often these days, me getting carried away in the beauty of chaos, in lurid intervals of narcissistic horror. The FX apparatus disgorges an enormous radiant fog of visual rumors and nonsense. I digress into the shattered violet neon dusk of my own atrophied human citizenship and the dazzling garbage heap of our tragic, dead age.

When I am like this, unpleasant things happen. The walls start bleeding. Nazi paratroopers land outside the window. Tiny white eggs on the back of my hand hatch into hungry wolf spiders, which proceed to strip the flesh from my bones. (Director's note: We'll leave this quantity of tainted celluloid on the cutting room floor.)

My favorite prop is the jar of pickled sea monsters. I caught them just a few yards from here in the roiling surf, my inner sea. Warning: Beware of the riptide. Do not swim without a prophet on duty. You could be dragged into the Land of the Dead.

How can it be otherwise? Here in my Patmosian exile, I have learned to give credit to the inner world, the world of fire -- the world behind the masonry walls of the everyday.

Heraclitus said "it is to Hades that they rage and celebrate their feasts." Hades – the world of Death, the conclusion of Practical Man and the ambition of Spiritual Man.

Still, I miss the practical, the everyday. I miss ice cream and barbecue, miss eating out. I miss so many things. The result is some rather severe restrictions on the "natural libido flow," as one of my court-ordered dental psychiatrists put it. So perhaps this place really is a prison.

And then, of course, I miss my face.

Yes, I noticed you've been staring at it. I don't mind; it's understandable. The right half of my face now resembles a cross between a slab of brown, bloodless beef and a piece of weathered lumber. Nothing human left. Alien. Most people assume it happened in the fire. But it's not a scar. This is the raw, undifferentiated tissue of evolution. This is the disintegration of culture into chaos. This is the alien within. It's even in the script.

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“Sure, we took a few liberties, skirted the old genetic taboos (aren't we all kin, really?) -- but it was all for science. Cutting edge work I tell you. A flipped anxiety disorder here, a web-footed phobia there. And just last week, a break through in the treatment of mystical psychosis: Cicada wings. Tiny little protrusions anchored by tendons to the clavicles. Talk about visionary transformation! Eventually, we'll get one we don't have to euthanize. So sad. They look quite peaceful up there on the lab shelf, lined up in their labeled pickle jars like sleeping baby dragons.”

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Pretty.

But for now there is only me, the prototype of the New Man. And quite manly at that. At one point, The Stranger tells me we will even grow two extra DNA delivery organs. Have to employ a paring knife to prune away the smallest ones. He claims we will experience no pain. "Makes the main trunk grow thicker and taller," he says, "just like a crepe myrtle." Don't know if that scene will make the final cut. An NC-17 rating is a definite financial risk.

Have I offended you? I am sorry. It's just that for the past few minutes I've been having a sepia-toned flashback of adolescent desire. I think back to English Lit, to Albert Camus: "Oh sun, beaches, and the islands in the path of the trade winds, youth whose memory drives one to despair!"

You are still the same, as though I left you only yesterday. What has become of you all this time? You're still the same. But you hardly seem to remember. How can that be? After all, our high school reunion was only last year. Have I changed so much, then? Or are you pretending not to recognize me? A year already, perhaps more.

I remember you, of course. As soon as the launch arrived and I saw you step out onto the beach, time seemed to reverse itself. The Clock in the Air rolled back to before the dissolution, before the World Catastrophe. We had retreated across the years and returned to high school, sprawled across the cool, black vinyl in the back of the Cutlass. Checking out my crepe myrtle.

You, at least, are still the same. You have still the same dreamy, Last-Year-At-Marienbad eyes, the same smile, the same sudden laugh, the same brusque arm movement...the same way of resting your hand on your shoulder and you still use the same perfume.

But perhaps that sort of Robbe-Grillet character arc is no longer an option. We're all grown up now, you say, responsible citizens. This is the bittersweet denouement, complete with the swelling metallic strains of the castrated violinists. The Hollywood critics will roll their eyes at this over-the-top romance, but I find that real people still like that sort of thing. We all want the boy to get the girl.

As for your offer of help in my hour of need – what's that? Well, I'm sorry, but it is clearly documented in my script. You are to make the offer, and I am to experience a warm, grateful sensation of humanity. Here's my line: "I am touched. I can't think of any lawyer – or any person, really – I'd rather have defend me in the Hague." And then I shall enthusiastically penetrate your membranes with my DNA delivery organs. (Ha ha, little joke.) Still, we may need a script doctor for this part. It is critical to the plot that I already stand condemned. The trial is mere theater.

You object to a scripted response, a premeditated life? I understand. However, I didn't make it up. This is the contemporary quandary that renders genuine experience unfeasible for all. I distinctly remember encountering this idea in a book somewhere (possibly Paul Elie's "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"). To paraphrase: experience is forever recycled, standardized, a story allegorically scripted and filmed for mass consumption. We are intensely self-conscious beings fated to an increasingly intensified rift from our own selves. Even the occasional, genuinely honest experience is ruined by this eternal personal awareness. The contemporary being is destined to a simulation of existence. The personality cannot be itself. The contemporary being cannot be acquainted with the earth or with The Deity.

That is why The Stranger makes movies. He wants to make obvious he lives.

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What's that? Ah yes, you wish to know about the Armageddon Drive-In Theatre.

I prefer to save the climax for last, but I certainly understand that many people like to know up front how a movie will end. The important thing to realize about the events at the old drive-in – in real life it was called the Hi-way 114 Drive-In – is that they did not come from my nocturnal visions. Rather, The Stranger based this part of the script on an anonymous posting found on an Exogrid message board dedicated to onbeam creations about the conclusion of time:

"The Christian congregations of my community had come together to take us all to a drive-in movie theater. When we got there they split us up into two groups: The ones who were going with God and the ones who were staying on Earth. And of course I was in the group that was staying. I saw people there who I have known for a long time, and some were worried and some were not. I was praying the whole time for forgiveness. I could not see why I was not going. I was mad that they had divided us into groups, as if they knew who God was taking. When they had brought us to this place it was night, and I prayed until morning. At sunrise I went inside the snack bar where they had gathered everyone who was going, and I saw empty candy wrappers and popcorn buckets and the pillows and sleeping bags on the floor where some had been sleeping. But there were no bodies, only imprints on the pillows where they had been laying their heads. I was so angry because I did not understand. Some people who had been left behind were saying how we were going to have to face the fact that we would not be spending the rest of eternity with God, but burning in Hell. I knew that I did not want to suffer in everlasting torment, and I unplugged. I was out of breath, and I was trembling slightly. I have never had an onbeam experience so real, and this was by far the worst of my recent creations about the conclusion of time. It has scared me so bad, and I wish that everyone who is not saved or unsure about their faith would have this experience also. I wonder why I am having them. I am unsure if I want them again or not."

Despite the unfortunate anxiety experienced by the anonymous dream surfer, this scene is incredibly funny. The Stranger decides that all of the extras will be church folk, but there's a catch: only the Methodists are going. Can you believe it? Methodists don't even believe in the Rapture.

Meanwhile, the others Christians of Strangers Rest do not like playing the role of "The Abandoned Ones," those who are staying and must spend the rest of eternity burning in Hell. This casting against type is particularly offensive to the local chapter of the Keepers of the Deity, the former congregation of the Strangers Rest Baptist Church

who jettisoned the old, dead, discredited name and now worship in the combination gas station/Exogrid church out on the interstate.

When they complain of this cinematic heresy, the assistant director serves up the introductory disclaimer: “It is the stated position of the Keepers of the Deity that His safeguards would prevent the occurrence of such blasphemous events as are depicted in this film. Furthermore, it should be noted that none of the characters portrayed in this film are meant to represent any waking world congregations living or dead.”

The Keepers of the Deity still grumble, but I see from the looks in their eyes that they are appeased. Their dogma has been validated in the ideal medium for our times: film.

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This is an objectionable era.

Dark nations and rulers are universally triumphant. Evil thrives in elevated locations.

Nevertheless, there is a more obvious and nearby danger. For I argue that the End of the World is already here. This end is not a destruction of stone and wood or flesh and blood. Rather, this is the end of a terminal legend, the legend of the conquering champion, of the rationalist’s Creature of Merit.

I know all about it because I dreamt it, because I dream it still. Here is the one-sentence film treatment: Christ-haunted journalist turns to 1950s B-movie sci-fi to report the biggest story of his life – how he prophesied the End of the World.

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Corpus Christi was once home to about a half dozen drive-in theaters. The Gulf, the Surf, the Twin Palms – they’re all gone now, lost to yesterday’s sun and sand and salty breeze, edited away with the rest of the dead Hydrocarbon Age. I fear the same thing will happen to my movie. Even with proper disclaimers, the distributor may find my theology unacceptable. He may insist upon the deletion of heretical scenes. My vision under siege.

We need a Director’s Cut, an undiluted version of me, the protagonist of my own true story. The movie will be by its very nature numinous. It will conclude with me consuming myself, a hand sandwich and a glass of fermented corpuscles, a multimedia Eucharist.

Mmmm, that’s good Messiah.

You are offended? Sorry, but the best movie directors have all been doubters.

If you accept the role of movie making muse, you can start by manipulating the footage in the can labeled “Notes For A B-Movie About The End of the World.” You like? The name is a variation on the subtitle of one of my all-time favorite movies, “Let Me Love You: Confessions of a Bad God on a Planet near the Conclusion of Time.”

This is key footage for “Next Year at Marienbad,” the movie that will bring about the End of the World – and the beginning of the New Religion.

A group of dedicated Marienbadists have already begun preparations for the world premier, which will be conducted at a specially constructed drive-in movie theater located somewhere in the Himalayas. Cylindrical clock chimes hanging from clouds will convene the moviegoers from around the planet. I will be stationed behind the camera, encircled by a multitude of grips and gaffers, vocalists and primal goddesses. Uniformed orators narrating manuscripts in marches and spectacles will fashion their share of the

exploits along with the primal goddesses, whose dance routines will incorporate eye signals and stroking of the fingertips in combination with aromas of enjoyable fragrances as well as pungent, smoldering flame. Columns of anger will dot the landscape, and fire will explode in streams of luminosity and expanses of conflagration. This will continue for seven days. When the movie is finally over and final credits roll, the world will at last come to an end. And then there will be a new Deity in the heavens.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Let Me Love You" is a great epic film. It is actually based on an essay by Walker Percy, who also wrote a book called "The Moviegoer" and a later one called "Lancelot," which is about the making of a movie in an old Louisiana plantation somewhere near the Land of the Dead. And then there is the confessional device – that is, the Me talking to the You. See, I did not write you into the script merely for the purpose of penetrating your membranes. Rather, you are present to hear my confession. You are my priest. It is a technique Percy borrowed from Camus' "The Fall."

This is a tricky business, combining "Last Year at Marienbad" with "The Fall." I'm told that Alain Robbe-Grillet and Camus did not get along. Robbe-Grillet criticized Camus for having a "dubious relationship" with the world, one that relied on the power of metaphors. He said "all my work is precisely engaged in the attempt to bring its own structures to light." I like that, though it is not true for me. All my work is precisely engaged in the attempt to penetrate your membranes.

Even though I have acknowledged the source of the stolen product – the recycled, premeditated experience -- there might still be a copyright issue. You could work on that, too. Remember, you have been cast in the role of the idealistic lawyer.

#

So why a sequel to "Last Year at Marienbad"? Why did I select this enigmatic creation from the '60s as the template for my end-of-time film?

Certainly I could have chosen to pattern my work on any number of movies I admire. "Let Us Love You" is clearly an end-times film worthy of imitation. "The Revolution of Zion" is another obvious choice.

I could tell you I picked "Last Year at Marienbad" because of a scholarly paper by Darragh O'Donoghue, who described it as "post-apocalyptic, almost science fiction." I rather like that. Or I could tell you I picked it because I recognize and honor the genius of this film and its symmetrical perfection. But those would be un-truths.

The real story is I wish to compel you to play the role of "A," clad in 1961 Chanel and feathers. At its heart, "Last Year at Marienbad" is a love story. Robbe-Grillet had it right: Boy gets girl. That is the conclusion I yearn for in my own art and life. The boy should always get the girl, even when the world comes to an end. Or especially then.

That is the role I have created for you, my darling muse, my love. Your destiny. Listen – you can almost hear the clock chimes, convening the moviegoers from around the planet. You're needed on the set; I must take my place behind the camera. In seven days the world will come to an end, and we must be ready.

I must be ready.

#

What's that? Yes, I still dream of my wife and children and our lives together in Strangers Rest. I still dream of the night of the apocalypse, the rain of fire. I still see the Lancelot-style headlines:

STRANGERS REST BURNS. BODIES OF TOWNFOLK CHARRED  
BEYOND RECOGNITION; REPORTER CHARGED.

The fire and the brimstone and the death, the deaths of so many – but I can't think about that right now. Besides, it all seems so distant, so unreal.

Forget "Last Year at Marienbad." I really wish I could do "The Abandoned Ones" thing. Big plots, familiar characters – it's a huge box office/publishing success thanks to millions of Keepers of the Deity. After all, the Rapture is their sacred story. Did you know there's even a special version for kids? Here's a jacket blurb:

#

WICKED TIMES AT ANTICHRIST HIGH

School's back in session, and wickedness is in the set of courses. Jewell, Rikki, Lynn and Rusty -- The Young Affliction Corps, a crack team of the Deity's abandoned orphans -- return from spring break to find their school has just been renamed Zuftaza Humanisto High after the UN's new secretary-general, whom their scripture-guru and Bible mentor, Brouhaha Shedes, declares is the Antichrist. The polished, menacing Humanisto has already begun planning a one-earth government, religion and coinage, so the Young Affliction Corps must get innovative. They start "The Subversive Tribe," a secret school television station that reports the true story of the Rapture and Humanisto's wicked plans for earth domination. The Young Affliction Corps all pitch in to make their pirate TV station happen, despite pressure from Humanisto's faculty and even a strange, possibly demonic collapse of the station's secret broadcasting antennae. Rikki is arrested as public enemy number one, wanted for her part in producing "The Subversive Tribe." Refusing to turn in her pals, Rikki gets inserted into the wicked place— the U.N.'s infamous Normpart Internment Camp in Arizona. But she makes it out because she's been adopted by a foster family... none other than the Bible mentor himself, Brouhaha Shedes! And the Young Affliction Corps, still committed to spreading the truth about the Rapture and the rise of Humanisto as the Antichrist, adds its newest member, Chatty, a young Jewish televangelist. "Wicked Times at Antichrist High" is the fifth installment of "The Abandoned Kids," the children's version of Giles de Jeer and Ike Havoc's Rapture hit, "The Abandoned Ones."

#

A well done tale. And yet, why does their sacred story seem so insubstantial – all the deaths and losses and the empty clothes and the unpiloted jetliners and the United Nations' One World Government and empty candy wrappers and popcorn buckets and humbled, penitent souls nevertheless tossed into the Lagoon of Flames – why does it seem so unreal next to a few teenage libidinal moments on the vinyl back seat of a 1970 Cutlass convertible?

That's right. This movie can be about you, too. I recognize the possibilities already. In this concept you have your own death and loss to deal with, your own nightmares. We could write a touching back story, ideally the death of someone close. There could be a kindly old man and a spunky dog, too. No? Well then, perhaps it is not a literal death, but a loss just the same. We can use a blue screen in post-production to superimpose an FX-created image of the pain into your eyes. I envision sadness, a world weariness – something that I could recognize in myself but never knew in you. Here's my line: "It didn't occur to me that you might have your own pain to deal with, your own demons to battle. Your own apocalypse. So that's it. We're both prisoners."

Pretty, huh?

And now you smile. I never could get the knack of you. So how about a little spin around the island in the old Cutlass convertible? We could rough out the film treatment while screen testing the natural libidinal flow on the black vinyl, a sort of stand in for the Hollywood casting couch.

Still you are smiling. Smiling but speechless. Ah, and now I see why. Here comes the boat. You must leave. Will you come again tomorrow?

Welcome again. Have a drink. You still decline?

You do not recognize me. And I don't mean just from high school, either. Didn't we meet last year, when your husband was away? I believe we attended one of the theater-in-the-park productions of Ibsen's "Rosmersholm." No? Well, perhaps it was somewhere else. Karlstadt or Baden-Salsa. Or even here upon these very sands, on the beaches of Marienbad. Didn't you say you would leave your husband and we would run away together? It was only last year. I remember it distinctly. You were wearing 1961 Chanel and feathers. Have I changed so much, then? Or are you pretending not to recognize me? A year already, perhaps more.

You, at least, are still the same. I think of Robbe-Grillet: "The same dreamy eyes, the same smile, the same sudden laugh, the same brusque arm movement, the same way of resting your hand on your shoulder. You still use the same perfume."

#

I have an admission. I lied to you yesterday. About the island of the Body of Christ, I mean. It was not so much a lie as an omission. I did not tell the rest of the dream. I feared what you might think of me. After all, my evolutionary transfiguration has been the subject of much public speculation. Certainly kept the supermarket tabloids buzzing for a while. (I should never have told anyone about those extra DNA delivery organs.)

I didn't want you to think they might be right, that I am an alien, a freak. But I realize now that was silly. After all, that's exactly what I am. Always have been. Who knows it better than you?

#

A short time after passing downtown Corpus Christi, we stop at an ice cream parlor. Once inside, I tell everyone that I am handling the food purchase. Apparently, this is by design and was decided in advance as part of our trip arrangements.

"But you must pay me," I add.

I am standing next to a seated man from our group, and he has a complaint.

"You owe me money from a previous purchase," he says, "but I'll still give you some money."

He holds out a \$5 bill. I decline to accept it.

"Since I owe you, you should keep your money. You are taken care of."

Then a man walks up behind me and begins to talk to this seated man. I do not look, but only listen. They begin to negotiate a theological transaction.

I understand the item for sale is mysticism. They are very blatant, discussing amounts and prices. It is a friendly negotiation, not at all part of a seamy, dangerous theological underground. I realize they are friendly because they see themselves as part of the same club. As I listen, it occurs to me that we are visiting a foreign place where this is not illegal. Or at least it is tolerated.

The transaction is completed, and the seated man begins to consume his purchase. I am handed a paper sack that is printed up in a colorful fashion. In this strange land, it is clearly understood by anyone who sees it to be a bag that is used for the sale of heretical theologies. The sack has a sort of stick glued to the outside. The stick is like a lighter; it is attached to the bag with a spot of glue so that the ends are unattached. One end has been lit, glowing orange with a curl of smoke rising toward the ceiling. I do not like it that I am holding this smoking, theological bag. It is like a billboard. Anyone who sees it will

know I am in possession of heretical theology. I decide it would be far less noticeable for me to stash the mysticism in my pants pocket and throw away the all-too-obvious bag.

Meanwhile, the woman who is managing the place is disturbed by the sale. She doesn't want that sort of activity going on in her place, giving it a bad name.

“Maybe I should call the police,” she says.

But I am not afraid of being arrested. I am an outstanding, responsible citizen, and the police will find I have no tickets or warrants or records of any infractions. Again, heretical theologies are obviously not a crime here. So although the circumstances make me look suspicious, I face no real legal dangers here in the Body of Christ.

