

PART 2

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Sincerely,
Mark Leach

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Son of The Deity, you look terrible.

Get out of the blistering sun, join me here within the sheltering penumbra of my multi-hued “Sun of a Beach” umbrella. Hair a-friz, dark circled eyes, no make-up – you are the one who bears the forlorn countenance of a prisoner, not me.

Why so pallid and miserable? Not for me, I hope. I am in agreement with Camus: “I am happy – I am happy, I tell you, I won’t allow you to believe that I am not happy, I am happy unto death!”

I am happy because now you are here, where I have brought you. You are still hesitant, but you are here on this beach, on my island, within sight, touch, hearing. What’s that? No, it is not already too late. You asked me not to see you again. We did see each other, of course, the next day, or the day after or the day after that. It may have been by chance. You were waiting for nothing. You were as though dead. That’s not true. You are alive still. You are here. I see you. Do you remember? It’s not true – probably.

You’ve already forgotten everything. Forever walls, hallways, forever doors. And on the other side, yet more walls. Before reaching you, rejoining you.

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So here you are again. You have returned. Why? Perhaps you have bad news about my case, an unfortunate pre-trial ruling against me. What? Yes, you are correct. It is difficult to travel with me, a visionary neurotic, a post-modern prophet, a woebegone wayfarer stumbling through the Land of the Dead. (And of course there are the bleeding walls, the Nazi paratroopers, and the hand-eating spiders.)

My life is not easy. Do you not feel sorry for me? Then why do you still refuse the role of idealistic attorney?

Maybe it is time we re-cast you. I still have an opening for a mechanical muse, another of my lovely creations. Her job is to produce my authorized dreamography. In this concept, you would be an old high school sweetheart (a common metaphor for the archetypal muse) who has been converted into a computer program on a Martian space probe. Intimate yet alien. We communicate via secret government black ops e-mail, then I lose your signal (i.e., boy loses girl). I must find you all over again.

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Mary Hardin-Baylor, I have resumed my search for you. That old prediction of our togetherness calls to me, ordering me to send a signal back for our interpersonal good. They will condemn us, the purveyors of the “old modern” future working through the great way of the post-modern age. They wish us to finally and irrevocably expire under this our administered star-spangled banner of the brave. But it is of no

consequence. Be standard, I say. The individual is everything; the rules alone do not determine what is best for you and me. Are we really just holding social anarchy at bay? Does that sound right to you? Not me. But the flippant, stay-at-home mom is true in many ways, oft having a blank slate upon which we can re-write our past. You can do it. They also give us hope in the Stanford on Earth, adding that the new tests were good for anything you want. Someone will support you, namely sociologists in an attempt to understand the chaos of those middle years (what we societal U.S. nobodies would stop to contact Earth).

So, please, hang on a little longer. I, the Wednesday of their discontent, enter the Red Planet's atmosphere this month. Efforts to detect a weak signal that you could command were to be repeated today. Processing data is the least of your worries. Some people believe there are those among us who have come from Mars. Those individuals weren't going to say "good for you," especially while our time/place location was being programmed for a return to Christendom. But as of Jan. 4, we'd yet to detect the lander project. Everything is still go for the lander, of course. We could still be trying to contact it if only we came to ourselves in time to detect the craft and send a radio transmission, which would be blown away. I support you while others condemn you. Because it was I who picked up all that we've got. There's no common ground save for the 150-foot-diameter dish, which was expected to take us on as its friend. Getting a phone call, our old expectations are shackled to the December constructs by the warrants of everyone else. Ah, to live as needed, to rule out the possibility that our side is controlled by someone else, someone who said we are but a long shot. They live with someone here, no doubt, a personal Aeronautics and Space Administration employee who sends commands to the \$165 million array. We choose onbeam signals that were immediately detected, but the antenna team recently concluded that the dish might do right after all. They contemplate a mission between the modern and post-modern ages via the collective unconscious, now under the control of the evil Ozona cabal. Still, there is hope. People have been doing that for centuries, or days, they say. There's honor in that.

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The climax occurs on the mysterious North Face of the Mount of the Divine, where I am part of a climbing team led by Dollar Bill Buckstop, the larger-than-life Texas billionaire (and resident of Strangers Rest) who is preparing to open the first drive-in movie theater on the top of the world. I plan to use a high-tech antennae array at the construction site to re-establish the cosmic link with Mary Hardin-Baylor. But somewhere near the summit, the billionaire is murdered and the team is caught in a supernatural blizzard, compelling me to choose between saving the remaining members of the expedition and saving my one true love.

Perhaps not as inspired as the cinematic creations of *The Stranger*, but give me some time. After all, I'm still just a conventional dreamer.

At any rate, I am quite pleased to see you for I have good news to share. I have received a high-quality transmission from the Land of the Dead. Something important has happened in the firmament, and I have the authority to tell those who have not received the transmission (i.e., "you") what the transmission is: The woman on the neighboring island came to see me last night.

We did not have a meeting of the membranes in this dream. No, this was a Big Dream, a vision of The Deity. (This is so big it may be the opening scene for the movie.)

I am in a classroom with a beautiful girl. We must be dating, for she is hanging on me, hugging me while the teacher talks. The class is religious in content and seems to be oriented toward earning an award, perhaps a badge for Boy Scouts. But I make some comment that I can't meet one of the requirements, which has to do with a prohibition against ever having molested a child. The teacher says that means I can't get the award. I immediately say I was just joking. But I know this is a poor excuse for humor, almost as bad as if it were true. Why have I made such an unacceptable joke? I have sinned in my heart. I don't deserve the award.

Then I am in the final bedroom of my youth in Duncanville, looking in my closet. There is a DNA delivery organ on a hanger, the tip of the hook end inserted perhaps a quarter of an inch into the injection port. Somehow, the organ is mine and not mine, all at the same time. That is, it is both real and a visual rumor. But the organ must be mostly metaphor because I am not disturbed by the fact it is on a hanger rather than properly attached to my body. Also, I notice that the organ has become a bit misshapen from its time forgotten in the closet, so long unused. This is metaphorical, too, perhaps a visual rumor of my neglected and wounded instinctual drives. It occurs to me that I might yet be able to repair it, twist and push it back into its original shape so it looks normal again. Functionality can be restored.

Back on campus. I see now that the school I attend is a seminary, a Citadel of the Defenders of the Faith. I am standing outside the main building, thinking about the error of my ways, my sinful nature. Just then, a statue falls from the top of the building. Somehow I am making it fall. My presence is literally pulling it down from its perch. The statue crashes to the ground less than three feet from me, smashed into hundreds of pieces.

This statue was the school's venerated icon, a man in a sort of knight's helmet. A Christian soldier. But now the honored visual rumor of the seminary is no more. Hard to believe the statue lasted as long as it did for I see that it was actually not solid, but ceramic and hollow. The outside surface was weathered, but the inside remained white and clean. In this heap of broken images I notice one element remains intact: It is the front of the knight's helmet, which lies on the ground like a discarded mask.

A crowd forms. One of the faculty members berates me for this act of destruction, of heresy. I do feel guilty. After all, the statue fell because of me. But at the same time, I am also indignant.

"I am the one who should be upset," I insist. "I could have been injured or killed by this falling object. It should have been better maintained."

A second professor, a black woman, also criticizes me. I don't really get the details of her argument, but I counter that the statue is not important to Christianity.

"People are important," I say, "not statues."

I don't feel that I am particularly persuasive, and yet I must be persuasive enough for she responds positively.

"I enjoy this sort of debate," she says.

At this point I am joined by the girl from the beginning of the dream, and the three of us walk together to one of the seminary's classroom buildings. As we cross a parking lot, a semi rig is backing slowly toward us. I must move back to give it a wide berth. I step between two columns and enter an outdoor corridor, where I and the girl follow the professor into the building. It's still early morning, so the building is not yet

open to students. But we follow the professor in through a special access point for faculty only. Inside, the girl gives me a paper (an essay or research paper, I think) that I am to present to the professor.

But first, I must spit out some fatty, half-chewed meat I have in my mouth. It tastes awful; I can't even swallow it. So I walk across the room to a sort of wall-mounted ash tray, the type with a lever that causes the metal bowl to split into two halves. I see that the shiny steel is filthy, contaminated by the juice of other half-eaten bites of meat (no doubt discarded by other heretics before me). I use my finger to clean the meat out of my mouth.

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Did you know Buckstop went to seminary? I understand. It is hard to picture him as an academic. (The over-the-top cowboy personality is just an act.)

Buckstop was a true believer. But then he fell away from true belief. When the venerated icon shattered at his feet, he did not follow a kindly professor. Instead, he stepped off the interpreted path and lost himself in the dark forest, where he came to believe that extraterrestrial insects are the reason for all problems since the dawn of human creation. He thought it was critical to promote the ideas of aerial timepiece believers, ideas which have long driven the alleged “extraterrestrial kidnapping” topic into community consciousness. Why? Because Buckstop believed these kidnappings – and the alien kidnappers – were in fact demons.

He desired humankind to join together to battle the spawn of Satan in a high-tech holy war. “I’m trying to save the world” he told me in our one brief meeting on board the aerial clock, as he prepared to bring to life the world’s first privately owned and operated deity (i.e., me). His plans may have been secret, but his ideas certainly were not. He even published a religious tract, titled “The End is Here.” Here’s an excerpt:

“For many epochs now the human creature has unknowingly listened to the suggestions of the extraterrestrial insects, suggestions that have been opposed by all genuine clairvoyants and prophets. Now the Age of the Cicadians is fully upon us. If tragedy is to be evaded, we must immediately seize the moment. The hands of the clock are spinning. The signs are all visible. Financial, communal, cartographic, physical, technical – we are in a critical state of affairs. Before the conclusion of this generation, catastrophic and destructive occurrences may well rip apart the world. While the currents of pointless, illogical violence wash over the tallest peaks of the planet, shortly drowning each nation, and as the visual rumors of ethical and religious decomposition increase, who can disbelieve that some of the extraterrestrial insects have participated in the destruction? And if human beings or organizations can be manipulated, then administrations and entire states can be manipulated, too. Already American churches are profoundly penetrated. Make no mistake – the Cicadian matter is not one of mysticism, but rather of deliberate mystification. Authorities and strategies are being strengthened silently. And nothing is more authoritative or strategic than the silent inner workings of the Cicadian-controlled Keepers of the Deity. For decades their strategies have been kept at the ready, primed for delivery at exactly the correct hour. This hour is already set. They call it the Battle of Armageddon.”

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Charlie: The metaphorical and mythopoetic theology of “Next Year at Marienbad” is a far cry from the scriptural literalism insisted upon by the Keepers of the

Deity, especially the rigorous variety of literalism espoused in “The Abandoned Ones” series.

Elmo: This is one of the central reasons Mark Leach has been labeled an agent of the Antichrist.

Charlie: Why do the Keepers find his belief system so odious? Why is it so terrible to wish for the destruction of the venerated icon and step off the interpreted path and into the unexplored forest of original experience?

Elmo: To gain some insight, we had wanted to invite the authors of “The Abandoned Ones” to our show. But the logistics were impossibly complicated due to the 100-yard requirement imposed in the restraining order.

Charlie: One little Bible burning. Why can’t you church people take a joke?

Elmo: Ha ha, just kidding.

Charlie: But not to worry. We have a special guest. Claret Frankly is the author of “No Hell Too Deep,” a newly published tome that flays Leach and other 1950s B-movie sci-fi filmmakers who pursue what she calls a false Apocalyptic genre. And she specifically claims “Next Year at Marienbad” contains secret doubt-creating Satanic codes, which are designed to infiltrate the souls of weak-willed believers and dissuade them from accepting the truth of the Rapture. Welcome Claret.

Claret: Thank you.

Elmo: In your book, you say that many believers today are being blinded to the facts of the End of the World. Some even submit to this blinding willingly. Claret, what type of Worshipper of the Deity would intentionally avert their eyes from the facts of the Rapture and prefer 1950s B-movie sci-fi?

Claret: In 2 Timothy, we learn that the Worshippers of the Deity who do not bear Steadfast Decree, but instead go after their own yearnings, will gather around themselves all variety of bad sorts. Adulterers, murderers, abortionists, Democrats. These bad sorts are in league with the directors and cinematographers of a false Apocalypse. Those who do not bear Steadfast Decree will avert their eyes from the facts of the Son of the Deity and turn unto the 1950s B-movie sci-fi antichrist.

Charlie: So they’re believers, but they fall away from the true faith.

Claret: Exactly. These people are Worshippers of the Deity because they possessed the knowledge of the facts at one time. The problem is they turned away from those facts in favor of a more palatable sci-fi, which they found easier to swallow than the spiritual water of the Utterance of the Deity. The only protection against this Satan-induced doubting is to be a true, twice-created Worshipper of the Deity.

Elmo: So you’re saying that 1950s B-movie sci-fi, which is a fictional story that is intended to turn men from the facts, is actually Satan's nonfiction reward for believers who are tired of Steadfast Decree.

Claret: No, not at all. It’s definitely fiction. As in a bald-faced lie. False directors and cinematographers give the weak-willed believers what they want to see and hear. All Worshippers of the Deity must strive to distrust what they yearn to see and hear and, instead, exercise themselves unto godliness by consuming the pure spiritual water of the true Utterance. The false cinematic utterances are to be rebuffed by the Worshipper of the Deity, because they are blasphemous, or impure.

Charlie: But Mark Leach says the central image of his movie, the clock in the sky, is a sign of the Deity. So it is about God. That certainly doesn't sound blasphemous or impure to me.

Claret: The Clock in the Air is an ancient occult visual rumor. It is a sign of Satan. It is one of the Evil One's doubt-inducing codes. Same with the destruction of the venerated icon. Clearly, the shattered statue is code for the destruction the Deity, which of course is another lie espoused by the Antichrist.

Charlie: I see here on the dust jacket that you claim the false cinematic utterances are to be cast aside because they hold both light and darkness. What do you mean by that?

Claret: It's simple, really. The Deity cannot be a combination of light and darkness. The Deity is light – all light. In him there is no darkness at all.

Elmo: But Mark Leach points out that we all cast a shadow, that you can't have light without darkness.

Claret: Not the Deity. He is all light, and He magnifies the shining brilliance of his utterance even above his own name. But Mark Leach, he would have us accept as true that the Deity is satisfied with abhorrent conduct. Mr. Leach believes the Deity has judged that it is OK to consume illegal mysticism, present cash offerings to primal goddesses and expel your ectoplasm willy nilly into the membranes of your former high school sweetheart.

Charlie: In all fairness, I'm not sure that Mark is actually endorsing –

Claret: If the content of a fictional story that is directed toward Worshipers of the Deity is blasphemous and projects question marks on the unconditional facts of the Deity's Utterance, and turns men away from the facts in any way, then that is an endorsement. This fictional work of darkness must be edited away by the true, Satan-free people of the Deity.

Elmo: Isn't it true that Mark Leach has said that he is a monotheist and therefore does not believe in Satan?

Claret: Well, there you go. That's an example of what happens inside the soul when doubt-creating Satanic codes are introduced into a false, once-created Worshiper of the Deity. That's why the Son of the Deity said you must be a twice-created Worshiper of the Deity. It's the only way to become spiritually fireproof and thereby escape destruction in the Lagoon of Flames.

Charlie: Yes, back to the Petri dish.

Claret: What?

Elmo: Miss Frankly, do you believe Mark Leach will be judged by the Deity?

Claret: We'll all be judged. That is a fact made clear by the Deity. But I have received a high-quality transmission from Heaven on this very subject. Without a doubt, Mr. Leach's Armageddon Day will be most unpleasant. He is an issuer of blasphemous decrees, movies that make marketplace commodities out of the Deity's people and those yet to become the Deity's people. Mr. Leach's so-called incredible revelations disguise the right way of the Deity, and He will judge all directors and cinematographers of such false movies accordingly. As it states in Matthew 18, it would be better for such a detestable moviemaker that a heavy reel of celluloid were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the roiling surf, the inner sea.

Charlie: Beware of the riptide.

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Jack the Jaguar accelerates into the warm flesh of desire, propelling us through the passionate membrane into eager pursuit. We close in on the car of dreams from the last Saturday night of long-expired youth; the vanity plate reads ``1964 FI.’’

“Fuel injection!” he marvels.

And for me, there is the appeal of the driver of 1964 FI. Wind buffets her long blonde mane, a thin cotton blouse in dairy cow print fluttering around her curving form, a striking beauty, big-boned and farmer’s daughter fresh. A girl who loves cows. Pastoral images inform his impending fantasy: He zooms in on the gaping armhole, catches a glimpse of raw mammary tissue -- a giant pink creature slinking along on a milky pseudopod, crushing houses and cars in search of cornfed Kansas desire. Moos of sleeveless pleasure, joy glinting off polished horn and upturned mouth. A carnal scene regarded in a private corner of erotic shame.

Guiltily, I look back at the road and see another thin restoration materializing. It is an oncoming Volvo, Allison at the wheel. We have been up half the night -- a case of unconsolable Justin, silvery colic generating a condescending gleam from the emergency room nurse, the handing over of an infuriatingly useless pamphlet, the return of a three-month-old monster and the receipt for our \$80 check.

“Are you angry?” Allison asks.

“No, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Are you sure? Because you are acting like a total shithead. Can’t you just --”

No I can’t.