I decide to ditch the bag in the restroom. I approach the men's room door, but I see that the woman manager has entered ahead of me. Could it be a unisex restroom? Or does she feel free to use any restroom just because she works here? Then I notice the words on the door. It really is the women's room, but the “W” and “O” are missing. I can only see the faint outlines of the letters. So I look a bit further and find the real men's room, a vast space that reminds me of the dressing rooms in the old Sanger-Harris at Red Bird Mall, where the impoverished Oak Cliff kids conveniently relieved themselves on the carpet.

#

Enigmatic signage. At least I got my gender properly worked out by the end. That will make the movie a lot more bankable. Although correlated with the deities, the hermaphroditic archetype is a particularly tough one to sell at the box office. Due to such financial considerations, a lot of it inevitably ends up on the cutting room floor. And even then, the reviews will not be kind:

INTENSELY REVOLTING ... THE MOST TOTALLY EMPTY MOVIE I HAVE EVER VIEWED FROM THE TIME WHEN I FIRST STARTED VIEWING.

What's that? Why yes, I am all about the movies. I've given up on journalism. The newspaper world is dead. It no longer functions.

When I was young, journalism was my calling. It was all about The Truth. Now it is all about The Lie. I admit that I do not yet possess even the basic tools of the cinematographer. But I can wait. The appearance of *The Stranger* is proof that one day I will be documenting the numinous experiences of myself and the world.

The movie. *The Stranger* is obsessed with it. Turns out that in my old age, I will live in a glass beach house in Southern California and take up movie making. I shall live with the sun and sand and the salt spray in my cinematic vision. Indecipherable religious imagery, bleeding childhood angst, mythological expectations.

“I cannot fully explain my life,” he tells me. “It is not always about life. My life no longer functions on that level. To be sure, one half is still life. But the other half is raw, undifferentiated tissue. Alien. That's why I want to make the movie. For years, I have experienced my life as a sort of dream movie. I have always wished to be about the *Odyssey*, the journey. I am the 2001 *Space Odyssey* astronaut, traveling in the divine sky clock, recast as cosmic child. The Deity is sending me back to Egypt, I think. To save us. Imagine this dream movie: I am Jonah, the man in the fish. We all know that it is a specially prepared fish (i.e., a visual rumor of the Son of the Deity). So I am swallowed up in Him. The wound is inscrutable. I offer my own little interpretation: The Deity showed Jonah what it is to be reborn as the cosmic child. I think I would like that role, suffering in the belly of the fish. We could do it up with soulless cool special effects,

visual rumors of the forgotten, abandoned church with the flooded basement and the old bearded preacher withdrawn from employment in advance of death. And the tag line: Am I dying?

“Books, movies, my own day. I simultaneously accept that the basement is flooded and the forgotten, abandoned church is me. (In the upcoming age, the true Christian will be the priest of his own church. Or he will not be a Christian at all.) All is as it should be, I tell myself, Christ-haunted about my life as the rest slumber in their beds, oblivious to the apocalypse swirling around them. Picture a scene with me starring up at the sky, looking for signs and portents, the visual rumors. Real F/X opportunities here, all labeled with harsh warnings in German creole. You have to be careful quoting them. Then, a bystander tells me he is disappointed to learn that the safest way to communicate with The Deity is above the concrete and rational, over the viral DNA dream phone. ‘We are more than the real,’ I tell him. ‘We have to be. The ongoing value of all this is as it should be.’ That’s good dialogue, good writing.”

Pretty.

#

Would you be astonished if I informed you that I might be experiencing romantic affection again? It’s true. So let us leave this place together. Let us leave behind these sculptured thresholds, lines of doors, colonnades, oblique hallways leading to deserted meeting rooms paneled in the baroque embellishments of an earlier time. Mute rooms, where footsteps are lost in sculpted berber so profound, so deep that one perceives no step, as if the ear itself were impossibly remote – distant and remote from this numb, barren décor, far from this elaborate frieze beneath the cornice with its branches and garlands like dead leaves, as if the floor were still sand and gravel, or flagstones over which I advance one again To find you. Between richly paneled walls, Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, paintings, framed prints amidst which I advance, among which I find myself already waiting for you. Very far from this beach where I stand now...before you, waiting again for one who will not come again, who will no longer keep us apart...tear you from me.

After all that and still you say no? How can that be so wrong? I cannot read you at all. You face is masklike, inscrutable. Forever walls, hallways, forever doors. And on the other side, yet more walls. Before reaching you, rejoining you.

Still no? Well then, I shall pursue another love.

The new object of my desire is the woman next door. In Lancelot’s case, she was the patient in the next room. In my case, she is on the neighboring island. I’ve not observed her in the waking world. But in a dream last night, I believe I may have compelled her to commit unnatural acts upon my DNA delivery organ. Some might say that is not a good start to a meaningful relationship. But as this debasement took place near the Land of the Dead, I believe the physical moral code is suspended in favor of communicating a greater metaphorical truth. Is that not the beauty of true romantic affection and the visionary religious experience? Years ago, traveling with you across the vinyl back seat of the Cutlass convertible, membrane to membrane, I could say to you “I am fond of this physical response stimuli, aren’t you?” And you could reply “oh God, bring forth the warm globs of ectoplasm.” Or something to that effect.

I believe that with the woman on the neighboring island it will be identical. Last night, our membranes were brought into proximity. Genetic material may have been

transmitted. At the very least I experienced an extremely positive response stimuli. She may have even responded in kind. At least she did not protest.

Clearly, this membrane-to-membrane encounter might have been without meaning. A one-dream stand, so to speak. But conversely, it may represent an authentic first contact. I awoke to find my membranes still surging, my DNA singing. It was as if I was experiencing romantic affection again for the first time.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I should start at the beginning – the beginning of the end of time.

This one is a 1950s B-movie sci-fi concept, too. But don't get too attached to it, because it's just an introduction. I never got past the opening section, which is somewhat sad but not surprising. They say every newspaper reporter has a movie script somewhere inside. And that's where most of them should stay.

#

One summer afternoon I accidentally decapitate a giant cicada.

It is one of a pair – still young, about the size of a squirrel – that has crawled up from the drainage ditch at the back of our lot, looking for a place to shed its exoskeleton. Interrupted in the weed-choked San Augustine, the ancient, mythic couple separate. One escapes through the uncut grass and splashes into the waters beyond. The other buzzes at the mower's right front wheel and disappears under the cutting deck. The engine stalls as the whirling steel blade does its work, shooting the meaty pupae across the cracked patio slab to the feet of Jack Bryson.

Jack nudges the headless form with the tip of his boot. The bug does not move. He continues to nurse a watery margarita, attempting to conjure a non-existent coolness from the unforgiving shade the westering sun makes through the high, jagged limbs of the post oak next door.

"It's too hot to mow," Jack says. "Let's go inside."

In the throes of an unbroken string of triple-digit days, shade has long ago ceased to provide any real relief. I stare across a neighboring field, a lumbering combine kicking up a gritty mushroom cloud of top soil, a dreamy moment in the shimmering heat waves. I am momentarily cast adrift, irredeemably lost in the scorching heat and torments of the everyday.

I say "the backyard's gone nuclear" or something equally metaphorical. I'm not quite sure.

Jack isn't interested in metaphors. For him, August in Texas is strictly what it is: hot. He has long ago determined the best way to beat the heat is with a cool, alcoholic drink and an afternoon pornographic movie -- certainly not jumping out of the path of projectile insects.

"Great time to mow the lawn," he observes. "Don't tell me you wasted one of your precious vacation days on this."

"Comp time. The Keller City Council met in executive session till 12:30 last night. So how do you take this every day?"

"Well, I don't try to mow at the hottest time of the day, like some newspaper reporter who spends his life in the air conditioning." Then Jack again nudges the remains of the insect. "And I never mow over giant bugs."

The cicada is only the latest in a series of poisonous insects, potentially-rabid small mammals, blood-sucking reptiles and other creatures that have recently grown to

nightmarish proportions. (The scientists blame it on environmental contaminants; the Keepers of the Deity insist it is a sign of the conclusion of time.) These B-movie monsters are brave, too, refusing to observe the faded neon pink surveyor's flags as the limits of their habitat.

Allison picked out our home site when the subdivision was still mostly vacant lots. I had initially balked at the \$5,000 premium for a ``canal'' lot, as the real estate agent called it. After all, it really was just a drainage ditch, half-filled with silt and cattails. But that was in the era when I still easily succumbed to the idea of marital bliss, the novelty of love. Besides, the agent assured us the canal would be cleaned out as soon as the developer started the second phase. That was before Wichita Falls Guarantee & Credit, the sanctuary that financed the project, was declared insolvent. In their final report, sanctuary regulators concluded that the institution was "creatively overstimulated. And as with much of the industry today, this overstimulation is the source of the financial troubles." Clearly the second phase of the neighborhood will be a long time coming.

I try to restart the mower, but it has flooded out. A few pulls on the starter rope and I am out of breath, wiping sweat from my face with the grayed sleeve of my "Strangers Rest 5K Run" T-shirt.

"Do you know what I've just heard? At this time last year it was so cold that the lakes froze. That's surely wrong."

"Too hot, I'm telling you," Jack repeats. "Why do you think Mexicans take those siestas?"

"Your Mexicans don't."

"Oh yeah? On my last spec, I caught one trying to sheet rock an empty beer bottle into one of the walls."

"You don't pay them enough. You don't love them."

"You liberal journalists are going to ruin this country. Liberals and queers. Do you know how much I pay for workmen's comp?"

"Do you know what I heard from one of the old timers? One summer it was so cold here that all the water froze. The creeks, the ponds, everything."

"That's impossible."

"Let's have a beer."

"You go ahead, it'll replenish your depleted electrolytes. Since I am the general contractor, I'll stick with tequila."

#

How do you like it so far? I call it "Lesbian Rest Stop." No, this concept does not include a rest stop. Or lesbians. Well, maybe a few. You can't go wrong at the box office with a few gratuitous lesbians.

The title was suggested by Jack. Of course, you knew he'd have to be mixed up in all of this. He also advised that the ads include the phrases "this movie will save your marriage" and "recommended by Oprah." When I proposed the more serious title of "Strangers Rest" he shook his head. "Do you want it to have a clever title or do you want it to sell?"

Jack Bryson is a product of the defunct Hydrocarbon Age. In recent years, he was one of the few well adjusted people I knew who were not under the care of a dental psychiatrist.

But now let us speak of incredible revelations. Let us speak of the Cicadians.

Yes, I am admittedly enraptured with my favorite movie, “Let Me Love You.” Why do I like it? For starters, it was made in Texas. One of the settings is Waco, which is where I was born and some of my family still lives. Also, there is the protagonist, Clark Caring. He is a sort of minor deity. And like him, I am periodically subject to many god-like delusions. So the real-life parallels are considerable.

I am so enraptured with this epic film that I wish for you to secure the copyright. I feel it is essential to employ key scenes from this great work of the Hydrocarbon Age and cult classic of the drive-in movie world. Consider the opening scene.

#

*Blessings – and apologies.*

*It has been 2,000 years since my last heavenly manifestation, my beloved creations. Time gets away from you, right? I make no excuses for this lengthy delay. The blame belongs solely to me. Shame, humiliation, self-criticism – I accept it all. You won’t find me trying to pass the buck. No way. I’m all about honesty. That’s just the kind of God I am.*

*What’s that? Why yes, you are right. It is hard to be me, your creator and sustainer, the all-knowing sentient being who keeps the wheels of the universe turning. And yet I do. Picture me rollin’! Ah yes, sometimes being the ultimate power in the universe is almost more than I can bear.*

*So yeah, it’s been a while since you last saw my giant disembodied head floating benevolently above you in the vast, pink sky of Planet Luh. Sorry to keep you waiting.*

*It is hard to be me. As far back as I can recall I’ve been misunderstood, particularly by those I care about most. It seems we are always hurt by the ones we love, eh? And yet, despite the unfortunate events of 20 centuries ago, isn’t it true my wrath has been generally exercised in your favor? Have I not done great things – marvelously incredible things – precisely for you, my beloved creations? Who showed you how to pound your plowshares into swords? Who caused your enemies to fall in battle, allowing you to sweep in and enslave their soldier drones, cart away their gold and smash in the heads of their larva until green goo oozed from their twitching, quivering mandibles? Who did it? That’s right – me. Your God. So do I not deserve your exultation and veneration? Am I not entitled to your admiration, you who I have brought into existence as citizens of the universe?*

*And still, you hurl the “terrible calamity” into my face. You still hold against me this one, comparatively minor transgression. “Oh, the terror!” you wail over the burned out shells of your hives and the graves of your larva. Yes, yes, fine. We have fully established the terror of it.*

*I do not deny this troubled episode in the life of Planet Luh – and yet, did it truly rise to the level of a terrible calamity?*

*Let’s be fair. Did I not cause the nuclear rain to quickly wash the fire and brimstone from the sky? Did I not employ the radioactive isotopes to create a genetic transmutation allowing you to quickly and (somewhat) painlessly shed your burned exoskeletons? And did I not cause new exoskeletons to grow again, albeit in a somewhat mutated form, at a greatly accelerated rate?*

*You are beings characterized by chatter. I am a being characterized by action. An authentic Native American saying comes to mind: Talk too much do too few. So where would you be without me, you talkers, you beings of chatter? Where would you be*

*without a being of action? That's right. You'd be talking too much, doing too few. You'd be nowhere.*

*So come on, folks, enough already with the terrible calamity. Let me do my God thing. Let me love you! Can't you just do that one little thing? Get out of the way and let me love you, you ungrateful six-legged bastards, you soul-sucking parasites, you –*

*Forgive me. This sort of thing happens to me a lot. Back in the day, four billion years ago, I would often find myself getting carried away in the beauty of chaos, in lurid intervals of narcissistic horror. I would digress into the shattered violet neon dusk of my own atrophied human citizenship and the dazzling garbage heap of my tragic, dead age.*

*Even now, when I am like this, unpleasant things happen. The walls start bleeding. Nazi paratroopers land outside the window. Tiny white eggs on the back of my hand hatch into hungry wolf spiders, stripping the flesh from my bones.*

*I admit it. I am a bad God. What's that? Well, there's no reason for you to agree so quickly.*

*OK, so let's get on with it. Since my last manifestation, some of your heretics and artists have been asking unpleasant questions about me. Some of you have been inquiring into my nature.*

*"Who is this Clark Caring?"*

*"Where does he come from?"*

*"Why does he do such terrible things to his creations?"*

*"When will he leave?"*

*When will I leave? Well, that's why I am here before you today. This is it, the time your heretics and artists have been waiting for these past 20 centuries.*

*This is the end of the world.*

*You weren't expecting that, were you? But that's the way it is with me, your God. I am the God of Surprises. Only I know the day and hour of the divine Apocalypse. And the day and hour is almost here.*

*I'd like to share with you a recent essay I read on Caringism. Don't worry. I'm not preparing to hurl any lightning bolts or anything. I actually found it quite enjoyable. Not a bad bit of writing. Nothing like you'd have seen back in the day from a truth doctor, of course, but a worthwhile journeyman effort nonetheless. Your creator and sustainer was proud. Then I came to the conclusion:*

*"Why does Clark Caring let bad things happen to good people? Perhaps we have the answer in our sacred texts. A paraphrased quote from this god might read something like this: 'I do what I do because I am a mysterious and awesome being.'"*

*Let me tell you something, you artists and heretics: I HATE THAT! A mysterious and awesome being? You make it sound as if I am some sort of irrational creature, some sort of anti-deity, a monster of the id, the Fiend of the Unconscious. Let me tell you, my beloved creations, I am a God of Love! I would not have to tell you that if only you would stop with your incessant questioning and let me get on with being me. Let me get on with loving you. Let me love you!*

*And enough with the lowercase "g" already. I am not "this god," but rather "your God" – that's God with an uppercase "G," goddamnit. You're treading on some mighty thin ice, my beloved creations. Have you already forgotten the terrible calamity of two centuries ago? Thin ice, folks. Mighty thin. Picture me rollin' – over your thorax.*

#

That's good 1950s B-movie sci-fi! You like? I see. Well, it'll grow on you. Meanwhile, back to Jack Bryson.

#

Opening the refrigerator. I am watched by a crayon cowboy affixed to the polished steel door. Held tight by the mysterious, magical forces of a heart-shaped magnet, the picture is a rendering of the Leach family done by Shawn, the eldest of our two sons. We are all rendered in classic stick figure style, just as any pre-schooler might draw. He's portrayed me with cowboy boots and hat, the long, tall Texan, six guns blazing -- one riot, one Ranger -- riding off into a Panavision sunset. "I'm his hero!" I think. But what is this? My paternal pride is quickly short-circuited by a rather unnerving detail: I have been drawn without arms.

I shut the designer refrigerator door with my elbow, slamming it a bit too hard, rattling jars of mustard and relish and unwanted memories. I hear the hollow slam of the tailgate of Allison's Volvo station wagon, its rear bumper disappearing around the curve at the end of the street; her fist slamming on the pantry door while I knell in the tiny closet, cleaning up a broken bottle of juice; a phone slamming in its receiver, seemingly forever.

The rattled condiments rouse Missy, still locked in the laundry room. She whines in a familiar, annoying way, sort of a laughing monkey. I take advantage of her beloved owner's absence by kicking the door. Jack laughs.

"How long you going to keep her in there?"

"Until she learns to respect me."

"So -- you're free at last."

"They ought to be landing about now. No doubt you sensed a disturbance in the heavens."

"Two whole weeks."

"Long enough to get caught up on my sleep."

"Sleep? Forget that. We're going to celebrate."

"Well -- "

"Come on, I'm not letting you stay home, not tonight anyway. You'll just end up sitting around in your underwear, watching re-runs of Star Trek."

"Only the original series. It was some of Shatner's best work."

Jack's glance falls on the notebook I've left on the counter. Before I can grab it away, he has it in his hands, reading the title I've printed on the cover with perhaps a bit too much self importance.

"The 'Voice of God: A Memoir of Dreams.' Ah, a little neuro porn? Naughty, naughty."

"No, it's just to get ideas for stories."

"Sleep my ass. I know you, man. You're planning to go onbeam, get down on some more dreamy pervert action. Maybe one of your elementary school teachers?"

"You're taking that one totally out of context. I should never have let you read it."

"Who else would read it but me? Always walls, always footsteps -- what's that crazy movie again?"

"What movie?"

"The one with the subtitles. Always walls, always footsteps. Mute, deserted -- what was that crap?"

“Marienbad.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Subtitles. The French are full of it. Why don’t they learn English? I think what you are really needing is the mystic revelation trip. You should get Jazzed.”

I groan. “Summon is dead.”

“I’m telling you, you need to buy some stock. Closed yesterday at \$32 a share.”

“But you paid \$75! It’s never coming back.”

“You’re crazy. Here, read this.”

Jack reaches into his back pocket. He retrieves a folded piece of newsprint, something he’s torn from what I recognized to be today’s Hedge Road Daily.

#

Summon Seeks to Repaint VI Canvass: Jazz Developer to Promote New 4-D Interface Dreamware On an ‘Open Foundation’ Basis

By Puton Clans

Summon Replisystems Inc. wants to get into your picture.

The virtual implant maker, whose Jazz technology is used in medicine for artificial retinas and plays a behind-the-scenes role in collective unconscious dreamware and services, is stepping up efforts to shape what users see on their implant canvass. In one dramatic example, Summon has been developing interface dreamware with four-dimensional effects that are a time-twisting alternative to the familiar virtual implant metaphor of landscapes, portraits and still life art.