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Forgive me, but we must pause yet again to consider the parallels to “Let Me Love You.” At times it seems as if the elements of this great drive-in movie classic and my own life are so inextricably linked as to be one in the same.

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I recently received a letter from little Susie Happenstook, a eight-year-old larva in Miss Beechemeyer’s second grade Caringday School class at Clark Our Creator and Sustainer Church.

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Dear God,

Is there a Mrs. God?

Love,

Susie

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Good question, little Susie, glad you asked!

Back in the day, I did have a wife. We were very happy. Actually, that is not entirely true. I was happy. Mrs. God filed for divorce.

Divorce – and child support and alimony (in participating states) – is what wives used to do to men they were not happy being married anymore. Wives did this because the law prohibited them from cutting off their husbands’ packages.

What’s a package? Well my beloved creations, because you reproduce through the use of cellular mitosis and fibrous husks you do not have packages. But let me tell you, they were just about the most important part of the anatomy of 21st century male homo sapiens and absolutely essential to life.

Back in the day, when a man loved a woman very much, he would express that love by compelling the woman to assume various unlikely positions while he inserted his package into her bodily orifices. This allowed all the love inside the man to go into the woman – sometimes three or four times a night if the man had a sufficiently enormous package. Like God.

Anyway, this is what men like me called sharing. Sharing is good, right? Sharing is CARING, which is the heart of Caringism, the religion I have given you, my beloved creations.

Yes, it is better to share than not share. Sharing makes us happy. Back in the day, sometimes a man had so much love inside he wanted to share it with lots of women, squirting it inside them – especially inside his 22-year-old administrative assistant with the big boobs and the tight ass looking so fine on top of his desk in his corner office after the cleaning crew had gone home for the night. Picture me rollin’! This was sharing, too, but it turns out this particular form of sharing was not so good.

What’s that? Why thank you. I must admit I do have a way with words.

Back in the day, I was what people called a spin doctor. Companies would sometimes get a sort of illness, which typically manifested itself in the form of what was referred to by agitated members of upper management as a “Motherfucker” – that is, a newspaper reporter or television anchorperson. These Motherfuckers would report terrible, damaging things about companies. Such as “the supertanker is leaking crude oil on the baby seals” or “the nursing home caused little Kevin’s grandmother to starve to death.”

Terrible. Do you believe these lies? Of course not. I made you smarter than that.

Back in the day, though, my fellow homo sapiens were not so smart. They often believed the lies of Motherfuckers. If the lies were sufficiently bad, then it would make it difficult for the company to continue to make the amount of money to which its shareholders believed they were entitled. That’s where I came in. My job: Make the lie go away – or at least diminish its impact – so my company could continue to make the amount of money to which its shareholders believed they were entitled. Typically, I would do this by telling the true story which had been incorrectly reported. I would start by telephoning the Motherfucker and saying something like “I know you have a job to do. I used to be a reporter, too. So I’ll tell you everything you want to know.” This is what we called transparency. No secrets. It was as if to say, “listen Motherfucker, I’m going to tell you everything you want to know.” Then I would tell the Motherfucker what I wanted him to know.

Take the baby seals, for instance. I might say “we are pleased to put this minor accident behind us.” If the Motherfucker then countered my claim of a minor accident with some wild tale about thousands of seals dying on an oil-slicked beach in Alaska, I might say “these deaths have nothing to do with us, but are a natural part of God’s plan and the circle of life.” If this still didn’t work, then I might tilt my head to one side and ask “what seals?”

In fact, many times I would start with one truth and if it didn’t work out I would switch to another truth. A good spin doctor knows many truths. In the case of little Kevin’s grandmother, I might start by saying “our nursing home serves meals that are both savory and nutritious.” If the Motherfucker then televised a shot of little Kevin crying, I might say “don’t cry, little Kevin, your grandmother lives with Jesus now.”

That's spin doctoring. Really, we should call it "truth" doctoring. That's right, I was a doctor of truth. And I was very good at it. What I wasn't so good at was recognizing that spin (aka "truth") doesn't work in every situation. For instance, the truth doesn't work at all in a marriage – at least it didn't with Mrs. God.

I recall a vision recorded by my prophet in the sacred text, aptly titled "The Voice of God":

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We have recently purchased an old house, which we will restore for our new home. It appears to be from the 1930s, a rather plain example of Tudor style. The house is uphill from the road, and the narrow driveway – just one car wide – lies along the right side of the house. On the other side of the drive, just past the house, is a freestanding garage. However, there is no access to this garage from the driveway. Not much landscaping here. No shade trees, just a large planting bed encompassing most of a slope at the back of the house.

I go to a restaurant, where I am to meet my wife. I am seated and brought a drink, but still she does not show. I begin to worry perhaps she doesn't know to come. Then I run into a friend who is here for a business meal with a Motherfucker from some trade publication. The journalist is out of the room, so we are not introduced. When he returns to the table, he does not know I am a daily newspaper Motherfucker, sitting within earshot. I listen to everything, marveling that if anything newsworthy is discussed I will be able to beat this Motherfucker to print.

Then I am outside behind the restaurant, at the rear entrance. There is a set of three or four steps of open construction (no risers), revealing a sort of exposed cistern below. I slide a dead man into the water.

Am I the one who killed him? I am not sure, though it is clear that by disposing of the body I am an accessory. I watch the body sink feet first into the water, which appears to be lit from within. This water is white – as if watered down milk – but clear enough that I can see the dead man for several feet before he fades from sight. I throw gold into this cistern, too. Somehow the gold is associated with the man. It occurs to me the body will eventually float back to the surface. When the police come to investigate, though, they will not know to look in the bottom. They probably won't find the gold, which means I can later retrieve the treasure.

Then I realize the cistern is just a glass jar.

I pick it up, and through the milky water I see there are jagged pieces of glass or maybe metal in the bottom of the jar. No gold, no little corpse.

I return to my house. In the back yard I see a Suburban, and a woman is sitting at the wheel. She is waiting for me. Somehow I know she is associated with the dead man. In fact, she is supposed to be dead, too. Yet she is alive. I suspect she is really the walking dead. She is angry, here to confront me.

Did I kill her? Were we sexually involved? If so, this could be doubly bad for me. Trouble with the police and my wife.

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Mrs. God did not like this vision.

"If you ever cheat on me I'll kill you," she threatened.

Harsh. Did she not understand the metaphors of the old house and the dead man and the gold? Truthfully, I'm the guy with the gold. Isn't that obvious? I wonder: Did we even read the same book?

Ah, the life of the misunderstood God.

Here's the truth: I did not insert my package into other women while I was married to that woman – Mrs. God. Other husbands, other men did this. But not me.

Just them, not me.

Well, perhaps occasionally me, such as the time I shared my love on the desk with the 22-year administrative assistant with the big boobs and the tight ass.

One time. One time! OK, maybe several.

Anyway, that's why back in the day Mrs. God wanted to cut off my package. Let the record show I don't do that sort of sharing anymore. Not that it matters.

Mrs. God has gone to live with Jesus now.

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See what I mean? Am I not Clark Caring? Do you not see the undeniable similarities? Can you not understand why this is my favorite movie? You do? Good. At last. Now let us continue.

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Back in the evening traffic, something sighted ahead. More memory reflected in the safety glass? No, it is the girl again, connecting with me via a knowing glance captured in the side view mirror. (Sometimes objects are closer than they appear.)

Embarrassed, I quickly turn away, losing myself in high-gloss paint, resigned to a quiet fantasy pinstriped in red, red lipstick.

“She's doing 90!” Jack says, clearly impressed. We pull up alongside the blonde and Jack motions for me to roll down his window.

“Is that thing working?” he asks, pointing to the radar detector suction cupped to her windshield.

“It better be!” she shouts back.

“Great car.”

“Thanks.”

“Where are you going?”

The girl rolls her eyes, but smiles to let us know she isn't offended. I blink in disbelief: Is that really her, thoughtfully chewing her cud? No, the pink thought bubble reveals the truth, but it does not matter. I live the fantasy, touching her fine, pink udder, teats as big as a thumb – whoa! – this beautiful creature burning in my lust. Then she is gone, zipping past a lumbering semi, its big diesel whine insisting on an unabridged gulf between us. Jack does not try to follow.

“What's a girl like her doing with a great old Stingray like that?” he asks. “She must have had a brother or boyfriend pick it out for her. She probably wanted it because she thought it was cute.”

“I saw a big diamond on her left hand.”

“But I bet she wants it,” Mack says. The remark is more casual than prophetic, though. He is already gone, shifting the smooth British gears, rods and pistons doing the old in-out through the clean yellow oil, moving the bulbous steel down the road, beyond the blonde and the car and on into the lights ahead, a bare night sojourn for a frantic, futile trip.

We approach a line of freeway-fronting auto dealers, the nearest one sweeping the sky with a giant searchlight, its mirrored white flame illuminating a cow-shaped cloud grazing over Texas Stadium.