Summon this week will announce plans to make the interface, dubbed Clockscan II, along with related Jazz technology available on an “open foundation” basis, allowing people outside the company to view and modify the implant code used to create the programs. The announcement, one of many at Summon’s annual JazzOne conference in Chicago, is designed to encourage other programmers -- particularly fans of the open-foundation Morel operating system -- to adopt and refine Summon’s technology.

#

“You can personalize your VI canvass,” Jack says. “Your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Your lips have been purified by a burning coal. The wings of angels. Yes, you shall hear the Voice.”

“No voice. Just stories, just dreams. Thought I might do some writing while the family’s away.”

“Two weeks, Mark. I’m not going to let you spend it all by yourself on a Dreamland holiday, writing your little stories inside the collective unconscious. We’re going to have some fun.”

“I don’t know. I’m really tired.”

“You are tired of being you.”

“If I were more like you, then I would be less like me.”

“Exactly. So take a nap. Take some sacraments.”

“I don’t do that any more.”

“Yeah? But you’d still do it onbeam.”

That is true.

“You know, buddy,” Jack continues, “sometimes you’ve just got to let your sleek dog run.”

I know what he means by that: A visit to Plato’s Palace, his favorite primal flesh temple. I am not really sure I am up for that level of sinning. Before I can mount a

suitable rebuttal, though, he points at the green digital clock on the control panel of the wall oven (a \$500 designer upgrade to the builder's mid-level amenities package).

"Is that thing right?" he asks.

"It ought to be. It's set to coordinated universal time."

Jack just looks at me.

"The atomic clock in Fort Collins, Colo.," I explain. "I get it off short wave radio."

He continues to stare.

"What?"

Jack sits his drink on the counter and shakes his head.

"What's happened to you?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever happened to the Mark Leach I used to know, the one I grew up with, the one who dropped his pants in front of my house one night while simultaneously taking a whiz in the gutter, smoking a cigar and playing the air guitar solo to Van Halen's 'You Really Got Me'?"

"The drunk and stupid one, you mean."

"The fun one."

"He lost himself. Lost his way along the straight paths between the immutable statues, granite slabs, where he is, even now, losing himself –"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"He got old, I guess. Too many trips to Cici's Pizza, too many Barney re-runs. Too much the corny, wisecracking dad."

"I don't believe it. Anyway, I've got to go."

"Late again?"

"Not yet. I'm supposed to meet my architect in Oak Cliff in 10 minutes."

"A 30-minute drive."

"I got to pick up some plans for dad."

"I thought he'd quit building. Only developing now."

"Doing it for a friend. He had the architect incubate a Louisiana Planters Cottage through the post-ceremonial dreams of the Tesuque corn dancers. Stayed plugged into the Exogrid for a whole week."

"Wow. I'd like to see those plans."

"Me too. I got to get over there before he goes to dinner."

"Have you ever been on time for anything?"

"You sound like my ex."

"I've known you since -- what? Third grade? And I can't think of a single instance of punctuality."

"Really?" He scratches the back of his head, pretending to think. "I'm sure there's been something, at least one time."

"No, I'd remember it. You are totally reliable in your unreliability."

"OK then, I'm not seeing the problem here."

I follow Jack to his truck, an electric subscription model he bought a few months back. It replaced a four-door monster with six wheels and a row of orange lights on the roof. The big truck, Jack's pride and joy, was a victim of a once-booming home building

market recently rendered comatose by a defeated oil industry, a disastrous change in tax laws and the collapse of the entire G&C industry. I hover outside the open window.

“So, about ten, then?” I ask.

“Ten? What are you talking about?”

“Well, it is technically still afternoon, and it sounds like you’ve got a whole day of work ahead.”

“Yeah, but don’t wait till ten. That’s when we’re leaving. You’ve got to come over before then.”

“Well -- ”

“I’m not going to do anything till you get there, you know that. I need you to kick me into gear.”

“So eight, then?”

“Don’t pin me down, man. If I’m not home when you get there, let yourself in. You’ve got a key. Loosen up, straighten out your priorities. Get your attitude adjusted.”

“My attitude.”

“Yeah. Drink my liquor. Play my stereo. Screw my cat. You know, just be Mark Leach.”

#

A confession: I didn’t really run the mower over a giant cicada (or any other creature of the unconscious). It was just a snake, an ordinary water moccasin. But I thought a cicada worked better for the story. Cinematic license.

I love those Cicadians. Whenever I consider them, I can’t help but think of Clark Caring and the pink skies of Planet Luh, his world of insectoid worshippers, his “beloved creations.”

#

*Why does “this god” let bad things happen to good people? Here’s a better question: Why did the Valuosity Life Planning Inc. hire a new truth doctor and give him my corner office and my parking place with my name on the curb in the basement parking garage reserved for my fellow executives? And why did it transfer me to the LET department and assign me to a little cubicle to write technical documents while my Lexus LS400 sat under the blazing Texas sun with all the insignificant cars in the insignificant employee parking lot? Let’s see one of you answer that.*

*Forgive me. You ask a fair question. Why do I let bad things happen to good insectoids? That’s a good one for your best thinkers to ponder. But so far these past 20 centuries, they’ve done a poor job of it. No headway at all. Now with the world about to end, you’re out of time. So I’m going to help. I shall attempt to answer the age-old question with an illustrative story. No, not another story about how I make the lightning flash and the thunder roll. Your smart-ass scientists seem to have figured that one out for themselves.*

*This is the true story of a different Apocalypse: the last days of Planet Earth. The end falls generally, give or take a few years, between the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the attainment of eternal life for all through the superior scientific achievements of Valuosity Life Planning Inc. and other companies in the military/industrial techno-structure.*

*You might also say this is the story of the end of God, which is another way of saying “the end of the world.” God equals world. Remember that. Without me, you’re nothing. And I’m afraid you’re about to be nothing.*

*That’s right. I am dying. You weren’t expecting that, were you? Don’t look so surprised. Even an eight billion-year-old extraterrestrial and former truth doctor of Valuosity Life Planning Inc. has to die sometime.*

*Anyway, this is a really good story, complete with 1950s B-movie flying saucers, gratuitous sex and a homicidal laptop computer. I think you’ll enjoy it. But first, before the temple crumbles and everything goes up in the proverbial ball of fire, let’s check God’s divine mail bag.*

#

Yesterday you asked me if I ever think about Allison. As a matter of fact, I just received a letter from her, a response to my request that she grant a blurb for the trade ads at Oscar time. You know the sort of quote I mean. “Electrifying!” or “A tour de force in cinematic storytelling” or “Brilliancy in a bottle.” Such a simple thing to ask, really. But the news is not pretty.

#

June 25,

Dear Mark,

I received your undated letter today about your plans to call. Don’t bother.

We’ve been through this before: I will not lend my name to your moviemaking schemes. I read your most recent concept. And despite rewriting key physical characteristics, I know precisely who you intend this character to represent. I am not stupid. You’re not fooling me or anyone else. Well, I guess you are fooling a few people – the right people. Psychiatrists! How anyone can think you are not to be held responsible for what you did is beyond me. Even so, my attorney informs me I can bring you back before the judge for violating the cease and desist order. Just ask your so-called lawyer “friend.” Or should I say your muse? God Mark, can’t you be any more original than that?

Regards,

Allison

#

Did you notice the vaguely insect-like tone of her attack? It is actually a positive development, a sign of the visionary transformation, delivered via a call over the viral DNA dream phone. I filmed it in my last dream about her, standing with a group of acquaintances outside a house in some rural area suggestive of the Land of the Dead.

#

We have just learned that the DNA of every human on the planet has been converted to that of an insect. We feel unchanged, but I comment to those around me that the outward transformation will begin soon. The new genetic code will transform us into new beings. And sure enough, I am right. The scene changes and I find myself standing over a comatose Allison. She is nude, covered in damp dirt. I am cleaning her with a sponge, revealing the beginning growth of an exoskeletal thorax. “We’ll all look like this soon,” I tell myself.

#

Of course, “she” is really me. The insect DNA is my own blueprint, the unifying global pattern for life. And the journey.

I cannot help identifying with Clark Caring, creator and sustainer of the insect-human hybrids of Planet Luh. I have received the prophetic, let-me-love-you plea from the insect aliens themselves. In the beginning it was not easy to decode their transmissions. The messages are beamed here from distant galaxies within, crackling through flesh-covered speakers in a sort of mangled cicada cry. Over time, the intercellular translators in the viral DNA dream phone smoothed out the discarded static into a comfortable, almost melodic rhythm, a poetic form suggestive of the magneto whirl of the disintegrated Machine Society of the West or the dry, disconsolate rasp of buzzard wings...

“After the saloons of old Strangers Rest stretches the desolate border zone, territory of cowboys and cattle drives, ancestral beings trapped in astral wastelands, electronic judgments imposed through ancient compound eyeballs the tint of washed out gray. Driving through Deep East Texas Piney Woods darkness, rolling on past picture perfect peaks, through the emaciated atmosphere towards a church that stands somewhere in the East. A sense of bereavement catches in the esophagus at the vista of skinned scenery, lifeless small mammals smashed in the road and scavenger birds gliding silently above the marshes and aged tree remnants.

“Further on, drive-in accommodations with beautification plank partitions, chattering sheet metal furnaces and sheer crimson bedspreads give way to an industrial sprawl of glittering retention lagoons and ginger methane flames, quagmires and trash mountains, carnivorous aquatic insects swimming about in wrecked funeral urns and metal shipping containers. Glowing glass tubes entangle 1950s roadside lodgings, stranded directors of primal goddesses and other lovely creations curse transitory autos from the nowhere of highway medians, ignored atolls of nonsense. Now the electronic judgments empty down in a dark rotating shaft, down from the azure heaven, that devastating, gory, azure heaven of the Land of the Dead, home of the nameless, the dreary and ghostly, the misplaced soul nationality – obligated to become, in effect, a being without a genus.

“No emotion, no organization, a world-compelled phantom requirement, spasmodically discharging warm globules of stale ectoplasm, detonations of DNA into membranes of chilly interplanetary liberty, floating in celestial grime, departing once again without the unfulfilled corpse left forgotten in a back room, the Vault of the Deity.”

#

From silent egg to crawling larvae, from sleeping pupae to screaming, mangled cicada cry of summer. This is the message of transformation that I am called by the Deity to spread across the earth. Don’t look so surprised. It’s not as if I received my calling from an actual burning bush or anything in the outer, waking world. No, I could never accept such a literal message. This is an inner process. Magnetica O’Famously put it best: “We cannot determine if the Deity and the Land of the Dead are two dissimilar things. Each one is an intermediate notion.”

Just like me.

Here’s a significant observation concerning Clark Caring’s extraterrestrial insects: They are from inner space, too. These cinematic aliens are actually the forgotten spirits imprisoned within contemporary Americans. The Cicadians pilot the aerial timepieces

from the great beyond to the rim of our earth with the purpose of resurrecting the spirits of the comatose. Their emergence from this underground “beyond” is an indication of the outer incarnation of our inner alienation. So we needn’t resist the transformation. Rather, we should just attempt to revive our own self, even as we know that the self we seek could be a sham and our revival an extraterrestrial conspiracy. Or something to that effect.

#

What’s that? Oh yes, I am aware of what Allison’s parents have been saying about me in the press. Clearly they fear for their daughter and grandsons. Imagine it: Allison, a Jewell Charity debutante, married to a murderer!

So misguided, so sad. Besides, there are so many people upon whom we could lay equal blame. Plenty of stock characters in this movie. There’s the mad scientist, Dr. Adolfo Morel. The power-hungry billionaire industrialist, William “Dollar Bill” Buckstop. The Hive Leader of the Cicadians (aka Bellerio Shield). Still, I remain everyone’s favorite villain. Perhaps I should have done more to save Jack and the girls, more to save the world. But how? Alas, such an outcome is not in the script.

#

Lost in an explosion of tiny pieces of metal, a shower of aluminum foil - no, that’s not right. It’s a single piece of aluminum, the housing of a giant orbiting space timepiece -- a Clock in the Air.

Across the room, I see a lab-coated man seated at a bank of computer monitors, working the knobs on a sprawling control board. The central machinery is familiar. Could it be – yes, it’s Seymour Cray’s 6600. Three hundred fifty thousand transistors and one metal plaque -- Property of Ozona International.

On one of the dual round screens I recognize downtown Strangers Rest. Frederiksbad Street is littered with the still glowing remains of extinguished torches. The albino-fleshed, red-mouthed Dr. Morel gazes upon me. Do I see a malevolent gleam in his eye? No, just the reflection of a blue-green computer readout, flashing “6:47 a.m.”

“And the famous Adolfo Morel,” I say. “Working on Ozona’s next new ad campaign, I see. Mineral water for the apocalypse, perhaps? An elixir for revelatory --”

I cast about for the right phrase, but the words will not come. Something is wrong. The words orbit around me, detached and paralyzed, exiled and numbed by the habit of self-grief.

I see another metallic snake, this one affixed to my navel.

I want to pull it out, but I can’t seem to make my hands work. Something is stopping me. I am blocked by – cloth. I am encased in a black cloth sack. I stare out through two holes, a deep sense of separation and dejection, of dizziness and disorientation, suddenly transcended by the scent of roses, mystic icons weeping blood, statues moving of their own accord, a cloud formation in the shape of a well-known corporate logo emitting a bolt of blinding white light. I try to speak, but my mouth doesn’t work, either.

“No use fighting it,” Dr. Morel says. “It’s all in the script, all premeditated. Melancholy journalist turned celebrity messiah. Though not looking quite so celebrated tonight, Mr. Leach. No, not so celebrated at all.”

I manage a nod from within the distended aura of abstraction, caught up in a swirling fog of broken glass and fire trucks and blood and smoke. The lab-coated man has turned his back on the monitors to focus squarely on me.

“He’s precisely as advertised,” he remarks, his countenance suggestive of a young Albert Einstein. “An authentic neurotic with free flowing discharge.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Your palms. In the initial draft, The Stranger wrote you as a stigmatic.”

The black sack is now gone, so I can see myself again. Sure enough, my hands are bleeding.

“We read all about you in The New York Agenda,” Dr. Morel says.

“What a creation,” Young Einstein marvels. He turns to Morel. “Look at his face,” he adds. “No scar.”

“I’m right here, you know,” I complain. My mouth is loosening up a bit, but I’m still struggling to unplug the metallic cable from my navel. “You might try talking as if –

“ But it’s no good. My powers of speech are still failing. The film has broken inside me; the projection bulb is melting the celluloid.

I find myself spinning heavenward through a shower of bleeding icons and rose petals and lightening bolts as Morel tells me about the future, the world after my rebirth as the world’s first privately owned and operated deity.

“Life will be strictly controlled through the imposition of an entire collection of electronic manuscript requirements. The Wise Ones will subject residents to electronic boulevard search and seizure by skinless auditors, who will wear tin stars affixed to their erect DNA delivery organs. The goal is total sexual demoralization. Official notations will be entered into the genetic ledger, and those without the proper notations will be subject to indefinite nude incarceration in ashen-walled prisons comprised of vanishing brick and mortar, an uncertain state of affairs that will inevitably result in charges of jailbreak. The problem will be defined as a noxious chemical imbalance, of course, treated with Fluoride9. So as you can unmistakably comprehend, the industrial options are infinite.”

#

In bed at home alone.

Despite Jack’s best arguments, I decide to stay in my first night without family. I am committed to getting some much needed sleep. Tonight I will be good. But sleep will not come.

How can it? Goodness is a lie. I am experiencing a crushing depression. I seek sleep for escape, not rejuvenation. What can I say? Maybe I got old. Too many trips to Cici’s Pizza, too many Barney re-runs. I’m too much the corny, wisecracking dad. Or maybe I’m not enough.

Listen once again to the hollow slam of the tailgate of Allison’s Volvo station wagon, its rear bumper disappearing around the curve at the end of the street; her fist slamming on the pantry door while I knell in the tiny closet, cleaning up a broken bottle of juice; a phone slamming in its receiver, seemingly forever.

Everything I contemplate is wretched and desolate.

This is a world of death and shadows. Urine-tinted vapor lamps illuminate the desolation, a terrain of crumbling failure somewhere near the Land of the Dead.

Devalued investment real estate, an old apartment complex. Several of the buildings appear to be vacated, condemned, surrounded by cyclone fencing, doorways and windows covered in warped plywood. Muffled voices and ominous rumblings escape from ghost units, wreckage of miserable depravity, squander of comatose electrical wires swollen and burned out, thick vines consuming the extinguished shell of a charred Camaro, snaking up through jagged holes in the rusted floorboards and springs of naked seat cushions, gripping the skeletal body tight to the crumbling asphalt under the dead, bitter light of the vapor lamps. Insects and nocturnal birds swarm overhead, darting in and out of the urine glow. A night snake ripples across a swimming pool slimed over with emerald scum. Bankrupt patio, dried stems of giant thistles and sunflowers sprouting from cracked sidewalks. An emaciated feral cat stalks its shadow, slinking against a ruined wall marked with spray-painted gang visual rumors. And then, something immoral and repugnant, gazing back in censorious dread. I know this strange creature: it's me, my reflection caught in the rear view mirror.

A dream from my early 20s: I am bitten by a winged demon, transforming me into a Hell's Angel. I join a band of these pitiful creatures flying through the night. We are circling a house (or perhaps a town), then I realize that dawn is approaching. We must leave, go down to the underworld to escape the rising sun. I am sad because I realize I can never again be part of the waking, daylight world. I fly with the evil ones now, life through oxygen containers and I.V.s, prepared for a satin-drawn coffin, arms folded like bat wings and lip stitched together in a silent scream.

I open my nightstand drawer. Jack's porn gear, conveniently stashed here at his urging.

"Sometime during the next two weeks, you may need to let your sleek dog run," he explained.

I read the label on the box of patches: "OFD Movable Pro 890, Instantaneous VI Cohort." This is the new Frames CE, a slimmed down version of the Frames operating system designed just for handhelds.

I tell you, lots of dream jockeys trash talk "FramCE," noting that it can't handle high-speed multisensory recollections or run the latest 64-bit dreamware. But that's not what it was designed for; Frames CE is for going onbeam on the fly. I've been lusting after this new system ever since I'd read about the instant-on capability. You can do a couple of minutes of onbeam creating without first waiting for the usual five-minute Frames boot up. (My favorite VI of all time is the old Zandy DP-2, a bulky, wristwatch-style interface that boots instantly from ROM. It was -- and still is -- perfect for dream writing; the DP-2 can hold enough neural charge for 10 hours of uninterrupted operation, quite an "improvement" over the usual two or three hour charge of most of today's transdermal patches. Of course there is a trade off. The DP-2's implant canvass is hopelessly outdated and crude, really nothing more than charcoal sketches. But sometimes that's enough.)

I unwrap a thumbnail-size patch and slap it on my forehead. Clip on the transceiver (titanium, nice!) to my left earlobe and plug the other end into the wireless card. Then I switch on the PDA and plug in. Instead of the usual hypnogogic flares and random RV-DOS codes of the boot up process, the implant canvass flashes a copyright -- "Another Invention of Morel" -- and immediately jumps to the Exogrid, in full 3-D, alive and in living dream color.

In the distance, rhythmic tribal drumming and vague chanting. A large quantity of inconsequential imagery, a distracting, leafy blur of banana trees and elephant ears and tropical cartoon-like visions of macaws and jungle cats. I feel a sudden wave of nausea. This program is lousy with jimson weed. But by closing my eyes and concentrating on the tone and the rhythm of the drumming and the chanting, the queasiness passes. The jungle images surge and became even more vivid. Flying over landscapes, past rhythmic African prototype warriors who look heavenward as I zoom past. And I see something else: a bright, rectangular entity floating in the distance, blazing like the sun.

This aerial entity possess within it a sort of stage -- no, a screen. It is a drive-in movie theater, and the show is already playing. I am still too far away to make out all of the action, but it occurs to me (in that strange way knowledge sometimes just seems to come to you in the dreamscape) that my judgments, or expressions verbalized in my brain, are representing themselves on the movie screen.

I am the director of my own movie.

I realize I am still watching all of this on the inside of my eyelids, and I wonder if this is a sort of dream within in a dream. So I decide to open my eyes.

The movie screen is still present, but it is now anchored firmly to the ground on giant, metal legs. And instead of flying, I am at the wheel of my old 1970 Cutlass convertible, parked at the Astro Drive-In. We're back in the old Hydrocarbon Age, a crescent moon and the evening star shining bright against the purple twilight sky of 1979, on or about the last night of my youth.

Despite the impossible visual angle, I can see through the sheet metal fencing to the marquee out front. I understand that the feature presentation is supposed to be "Urban Cowboy," one of the last movies I ever saw at the Astro. But for some reason I cannot actually see this movie, a phenomenon that suggests the central part of my retina has been burned away, the result of gazing too long into the dazzling light of original experience.

And then I am in an examination room. "They" are studying me.

#

Clinical, domed ceilings with gray white walls – smooth, sleek, varnished, unbroken walls. Gaunt metallic hallways and curved hallways, voluminous medical equipment on wheeled carts and affixed to floor-to-ceiling windows. In the corner, a terrestrial observer, an old man in a thick cardigan sweater and wrinkled hands endlessly working over a red potato.

I am here, and I am far away: In the downtown of a small Texas town. It is morning. Nobody on the street. I am in a store, perhaps with my family. I leave with my purchase, a rolled up poster. I take it to a storefront a few doors down. This is my business – perhaps a furniture store, maybe a café. It is done up in cowboy décor. I unroll the poster, which I see is also in a cowboy theme. The poster is long and skinny, more like a scroll. I look around for a suitable place to hang it. Then I am startled to see that I am not alone.

A woman is sitting in a black vinyl recliner, slumped deep in the cool, dark cushions as if asleep. And perhaps she had been sleeping, but now she is fully awake, looking at me. Then I recognize her: She is Nanny, my great grandmother who died 30 years ago.

I can't believe it. Nanny, back from the dead. I look into her face, study her countenance. It's her all right. She looks good, too, maybe in her 60s. She does not

appear ancient and sickly like I remember her the last time I saw her at the nursing home, a few weeks before she died.

“You’re so pretty and young,” I tell her. She thanks me and says “I have some things to tell you, both good and bad. So pull up a chair and sit beside me.”

I do as she asks and sit in front of her, knee to knee. But I don’t wait for her to talk. She has information I wish to acquire.

“Is there a heaven?” I ask.

“Oh yes, and it’s wonderful. You don’t earn your way there. Everyone can go.”

“Oh, I’m so happy,” I tell her. And I mean it, too. Because I am a doubter. So it is nice to have confirmation of the un-confirmable from someone who has seen Heaven first hand.

Then she disappears, but somehow I know she is still here. And I know this is not good. Still, I must proceed.

“Now tell me the bad,” I say. “What’s been troubling you?”

Suddenly I am propelled upward toward the ceiling, tossed skyward as if by an unseen hand. Then I fall to the floor. Perhaps this visitor is not Nanny at all. Time to escape. I run for the door.

I decide the lights are already turned off, so all I need to do is lock the door and return to the safety of my family at the nearby store. Only I can’t get the door to latch. I’ve set the door knob button to lock, but the door will not hold. I even tear away some foam weather stripping that I think may be the problem. Still no luck. Then I glance back inside the store for one final look. A vinyl restaurant chair is moving about all by itself, and I know immediately it is being propelled by a demonic force. So that is it. My store is really a diner for demons.

#

Laid out on an operating table, strapped down like a dogfish ready for dissection.

A lighted, arm-like device wielding piercing instruments of surgical steel performs the extraction and shattering of bones, the dissection of organs, the suction tube extraction of ectoplasm from the DNA delivery organ. Then organs and bones are baked, re-calibrated and reinstalled, allowing me to unconsciously pull in transmissions from distant galaxies within and detect the distortion created by strange forces without.

Re-assembled, I rise from the table and glimpse my reflection in the polished metal walls. I appear exactly as before; the ordeal leaves no unseen marks or scars. And yet, something has changed. I view the future as contained in glowing drawers of human-insect hybrid fetuses, the children of a hidden planet that surrounds the subject in an alien trip, the attraction of the borderland and the epic film. The image is blinding, almost beyond comprehension. Then the narrative voice-over:

“The motion picture offers a place where self absorption can inflict the first wound, a psychic wound in the heart of the aggressive drama of the mind -- a moviegoer internalized by his own continuity. In the rhetoric of violence an exploitation ensues. The church that lies somewhere to the East is rediscovered, but in ruins. Bitterness and loneliness, killer, negator, scourge -- lost in despair. A modern sense of exile is projected onto the screen of the past, where convention and tradition conspire to heighten the constriction of life, estranging us from emotional life. His emotions do not belong to him. Rather they belong to a Stranger, a double who is oddly familiar in his recapitulation of experience. Psychically wounded, a visual rumor of limitation and pride, rendered

impotent and furious. Violence and The Stranger, an agonizing rage, engulfed in guilt or fear.”

#

I'm told alien abductions are the most commonly selected dramatic scenarios of onbeam travelers in the collective unconscious. In my case, I was drawn to 1950s B-movie sci-fi imagery as an alternative to the lucid technical and systematic principles of our age, a familiar and yet entirely novel direction that can be looked upon as the outward amplification of an inner legend.

Through the Archetype of the Alien, I firmly believe we can pursue the interpretation of reality as a subject of general story believability and then proceed to – eh, what's that?

Oh. Well, that is interesting that you are most drawn to the sexual imagery. Perhaps pornography is my special gift.

As for you being Luh – yes, I must admit that the young woman on the neighboring island bears a great symbolic resemblance to you in high school. As I gazed upon her I did genuinely consider what it would be like to have you again in the back seat of the Cutlass, this time enthusiastically penetrating your membranes, expelling my ectoplasm inside you. Filling you with my spirit. However, you never allowed me to express my feelings in quite that way. You were always the nice girl.

But then came last year, when we met again and you promised we would run away together. Still you do not remember? That is too bad, for a claim of virginity rules you out as the muse.

Luh is neither virgin nor whore. She is a being of the unconscious, a tour guide to the internal existence, an arbitrator of waking world awareness of the often ambiguous landmarks and residents of inner reality. She assists in the investigation of significance and is the inspiration of and for the existence of the movie director. In short, the muse is an escort through – and at the same time a personification of – the Land of the Dead.

She is always trying to escape this ghost terrain, to take up residence in the sunshine of the waking world. One of the ways the muse attempts to do this is by projecting herself onto the real women in my life. Unconsciously, I am forever attempting to compel women like you to become a living host for my muse, the carrier of my own inner world – a membrane to be penetrated, an external receptor for the expulsion of the internal ectoplasm of visionary experience.

I am an odious being, of course. I should see people for who they really are, not for their resemblance to some inner aspect of myself. So one of the jobs I have given myself for the second half of my life is to work hard at recognizing this “projecting” as soon as it occurs. I must cut the power to the projector and send the muse back inside my head, where all imaginary beings belong.

And yet, I cannot do so when it comes to you, my love. You would make a highly desirable muse. According to the cinematic images of my dreams, you are the perfect physical host. I have already begun to animate the muse inside you. (In the language of B-movie sci-fi, I am Dr. Frankenstein and you are my artificially created bride, assembled from body parts unearthed from my own unconscious.) If you will voluntarily enter my dungeon lab and submit yourself to the final stage of the transformation, the animating process will be nearly effortless. Granted, the price will be high. Most likely, you will quickly tire of being a psychological archetype. You will say “enough” and walk

away. That is for the best, because people should not be archetypes. But if you do not walk away – well, the muse will totally consume you. She will induce you to surrender your unique individuality. You will be compelled to lead me down into the darkness, through the creative process deep into the Land of the Dead. I will be forever bending you over in the hot shower, penetrating your membranes with my DNA delivery organ, expelling my ectoplasm inside you, filling you with my spirit. Would that be so bad?

Compliments, adoration, inspiration – I will demand it all. And still, I will always be questioning the situation. Is she really my muse? Can it be there is still some unconscious remnant of the individuality of the former owner of this body – what was her name again? You will be a mere receptacle, which is to say no longer “you” at all. In the end, the muse will destroy us both. Hey – I think I just outlined the concept for my next movie. Can you believe it? The muse strikes again.

So, perhaps you are the muse after all. In light of this revelation, I am going to skip ahead in the narrative and tell you about the time the son of the muse – our love child? – tried to murder me.

#

Luh came to visit again last night.

But the visitation does not occur here, on the island. Somehow we are at the home of Allison’s parents, where I am cleaning up after the burglary that preceded the big road trip. It is not pleasant. I am about to the lower the garage door when I hear a crash inside the house. A wave a fear washes over me, sends my stomach into sommersaults. Could the burglars still be inside? But then I hear a cry. A woman’s voice. How dangerous can that be?

“Hello? Are you OK?” I ask.

No answer. Then another crash, apparently from Allison’s old bedroom. My heart is pounding, but somehow I find the courage to creep down the hall, past family photos and framed elementary school report cards. I rip open the door and find Cinnamon, sprawled across the eyelet bedspread. She is lying on her side, one hand propping up her head and the other resting on her hip. Wearing nothing but a dark tan and a smile. My arms goes limp; I drop the hammer.

“Sorry about the racket,” she says. “I accidentally knocked over a stack of shoe boxes. She must really like shoes.”

“Allison’s definitely into fashion.”

Then she rolls onto her stomach, and I see that she is not Cinnamon at all. She is Luh.

She kicks a foot up behind her, as if relaxing at the beach. Indeed, hanging over the headboard is a lake painting Allison did in high school. There is boat with a fisherman looking toward a pair of sharply peaked mountains in the background. I try not to stare.

“I’m guessing the loot is already gone,” I say.

“Hours ago.”

“How about I call the police.”

“I’ll just tell them what you did to the piano and the painting.”

“Like they’d believe you.”

“What do you care anyway?”

She is right. I don’t care.

Luh swings her legs over the edge of the bed and pulls on one of Allison's old bath robes, an artifact from high school.

"Now it's time for your gift," she says.

My gift? But then why did she put on the robe --

From under the bed she retrieves an old laptop computer. My eye immediately lands on the corporate logo, the venerated icon.

"Is that -- ?"

"A Macintosh Portable," she explains. "The 5126."

"The backlit model?"

"It will be perfect for your writing. See? It's been restored to mint condition."

She sits it on the bed, flips open the lid and hits the power button. It immediately clicks to life.

"It's got the rebuilt battery," she explains. "And the 8 meg PDS slot RAM card from Dynamic Engineering."

As it finishes booting, I gaze into the system screen, glowing pale in the deepening twilight.

"It's got the hard drive upgrade kit, too?" I ask.

"That's right. I replaced the 40 meg Conner with a 500 meg PowerBook SCSI drive. It's formatted and loaded with Mac OS 7.01."

I pick up the humming computer, hold it in front of me. "Where did you get this?" I ask.

"You like it?"

"Like it? It's fantastic. I've heard of Japanese collectors who'll pay upwards of \$1,000 for a 5126 in this condition. But why?"

Suddenly, the computer begins to change in my hands. The white plastic case darkens to a light bronze flesh tone. Arms and legs spout from the various serial ports. It is becoming a doll -- but not a nice one. This is a homicidal Chucky doll, writhing and struggling in my hands, its face twisted in hate.

"What is it?" I ask, trying to keep my fingers away from the snapping jaws.

"A reincarnated unkind being."

I put my hands around the doll's neck and squeeze, but that just makes it fight harder, trying to bite me. This Chucky wants more than a taste. He wants me dead.

"Sometimes he goes too far," she remarks. "But he's always the first to admit it."

"Quick, pick up the hammer! Smash its skull."

Luh shakes her head.

"We must positively integrate your destructive impulses, not indulge them."

"Smash it now," I repeat.

"He just needs attention. He needs love."

"Love? It's a killer."

"But he's our baby."

And then the hammer is in my hand. I strike at the psychotic computer, again and again -- splintered plastic, scattered microchips, a river of teeth, a raging current of broken incisors, saliva, blood and other bodily emissions.

Don't I feel good now?

#

I know you are familiar with the story. Everyone is. But it's all from the news media. All lies. Before we go any further, you need to understand what happened the night of my alien abduction scenario from MY perspective.

Here is the true story: I experienced an apocalyptic vision.

Not my first, but it was perhaps my most important. This is one that led me to create my famous tag line: "Here's one way the world ends."

#

Here's one way the world ends: I am in Louisiana, walking east along the El Camino Real towards Fort Jesup, the capital of the Land of the Dead. I come out of the ancient turpentine mist and the dripping Spanish moss and the pines and find myself at Trinity Baptist Church, the same one my grandparents belonged to (and many of my relations still do).

As I approach, I am amazed to see that next door to the church is an old white chapel I remember from my childhood. I have not seen it in years. It should not be here, but it is. What a find!

I look inside, and it is just as I remember. The last attendance figures are still on the little sign at the front of the church. It is like a time capsule.

But all is not well. The front of the building is gone, sliced off like a piece of cheese. The pulpit and pews are all in place. But, no -- that's not right. Because I can see into the basement. It is flooded with water, creating a sort of pool. A concrete ramp disappears into the water, suggestive of a boat ramp at a lake.

From out of the ruins, I am greeted by an old man in a plaid flannel shirt and a short, neatly trimmed beard. I learn that he is a former pastor of the church, now retired. He tells me he is in the process of restoring the old chapel. But after he took off the front of the building, it rained and the basement filled with water.

I am sad, for I realize that the church had been safe all these years but due to his ill-timed restoration efforts it is now in danger of total destruction. Surely, the cost of repairing the water damage is beyond the means of this old man. Still, I am happy that I have rediscovered the old church, which I thought had been demolished decades ago. At least I am seeing it for one last time, a joy flowered in difficulty.

A car arrives. It is my wife and our two sons. They are here to pick me up so we can continue on the last couple of miles to my grandparent's old house, where the Leachs hold their annual family reunion. I suggest we walk the last stretch. Allison is skeptical; however, she agrees to my plan.

We walk a bit, but soon I become disoriented. The route does not look the same on foot. I take the wrong road, and we wind up in a hot, deserted stretch of country. It has been denuded of the lush pine forest that dominates this area. The boys begin to complain about the heat. They are thirsty. Allison remains silent, furious. And I am overwhelmed --

overwhelmed by the nausea of failure, one more broken attempt to transcend the everyday.

#

Morning, face smashed against a gravel walkway. I awaken to the temperate nudge of boot to ribcage.

"Sorry, thought you were dead."

The boot belongs to Sam Cunningham, precinct No. 3 county constable and perhaps the last person I want to find me sleeping on the front steps of the old derelict Strangers Rest Baptist Church. But maybe I'm not really here. Maybe I'm still onbeam. I touch my forehead, and hope vanishes. The VI patch is gone.

Will he arrest me? I see the headline, in my own paper no less: "Reporter arrested for vagrancy, trespassing."

Certainly the state of affairs does not appear promising. But there is another reason he might wish to haul me in: I have written unfavorably about him.

The previous fall, the county commissioners cut Cunningham's constabulary budget from \$46,728 to \$15,006 and his salary from \$33,000 to \$9,000 because of accusations by the precinct No. 3 Justice of the Peace Hubert Skinner and some residents that he'd quit serving civil papers. That didn't merit more than a news brief in the Northeast Extra. The big story came soon thereafter. Skinner locked Cunningham out of the office they shared on Frederiksbad Street. The judge said the constable and his deputies had a habit of going through his files. So he had Cunningham's office dismantled and its content stashed in the old county jail. Now that was a good story. They even put it on the wires; it appeared in papers all over the country. Sam was a coast-to-coast joke.

In all fairness to Sam, he never complained to me. But I did receive an anonymous letter, a copy of the story and the Bill of Rights. The passage about freedom of the press had been highlighted with an orange marker.

"Great to see you," Sam says, helping me to my feet, looking me over. His hands work my shoulders, feel my bones -- me in my rumpled golf shirt and khakis, blood-filled eyes with gravel pressed into my cheek, he in his starched brown uniform, shiny brown Ropers and .357 magnum.

"You OK?" he asks. "You don't look so good."

I can't believe it. He is even concerned about my appearance. He won't be arresting me after all. Ah, there's nothing like old friends.

"I'm fine, just a little tired."

"He's not here today."

"Who?"

"The new owner."

"I didn't know there was one."

"Yeah, he's a movie director or something. Been filling the place up with all kinds of lights and cameras and film gear. He even had the electric company put in a new transformer. He's running 440 volts."

I look at the old chapel. From the outside nothing seems to have changed. The heavy front doors are still chained and padlocked, the faded metal "for sale" sign is still stapled to the white clapboards, chimney swifts is still darting in and out of the louvered belfry. Everything is just as it had been for the past five years, ever since the congregation of the Strangers Rest Baptist Church decided to drop the "Baptist" for a "dot com" moniker and move away from their historic property on Frederiksbad Street. Now their home is out on a forlorn, treeless stretch of Interstate 35-W in a giant, metal

warehouse of a sanctuary – a combination gas station/Exogrid church featuring a multimedia stage for contemporary praise music and the pastor's "talk points" and restaurant-style beepers to keep parents in touch with the nursery. (These Keepers of the Deity have no interest in finding the church that lies somewhere to the East.)

"So, really great to see you," Sam says again, still feeling my bones.

"Yeah, me too." But what do you want?

"I've got a story you might be interested in."

Ah yes -- the price of staying out of jail. "Tell me about it."

"You know the street dance on Saturday?"

I know.

It is to be a fundraiser to save the Silver Spur, the empty rock shell of an old West saloon (circa 1880) from the days when Strangers Rest was a rowdy cattle town. The corner property is for sale for \$60,000, but of course the big expense will be the restoration -- a couple of million at least. So Strangers Rest has called in the big gun, Cowboy Roy, a singing cowboy from the 1950s who owned a ranch on the edge of town. He is resurrecting his old band, the Wrangling Wranglers, for a live broadcast on the local National Public Radio affiliate.

"So, of course, as town marshal I'm in charge of crowd control, of security. But there's going to be like hundreds of people. I can't control them all by myself, right?"

"Right." And I'm still out of jail.

"So I'm going to round up a posse."

"A what?"

"Yeah, I'm going to have my own posse, like on 'Gunsmoke.' I'm going to deputize some of the local citizens."

"You can do that?"

"I called the attorney general's office in Austin. They gave me the OK."

"A posse in Strangers Rest."

"Probably the first time since cowboy days."

"You know, that is a good story."