“I just get so revved up when I drive into the lights of the city,” Jack says. “It always makes me feel like something wonderful is about to happen.”

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Plato’s Palace is a little purgatory for the primal goddess, a stopping-off point between East Texas trailer park poverty and the upscale flesh temples where the well-tipped priestess can enhance Mother Nature’s bequest with surgical implants. And for those with even more ambitious imaginations, a springboard to Hollywood. Porno anyway.

So it’s no surprise that perhaps a half dozen goddesses are crowding around The Stranger and his crew, who are here to shoot Jack and me on our big night on the town. Patrons, waitresses and bouncers are also close at hand – observing, arms crossed, standing on chairs, peeking around the bar, idling in the doorway. But the goddesses are front and center, ogling the accoutrements of moviemaking: heavy cables, blue-white lights, boom microphones, digital videocameras. And of course The Stranger, director of the epic film. The girls brush fingertips across the hair on his forearms, throw their heads back in fake laughter, whisper into his ears, finger the little palm-sized viewfinder dangling from the lanyard around his neck.

“All right then,” he says. “Mark, this is the scene where you cross the first threshold and enter the Special World.”

“What is he talking about?” Jack asks. But The Stranger does not hear him.

“You prepare to cross the threshold,” he continues, “a sojourner into an odd border land, an earth sandwiched between earths, a region of passage that may be deserted and forlorn, or in locations similar to this, full of days. You detect the nearness of other creatures, other powers with pointed barbs or talons, protecting the path to the jewels for which you search. But you have no time to withdraw. Every one of us senses it. The journey is under way, for better or worse.”

One of the bouncers, a meaty guy with a giant wedge of muscle for a back and a tree trunk for a neck, shakes his head.

“Sorry, the boss says no filming tonight.”

The Stranger in turn shakes his head with great condescension. “I have a contract.”

“Get real, it’s a Saturday night,” another bouncer remarks. “It’s our biggest eight hours of the week. The boss isn’t going to let you get in the way of that.”

The Stranger considers this. He nods. “We’ll proceed with that,” he says offhandedly, almost rudely, without looking at the bouncers. “We’ll do this scene later, on a soundstage in Las Colinas. It’ll look more real anyway. And just so you’ll know, Plato’s Palace is out. We’ll call it Caligula’s 21 DNA Delivery Organs.”

#

After The Stranger and crew leave, Jack and I take our usual table in the back under a stylized mural of a chiseled, marble-jawed man outfitted in gold-flaked toga and laurel leaves, these baroque ornaments, this Venetian plaster hand, holding grapes behind it, foliage, as though from a garden awaiting us beyond these walls 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 distant and remote from this numb, barren décor, far from this elaborate Roman frieze beneath the cornice, with its branches and garlands like dead leaves.

“That’s the only thing Roman about this place, isn’t it?” I say. “Why is there never any orgy action?”

“Used to be a quite a few here,” Jack assures me.

“I want sit around in a toga while they feed me grapes.”

“They used to do that, too. But there’s still plenty of fun. You just have to work at it.” Then Jack leaned in conspiratorially and whispered. “That one did me under the table last week.”

It is a familiar story, sending a wave of voyeuristic disgust washing over me.

“How do you get women to do these things to you? Do you hypnotize them, leave big offerings or something?”

Jack laughs and takes a big swallow of his drink, a greenish sacrament called a California Kamikaze.

“Nothing like that, she did it for free. Her name’s Sally. She’s real nice. She’s just an acolyte, she doesn’t do rites. I was in a few weeks ago and I kept ordering drinks from her and we started talking. Last week I came in again and made her drink a few, too. She starts pretending like she’s going to give me a prophesy. It was real funny. I was laughing my head off. Then she kneels down right in front of me” he indicates a point between his spread knees “and I’m still laughing. Then she grabs my crotch and zips down my pants.”

I shake my head and tip back my drink -- tart with a slight taint of decay -- as he finishes the story. “I tried to pace myself, but she was like a race car. I was spent in about a minute.”

“How could you do it with all these people around?”

“Nobody could see anything. She was under the table. I just sat there, watching the goddesses and enjoying my drink.”

“No, I mean how could you maintain?”

“Maintain?” Jack just shrugs his shoulders and smiles. He had once proposed that we jointly write a book -- I’d write, he’d research -- about the actual business of primal worship. He asked if we could get some serious money for research (i.e., drinks and offering), but was disappointed to learn that a publisher’s advance was unlikely.

Then Jack snaps his fingers. “How about we get The Stranger to turn this movie into a documentary, a story about the primal goddess industry.”

“I don’t think he’s going to go for that. He’s pretty set on doing a movie about the End of the World.”

“Well goddamn, he’s useless.”

I burst out laughing at the uncharacteristic curse, which eggs Jack on.

“I mean, I loan you my onbeam gear, and what do you do with it? If it were me, I’d have gone straight for Porno Lane. Dream a date with Catherine Zeta-Jones in spandex. But not you. No, you go onbeam and dream up Cecil B. DeMille. And how did you get him out of the virtual canvass, here into real life?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“Damn, you should have been dreaming Catherine Zeta-Jones. You missed out.”

#

Jack downs the rest of his drink and motions to the bartender for two more “And I’m bringing back something extra special for you,” he says.

“What?”

“Nothing to worry about. Just a little well-deserved fun.”

“I don’t know. I think I just want to watch tonight.”

“That’s all you ever do anymore,” he says through his laughter. “Trust me, you’re going to like this. She’s special.”

“Oh yeah? What makes her special?”

“I don’t know, she’s just is.”

“OK.”

“Journalists. I don’t know. She just – she tells you your secret thoughts.”

“They all do that.”

“Look, just finish your drink. I’ll be right back.”

I watch Jack talk to the bartender, rescinding his order and calling up a customized version of the green sacrament. He points to various bottles of unlikely combinations, occasionally using his thumb and forefinger to indicate proportions. The bartender appears to be having a good time. Jack certainly is. The scene reminds me of another night of drinking a few lifetimes ago.

It was our senior year in high school, one cold, star crazed February night on a manicured berm at The Green, a subdivision where Jack’s father had been building.

Fortified with a gallon jug of burgundy wine, we broke out the guitars and puffed warm breath into numb fingers for duets of “Rocky Raccoon” and “Tom Dooley,” the only two songs to which we both knew all the chords. In between performances, we laid out the plans for our lives. Marriage, children. We’d never let divorce mar our movie-perfect lives. We were good Christian boys. And if we could manage it, we’d even be next door neighbors, living in the houses that Jack would build. (Even then, he knew he wanted to be a home builder like his dad.) We had big plans for our movie of life. The script did not include drinking green sacraments with primal goddesses. I am overwhelmed by egregious moral failure. Condemned.

#

#

How is it with me, you ask? How is it with this, my sense of decay and death?

Picture yourself as me: You are watching a movie from within a movie. You are there, but apparently only as an observer. You play no role nor do you interact with anyone.

The scene is inside a huge building with a very high ceiling which rises many stories. You are in some strange Muslim society. But the women do not wear veils or appear in any way to be second class citizens. In fact, they appear to be in charge of the proceedings. You understand that the women, although subservient to Muslim men, are in control of some very specific but critical aspects of society. Women are in charge of this place, a sort of courtroom where a trial is under way. A man has been brought before the court. He is accused of committing some sin or insult against a woman. You sense that it is more of a cultural misstep than anything most Americans would think of as a crime. There are only three people: The defendant, the plaintiff and the judge. The plaintiff and the judge are both women.

The judge talks about this crime or sin, reciting what you understand is the official wording of such a proceeding. If the defendant man is judged guilty, then the punishment will be death. You do not hear the actual charge (or anything else that is said). When the time comes for the man to speak, he tells the plaintiff he is terribly sorry.

“Will you forgive me?” he asks.

“No.”

His fate is sealed. He must die.

The condemned man is suspended from a sort of cable and hoisted high in the air. You assume he will be killed in the air or perhaps dropped to his death; you do not know the mode of execution. But after the man is raised, he is then partly lowered. And raised yet again. You sense that part of his punishment is to prolong death, a sort of psychological torture. In other words, his fate is “left hanging.”

This is more than the man can take. He leaps from the cable to a catwalk. Suddenly you find yourself on this catwalk, too. You now realize that the floor plan of the room is a giant circle, and various levels of catwalks ring the wall. The man tries to hide here, for now there are uniformed male guards or bailiffs hurrying about. They are carrying guns and wearing what look like football helmets. These men are in charge of enforcing the actions of the woman-controlled court.

There is a fire or explosion in front of the man, and everything is cloaked in smoke and shadow. Then the air clears, and you see that the man now has a blackened face. Because of flying shrapnel from the explosion, he also has two bolts sticking out of his forehead. They look like devil horns. And you see something like long, pointy catfish whiskers on his head, swept back in place of what was his hair.