"You could even be one of my deputies."

"Me?"

"Absolutely. You live here, you pay taxes."

"A reporter with a badge."

"You can ride a horse, too -- if you can get one. I'll even let you carry a shotgun."

We set up a time and place for the interview.

"And a photo?" Sam asks.

"Of course." After all, I'll be the deputy town marshal.

"OK, then. I'll see you next -- hey, where's your car?"

"What? Oh, I walked."

"You want a ride home?" He jerks his thumb back over his shoulder, toward a dusty old Toyota bubbletop.

"Undercover?"

"Yup. Probably the only constable in Texas who has to patrol in his own car."

"No, I'll just walk back."

"You still don't look so hot."

"I'm fine. See you tomorrow."

"I'll bring your badge."

"And my shotgun."

#

Poor Sam. The story of his fall from grace is even worse than I have presented. After the contents of his office were locked up in the old county jail the commissioners assigned Sam's duties to a deputy constable from another precinct. But the emasculated constable still wanted to prove himself. So he continued to work at his reduced rate of pay. He even tried to win over townfolk by agreeing to take on the non-paying job of town marshal. At least it meant he'd have a patrol car. But that didn't last long, either. The city council voted to curb it rather than raise taxes to continue its operation. They parked it in the mayor pro tem's back yard, the town's most expensive dust catcher. That gave me another great story.

Poor Sam.

#

Walking Frederiksbad Street, a tree-lined residential street little changed since the 1930s. I move in and out of the shade the morning sun makes through the trees, enjoying the view. There's a mix of craftsman-inspired bungalows, simple half-porch, center-gable cottages and my favorite, a one-story red brick tutor with an S-shaped drive, vine-covered porte coche and a red barn out back. An old woman with a hand trowel and floppy straw hat works the front flower bed, tending her elephant ears and phlox. Allison and I used to covet the place. We'd drive by every week, hoping to see a "for sale" sign. The old folks just wouldn't die. They outlasted us, forcing us to the new subdivision where we had our choice of three grades of carpet and a premium waterfront lot.

I feel a bit shaky, a wave of nausea building in the humid morning air. But something is not right. I see patches of snow and white ice on some of the roofs. The sunlight is thawing this white, which flows off a high stretch of tutor roof in the manner of a mountain waterfall.

A few blocks later, an unusual house catches my eye. It looks like a tower supporting a saucer-like structure. A UFO home. How did it get here, in downtown Strangers Rest?

The house resembles a miniature version of the Tower of the Americas in San Antonio. The shaft of the tower is made of glass and contains a spiral staircase. Doesn't look much like a house at all.

Next I spot an even more dramatic example of the UFO style. No tower, but a much larger saucer structure, which is surrounded by a porch. I've seen this place before, in a dream. I am with a companion, and we wish to have a closer look at this house, which is clearly a significant piece of architecture. Someone is in front of us, pushing a cart or baby stroller; they too are trying to get a closer look. It is twilight, and the lights are already on inside the house, intensifying the UFO effect. The people in front of us walk onto the porch – its ceiling dimly lit by flush-mounted light panels – and look inside a window. The residents are inside eating dinner, and they are understandably unhappy about this intrusion. I cannot hear what they say, but the meaning is clear. They send the intruders away. So we leave, too, without looking inside or even seeing anything else of the outside of the house. Clearly this place is not for me.

My nausea incubates in the next block, a collection of low-slung '50s ranch houses with attached carports and big AC units on concrete slabs. No need to plant trees

when you've got central air. I raise a hand to wipe the sweat from my forehead, and realize for the first time that the VI patch is gone.

How did I get from my bedroom to downtown Strangers Rest? I squint into the bright sun, the sweat now pouring off my forehead. It is hard to concentrate. My stomach feels like curdled milk, overwhelmed by the nausea of failure. No way I will make it the mile or so to my house. If only I can get to the Circle L, sit down in a cool, vinyl booth near the cold cases and enjoy a carton of orange juice. I turn onto Frederiksbad Street, the Circle L almost in view.

But a half block later it becomes clear I won't make it. I sit down in front of a vacant lot against a power pole. The scent of black crude somehow settles my stomach. I close my eyes, just for a moment. But there is no time to rest. I must flee.

I am running down a freshly paved residential street, the scent of the black crude filling my nostrils, a police car in pursuit. But he can't catch me. Adrenaline pumping, I am running so fast that my feet almost leave the ground. I come to a dead end and leap over the barricade like an Olympic star, leaving the police car far behind.

I hide in dark undergrowth, alone in the twilight shadows. And yet, I am not alone. I have an accomplice, a stranger. We cannot be seen together. They'll be expecting that. We must split up, go our own ways.

"Wait five minutes, then take off," I tell the man as I sprint for the next street over.

It is evening now, and the neighborhood is empty. Everyone is inside for the night. I come to a cross street -- the last big barrier before I get home -- and I see a police car a few hundred yards away. He has pulled over a mini van, giving the driver a ticket. With a little luck, I should be able to cross the street unseen. But I have no luck. Suddenly, cars begin to appear. They are coming from both directions. The speed limit is about 40, and the cars are following each other very closely. There is no opportunity to squeeze between cars and cross the road. Then a car stops in the middle of the road, and the traffic begins to pass slowly on the shoulder. This is my chance. I bolt between two cars, just missing their bumpers. I've made it. But then, out of the shadows comes the policeman. He is right behind me, too close for me to get away. He takes me down in a flying tackle and we crash into a side yard filled with old buildings materials, salvaged French doors, painted pine moldings and beaded boards and yellow Texas Star bricks edged in dusty, crumbling mortar. The homeowner is there, too, and I say that I am being attacked. Not realizing my attacker is really a policeman, he jumps to my aid, pinning the officer to the ground.

"Thanks," I say as I run towards the alley. "Just hold him for five minutes, that's all I need."

Then I throw myself through a plate glass window, like Tom Cruise in "Mission: Impossible" and escape to the little town's historic central business district. But this is no escape, either. Everyone has heard of me, the fugitive. A librarian I know tells the crowd that they should give me a chance to explain myself, but her words fall on unsympathetic ears. They're out to get me, a misunderstood creature pursued by torch-wielding peasants. A group of Boy Scouts in khaki uniforms with red neckerchiefs swarm me, little hands grabbing at my clothes. One of the older boys has a syringe, presumably filled with some barbiturate that will make me easier to apprehend. Even without the injection, they will surely win. I can't possibly fight off this many, even if they are only children. But having

been a Boy Scout myself once, I know how to outsmart them. "Watch out, I'll breathe my illness on you." I am so convincing that I can actually see my breath, a green dragon fog. Scary! "I have V.D. Do you know what that is?" The scouts are speechless, wide eyed. None of them know. So I tell them. "It's a disease that makes your DNA delivery organ fall off." And they all back away.

#

I come to myself inside the Circle L, stretched out across plastic milk crates in a cool, dark nook near the front counter. I feel tired, but the nausea is gone. I attempt to sit up. No luck. I can't quite get my arms to operate. A set of tough, wizened hands helps me the rest of the way.

"Looky here, he's alive after all."

Gazing down at me, sweat-stained Stetson shoved back on his balding head, stands Cowboy Roy.

"How long have I been here?"

"Oh, not long -- about 10 minutes. I saw you when you sat down out there on the road. We had a heck of time getting you into the Bevomobile."

We? I look around and see the Boy Scouts. They have escaped from my dream, clearly a troubling development. The Scouts eye me warily, taking care to stay far from my mouth, source of the green dragon fog.

Cowboy Roy does not recognize their fear. He only sees them as another audience.

"That's right, boys, the Bevomobile," he says. "It's a movie star car, a white 1959 Cadillac convertible outfitted with rawhide seat covers, six-shooter door handles and a set of polished longhorns mounted on the hood. I've been driving it since 1961, when I made my last movie, 'By the Guns Forgot.' You boys ever seen that one?"

Blank stares.

"Well, they show it on the UHF stations sometimes on Sunday afternoons. Watch for it. Now regarding the Bevomobile, it is one of my most prized possessions -- that and my trusty Bisley."

Roy reaches into a rhinestone-studded holster and comes up with the six-shooter he inherited from his grandfather, a sheriff in turn-of-the-century Strangers Rest. He gives the pearl-handled gun a quick twirl on his finger.

"I'll be wearing this on stage Saturday night," he says. "I always like to have the big iron on my hip when I do the Radio Ranch. For my fans."

"I heard tell you're going to sell it," says Odie Cowan, owner of the Circle L.

Roy spins around and stares.

"Who'd you hear tell that?"

"Oh yeah, it's all over. That gun collector from Waco was in here last week. Told me he'd heard about your famous old broken down six-shooter. For some fool reason he wanted to buy it."

Mayor Toots Tedwill picks up on the story, too. "That's right. I heard he was going to pay you a whole bushel of money for it."

Cowboy Roy sets his jaw hard and shakes his head at the smiling men. "He was a thief and an idiot," he says quietly.

“Why what do you mean, Roy? Didn’t he make you a fair offer?” Odie asks, winking at me. Everyone in town already knew what happened. And what Cowboy Roy thought of it.

“He offered me \$2,000,” Cowboy Roy says through clenched teeth. “I figure it’s worth 10 times that, so that makes him a thief. And if he’d bothered to check around, he’d known it weren’t for sale. So that makes him an idiot.”

“Two thousands bucks sounds like a mighty fair price to me,” Toots says. “After all, it’s just a wore out old gun.”

“Wore out?” Cowboy Roy roars. “Why, I’ll have you know that gun is priceless. And famous at that. It was given to my granddaddy by the Texas Attorney General for his service cleaning out Pancho Villa and his boys down in south Texas. Kit Karger and Big Foot Wallace was at the ceremony. My granddaddy wore that gun the whole time he was sheriff back here, and he kept on wearing it after that, right up to his dying day.”

“Oh, well I didn’t know about all that,” Toots remarks, though of course he knows. All the old folks in town know the story of Granpappy Thornton’s Bisley revolver because Cowboy Roy has been inflicting it on them since they were kids.

“Wore out,” Cowboy Roy repeats, oblivious to the choked laughs around him. Roy turns his attention again to me.

“You didn’t look too good when we carried you in here,” he explains. “Odie didn’t want me to bring you in. He was afraid you might die here, be bad for his business.”

The store owner stiffens as he sacks up a quart of milk and a pack of Marlboros for a tired-looking pregnant woman with a “Baby On Board” T-shirt. As soon as the door closes behind her, though, he slams the cash register drawer and spins around on Cowboy Roy.

“I just thought it might be something serious, that he ought to go to the hospital.”

“Well, looks like he’s going to pull through after all, so why don’t you quit making excuses and brew us up some fresh coffee?” Roy winks at me and whispers, “he didn’t want a dead body contaminating the Moon pies and Ranch Style Beans.”

Odie disappears into the back room to secure another can of coffee, leaving Roy without an audience -- an untenable situation. Roy’s eyes quickly light on the far booth by the restrooms, where 80-year-old “Toots” Tedwill is finishing up the crossword from the morning paper.

“Yeah, Odie’s just a broken down old woman,” Roy says. “Not a young, good lookin’ cuss like me.”

Toots doesn’t look up from his paper. “I need a four-letter word for --”

“Now look out,” Roy warns him. “We got a member of the press here today.”

“You ought to take it easy on needling Odie. He says he’s thinking about charging for coffee.”

Roy affects a look of shock. “No free coffee? But it’s always been free. It’s a tradition. You can’t buy a cup of coffee in Strangers Rest.”

“Yeah, well Odie don’t much care about that tradition,” Toots says. “He said ‘if I start charging for coffee, Roy’s the only one cheap enough to quit coming. It’d be a real win-win for everybody.’”

I try to smile, but I still felt too weak. Roy gives me a quizzical look.

“I’ve never passed out like that,” I explain.

“Shoulda took him to the hospital,” Odie shouts from the back of the store.

"We were a bit worried," Roy admits. "We even called your wife."

Allison. A fresh wave of nausea washes over me. I could almost see her at the beach house in Maine, roused from sleep by my in-laws. ("Can't Mark take care of himself for one day?")

"I told her she didn't need to worry, though," Roy adds. "You were just sleeping off a drunk."

Then he starts laughing, slapping his hat against his leg. In exchange for my being a good sport, though, Roy buys me a plastic bottle of orange juice and a Twinkie, just what I need to bring my blood sugar back up to nominal operating levels. I rise from the milk crates without assistance. Roy opens the door with one hand and jingles the change in his pocket with the other, searching for his car keys.

Odie returns from the back room with a carafe of water, which he pours into the top of the Mr. Coffee. "You don't have to put up with his carrying on," he says. "Roy's not nearly as funny as he thinks he is."

"What do you know about humor?" Roy replies. "I'm the professional entertainer, remember? I once shared a bottle of Jack Daniels with Slim Pickens."

"I remember. The whole town remembers. You don't give nobody a chance to forget."

"I want that coffee ready when I get back." Roy smiles and gives me another conspiratorial wink. But Odie doesn't see the smile or wink. His is squinting at the open door, his attention focused on something outside -- something up in the sky.

#

To fall into an alternate reality – is that not the very definition of visionary transformation? Consider how it occurred for Clark Caring:

#

*A strange and disquieting morning, my beloved creations. It takes only a couple of queries to confirm my suspicions, unbelievable and unacceptable as I find them to be. This is the day I learn that Jehovah, the creator and sustainer of Planet Earth, has been arrested.*

#

*Sen. Stone Says R.E.L. Four Should Resign*

*AUSTIN (SPM)— Sen. Raulston Stone on Wednesday called on Planetary Administrator R.E.L. Four to resign, one day after berating him during a town hall meeting over what he called an "abortive strategy" in the United States.*

*"I simply don't comprehend why we cannot acquire new management to give us a genuine opportunity to reverse the course of events before it's too late," the Harris County Federalist and potential presidential contender said in an interview with State Public Media. "I believe the president should demand administrator Four's immediate resignation."*

*"The administrator has lost trustworthiness with the Senate and the House and the people of the Republic of Texas," he said. "The moment for action is here. Four must stand down and be exchanged for someone who can cultivate a successful strategy and convey it successfully to the Texas people and to the world."*

*Stone had resisted joining the refrain of other Federalists demanding an official sanction of Four. His remarks Wednesday were the harshest assessment yet from the man considered his party's early front-runner for next year's presidential nomination.*

*The former Army general has come under attack from some in his own party for voting for the police action five years ago and his current opposition to a deadline for Texas troop withdrawal.*

*He criticized Four yesterday morning during a town hall meeting in Texarkana near the demilitarized zone, where recent insurgent fighting has threatened to end the 47-year border truce between the two nations.*

*"Under your control, there have been abundant mistakes in reasoning that have directed us to where we are," he said. "We have a full-fledged insurgency and full-blown sectarian conflict in the United States."*

*In a celestial manifestation, the planetary administrator rejected some of Stone's specific criticisms as purely incorrect and said the war against sacrament abuse will be a long-lasting course of action. He said he in no way has downplayed the troubles of the struggle.*

*"I have in no way mislead you," he said. "I've been very deliberate in my statements, and you will not be able to locate scripture in which I have expressed undue sanguinity."*

#

*Word of this amazing development apparently came months before, when a giant clock suddenly materialized in the eastern sky. The world watched in dumbfounded amazement as the hands climbed to 12 o'clock, then dissolved into a giant head. This head bore a kind and benevolent expression, a unique countenance the citizens of the planet instantly regarded as the face of a god (or, depending on personal religious beliefs, a rock star or JFK).*

*"Greetings, Earthlings," the giant head entones. "I am R.E.L. Four, a citizen of the unseen, metaphysical world many of you know as Heaven. Today the Tri-Lateral Court of Cosmic Affairs administered warrants for the arrest of Jehovah (aka Yahweh, God, the Almighty, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, Allah, Krishna, Zeus, et al) for various and sundry crimes against humanity."*

*How about that? After a few dozen centuries, God's colleagues have finally got around to checking on the insignificant world known as Planet Earth. Seems they don't like what they've found. Wars, rumors of wars, sickness, death, murder, hatred. Jehovah has created a cruel and pain-filled world.*

*When they check the sacred texts compiled by His most beloved creations, they aren't real keen on what they find, either. A worldwide flood, a woman turned into a pillar of salt, a man covered in boils and robbed of all he owned as part of a bet. And when they reach the final chapter, they are downright unhinged by His plans for destroying all of creation through a worldwide apocalypse.*

*"Deities have a responsibility to provide for the needs and wants of the sentient beings they create," R.E.L. Four explains. "Jehovah has violated that responsibility. Clearly, he has become an irrational and dangerous being. Therefore, the Tri-Lateral Court is holding him in administrative segregation until such time as he is compelled to answer for his alleged crimes before a jury of his peers."*

*Harsh. An Earth with no god? Unfathomable. How will we function? Who will keep the planet rotating, the sun shining, the rain falling? And to paraphrase Ambrose Bierce: Who will we ask to annul the inviolable laws of the universe on our behalf even though we are confessedly unworthy?*

*Well, it turns out the answer is – R.E.L. Four.*

*Yes, he is assigned the job of putting right all that God has done wrong. A tall order, to be sure. For R.E.L. Four quickly discovers that homo sapiens have a lot of needs and wants, many of which are in extreme conflict.*

*Take the Republic of Texas, for instance. The Americans of the East Coast and southern California did not like it that Texas had become an independent nation. Talk about your impossible alternate realities. And yet, somehow under the watch of R.E.L. Four, the Republic of Texas had come into existence. The history books said it began in 1861, when a 20<sup>th</sup> century nuclear weapon fell through a black hole and into the hands of Sam Houston. The State of Texas re-declared its independence and joined forces with the United States to quash the Confederacy. R.E.L. Four might have put it right again, except for the fact that the citizens of the Republic of Texas insisted it was natural reality, unaltered by artificial intervention. “They’re lying,” the Easterns and SoCal types insisted. “Read their minds and you’ll know it.” But R.E.L. Four refused, insisting it would be immoral to use his divine abilities to resolve what was in effect an earthly dispute.*

*And then there was the problem of lottery drawings. How can R.E.L. allow all players to become lottery millionaires without bankrupting the lottery, which is in fact designed to fund public education? In that particular case, R.E.L. resolved the millionaire/public education conflict by outlawing all lottery drawings. According to the news archives, he wasn’t a very popular god that week. A Harris Poll put his popularity rating at 20 percent and falling.*

*“I have learned there are many things a god cannot do,” R.E.L. admits during the conclusion of one of his worldwide “giant head” fireside chats. “Certainly a more fair and equitable solution to funding education would be taxes. The society benefits, the society pays. Of course, taxes are no longer an option because as you’ll recall I abolished them in response to an influx of prayers on the subject. Anyway, I’m sure that together we’ll think of some way to pay for education. Blessings, and keep those prayers coming.”*

*Kudos to the Prophet, for he has written into the sacred text that this new god should have a problem common to many mere mortals: Talk too much do too few.*

#

Despite having viewed “Let Me Love You” about a hundred times, it was still some time before I divined the full visionary significance of the Clock in the Air. At first, I thought it was literally a sentient being from outer space, like R.E.L. Four. But then I came to see it as more than a cinematic allusion. The Clock in the Air is a metaphorical message, one sent by the inner all-knowing me to the outer less-than-knowing me. Consider the case of the extraterrestrial insects.