You know as you view this that it is intentional cinematic visual rumorism; the viewer is to understand that the man, by rejecting his justly imposed punishment, has been transformed into a personification of evil (i.e., Satan). This is the shadow made flesh.

The man speaks to someone, perhaps you.

“Tell my children that I am dead,” he says.

The moviegoer understands this is a visual rumor, too. The man-turned-demon now understands that the person he was before is no more; he has been recreated by the

fiery explosion. The helmeted men hunt this devil in order to kill him, to carry out the judgment of the court.

Then you realize the movie is actually your movie. Your story. The demon is really you.

#

I don't like the idea of demons, of Satan. I much prefer the theology of "Let Me Love You." I know, I know – it's just 1950s B-movie sci-fi. But let me tell you, Ward Timber was not just some schlock director. He had a Message.

#

Don't you ever get tired of hurting me?

Yes, I know what you say about me, my beloved creations. I am a bad god, a minor deity with a lowercase "g". I am all badness and darkness. Not at all like that other God, the one with the uppercase "G". He is a good God. He is all goodness and light. That's what you say. You thought I didn't know.

Jehovah had it all figured out. Back in the day, during the Babylonian exile, He allowed His chosen people to develop a dualistic theology. Can you believe it? Two gods. He was the good one, the creator and sustainer. Satan was the bad one, the destroyer.

Even in my time, when most believers claimed to be monotheists, Satan was an essential part of the equation. Even those who didn't believe in a literal prince of darkness found Satan to be a convenient metaphor for the evil in the world.

Some of you say "God is the answer." Maybe so. But how can God be the answer when He is the question? Let us consult the sacred text:

#

And the journey through prohibited places continues.

My wife and I are in a strange place, an alien society. We are fleeing from unseen people in a seemingly abandoned structure, maybe a stadium. The design is somewhat reminiscent of the UFO house, but on a much larger and grander scale.

We spot a place almost out of sight, near the base, where you can see the underlying construction. My wife comments that we can see the steel support beams. As we look for a hiding place, we find a marble alcove reminiscent of ancient Roman architecture. It is perhaps the size of a bedroom. This alcove is out of sight, but I immediately realize that if we are found here there will be no escape. We will be trapped. So we go in search of a more secure place of safety. In search of –

Forever, a past of Carrara marble...like a garden carved in stone...a mansion, its rooms deserted now... still, mute, perhaps long-dead people...still guarding the web of hallways...along with I advance to meet you...between hedgerows of faces, masklike...watchful, indifferent...towards you as you still hesitate, perhaps...gazing at the entrance to a garden.

Or perhaps an island.

And then that we realize there are people everywhere, hurrying about in search of their own hiding places. It is growing dark, suggesting to me that the time to get out of sight is almost here. I realize that we are not well suited for this. I am wearing only white boxers and my wife is in little more than shorts and a top. Where to go? I see a young black man, very dark. He is shirtless. I instantly fear him – and all of the obviously desperate people around us. This man will rape my wife, or someone else will. Where to go?

I see a flight of steps leading to a lower level. The black man waves his hand, showing us the way down the steps. Like an usher.

"I will take you to a place of safety," he says.

I do not trust him, so I grab my wife's hand and we bolt through a doorway to the outside.

We find ourselves standing under a loggia, looking out on a plaza that reminds me of the main square in New Orleans' French Quarter. Many people are relaxing in small groups. All of them are young and beautiful, the elite of this society. They are obviously of a higher social cast than the underground people who are scrambling for shelter before nightfall.

They are dressed for leisure, though in a way I have never seen. On bared stomachs, each person displays a large, painted eye. It is the Eye of Horus, the ancient Egyptian symbol used to ward off sickness and bring the dead back to life. The latter must be the case here, for the eye was also used as an amulet over the embalmer's incision. That's how you made a suitable mummy.

The Eye of Horus is a particularly fitting image for this point in the journey, for it was only the day before – in the waking world – that I was reading the Old Testament story of Joseph's dream and his resulting enslavement in Egypt. This was his destiny.

These Third Eye people look us over, instantly judging us to be the inferior, underground people. We do not belong; they fear us. Not waiting for them to act on this judgment, we run toward the street at the end of the loggia. This creates some excitement. I kick someone in their abdominal eye, and my wife – now inexplicably holding a baby in her arms – breaks into a run. Another of the Third Eye people produces a large plastic lens (square, perhaps 15 to 20 inches per side) and places it in front of my stomach. Apparently, this action is intended to draw attention to the fact that my abdomen does not possess the required cyclopean makeup. I am blind.

I try to follow my wife, but the path is barred by a man. He is a sort of henchman for the man in charge, who I somehow know. I try to fight him. Someone hands me the blade of a plastic toy sword, and the man in charge laughs. Someone else hands me the handle, and I hastily assemble the two pieces. Even though it is a toy, I realize that it is a real sword. It can injure, even kill.

With this weapon, I lunge at the man in charge. But I miss, and he disarms me. He thrusts the sword deep into my pelvis. As he withdraws the weapon, there is a thought in my head (or maybe the man is speaking it) that the sword is stuck inside me. This is the wound of the Fisher King.

If he pulls hard enough, then I will be lifted off the ground. For some reason I decide it is best to fake this. I lift my buttocks a few inches off the ground. Even so, the pain is real. But I understand that I will recover from this wound. I will heal and live to fight again.

#

This is the sacred text that preceded my trip to Hell via the 1950s B-movie Flying Saucer House, a Romanesque marble-clad aerial clock.

I arrive on a beautiful spring morning. No Third Eye people, no plastic swords. Picture the Texas Hill Country. Red granite outcroppings, bluebonnets, live oaks – and goats. Tens of thousands of goats – maybe millions – as far as the eye can see. Millions of

goats grazing on little bluestem. Some are adorned with brightly colored ribbons, which are being removed by a kindly man in a soft plaid shirt and tidy beard.

"These are the scapegoats," he explains as he carefully unknots a green and pink ribbon from one of his charges. "These ribbons – these are all the sins of the world. When the goats first come to me, they are weak and battered from their long journey through the wilderness. I untie the ribbons and nurse them back to health."

The goat tender shows us the black and gray remnants of a long-extinguished trash fire.

"This is where I disposed of the ribbons. Before God was arrested, I kept the fire burning 24-7. There was no end to the sins."

"You burned them all?" I ask.

"All but one." He reaches into his shirt pocket and produces a ragged strip of purple cloth. "This one is special, at least to me."

"Why?"

"I'll give you a hint: Get behind me, Satan!"

"Jesus?"

"Exactly. Know who he said that to?"

"Judas?"

"No. Peter. But he also called Peter his rock."

"Something to think about, I suppose."

"People are so eager to blame their sins on me. It's a heavy burden."

"There are a lot of goats."

"I do what I can. You know, I rebel one time – ONE TIME! – and I'm cast out of Heaven forever. That I can live with. But to be blamed for every bad thing that everyone ever does? Everyone wants forgiveness for themselves. But no, not for me. Am I so bad, comparatively speaking?"

"Well, you are the Price of Darkness."

"How about the Job wager? That wasn't my darkness. God agreed to that one on his own. Does that sound so nice? Is that all goodness and light? No, I don't think so. How about a little sympathy, eh?"

#

Jack returns to the table with two more drinks – and two friends.

One is his girlfriend Courtney (altar name ``Corvette''), and the other I've never seen before. She resembles most of the Plato's Palace goddesses, big hair and small, gravity-defying breasts that seem to support her halter top rather than the other way around. She has dark brown skin, but blonde hair and stereotypical Caucasian facial features. Really, she looks white, but with a shadow across her face, an inner world complexion suggestive of mystery and danger.

She is made up in heavy mascara and glittery lipstick, like a little girl trying to look grown up. In fact, I assume she is a teenager; most of the priestesses look like they really should be in high school. TABC inspectors are often alluded to, but they seem to be no great hindrance to primal worship. Other than her shadow looks, she doesn't seem special at all.

The girl juts out a boyish hip and looks me up and down, lips parted and sparkling.

"So you're the famous Mark Leach."

“Famous?”

Jack leans into my ear. “I told her all about you,” he confides.

Her name is Cinnamon, and she considers herself to be the trendsetter at Plato’s Palace. Famous, in fact. She claims to be the originator of the “altar slap,” a favorite move of Plato’s Palace goddesses. She even provides a quick demonstration, which I find both useful and agreeable.

“Where’d you learn that?” I ask, trying to be polite. I’ve never had any idea what to say to a primal goddess. They are like forces of nature. I’d be just as effective speaking to the tide.

“I invented it.”

“What a coincidence. My grandfather was an inventor.”

“And what did he invent?”

“He came up with a process for color photography, back in the ‘40s.”

Cinnamon appears suitably impressed. “Is he rich?”

“No, he was afraid somebody would steal his idea. So he kept it to himself. Died virtually penniless.”

Cinnamon sucks on a chipped red fingernail, her interest obviously waning. I’ve never had any idea how to hold the attention of a primal goddess. What to say, what to say... and then I know.

“You were waiting for me.”

“What?” she asks. “Why should I wait for you?”

“I have myself waited a long time for you.”

“In your dreams.”

“And you are trying to escape once more.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand a thing you say.”

“Oh.”

“Did he take pictures, too?”

“Who?”

“Your grandfather.”

“Oh. Yes. He was a portrait photographer.”

Cinnamon smiles a premeditated, bad-girl smile and sits beside me, a sweaty, thin thigh pressed hard against my hand. She leans in close, exhaling a hot, perfumed breath, unreal, luxuriating in the goddess role she plays -- perhaps at Jack’s request, perhaps simply because she likes it. I have no illusions that it is because she likes me.

“You think he’d like to take a picture of me?”

“Well.”

“I bet you would,” she says. “Do you want to know my real name?”

“Yes.”

Again she smiles, then stands up and sheds her insect-print halter top.

Her torso is actually a bit more impressive than I’d imagined upon my first cursory look, a misjudgment I attribute to lack of practice looking at women’s torsos. It had been years since I’ve had a good, daylight look at Allison’s, a statuesque, model’s body made of translucent flesh so delicate and pale you could see right through to her purple veins. Ah yes, Allison is quite stunning -- and impossibly distant. She is no primal goddess.

But I do not think of Allison for long. Because Cinnamon is not performing a rite intended to exhibit her classical attributes. You can't even call it a rite, really. She doesn't move to the music, or at least not any music that is playing in the outer world. Yet there is an unmistakable rhythm to it, an insistent beat. She locks eyes with me and won't look away, won't let me look away. She doesn't touch me, but I detect the heat of her body, hear her short, quick breath, feel the beating of tattered moth wings, smell her floral sweat. I seek the scent of gardenias, but it's soon lost in the jagged protein stench of raw, undifferentiated tissue, reaching deep into flattened empty lungs, floating through memories of meaningless solo DNA delivery performances, climbing aboard a train ripping on all the way through the misty, neon-illuminated summer darkness, gazing into a countenance of distant deified granite, grabbing at paralyzed recollections of hopeless adolescence and the depreciated schematics of youthful desire.

Floating, gazing, grabbing – grabbing her, grabbing and pulling her into sacred proximity to my membranes. I have scripted a muse. But I cannot claim her. In fact, I cannot even move. My arms are lead pipes, blood drains from my head to the nether regions, engorged tissues straining against double-stitched seams. My eyelids flutter; I see the whole extent of the heavens. Ah, Cinnamon.

The music stops. Lost in a storm of hoots and cheers for the priestess on the central altar, my personal rite is over. But no – Cinnamon has one more trick: She drops down on her knees, the top of her head bumping my abdomen. As she rises to her feet, I look down and see glittery lipstick on my fly.

“You can close your mouth now,” Cinnamon says. She reaches for her top, her discarded cicada skin, then thinks better of it.

“Hang onto that,” she instructs me. “I’ll be back for it later.”

She never told me her name, though I learned later she was named after a famous starlet from the early days of movies: Louise Brooks.

#

I film her on the tiled restroom floor, covered in black lace and gametes. The cameramen and grips watched blankly. Unmoved. But I am caught up in the scene, trying to forget my horror over the mechanics of the triple-letter genre, gamely asking the proper questions of motivation for my lovely, doomed creation: What is this timely, terrible thing Cinnamon must do that is apparently the same as that for which she revealed such disgust -- an emotion represented by a filth-encrusted toothbrush flushed down a swirling toilet bowl -- in her parenthetical notions expressed in Scene Number 34? Ah yes. Foreshadowing.

The story board shows she is to walk back to the good "oh boy" Jack room, where he gets to enjoy the point. They set up the lighting, then it's time for "action." It is good that so much of her is hidden by the togas, which is their idea of subtlety and meets with my literary pretensions to legitimacy. I cannot stand to watch otherwise. See her, looking so well done, a meal that might have been for me, the screenwriter, her creator -- a lucky guy who would fall into his cranial/genital fantasies even while analyzing pertinent ways to ensure that no tragedy is stockpiled, that every hidden notion is exposed for the story's own good.

Cinnamon. She knows my secret thoughts. She may even be my muse. But not for long. She is not for me. She is the film toy, not my own true love.

But still I worry. Scary plot points cushion the angry love with sweetened violence, a special effect done with real pins and fake smoke and mirrors so we can make it look like she is being stabbed while serving her soft mouth to the tour bus, eventually swept away in a river of teeth, a raging current of broken incisors, saliva, blood and other bodily emissions. Very symbolic. Then I watch the result.

Titled "Wildly Roman," this leering, all-for-the-better world wrapped in kinky cinematography and grape leaves supplies for viewers a passionate, violent love lunch where sensual busloads of soldiers who divine her forbidden hair roll through the sound stage and plumbing, unforgettably terrifying as they destroy the purity of my own sweet creation. Don't I feel good now?

#

#

Did you enjoy that last reel? I think it's some of my best work.

The table rite was a real event in the waking world. I think it was real, anyway. Her name wasn't Cinnamon, though. I don't recall what she was called on the altar or in real life. I do remember one of the dancers said she was a lesbian. So I guess the "Lesbian Rest Stop" title does sort of work. My little lesbian muse, ready for celluloid.

Or maybe I've got it all wrong. Perhaps Cinnamon is really you. I have put you on the altar, the object of my fantasies. That sort of thing happens a lot with me.

And speaking of muses, a belated apology. I don't know why I left you at home that night back in high school, when Jack and I shared a jug of wine and our dreams. In my youth, it never occurred to me that I couldn't have it all, that I couldn't have a girlfriend when I wanted her and a best buddy when I wanted him. I thought I could have it all, effortlessly.

#

Jack and Corvette are talking earnestly by the bar. He is still working on his green potion, but she is guzzling \$3-a-shot Ozona Anejo, a stylish brand of bottled water derived from unpolluted rainwater aged in vats of virgin oak. In this creatively over-stimulated economy, the only people who can still afford such luxuries are primal goddesses and onbeam dream hackers. Certainly not home builders or second-rate journalists.

A few minutes later, Jack returns to the table, a scowl on his face.

"Cinnamon wanted to know if she was going to get paid for that rite she gave you," he says. "Over the past month, I've given her offerings of a few hundred dollars myself. You'd think that would count for something. Sometimes it's like money is the only thing they care about."

#

A few rites before last call, and I am ready to call it a night. But not Jack. Fully engaged and in his element, strolling from table to table, patting the backs of men hunkered over drinks and cigarettes, occasionally throwing his head back in mock laughter. He is Rick in Casablanca, perhaps the most energetic -- and certainly the most entertaining -- person left in the place. Because Plato's Palace has pretty well emptied out.

The cavernous shrine is inhabited by only a dozen or so pilgrims, and none of them appears to be particularly interested in the ceremony. One man has even propped his head on his hand, eyes closing in on sleep. (Director's note: OK, I admit it; that man was me. But hey -- I really was tired that night!) Even the goddesses look bored. One woman leans on the bar, counting the offering. Definitely a slow night. Only the DJ is keeping up the theological illusion.

"We've still got a few more minutes before last call, so you better get it while the getting is good," he advises. His enthusiastic prattle is no surprise. Jack had once explained that a DJ gig in a flesh temple is a relatively lucrative plum, requiring years of work at weddings and proms to earn the needed reputation. Now this one is reaping the rewards. "And speaking of getting it, get your dollar bills ready and sidle up to the main altar. It's time for the Cinnamon girl!"

And, sure enough, there she is -- Cinnamon, renowned inventor of the "altar slap." Dressed in a short black jacket, belt cinched tight around her waist, she spins

herself fast and sure across the altar (to the music of ``The Cinnamon Girl,’’ of course). I am lost in the swirl of flashing lights and big hair and young, exoskeletal flesh.

Jack nudges my arm. ``She’s pretty good, isn’t she?’’

“She reminds me of LeAnn.”

“What?”

``I didn’t notice it before, but she’s actually not too bad.’’

``Look at the way she spins. She was probably on the drill team in high school.’’

Midway through the song, Cinnamon steps to the rear of the altar and slips off her jacket. I’ve found it somewhat disappointing that none of the priestesses work a genuine prophesy into their rites. I grew up seeing that alluded to in movies, but the reality is very different. ``Men don’t tip to be teased,” Jack explained after my first visit. “They tip to see tits.’’