The giant cicada stands on its back legs, revealing an exoskeletal underbelly of armored plates the tint of washed out gray. A whirring, rasping voice comes out of a vibrating membrane on its thorax.

“First remove the log from you own eye, then you can help your neighbor remove the speck from his,” it says.

I drop my drink, and the carmel colored liquid bleeds into the thick wool berber. My heart staggers. Caught in a crime (and by a Bible-quoting extraterrestrial).

“I – I was just cleaning up,” I stutter.

The insectoid's tympanum begins to vibrate again – but no, that's not it. The alien is talking through its eyes. "Do not be alarmed," it says. "All who have eyes have eyes that speak."

#

The creature's name is Bellerio Shield. He tells me he is a traveler from inner space who arrived in the Land of the Dead via a Sunday afternoon rerun of a 1964 episode of *The Outer Limits*.

"This is a creative visitation," he explains, "a paraphrase of a favored motion picture."

"A movie?"

"Do you not recall the first words of the alien in 'The Revolution of Zion,' a QCT Drama Special based on the extremely applauded work of print fiction of the same name?"

I do recall.

"Haven't seen it in years, though," I say. "I read that it is lost in some film vault, I believe, caught up in a copyright issue. Something about a Beatles song. But I do remember it fondly. It was very good."

"You remember it fondly because you are a being of the movies," Bellerio explains. "And, of course, the movies are you. The epic film is employed to provide the pattern for our manifestation. Earthlings are unique among the sentient beings of the cosmos. It is normal for your species to have a split personality, living one utterly neglected, unacknowledged way in the metaphorical inner world and one far-too-obvious-and-self-aggrandized way in the literal outer world. What your species does not yet realize is the Deity is not an absolute life form living in the back of beyond. Nor is He a supernatural creature in outer space or the heavens. He is not restricted by occasion or location, the past or its formation."

"So what is He?"

"The Deity is the underpinning of all existence. Everywhere else we have traveled the reasoning beings already know this. They are of one mind, understanding the universe and its creator as we do. The inner and the outer are just one world. They live in that one world at all times, all feet regardless of number simultaneously in the inner and in the outer."

"It's a little hard to manage on earth, even with only two feet."

"And that, Mark Leach, is why you should understand that you have been given a great gift – an Incredible Revelation. You are among the first Earthlings to experience life as it is experienced by the creatures of the rest of the universe, the creator manifesting itself in the creation. You are seeing the culture's communal, extra-worldly perception concretely realized in the waking world. The dream made flesh."

"It's more like a nightmare."

"You don't find the *Clock in the Air* beautiful?"

"How can I? I've dreamed death, the conclusion of time. I've dreamed my hometown reduced to cinders." I look at the wreckage around me, the hammer in my hand. "And I've dreamed death. I am the bringer of death, youth whose memory drives one to despair. I've done terrible things."

"No, you've done great things, Mark Leach. Marvelous things."

"But the destruction –"

“Yes, the Deity is also a being of destruction. We must bravely say ‘bring on the big world dreams.’ Nuclear-based brimstone, everlasting dark, bitter pursuit -- an awful tragedy, huge anguish, Bengal tigers roaming free in subdivisions reverted to wilderness, moth and mold consuming the flag, vines taking over pews and pulpits. The thing for you is that you are the obliteration, the bomb blast. Senses are dulled, you can barely feel it. You are medicated or something. You are far from earth, in total separation, the emotion of being powerless in that state of affairs. You fall on the Martian surface, where you are rescued from your burning spacecraft by an old girlfriend, the hidden assistant. For you see, dreams are really about ourselves. The conclusion of time is a rebellion against the sarcophagus, flames of torture, dream-bearing ballistic missiles, demonic control and other tempests of mauve painted insanity. The ‘it’ is actually happening. You had Mars, in a lunar-style lander that had stored in its pain banks one of the great cyclone visions of all time. They always come back, spinning you around, perturbing you.”

“Pretty.”

“Precisely. Enjoy the beauty of the picture. But also be careful. The legend of the conclusion of time attempts to captivate us with a larger-than-life metaphor that can actually lead to seriously literal effects. Be careful of being charmed by this beauty, by what is impressive. For it is possible that this Judgment Day performance may yet torture and destroy the earth, which is to say you. Remember this: as sentient beings, we are required to create. We are not required to live.”

The old men at the Circle L have their theories about the aerial timepiece, and they aren't afraid to share them.

"I tell you, it's a commercial for television," Toots says.

Roy shakes his head. "I tell you, it's an alien spaceship."

I laugh, but then see by the solemn look on Roy's face that he is serious. "You don't really believe in UFOs, do you?" I ask.

"We've known about them for years," Roy explains, "ever since the '40s. We've been maintaining the ruins of one out there in the wasteland in Nevada at that clandestine air base on the dried up lake bed. Our scientists have been trying for years to reverse engineer it. Looks like they finally did it. Ain't that right, Odie?"

But Odie doesn't offer an opinion. He is busy fiddling with the double aerial of small TV he keeps by the cash register.

"Got it," he says.

The screen is full of azure skies. The camera pans down to a brilliant emerald meadow labeled "Waterford, N.Y." Odie aims the remote at the set, and the orator crackles into existence.

"-- was first reported at sunrise over this dairy farm in upstate New York, but it is rapidly dispersing to the remainder of the country, at times with volatile consequences."

The view switches to a scene of firefighters and policeman busying themselves in the area of a tractor trailer half buried in the side of a sheet metal structure. "Fifteen people were injured this morning at a horse show in Oklahoma City, when a truck driver lost control of a trailer of thoroughbreds and plowed into a horse shed." A man in a John Deere cap appears on the monitor. "It just fills the heavens, a hundred miles across. I don't understand. It's like - I don't know, it's like it's the End of the World, the conclusion of time. How can a guy make a living off the world any more when it's all come to this?"

#

Traveling to the Attitude Adjustment Bureau in the Bevomobile. (Roy insisted on driving me.) I see something new on the dashboard, a small oval medallion. Muse Sound System.

"I ain't never noticed that before," Roy says. He turns on the radio to check it out. A voice like Moses emerges from the dashboard speaker.

"You are on Frederiksbad Street in Strangers Rest."

"How about that?" Roy marvels. "They're broadcasting from our town."

I recognize the words. It is the narrative of a dream I experienced a couple of years back, but now converted into the anonymity of second person: "You see that they are demolishing the old brick house next to the winery, which is a converted church. This is a house you and your wife have always liked and used to hope it would go on the market so you could buy it for yourselves. Its destruction is sad. You don't know why it is being torn down because the house appeared to be in good shape. Even now, the exposed frame looks almost new. And the foundation – flagstones over which I advance once again, through the hallways, meeting rooms, colonnades... the form of this mournful mansion from an earlier time... this vast and magnificent mansion... where hallways without end follow upon hallways... mute, deserted... enveloped in baroque embellishments... mahogany veneer, Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, Carrara marble... dark glass, obscure illustrations, Romanesque columns..."

Then you see that the house is gone. It has been razed to the ground, nothing left. You realize that you have bought it anyway. You are using the site to construct a walkway, a winding paved path labeled like a game board. This walkway encompasses the old cement walks of the demolished house. The walkway will pass by the side of the old ruined church-turned-winery but it really goes nowhere; it just makes a loop. It occurs to you that what you have envisioned is a sort of park. And like a park it really should be open to the public. Free. So you must come up with a way to make money from services you provide to those who travel your Pathway.”

“Let’s see if we can get some news,” Roy says as he reaches for the tuning knob.

“Don’t touch it!” I yell, and Roy quickly puts both hands back on the wheel, sending the Caddy into a sickening weave toward the highway shoulder.

“-- the publication is similar to your existing weekly bulletin, but with a more modular design. You see on the cover that it says ‘Baptist.’ Someone explains that the newsletter was produced by two people from a Baptist church. ‘This is just a test product for us,’ they explain. ‘However, we may decide to adopt it as our own.’

“You are on the Pathway again, writing your scripts. You compose an opening line: ‘He heard the voices of angels.’ Then you have a revelation. You revise it: ‘He heard the voice of God.’ Excited, you continue writing. ‘But he knew not to talk about the voice. So he wrote of strange happenings, which he understood would be acceptable as fiction.’ You realize you finally have the movie you should make. You see that you can include some short films you have already scripted. It can all be included in a structure that deals with the theme of hearing the voice of God. You even see a lobby card, a Medieval painting of a haloed Son of the Deity framed by parted clouds. You have finally seen the truth behind your dreams. And that is what will make the difference. You have heard the voice of God. This is the revelation that will make you a successful movie director. This is your destiny.”

#

The astounding appearance of the aerial timepiece is big news at the Tarrant County Register. Executive Editor Libby Wright has called in all hands to produce a special end-of-time edition. I arrive at the Attitude Adjustment Bureau to find Guy Wint, the bureau chief, covering the biggest story of his life the same way he covers the smallest: Like a neurotic.

Guy is running from desk to desk, coffee cup in one hand and cigarette in the other, already micromanaging the various assignments he’s handed out only minutes before. He is particularly neurotic this morning because he is simultaneously directing feeds to send downtown for the special edition and stories for a special section on Wednesday. Working title: “Crossroads to the Sky.”

“All right, Mark, what you got for me?”

So I tell him about my Vision, my Incredible Revelation, about how I dreamed the clock in the sky and the radio transmission from the Deity.

“Give me three inches on the Circle L. I’ll put it in with the rest of the feed.”

“You don’t get it,” I say. “I’m telling you I saw it all in the past, in my dreams. Dreaming the Apocalypse. It is as if I have heard the voice of The Deity.”

“The Deity?”

“I know it sounds insane, but there is no denying the oddity in the sky. Or that I dreamed it, a merger of fiction and reality.”

Guy looks at me with obvious concern, and I don't blame him. I know I sound insane. But I can't stop myself. I am compelled to speak of strange happenings, of my Incredible Revelation, which comes spilling out in a tumble of uncontrollable words.

"When I awoke from the clock dream, I felt myself inundated with a feeling of nearly divine grace. It was almost as if I came from the Deity, a canary in a coal mine, first-line detector of brightness and vanity, depression as an entitlement, a civilization in which everybody is fraudulently performing instead of genuinely existing."

"Fraudulent?"

What am I saying? I should stop. This is abnormal for me. I am always one to speak rationally, to keep my nose to the grindstone and my mouth shut concerning strange happenings. I fear making a mistake, saying the wrong thing – failing to be a perfected being. Why do I persist with my story? I sound crazy, imperfect. But I cannot correct myself. I am in the grip of an Idea.

"We are a civilization that is all too battle-willing," I say, "violent, pubescent, gluttonous. We are dramatists without wit, intensity or thoughts, unspeaking in our muted blazes. And I'm the worst, the biggest dramatist of all."

"Oh no, Mark, I wouldn't call you dramatic."

"I have neglected the signs, the entire construction of images is assembled in my head. But no more. Now it's all coming out. It's into the world, an attempt to overcome the prearranged, the false experience imposed by the contemporary personality awareness that dooms us to a simulation of genuine life. What is happening in the world is nothing less than a message from the Deity, an insistence that we must escape our falseness and become the truth."

#

To Guy's credit, he doesn't cut me off or tell me I'm crazy. He waits until I'm done, then nods thoughtfully, pretending to mull it over. "Are you saying God made it happen? Or that you made it happen?"

"I don't know."

"You actually dreamed the clock, actually dreamed it up into the sky?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just dreamed what was going to happen."

"Like a prophet?"

"I've got a feeling it's tied to an alien abduction scene I experienced last night while onbeam –"

"Well there you are, Mark. You were in the Exogrid. It's just a hallucination."

"No, the clock is real. And so is the Muse Sound System."

"They could be false memories, implanted while you were onbeam."

I know he could be right. But I don't believe it.

"I have dreamed the Apocalypse," I insist. "I've been dreaming it since childhood. My vision. I remember one time in particular. I am standing with my parents on the front porch stoop of our house. I look out at our little town. The houses have been destroyed. All that remains of Duncanville are the brick chimneys, rising above the smoking ruins, monuments of blackened obelisks, fires of destruction burning red in broken hearths, the world of childhood is no more."

"Flash! You know, maybe we could sell this for P-1 as the Rapture. We should interview someone. Hey Ringo, go over to North Hills Mall, see if you can find a Christian."

Ringo shrugs. "And if there aren't any, maybe I could round up a Catholic."

Guy ignores the sarcasm. "Mark, as for seeing weird things while onbeam, yes, lots of people can relate to that. We'll catch it on the Monday follow-ups. Hey Jenny, how are you doing on that reaction from the soccer moms?"

The walls are bleeding again. Nazi paratroopers land outside the window. Tiny white eggs on the back of my hand hatch into hungry wolf spiders, which proceed to strip the flesh from my bones...

#

Do you see now why I abandoned journalism? It no longer functions.

I first recognized the absolute power of the movie metaphor in a particularly vivid dream – a drive-in movie dream.

In this vision, I arrive at a desolate - perhaps abandoned - shopping center where in recent times the owners have shown drive-in movies on the side of one of the buildings. A sort of guerrilla-style drive-in theater. But when I get there, the movies are no more. This was apparently the last drive-in theater in the world. I am sad, for this is surely the End of the Age. Then it occurs to me that I should start my own drive-in theater. I am sure I could make it work. But I realize this is not realistic for I have no start-up capital.

The 1950s drive-in image continues as two cars line up for a drag race. One is a real hot rod, a red Model A - a little deuce coupe, like one the Beach Boys might have sung about. The other racer is a black sedan, the same winged car I saw outside my grandparent's house in Fort Jesup.

So this is to be a race with death.

The two cars take off in a cloud of dust and gravel. The black car immediately abandons the race, peeling off to the right. The red coupe passes close to a parked car, loses control and flips over several times. It is a terrible accident. The car crumples up like a soft drink can and tumbles to a stop next to a building. I run to the crash scene to render assistance.

A man exits the wrecked car and runs towards me, apparently uninjured but understandably distraught.

"Is there anybody else in there?" I ask.

"My buddy!" he says, choking, almost in tears.

#

Overwhelmed by my own narcissism I slip away to the back room, a windowless alcove where we keep the coffee maker and a mini refrigerator. Guy's three-year-old daughter is sitting in the middle of the cardboard honor snack tray, grazing on dishonorably consumed bags of Fritos and Butterfingers under the less-than-watchful eye of Reece Sloan, the bureau's editorial assistant/receptionist.

"In the last five minutes, Charity's destroyed about \$10 worth of chips and candy bars," he complains. "No wonder the honor snack guy always says we've shorted him. I myself paid him \$5 out of my own pocket last week."

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Because I'm not the baby sitter. I have a degree in journalism, something Guy can never seem to remember."

I nod back toward the newsroom.

"He been like this long?"

"I found him this morning in the Bennigan's parking lot, trying to pick up a waitress. He said he was doing a story about prostitution in the suburbs."

"I thought he was on the wagon."

"Does he look like he's on the wagon? He told me yesterday he'd maxed out all of his credit cards buying coch. And Linda said one more time and she'd leave him."

"And she'll make him keep Charity, too, no doubt."

"Scary. Dan and I went over there to pick him up last week, while his car was in the shop. There was a dirty diaper in the middle of the living room floor."

I want to tell Reece about my vision, but our conversation is disrupted by an explosion in the parking lot.

We rush into the hallway and see the smoke and fire through the plate glass store front. An iron gray plume is rising from a hole in the blacktop.

Customers from the Olin Mills -- kids and moms and dads in their Sunday best -- are already gathering at the jagged lip of a smoking crater. But no reporters, a situation Guy finds untenable.

"Say, did anyone notice there is a newsworthy explosion in the parking lot?" he asks the newsroom.

"We noticed," says Chandler, a former downtown Metro reporter reassigned for attitude adjustment. "But that's breaking news."

"Does that not interest you?"

"Of course, but that's a downtown story. Front page. I just cover bureau life. Back page. For instance, I'm busy right now producing 12 to 15 inches about a man who has trained his pet parrot to take early morning joy rides on the roof of a remote control police car."

"I've just about had enough of the attitude this morning."

"Why? After all, this is the attitude adjustment bureau."

"I hate that nickname."

"And the parrot sings, too. 'Sunrise can't be sunrise, short of the Dallas Sunrise Bulletin.' It's a catchy jingle."

"Enough!"

#

We gather around the smoking crater. A red sports car wheels into the parking lot. It's Kyle Coburn, assistant managing editor for suburban bureaus. He had come all the way from downtown, presumably to make sure Guy's neurotic enthusiasm and energy actually translate into useable copy. He mills about with us, hands shoved in his pockets, peering down into the fire and brimstone.

"What's this about?" he asks.

I also look over the lip of the flaming crater. A breeze momentarily clears away the smoke, revealing an almost forgotten dream from junior high.

I launch a homemade rocket, but it is not stable. My creation falls to earth in flames, resembling a fireplace log wrapped in burning newspaper. This occurs on a hill behind my house. There should be no hill here, only a vacant field. Yet there it is. And over the top comes a platoon of soldiers, ready to take the hill. They are streaming over it, engaged in battle. Explosions! Gun fire! War! I can hardly believe it. All this initiated by the crash of my harmless homemade rocket.

#

"Looks like a bomb to me," says Chandler, who's decided to check out the scene after all.

Guy shoves up behind me, almost knocking me into the flaming pit. "Maybe it's a piece of space junk. Wow, what a story! Ringo, I want you to get over to North Hills Mall, get some reaction from the shoppers."

"I thought I was supposed to look for Christians."

"Do both. Kill two birds with one stone. And we need someone to go up to the Fast Lane. Mark?"

"You don't have a clue about what's going on here, do you?" I ask. "This is the conclusion of time. I've seen all of this before, in my dreams."

"Eh, what's that?" Kyle asks, cocking an ear toward me.

"It's what I've been trying to tell Guy. This shouldn't be real. And yet it is. Somehow my dreams are being transmitted into strange happenings, into reality. The soldiers will be here any moment. We should get inside."

"This is great," Kyle declares. He turns to Guy. "What do you think about a first-person conclusion of time feature?"

Guy nods with great enthusiasm. "We could illustrate with publicity stills from 'The Abandoned Ones,'" he suggests, "maybe the scene of the abortionists, Democrats and Catholics lining up to get 666 tattooed on their foreheads."

"I'm seeing a definite first-person piece," Kyle says. "We'll headline it 'Crazed Dreams: Phantasms of a Psychotic Son.' Mark, have you ever been treated for a mental illness?"

"What?"

"Ha ha, just kidding. But it would make it better."

"Yes, I see it," Guy says. "A whole spectral special section with creative interpretations of the clock. We'll call it 'A Clock in the Air.'"

"Yes, the title of a significant book," Kyle remarks. "In fact, Libby has already decided we'll be distributing a free copy to each member of the news staff."

"And for art we could do a picture of a man in bed with a clock in the sky outside his window."

"But we need a good hook, one filled with personal pathos. Mark, didn't you have a beautiful, talented girlfriend with a bright future who died a tragic and senseless death?"

"Not me," I say. "You have me confused with one of your downtown writers. Ty Maial. I believe he won an award for that one."

"I could have sworn that was you."

"I don't win awards."

"Don't be so defensive," Guy says. "There's no rule that says the Register can't have more than one reporter with a beautiful, dead girlfriend."

"Or maybe," Kyle adds, "you could befriend a spunky, old homeless person, then one morning find him frozen by the side of the road in the rain, his faithful dog by his side."