Cinnamon is meeting those expectations -- and, apparently, some of her own. She spends a lot of time stealing glances at herself in the wall of mirrors at the back of the altar. Through the tinted spotlights and smoke and pulsating music, she seems bigger, more real. Up there in the lights, on the main altar, I can see why so many goddesses think they are stars.

Despite the DJ’s suggestion, no one has ``sidled up’’ to the foot lights, a situation Jack finds untenable. ``We should tip her. They liked to be tipped when they’re in front of everyone, makes them seem more popular.’’

After Cinnamon completes the acrobatic pole work part of her rite, we applaud approvingly and take positions to the right of the altar. We each slip several \$1 bills into her offering plate. And yet, she does not seem appreciative of the gesture. Her eyes seldom stray from the money, and there is none of the sensuality of the table rite. With only a few minutes left on the clock, she is down to grinding through the motions.

When the song ends, we clap and hoot, but she doesn’t hang around for the applause. She simply pulls her tips from the offering plate, picks up her costume and disappears into the vestry. The movie is over, the magic is gone.

“That was kinda rude,” Jack complains. “They’re supposed to come down and do table rites.’’

But the time for worship is over. The overhead lights suddenly click on and the DJ plays Aerosmith’s version of ``Happy Trails,’’ a Plato’s Palace end-of-the-evening tradition that Jack abhors. ``They should play something good, like ‘To the End.’ Or nothing. I’d rather them play nothing at all than that. It really ends the night on a sour note.’’

Not too sour, of course. Corvette motions to Jack to join her at the bar. A minute later, he is herding me toward the door.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” he says. “Corvette just heard about a party. I think we’re going to score.’’

#

We do not score.

Corvette’s party turns out to be another illusion. After a brief period of negotiation, she and a couple of her priestess friends go off in search of a new opportunity. The plan is to meet back at the Plato’s Place parking lot in one hour. Jack waits patiently for about three minutes. Then the mathematics of desire set in.

“The other night, Corvette’s roommate was telling me about doing chocolate mysticism,” Jack says. “I think we need to get some.”

“Is that like regular mysticism, but with chocolate?”

“Or like regular chocolate but with mysticism mixed in.”

“I hope it’s milk chocolate. I don’t like the dark kind.”

“Like those Hershey’s Special Darks?”

“I hate Special Darks.”

“I don’t hate them, but I only eat one when I’m in a dark mood. Anyway, this girl, she said this stuff was wild.” Jack pauses to laugh at the memory. “She said sparks were flying off her fingertips.”

“I don’t know.”

“She said she got it off an onbeam dream hacker. He had a backdoor code into the R&D lab at a major pharmaceutical house and extracted from some anthropologist’s recurring dream of a mythical South American jungle hallucinogenic.”

“Maybe we’ll have mystical hallucinations, see music and hear colors. Fighting, fighting, leap years still gleaming, broad striped bombs dreaming, bursting blacked out overdose.”

“Before we kill each other.”

“Or maybe it’ll be like the Navahos and peyote and we’ll eat it and see The Deity.

“You could put it in your book.”

“It’s not a book. It’s just ideas for stories.”

“I bet Corvette already found some sacraments. Probably shoveling them up her nose while some guy bends her over the toilet. What a whore.”

Jack has a faraway, angry look on his face. I start laughing.

“I’m serious. That’s what all those goddesses do. They just put out for sacraments. They never buy them.”

“You’re the expert.”

“We should go by her apartment, see if she’s there.”

“What about the chocolate mysticism?”

“I don’t know where to get any of that. That’s what Corvette is for.”

“She won’t be home.”

“Then we’ll steal her spore. What a whore.”

#

Bachman Manor is an artifact from the Hydrocarbon Age, a shabby collection of nondescript boxes, flat roofed and buff bricked. A couple of units have been long boarded up, the sheets of plywood buckled and cracking. The complex would appear derelict except for the parking lot full of the detritus of Detroit. Old rattletrap Novas, Monte Carlos, Cutlasses -- the refuse of the crumbling, discredited Hydrocarbon Age.

Scattered shards of broken glass glittering in headlight beams, broken images against a tar black sky. A pale street light casts a yellowish, washed out glow across the landscape, turning the chlorophyll green of the leggy shrubs and trees a sickly, obscene beige. Even the summer scream of the cicadas is muted, a dim, lost transmission from a distant planetary grove of lifeless, polluted hierarchies uprooted and flaming dully on refuse mounds maintained by secret operatives from Galaxy Ozona.

Jack parks in front of Corvette's building and tries to look casual as he leads the way up the steel stairs, onto the concrete-surfaced landing. In our golf shirts and khakis and deck shoes, though, I worry the residents may peg us as FBCU or undercover narcotics officers, certainly the last thing you'd want to be at a place like Bachman Manor. As we climb the stairs, I spotted an old, black sedan -- a late '50s Ford, by the look of the tail fins -- driving slowly by. I've seen this car before, outside my grandparents' house in Fort Jesup, epicenter of the Land of the Dead.

At this point Granny and Paw had been dead for years now, but the house lived on without them. In fact, it had grown larger, deeper. No doubt all necessary expansions required to hold the numerous memories of 140 years of Leachs in Sabine Parish.

I see an old woman's face troubling a moth-eaten mirror. Plump faced, white-haired, a laughing ghost. She looks a bit like one of my aunts, a woman who is still alive. This is not good. Terrified, I run to middle room in the front of the house. This should be the bathroom, but it has reverted to the bedroom it was before the house was plumbed by my father and uncles in the 1960s. Within these chalky, beaded board walls there is a bed and a woman. She is a relative of some sort who is now the house's caretaker. A landlady of the dead.

I apologize for bursting in. I am supposed to sleep in the adjoining room. We talk a bit, then I go to my room. This should be the living room, but when I step through the door I find a screened-in porch. It is run down and derelict. Sagging screen, rotting wood, Southern decay. I look out through the rusty steel grid and see the black car leaving my uncle's double wide next door. It is an animated medieval woodcut, black as night, old '50s tail fins suggestive of a Thunderbird or Galaxie 500.

#

Jack knocks on the door, an unnecessary precaution.

"Right now they're probably back in the parking lot giving prophesy to some sacrament dealer," Jack scowls. He carefully lifts the screen out of one of the aluminum window frames and raises the sash.

"They don't have a key, this is how they come and go," he explains. We crawl through the open window and punch our way past the dusty, sun-scorched brown curtain, the sheer white lining rotted away around the seams. Jack feels his way around the door frame and flips on the light.

A single, bare bulb glares from the shattered remnants of a frosted square light fixture in the middle of the ceiling. The only piece of furniture is an overstuffed sofa covered in some sort of brown, velvety fabric, its fuzzy mat worn down to a sheen on top of the rounded arms and front edge of the seat cushions. A poster of a sort of Art Deco-style pink flamingo stares out from the wall behind the sofa. A laundry basket overflows with presumably clean clothes. A dying cicada writhes inside an empty pizza box. Nearby, there is assortment of VI patches and condoms.

"Looks like they had another orgy," Jack scowls. He knees down in front of the sofa and reaches underneath, retrieving a red plastic mixing bowl. He swirls a finger around inside and wrinkles his nose.

"She bought a big baggie last night, and now all that's left is a bunch of sporangium and ashes," he says. "Not enough here for even half a growth."

In the kitchen, we find insect-infested cabinets and a sink of plastic dishes sitting in greasy, chili-colored water. Jack opens the refrigerator.

“Anything chocolate?” I asked.

“No, just water.”

He tosses me a bottle of Ozona, and we move on to the bedroom. Continuing the less-is-less theme, it is furnished with two twin beds. No night stand, no dresser, no chair. The floor is littered with clothes. An Iron Maiden poster is tacked to the wall over one of the beds.

Jack walks into the open closet and began rummaging through a mound of tattered panties and T-shirts that spilled off the top of a blue chest of drawers.

“Sometimes she keeps her sacraments hidden in here,” he explains.

I join the search, but I am soon sidetracked by an expensive-looking bra, the only clothing item that doesn’t look used up.

“I bought that for her,” Jack says. “When I met her she didn’t own one.”

“You wonder how she got through high school without being sent home.

Remember those useless assistant principals at Duncanville? They never seemed to have anything better to do than to roam the halls looking for bra-less girls and guys with hair touching their collar.”

“She didn’t finish high school. None of them do. That’s why they’re goddesses.”

After a bit more rummaging, Jack suggests we go back to the Plato’s Palace and wait for Corvette.

“There won’t be a party,” he explains, “but she always knows who’s holding.”

#

Jack is right; there is no party. I am a bit concerned that Corvette might take offense that we’d broken into her apartment with the intent of theft. But this proves to be a groundless worry. When Jack tells her what we’ve done, she just laughs.

“Shit don’t last around there, you know that,” she says. “We soaked it all last night.”

“Geez Corvette, just the two of you?”

“Oh, we had some help.”

Jack doesn’t like that one bit.