Before I can explain that he is still thinking of Ty (who got an award for that story, too), the soldiers begin streaming over the hill.

"It's the Sunrise Bulletin," Guy says. "Fall back to the bureau!"

#

Machine gun fire strafes the front of the strip center, showering the sidewalk in white Venetian plaster and plate glass. Guy is the first inside, huddled behind a wall of burlap sand bags that has suddenly appeared in the middle of the newsroom. He hands each of us a green Army helmet and an AK-47.

"You know, Guy," Kyle says, "I always knew someday I'd win a Pulitzer. I just didn't expect it to happen so soon."

"Don't you think this is all a little odd?" I ask. "Don't you see something missing from this picture?"

"Right you are," Kyle says. "We should design a bureau flag."

Another round of gunfire tears into the ceiling tiles, raining down white dust and broken florescent lighting. Kyle taps Guy on the arm. "You know, these special effects would make a nice photo essay in the Crossroads of Time section."

"You mean Crossroads in the Air," Guy says.

"But they're really shooting at us," I say. "With real bullets."

"Don't be frightened, this is normal," Kyle remarks. "You've never been through a newspaper war before."

"A newspaper war? We don't have any competition, at least not financial. We've got the 30 percent government subsidy."

Another round of gunfire into the ceiling tiles coats us in a fine white dust.

"Don't be naïve," Kyle says. "It's not like we're a family farm."

"Why do you all say that? It's exactly the same. The program is even administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture."

"Don't worry," Guy says, "the Sunrise Bullshit will never take this bureau."

Then he turns to me, and I realize his face had changed. His jaw had widened and a long scar stretches across his right cheek. He has become Talking G.I. Joe.

"Enemy planes, hit the dirt!" Guy commands in a scratchy, mechanical tone, a giant pull string dangling from his larynx. "They been playing hit and run with us all over the eastern front, trying to establish a beachhead in the Mid-Cities, maybe Arlington. But we're going to stop them - right here, right now. We're going to kick them in the craw."

Then he suddenly rises to his feet and removes his helmet.

"Wait, what am I doing?" he asks. "I almost forgot about the certificates of achievement."

#

His face again returned to normalcy, Guy brings us all back to his office. He has us arrange the chairs in three rows, like a classroom. He opens his desk drawer and pulled out a stack of certificates.

"What's this for, Guy?" asks Bessie, the grandmotherly writer of the police blotter. This is Bessie's first newspaper job out of journalism school, which she finished last year at age 65.

"OK, picture this. It's a Sunday, almost noon. You realize you have a math test on Tuesday for a class in which you have done no work."

"I'm terrible at math," Chandler says.

"Of course, you're all terrible at math. That's why you're newspaper reporters." That gets a good laugh.

"But it occurs to you that you still have time to cram on Sunday afternoon and ready yourself for the test. And this strategy must have worked. For the next thing you know, you are gathering in my office - I mean, your classroom - to receive your honors."

A round of applause briefly overshadows the gunfire.

This too is one of my dreams. But it is hard to focus because I know I am to be one of the first to receive this award. This is a problem because I am no longer wearing a shirt.

How did this occur? All I know is this is an exact replay of my dream.

While Guy flips through the certificates, Bessie regales the group with a sort of acceptance speech: the tale of her first police story.

"So anyway, the policeman is taking her statement and it doesn't sound right to him. He says 'uh, so what, you're just sleeping with this guy?' And she says, 'yeah, I guess,' or something. And the cop says 'well, you sleeping with any other guys?' And the girl says 'oh, only six or seven?' And he says, "well, what are you, a whore?"

We are amazed to hear the grandmotherly Bessie utter the word "whore," so amazed in fact that no one appears to notice that I am shirtless. Still, it is only a matter of time. What to do? I try to think of some way to slip out unnoticed. But why? It seems I am holding a sweaty shirt with an undershirt inside it. The outer shirt is too filthy to put on, but for some reason I decide the undershirt will be acceptable. So as Guy called out the names of the certificate winners, I hastily struggle back into the undershirt.

"And you wouldn't believe it," Bessie continues, "but the officer wrote it down just like that, as straightforward as could be. He wrote: 'I asked her if she was a whore, and the complainant called me a bastard and starting crying. Then we left the residence.' He wrote it just like that. So I wrote it just like that, I thought that's what I was supposed to do. It was an official police report. And then again, right in the middle of the newsroom, Owen said out loud 'Bessie, I thought you were such a nice lady when I hired you, but I guess I was wrong. You are a potty mouth.'"

Everyone laughs, and Bessie smiles.

"Well, I was just mortified. I couldn't imagine why he was saying such a thing to me. I said 'Owen, what are you talking about?' I couldn't imagine what he meant. Then he told me" -- she started to laugh, but stifled herself -- "he said 'This is a family paper, Bessie. We can't have all this potty talk.'"

"Owen was pretty funny," Chandler agrees.

"I hated it when they sent him to the Austin bureau," Bessie says. "I know it was a good career move for him, but I really miss him."

#

The certificate is very nice. I've got it hanging inside, over my dresser. It's real sheepskin, stamped with a 14k gold foil seal. I don't know where it came from. I don't specifically remember dreaming of being naked in a math class; however, I'm told naked dreams are rather common. My therapists and dental psychiatrists attributed the incident to unresolved childhood issues, perhaps a sense of inferiority. This is common in Dream Anxiety Disorder.

What's that? Why yes, it is a real disorder. I am a genuine neurotic. I diagnosed myself after a trip to the Strangers Rest Public Library, where I discovered my troubled self in a decrepit copy of the American Psychiatric Association's "Diagnostic and

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.” (Apparently I am not the only person in Strangers Rest who is engaging in do-it-yourself psychoanalysis.)

Features of Dream Anxiety Disorder (aka Nightmare Disorder) include:

- Frequent association with artistic ability.
- Personality patterns of distrustfulness, alienation, estrangement and over-sensitivity.
- Schizoid or borderline personality traits.

Does that not sound like me? By no means is Dream Anxiety Disorder my only mental condition, either. Turns out I have various features from eight to 10 other recognized psychiatric conditions. I don't have enough features in any one disorder to meet the criteria for a full diagnosis. But if you put them all together they add up to a whole new condition, which I call Post-Modern Prophet Disorder (aka “Leach’s Syndrome”). I will be sending the American Psychiatric Association a letter requesting that this newly identified illness be added to the next edition of the DSM.

#

#### DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR POST MODERN PROPHET DISORDER

A. Characteristic symptoms: Four (or more) of the following, each present for a significant portion of time during a 1-month period (or less if successfully treated or the world comes to an end):

- Detachment from subject’s own mental processes or body, as if an outside observer.
- Feeling like an automaton or as if in a dream.
- Restlessness, vigilance and scanning.
- Feeling keyed up, on edge.
- Exaggerated startle response.
- Difficulty concentrating or “mind going blank” because of anxiety.
- Irritability.
- Psychomotor agitation expressed in pacing or as an inability to sit still.
- Recurrent thoughts of death, often accompanied by the belief that subject or others would be better off dead.
- Themes of personal inadequacy, guilt, deserved punishment and death.
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt, which may be delusional.
- Diminished ability to think or indecisiveness.

B. Obsessional dysfunction: For a significant portion of the time since the onset of the disturbance, experiences obsessions which are recurrent and include persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses or images that are intrusive and senseless (ex: having recurring blasphemous thoughts) and subject attempts to ignore or suppress with another thought or action. These obsessions are a product of subject’s own mind and are not related to guilty thoughts in the presence of a major depression.

C. Depressive Episode: Accompanied by low energy and fatigue, low self-esteem, poor concentration and feelings of hopelessness.

D. Dream-based alien dysfunction: Dreams of being a robot or an extraterrestrial or dead. (Example, a dream by Mark Leach from the night of June 5/6, 2005: I am renting a house, which I share with a roommate. On my way to work, crossing the Hulen Street bridge. Heavy fog. I just make out cars sliding, colliding ahead. I put on the brakes, but I

can't see anything. I begin honking the horn so other cars will know I am here. Then all goes white, lost in total fog. Next I find myself inexplicably standing outside the garage of my rented house. I punch in the access code, and the automatic garage door rises. My roommate's car is here, but not mine. Inside the house, a party is under way. Some of my relatives are here. So are some friends. Someone – maybe my roommate – explains what has occurred: I am actually a carbon copy of the original Mark Leach, who was killed on the bridge in the fog. I don't feel like a copy; however, that is because I have all of the memories of the original. I am an exact copy. Then my roommate and I look outside. We realize somehow that all of the cars are gone now. A world without cars. Could this be a world of carbon copies, a world without original people? So we walk outside, look at the next door neighbor's home. They have a swimming pool, but it's in the front yard. And on the front walk next to the pool is a three-wheeled, robotic pool cleaner. This is a troubling sight, for I see the robot as part of a vast conspiracy to eliminate the original people of the world and replace them with carbon copies. I persuade my roommate to help me flip this robot onto its head. We run away, and I am laughing. Even when I see that the homeowners are watching me through the picture window, I am still laughing. But my roommate doesn't find it so funny. He tells me this is bad. We'll have to pay for the damages.)

E. Anxiety: Accompanied by irritability, brooding or obsessive rumination.

F. Persecutory delusions: Accompanied by sense of a moral transgression or some personal inadequacy.

G. Flight of ideas: Accompanied by subjective experience that thoughts are racing.

H. Distractibility: Attention is too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli.

I. Lability: Rapid shifts to anger or depression.

#

The shooting continues. Guy attempts to rally the staff, but they are busy packing themselves into the break room. Bessie is baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies in the microwave.

I quietly slip out the back door, where I find Cowboy Roy waiting in the Bevomobile, the motor running.

"Can we get out of here now?" he asks. "Those reporters are crazy. Don't they know they're being shot at? With real bullets?"

"Let's go," I say. "I'll fill you in after we're out of range."

Roy drives cautiously down the alley, the sound of gunfire echoing all around us. I hear a siren coming from the freeway, and I turn around just in time to see a fire truck fly by. Roy is about to ease the Bevomobile onto Bedford-Eules Road when Guy comes running around the front corner of the shopping center.

"Go!" I shout, but Guy is too fast. He throws himself over the trunk, sliding into a heap in the back seat.

"Follow that fire engine," he commands. "That's a story in progress."

"Chasing fire trucks is against the law," I say, but Roy is already caught up in the moment. He guns the old V-8, aiming the longhorn-ornamented hood for the freeway on-ramp. I look back in time to see the reporters streaming outside to enjoy a parking lot

garden party (apparently the inter-newspaper shooting is over). Bessie is passing around a plate of cookies.

"Ah, road trip," Guy says. "Good times. We should pick up some beer on the way out of town. Some other stuff, too. I know a guy who can help us score some Piney Woods spore and -- "

"You know, it does feel like we are on a trip to a faraway land," Roy says, "maybe Africa or South America. Reminds me of the night sea journey in my war movie, 'Shores of Tripoli.'"

"We'll have to travel across the ocean by boat," Guy says.

That assumes we even make it to the city limits. It is proving to be all Roy can manage to navigate the highway south toward downtown Fort Worth. He straddles two lanes as we approach a trailer that bears a rocket-shaped craft resembling the Blue Flame rocket car.

"I know what this is," Guy tells us. "This is a mini submarine, which Princess Diane is going to use -- or used. Isn't she dead?"

I can't remember, either.

"Anyway, I do know it was designed so she could anonymously travel the oceans," he says. "We must be heading in the right direction."

#

Here's one way the world ends: You are part of a group on a river tour, traveling in canoes. You are nearing the destination. The slow moving river flows through a stone canyon which centuries ago had been carved into a city. It is incredible, the ruins of an ancient civilization. On the right you see a set of steps lined with large pots -- perhaps waist height -- and it's all carved from the stone walls of the canyon. Your sons are with you, so you direct their attention to this incredible site. So perfect, it reminds you of the way Disney would build a set of ruins. Then on the left you see a flat area, apparently a stage. At the rear of this stage is a stand of palm trees and in the trees is a flock of red, tropical birds. There are no people yet, and you are a bit apprehensive. Will the locals be friendly?

You spot a man and see that he is coming out of a building. He is wearing a pith helmet and long khaki shorts, like a British explorer. As you approach him, you see other people and realize this is an archeological camp and the man is a scientist. You arrive with your group at the camp, and you see that the man and his wife run it. Both are archeologists. You are part of a group of three people. You are a journalist, along to document the expedition. But when it comes time for introductions, the woman who leads your group introduces you as a scientist, too. So you are a combination scientist/writer.

A group of about 10 children come rushing in, and you smile and say hi. You realize at this point that your sons and wife are still back in Strangers Rest, a half a world away. It is evening as you and the group enter the camp's main building, where you hold a one-page handout on the camp or the expedition -- you're not sure which. You find a pencil and begin to write a letter home on the back of the paper. You know there's not much to say yet, but you decide to let Allison know you arrived safely and what happened on the journey.

The next morning, you sit outside in an open-air Jeep and look at the big, azure sky. It will be a bright and sunny day. You realize it will be a hot day, too. In fact, Jack

Bryson walks up to the Jeep and tells you the temperature will probably rise 20 degrees in the course of the day.

"It reminds me of Texas," you comment.

You will need sun block and a hat. But you forgot to pack those items. And you forgot to bring any cash. You have your credit cards, but not a single dollar. A policeman approaches, outfitted in khaki shirt and shorts like you'd see on a policeman in South Africa, Australia or some other place with British colonial influences.

"No problem, sir," he assures you in an official-sounding accent. "You can purchase anything you need in the town."

You look up the road and, sure enough, there is a town. The camp is just one of many buildings. Someone from the camp drives you to the end of a row of buildings that lines one side of the street. On the return trip, you look in the storefronts, but you don't go in because you haven't resolved the money issue. You notice that one business -- a donut shop, perhaps -- has a Visa sticker on the window. Perhaps you can get money here, then buy your supplies.

You stop again at the camp, the situation still unresolved. Children are playing. You see your bag on the ground. One of the children is holding a sort of mummified snake with a small, living snake inside. The little snake is slithering around, making it appear that the boy is holding a mass of living reptiles. Then you notice a snake in your bag. It is black with tiny white spots or dots. You kick at it, trying to get it to leave. But somehow you are just filling the bag with sand, dry desert sand. You almost bury it. After you are sure the snake is gone, you reach into the sand and pull out a pad of paper. A boy shoves you from behind and laughs. You are a bit scared, still nervous and worried about the snake. But you don't want him to know this. So you tell the boy he shouldn't push you from behind.

"You'll hurt my back," you warn him.

He says he is sorry.

#

Guy and Kyle do not choose to let me tell our readership of this Vision, my Incredible Revelation. Indeed, they determine that not even my three to five inches is required.

"You should go home," Guy tells me. "Go home and get some rest."

"But you saw it," I protest. "You saw Princess Di's submarine."

"A submarine on a trailer on the highway. Interesting, but hardly proof of the conclusion of time."

"And what about the river trip?"

"Mark, we're doing you a favor," Kyle says. "We're your friends. We know what you're going through. I myself see a dental psychiatrist every Wednesday and brush with Mentine toothpaste every day."

"Me too," Guy says. "My therapist says they should just pump Fluoride9 straight into the water supply. When I don't get it, I start to receive mind messages from the Fourth Hardness."

"Me too. After a few days, my brain is just riddled with CGODMs."

"What are you two talking about?" I ask.

"CGODMs," Kyle says. "Cubical Genetic Observation and Direction Machines. They're little cubes about two millimeters in diameter."

“They are extraterrestrial-enhanced neural CPUs implanted into your brain by autonomous nanobots,” Guy adds. “They’re driven by a miniature positioning current that manages or imitates the actions inside a sentient neural network with miniature communicators that reproduce mind procedures or engendering prototypes.”

“I didn’t realize you were part of the Global Airtime Cabal, too.”

“Three years now. I’m up to Dark Echelon clearance. How about you?”

“No, I’m still new to the Society of the Purple Sunset.”

Arrg. The Society of the Purple Sunset is an annoying onbeam role-playing game, sort of a Prisons & Serpents meets Celebrity Hike. The Sunsetters, as they like to call themselves, discuss the intricacies of their little fictional universe ad nauseam, sometimes for hours. They even have conventions where they dress up like their favorite game characters. Ever since Libby started playing (she selected for herself the role of High Priestess, of course), “Doing the Sunset” has become the latest stylish pursuit among the editors at the Register.

Suddenly Kyle remembers I am still here and looks my way. “You see, Mark, the Global Airtime Cabal got it all started in 1947. That’s when they used the Corpus Christi Project to launch the first Vision-O-Sonde, a tiny pale sphere connected to a weather balloon. It is an extremely efficient converter of psychic energy into ethericom matter.”

“And the worst is FEM,” Guy adds. “Fatal Ethericom Matter, which threatens life at the 200 to 500 MHz frequencies.”

“Brain management. The scientists prefer to call it ‘disposition modification,’ but unadulterated brain management is really what these crazed ideologues are up to.”

“Did they ever put you in the brain-changing stool?”

“Oh man, it was terrible. The pre-ecstasy condition was pleasant enough, but the programming was unendurable.”

“They’ve sent a lot of poor kids down that subway. They simply burned up, and the Wise Ones watched it all on their cathode ray tubes. Imagine it: A functioning time subway of death.”

“I heard about this one guy, they put him in the stool and told him to think about Godzilla. And when the subway doors slid open out stepped this sort of psychic beast --”

“The Fiend of the Unconscious.”

“Yes. I heard everyone who was onbeam at the time went into a raging terror. The way I heard it they immediately switched off the transducer, but not before the creature ate several people and pieces of computer hardware.”

“You heard it exactly right. I saw it all.”

“You were onbeam that day?”

“It happened just after I became a Journeyman. When I came onbeam, the time whirlpool was already bolted on to the 1942 test. It created a self-sustaining ethericom tetrahedron, exactly as posited by Dr. Adolfo Morel in his famous time equations, and that’s how the monster formed. They actually had to time shift back to the mothballed U.S.S. Ethan Allen Hitchcock, which was already flooded with FEM, and switch off the main reactor. A lot of people thought they went too far on that one.”

“So, uh – you guys think you’re maybe being controlled by the Secret Government or something?” I ask. I try to sound genuine, but Kyle and Guy are not fooled. Apparently they had momentarily forgotten about me, for now they look upon me with pained expressions reeking of condescension for the non-playing nonbeliever.

“Go home,” Guy repeats. “Drink some whiskey, pop some pills. Do whatever you have to do.”

Kyle nods. “Get unconscious.”

#

Get unconscious. For me, that is not a relaxing state. Journeying through the Land of the Dead is exhausting work. Consider this dialogue between two famous movie reviewers, a bit of tainted celluloid that The Stranger unveiled for me as part of his career retrospective at the Armageddon Drive-in.

#

Charlie: Enough anal probing. Now let’s try sci-fi Roman chariot racing! Yea! Young idea. The Deity may communicate with man through ancient dreams.

Elmo: Mark Leach as the Christ? Interesting concept, but it goes bad so quickly.

Charlie: Let’s roll the clip.

#

The husband popped his head out of the dark pantry and asked of his wife “where’s the bread?”

“There is no bread,” she replied. “We have no money for bread.”

“But how can that be? Look around us. Wealth everywhere. A leather sofa here, a swimming pool there, berber carpet everywhere. What have you done with the bread?”

“You don’t make enough money to allow me to live in the style to which I deserve to become accustomed. So how can you expect me to buy bread?”

“I’ll starve if you don’t give me some bread.”

“Husbands do not live by bread alone,” she said. Then she retrieved a knife from the cupboard and motioned for her husband to place his hand on a scarred wooden cutting board.

“Are you crazy?” he asked. “It’ll hurt!”

“Crybaby.”

Shrugging, the husband relented and she cut off his right hand.

“Why, that didn’t hurt at all,” the husband said. “Like cutting your hair or finger nails.”

“That’s because you are already dead,” she explained, then handed him his severed hand on an orange Fiesta platter. “Eat this.”

“Mmmm, that’s good cadaver,” he said.

“Yes, and you should try the wine,” The wife hoisted a small glass of red covertly retrieved from the oozing stump of her husband’s wrist. “A rather disappointing rioja with delusions of mystical revelations.”

“Now you’ve gone too far,” the husband roared. “There’s no call for religious persecution. Why do you want to make me suffer?”

“Because it is only through suffering that we can find our redemption.” Then she dug out a set of kebob skewers from the back of a drawer and nailed her husband to the pantry door, bread crumbs and wine spilling from his stigmata.

Over the husband’s head, the wife tacked a recipe card upon which she’d written “King of the Losers, signed wife.” She dotted the “i” in wife with a smiley-faced heart.

#

Elmo: Yes, it comes off somehow feeling true. A touching vision, angels listening to the words, lost in warm globs of ectoplasm. The knowledge of that idea that The Deity would say –

Charlie: Well, let's think about this. A talking deity? Not necessarily funny. Such a film might not sell.

Elmo: Instead, perhaps we should consider banjos, plotting murder, enjoying sodomy. Buttered DNA delivery organs inserted into naughty places.

Charlie: Now that's funny.

Elmo: Those were the desires of Mark in his youth. We know from The Stranger's movies that he's always liked young girl toes dipped in wet sexuality.

#

The red diode flashes on the answering machine. I hit the play button; it is Jack.

"What the fuck. Ha ha. I called your work. That old biddy grandma answered. She said 'oh Mark? He went home. He wasn't feeling well.' I told her 'yeah, 'cause he's on chocolate mysticism.' Ha ha. She can suck my -- sorry, that was really inappropriate. Just kidding. I'm not really like this, you know that. You bring it out in me. You make me this way. My freshman year in college I was going to be a preacher. ORU, 900-foot Jesus. Talk about being well hung. Ha ha. Ah no, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. Look, man -- get some rest. Get yourself straight. Then call me. Tonight we let the sleek dog run."

Next, a transmission from the superego.

"Mark, this is your mother. I just wanted to see if you want to come over for dinner tonight. With Allison and the boys gone, you probably don't feel like fixing something just for yourself. You can't eat pizza every night, you know. I've laid a roast out to thaw, but your father and I can't eat it all by ourselves. You can bring your clothes over and spend the night. Or you can stay the whole time they're gone. It'll be like a slumber party. So I'll talk to you later."

The other two messages are from Allison. For my convenience, she'd left the phone number for the beach house on a pad next to the phone.

"Where've you been?" she asks. "I've been calling since last night."

"I went out with Jack," I lie.

"Figures. Did you get any sleep?"

"Not till this afternoon. I had to go into work to cover the clock story. Could you see it there?"

"Of course not. I'm here with my parents."

I want to tell her about my Incredible Revelation, about everything that had been happening. But I hear a commotion in the background, one of our sons demanding ice cream.

"I told you it's too late for that," Allison says. "Go to bed now!"

"What's happening?"

"It's my family. They keep doing all these great things for the boys, giving them everything they want. But I'm the one who has to be the bad guy. I have to make them go to bed, I'm the one who has to be the bad one after everyone spoils them."

She lays down the phone, and I hear footsteps and crying. "I told you to go to bed," she says. "I'm so sick of this. Why can't anyone help me out here?"

I wait a moment, and she returns to the phone.

"I've got to go," she says. "Call me later."

“OK, I’ll call you in the morning.”  
But she doesn’t hear me. “Go to bed!”  
The line goes dead.

#

No sign of The Deity in that apocalypse. Perhaps my trouble is that I don't pray anymore. It isn't that I don't believe in The Deity. Rather, it's just that praying to Him no longer seems relevant. Why? I have constructed a possible answer by paraphrasing Walker Percy:

The central query is not does the Death and Resurrection remain germane, but rather this – Is the sentient being experiencing a stormy reorganization of its awareness which does not currently permit it to seize understanding of the Death and Resurrection?

Pretty.

But what is the nature of this reorganization? The answer comes in the form of a voice of dire warning from the kitchen. “Don’t answer it! It’s him! Call the police!”

This is Allison’s voice. But it can’t be her; she is still in Maine. And then through the front door, I see a figure silhouetted in the oval of etched glass. I know this person. I know him all too well.

The Stranger has arrived.

Here's one way the world ends: Inside my house at night.

Allison warns of a threatening stranger who has visited recently and will return.

"We must beware," she says.

There is a knock at the door.

"Don't answer it!" she says. "It's him! Call the police!"

I go to the door, look out the window. But there is no danger. Just an old man in a thick cable knit cardigan sweater, cleaning a red potato. The man is stoop-shouldered and white-haired. I let him in.

We talk a bit, I don't remember about what. But it soon dawns on me: He is me. Did my wife know his identity? Yes, he had visited once before, but I was not home.

So this old man is the threatening stranger. Why does she fear him?

"How did you come to be in this peculiar situation?" I ask him. "How did it happen?"

Turns out there was some sort of court action and a mental/emotional breakdown. He -- "I" -- had held in his emotions too long, trying to look normal at home and at work.

But now this future version of me has lost everything. He has no wife and only a menial job. Still, I sense that people might be able to like him. At least I like him.

The man says is going to leave now. He has to get back to his job. My wife is ecstatic. But I don't want him to go.

"No, you can't leave. We were meant to be together. We are one."

The man's boss shows up, wanting him back at work in the restaurant kitchen. He wants him to fix those potatoes.

"No, we quit," I say.

The old me can't believe I just quit on his behalf.

"What can we do? To get a decent job, we need a doctorate."

I know he is just feeling a little pessimistic. So I say "OK, so we'll get a doctorate together."

Again, I tell the boss that he is quitting. He fills out a form, presumably for the old man's final paycheck. All the while he keeps one eye on us. I am very excited about this development.

"We're going to be the world's first two bodied man," I tell my other, older half.

"But what about women?" he asks. "We'll never get one."

I look at this gentle man and smile.

"Are you kidding? They're going to love us."

#

"They hate us! Hurry, let me in! They're right on my heels!"

The Stranger bolts past me, running through the den toward the kitchen, flipping off lights as he goes, plunging the house into the protective anonymity of night.

"So they can't see us," he explains.

I stand bewildered in the open doorway, looking out toward the street where he's parked his car - a red hot rod, the Beach Boy's little deuce coupe. And something else.

The street light is out, a first for our perfectly functioning neighborhood. But there is enough of a moon that I can see it, gliding slowly past like a giant bat. It is the pursuer -- the black sedan, the dreamed car of death.

"For goodness sake, shut the door," he hisses. "They have night vision scopes."

“I’ve seen that car before,” I say.

“Of course you’ve seen it before. It’s registered to Ozona International, part of their black op’s street theater troupe, the guerrilla drive-in movies. Can you please shut the door?”

#

“They’ve been blocking me for weeks,” he continues, “as I walk or drive about.”

“The street theater troupe?”

“The perps, the disinfo agents. These incidents have been increasing dramatically, several every day, either someone slipping ahead of me at the ATM or the supermarket checkout or parking in unanticipated places in parking lots.”

He fills a green glass with chilled water from a lighted recess in the refrigerator door, hand encased in an emerald glow. Very Hitchcock-esque.

“It’s not normal interactions,” he explains. “I’m talking about incidents that occur far more often than one would attribute to mere chance. Imagine it: cars speeding up to stop signs just ahead of you, then braking part way into the intersection. And meanwhile, you find other cars cooperating in the theatrical attack, blocking your progress, particularly in shopping malls. That’s their favorite place. Oh yes, they’re definitely after me.”

He goes back to the front door and cautiously stares out the oval of etched glass.

“Mind control,” he continues. “I’m one of their unwilling test subjects. It started in the 1950s with MKULTRA, the CIA’s behavior modification program. That was understandably limited in scope. But now they’re using onbeam avenues, taking it worldwide. Random individuals are secretly chosen for covert behavior, thought and perception control via onbeam avenues and other advanced technologies.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“They’re mostly unknown to the average scientist who isn’t part of the New World Order’s mind control conspiracy. These technologies can’t be repeated, prevented or even revealed using current market technologies. Onbeam systems have been infiltrated with covert backdoor access points, where the black ops agents use Fluoride9 to gain entrance to the brain’s unconscious processing centers. Those of us who are victims of this mind control have found our attempts to fight the conspiracy regularly thwarted by technology that can penetrate EM and acoustic shielding, move objects at a distance, pull legs out from under people at a distance, propel a moving car sideways, make objects disappear and reappear in a new location, apply enough force to a building that it will make snapping noises, especially at night as you are just falling asleep, make people burp or pass gas when they least expect it, usually in public places around a lot of people, cause consumer appliances to fail shortly after the expiration of the warranty and give people sunburns on cloudy days.”

“Well, the sunburn’s not so strange. That’s happened to me plenty of times. And the rest could be coincidences.”

He stares at me, a glint of brimstone in his eyes.

“This isn’t about normal events.”

“OK.”

“It’s like when you see a natural paranormal effect, but it happens in circumstances in which the effect can only be explained as possessing a deliberate signature of precise causal intent. I’ve seen full levitation, possibly utilizing anti-gravity

propulsion devices discovered on UFOs studied in Area 51. I mean, that much is real. You've seen it in the sky, the clock – the end of time. Right?"

"Right."

"But it's the onbeam mind control that's the most difficult to fight. Psychotronic manipulation, silent sound, sub-vocalized speech, direct skull transmissions, neuro-electromagnetic ruination - all variations on a theme of utilizing remote induction pain and creating artificial mental disorders. And they do it in a way that to a disinterested party it appears that the victim is imagining things. It's all part of the design to harass the experimental subject."

"But why you? Why do you think they want to experiment on you?"

"They want my dreams, of course. Our dreams. They want the Nova Effect."

"What's that?"

"It's part of a massive conspiracy by the secret government to scramble all of the text of the galaxy into a swirling chaos, which they can employ via flesh-coated Markov chains to manipulate the people of Earth as well as a couple of outlying humanoid planets. When they take the Nova Effect live they'll be able to hook us up to the viral DNA dream phone, call anytime it suits their purpose. Your time will come, young Mark. And when it does, try explaining it to people you know and see how many believe it is intentional. 'Oh, listen to that Mark go on,' they'll say. 'He has lots to say. And yet, no answers to our questions. At least no satisfying, rational answers.' It soon becomes clear to them that you don't have a clue as to why you are here. You claim no insights into the true nature of the strange happenings afoot in the waking world. Clearly, there is no point in questioning you about real world events. That's what you're thinking, right?"

"I didn't say that."

"Surely you and I could not be the two-bodied man of the Vision. No, I am merely a creation of nocturnal imagination, a visitor from the Land of the Dead."

And that's when he spots the cameraman.

"Cut!" The Stranger flips on the kitchen light and opens the back door, beckoning the man into the light.

"That camera's got a 3,000 to 1 dreamscopic zoom," The Stranger says, "and yet you still find it necessary to invade the Cinematic Reality Zone in order to get the shot. Why is that?"

A half dozen crew members slowly emerge from the shadows, trailing thick black cables, portable lights, reflective panels and microphones on the end of long aluminum poles. They gather in the kitchen as the cameraman absently fiddles with a black rubber lens hood. "Depth of field was all wrong," he explains. "He was going two dimensional again."

The Stranger nods sympathetically. "It's understandable. Cinematic technology can't be expected to always keep up with the full depth of visionary transformation."

"You're making a movie about me?" I ask.

"Not you – us! The two-bodied man. Working title: 'Strangers Rest.'" The Stranger retrieves a small radio from his pocket. He extends the antennae and puts his mouth to the speaker.

"OK everybody, it's a wrap. Nice work. Go back to the church, get some sleep. We'll meet in the sanctuary at oh six hundred for the rushes."

#

The Stranger doesn't look much like the old man in my dream.

No cardigan sweater, no red potato. He's not stoop-shouldered or white-haired, either. This Stranger has arrived in my waking world life on the red eye flight from the soulless cool terrain of Burial Chamber, Calif., looking young and hip in Spanish wraparound sunglasses and vintage '50s Hawaiian shirt with a vaguely obscene hula dancer print. He clearly hasn't been peeling potatoes or doing any other restaurant work, either. His nails are freshly manicured, quite the contrast to my own ragged cuticles and split nails. (When did I start letting myself go like this?)

His head is closely shaved, so I cannot ascertain if he is balding or going gray. Interesting, this uncertainty actually makes him look young and vibrant – younger and more vibrant than me. Even his face seems more youthful than mine, more robust and tan. It is as if I am the old man. I am The Stranger, and The Stranger is me.

"You told your editors of your incredible revelation?" he asks.

I nod. "They didn't even want a three-inch feed."

"It is because they are among the Comatose Ones. By tomorrow, the Clock in the Air will just be another weather phenomenon, entertaining but not meaningful."

"So I should just drop it?"

"Not at all. Write of strange happenings, of course. That is your destiny."

"My destiny?"

"And you must also accompany Jack on a journey. Tonight. A journey crossing the threshold into the unknown. We've got to get this show on the road."

"We'll have a great talk, I'm sure."

"Yes. But don't bother with newsprint. Using the Register, using any newspaper, to make your witness is useless. To announce the appearance of the Clock in the Air as a visual rumor of the Deity, as a prophetic call to overcome the falsity of the contemporary in a flood of visions into the waking world, as a declaration that the Deity is now primed to incarnate not just in one man but all mankind – well, that is like unveiling a new wagon wheel design at the Horse and Buggy Convention of 1910."

I attempt a lame defense of the Register. "It's a pretty good paper."

"Quality is not the issue. People simply do not believe what they read in newspapers anymore."

"I hope that's not true. It's how I make a living. It's my career."

"You need a new career, and you'll get one soon enough. You'll have no choice. Contemplate the fundamental strangeness of the aerial clock. We should not imagine the customary logical techniques of clarification will be at all sufficient. The visual rumors first come into view in outer space so that one and all shall observe them. They strike a chord, causing us to recall our individual spirit and our individual totality."

"Because people don't believe what they read in newspapers anymore?"

"Exactly. But they do believe what they see at the movies."

#

Elmo: "Next Year at Marienbad" is a visually stunning film, featuring some of the most beautiful celluloid I have ever viewed. Technically speaking, let's talk about how you achieved these results.

Stranger: My experiences are quite similar to those described by Brian De Palma in an interview he gave for his cinematic masterpiece, "Sisters." Make no mistake; I am a great fan of Alain Resnais. "Hiroshima Mon Amour" and "Last Year at Marienbad" are

among my favorite films of all time. But in many ways De Palma was my true inspiration for “Next Year at Marienbad,” especially the two-bodied protagonist concept. Believe it or not, we filmed it all in just six weeks. And we didn’t go all California, either. We used broadcast-quality personnel, a GOTWM (General Organization of Transmission Workers and Machinists) team. In no way do they resemble a Burial Chamber team, but they labor intensely and cheaply. And the Deity understands they’re sincere. As for equipment, we used a Misty CMD with Panadream lenses, a Beulah 9000 for the Super-16, and an Exogrid-slaved Arrant and two Mistys for a few of the time slips. The movie was filmed completely on site in Strangers Rest, downtown Fort Worth, North Richland Hills, North Dallas and Fort Jesup, La., except for the material on the aerial clock set. Our firing relation was very tight – the ratio was 9.2 to 1. We had very little waste because each scene was fixed and thoroughly plotted in advance.

Charlie: What did you do to get all that gorgeous lighting?

Stranger: Again, I must credit De Palma. His work in “Sisters” inspired me to create a film that is exceptionally and prudently illuminated in a truthfully traditional fashion, and it required plenty of time – which is most strange in a B-movie. But that is the reason it feels so unusual. The cinematographers occasionally required up to one hour to illuminate close-ups, which is particularly uncommon in a B-movie. However, it formulates a considerable dissimilarity to the bland waking world. And it made the primal goddesses look good.

Elmo: That is quite noteworthy. Because the archetypal B-movie typically employs recoiled lighting, gets it in place as quickly as reasonable and then progresses to the subsequent scene.

Stranger: But recoiled lighting, genuine settings and traveling quickly are for another kind of movie with another kind of importance. Another kind of element is necessary in a film like this, and it’s not necessary in something like, say “The Celestial Marketplace of Benign Ideas.” The critical element in that film was to capture the realism of the locations the characters inhabited. Like “Sisters,” the movie “Next Year at Marienbad” is an ambiance film. We expended much effort to construct a situation to generate an ambiance. We even built a distinctively customized missile silo.

Elmo: I understand you did a lot of the handheld Super-16 work yourself.

Stranger: Like De Palma, I have come to appreciate granular images – provided one can employ them correctly. They create a tremendous sense of the inner world in relation to the more literal images of 35 mm. However, one must place granular footage in the correct location so that the resulting product doesn’t resemble a tasteless exploitation flick.

Charlie: You’ve called “Next Year at Marienbad” an experiment in the understanding of your incredible revelations. What do you mean by that?

Stranger: In “Next Year at Marienbad” I was attempting to labor in an unadulterated motion picture design – accomplishing the whole thing with dramatic imagery and determining the way all the bits of celluloid would be meshed, then scripting the narrative and compelling it to actually emerge from the incredible revelations of my nocturnal visions. I am filming it exactly and assembling it exactly and realizing that it in fact succeeds exactly. Moviemaking is a wonderful art form. There is no more wonderful way to capture an inner religious vision and bring it to life in the outer world than through film. This is what I mean by the phrase “Dreaming the Apocalypse.”



QUESTIONS:

1. Do you like the story so far? Yes ( ) No ( )
2. Does Mark Leach resemble John of Patmos in Revelation? Yes ( ) No ( )
3. In the further development of the story, would you like more wrath of God ( ) or less wrath of God ( )?
4. Is there too much eruption of the unconscious in the narration? ( ) Not enough eruption of the unconscious? ( )
5. Do you feel that the exploration of new mental disorders is a viable undertaking for the novelist of today? Yes ( ) No ( )
6. Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension? Yes ( ) No ( )
- 7 What is it (25 words or less)?
8. Have you understood, in reading to this point, that The Stranger is attempting to create a movie based on “Last Year at Marienbad” in the same way that Donald Barthelme created a novel based on the story of Snow White? Yes ( ) No ( )
9. That this questionnaire is based on a list of questions in Donald Barthelme’s novel based on the story of Snow White? Yes ( ) No ( )
10. That Mark Leach is a fictionalized version of the author? Yes ( ) No ( )
11. That The Stranger is both the author and the Christ figure of the story? Yes ( ) No ( )
12. Do you believe the author thinks he is God? Yes ( ) No ( )
13. Would you like the world to end? Yes ( ) No ( ) If “yes,” when? ( )