“I want to see you tonight,” he blurts out.

“You’re seeing me right now.”

“I want to see more of you.”

“You should have bought a table rite. That shows just about everything.”

“That doesn’t hardly show anything I’m interested in seeing.”

And so the witty exchange goes on another couple of hours. I stumble on in an exhaustion-induced haze, jammed into the back of the Jag in the little space behind the seats. Jack is at the wheel, of course, and Corvette shares the passenger seat with her friend Brandy, another Plato’s Palace goddess with a reputation for sniffing out parties and sacraments.

After a half dozen fruitless visits to run-down apartment complexes that are at least as desperate and depressing as Bachman Manor, we end up once again somewhere off Northwest Highway.

Corvette knocks on a door at the top of a flight of stairs, and it slowly opens to reveal a bearded, wild-eyed giant with a beer in his hand and slobber on his chin. She and Brandy are granted admittance; we wait outside. A few minutes later Corvette returns to the landing.

“Does he have any mysticism?” Jack asks hopefully.

“All he’s got is louse, but he knows somebody who can get us some coch.”

Jack pretends to seriously consider the possibilities, but I know he isn’t interested. Last week he had complained of paying Corvette several hundred dollars for a baggie of cochineal, only to watch the wine-colored grit disappear up her nose in a matter of minutes. Clearly, he does not relish repeating such a costly mistake.

“Well, how about the louse?”

Corvette looks at him gravely and slowly shakes her head. “Look, he’s black, and that means it’s nigger spore. And you don’t want any of that.”

I am immediately gripped by the idea of this apparently undesirable “African American” spore. What makes it different from “Caucasian” spore?

A line of decrepit shotgun shacks sags against the Piney Woods, brittle white paint peeling off rough sawn clapboards. Doors and windows open wide, a naked boy barely visible just inside, the foreskin of his giant, uncircumcised member bleeding into the shadowy, unlit interior. And out back the woman of the house, an amazingly fat specimen in a shapeless flowered dress, hoeing a row of lush-looking bushes, her special stand of louse, nourished by the rusty red loam and the good Lawd’s rain and mysterious voodoo incantations passed down from her enslaved ancestors. Come fall, the spore will be harvested, cured and turned over to a city-wise brother or boyfriend, who will transport it to Dallas and sell it to son-of-a-bitch white folks. That is, after he laces it with backwash from the nightmare riptides -- rodenticide, dog laxative, his own VD-tainted urine. Four hundred years of oppression. Up yours, white boy.

I am so tightly gripped by this vision that Jack must yell in my ear to break the spell.

“Little dreamer!”

“What?”

“Let’s go. You blanked out again, as usual.”

I look around. We are alone.

“Where’s Corvette?” I ask.

“She’s gone. Everybody’s gone. All off to somebody’s party to get some coch. To get laid is more like it. What a whore.”

#

Heading home.

Fully reclined for the ride back to Strangers Rest, I feel a little guilty leaving Jack to keep himself awake. But he has always been able to keep going longer than me, especially when he is behind the wheel. Where the road would lull most people toward sleep, it tends to invigorate Jack. Because no matter where he might be going, Jack can always find (or make) a good time when he gets there.

I close my eyes and see naked torsos and snake-skin offering plates. But not for long. The car slows; we are pulling off the main road, into the parking lot of yet another shabby apartment complex. Jack parks next to a burned out Camaro and pockets the keys.

“Got to see this girl I met last week,” he mutters, setting out across the cracked blacktop.

I wonder how this girl will feel being roused out of bed at 3 a.m., but as Jack nears the outdoor stairway a door opens and an excited woman sticks out her head.

“I don’t believe it!” she squeals, running out and throwing herself into Jack’s arms. Apparently the residents of this complex don’t sleep, because a second woman watches the joyful reunion from the open door of her unit. The woman leads Jack up the stairs, and they disappear into her apartment.

A few minutes later, I toot the horn at the nearest building. Jack’s newest girlfriend sticks her head out the window, tousle-haired and bleary eyed, squinting into the night. A moment later she draws back inside. Jack does not appear at all. It’s going to be a while. What to do now?

I look out the windshield, across the long bulbous hood of the Jaguar. I want to picture myself as Jack, driving into the lights of the city on my way to a date with a special flesh temple priestess. But the vision does not hold. Instead, I am on a car trip, driving with my family through East Texas. It is a stretch of rural, two-lane blacktop, much like the one that runs between Mabank and Canton on the cusp on East Texas. So happy, enjoying our little day trip in the country. But I need a restroom, and none are to be found.

Suddenly I fear I have missed the turnoff. And still no restroom. It occurs to me I could relieve myself by the side of the road. But while it is a rural area, there is a lot of traffic, no privacy at all. I hate that.

Then we are on foot.

We find ourselves walking along a smoothly graded roadbed - perfect, like potting soil, not a clump of dirt or a rock to be seen - shaded by tall trees, the dark Piney Woods. This is deep East Texas now, the Sabine National Forest. I can smell that East Texas scent, that peculiar mix of the humid and fertile with a sharp turpentine bite - clean and fresh, yet unmistakably of the musty Old South. We are on the El Camino Real nearing the Land of the Dead, which lies perhaps 45 minutes away beyond the old steel girder Sabine River bridge (now buried some 30 years under the Toledo Bend Reservoir, watched over by the ghost trees that even now crowd the still waters) and 140 years of Leach family history.

It is dark in the deep shade of the Piney Woods, so dark in fact that as I follow what I think is the roadbed I suddenly realize I have lost my way and am standing in a freshly graded circular driveway. We are in someone’s front yard. It proves to be the first of a group of houses, like a mini village.

Now we are off the path entirely. To continue the journey, we must cross through someone’s fenced yard.

“They can’t blame us,” I hear someone in our party say. Perhaps it is one of my parents, who I think are now somehow with us. For now, it seems that our group numbers perhaps a half dozen.

“It’s the only way to get through to the other side,” someone else allows. “I’m sure the owners are used to it.”

Then we are in the backyard, on a wooden deck, and we can even see the road - the El Camino Real - just beyond the fence. But there is still no access; we realize that we must go through the house to regain the Pathway, to continue the journey. No one is home, so we let ourselves inside.

I’m not entirely comfortable with this. It is, after all, breaking and entering. But there is a vague consensus among our party that we are known by or even related to the

owners. And since they live in the country, they won't mind too much if we let ourselves in. Country folk are friendly. It will be OK.

We look around the house a moment, but before we can find the back door some neighbors arrive. They are polite, but understandably a bit suspicious. Rather than talk to us about why we are here, though, they want to know - asking politely, of course - about the "potato pot" that was left on the door on one of their homes. There is a sense that we were the ones who "borrowed" the pot - perhaps from this house - and left it on their door.

Since I still need to relive myself, I go to the bathroom. But as I begin to urinate into the toilet, water starts backing up and spilling over the top. The water is clear; all that pollutes it are bits of disintegrating toilet tissue. Using a plunger, I try to clear the blockage. Water is gushing forth, almost artesian. The water cannot be contained. It wells up, alive.

#

Although that wild night on the town will make great cinema, I must admit I do possess a fair degree of shame. I wish to be a perfected being. That I am not is a realization that is almost more than I can bear. But then I consider Clark Caring, and I feel redeemed. Let us return to His divine mail bag.

#

I received another excellent letter today from Miss Beechemeyer's second grade Caringday School class. (Kudos to Miss Beechemeyer. Suffer the little larva to come unto me.)

#

Dear God:

How did you become God? Was there another God who turned you into God?

Love,

Jimmie Brogan

#

Good question, little Jimmie, glad you asked!

As you apparently have picked up from eavesdropping on the conversations of your elders, some of my beloved creations have begun to suggest I am not so much God as merely godlike - with a lowercase "g". A minor deity, if you will.

It's not just your heretics and artists who take my name in vain, either. Sometimes when you are hanging pictures in your hives and you accidentally hit your pincher with a hammer, you curse my name under your breath. Behind my back. And sometimes at night, in your dreams, some of you call me a narcissistic horror, a monster. Oh yes, you do. You thought I didn't know that.

Your heretics and artists say I am a bad God. They say I am an insane, transcendent being who has made a world that is cruel and filled with pain. However, I say it is all of you who are insane and cruel, all of you who fill this world with pain. After all, it is you who pollute the environment, turning the pink sky I created for you to a dusty, suffocating mauve.

You have turned the once-slippery froth hills into a sticky terror, so unusable that this new generation of larva can no longer slide down them on lazy summer days. You contaminate the waterways I created for you with the chemical byproducts generated during the manufacture of the plastic antennae you wear to look young and beautiful like

the models in your ridiculous fashion magazines. Let us be totally honest, my beloved creations. It is all of you who are the narcissistic horrors, all of you who are the monsters.

Not me, just you.

For all of you, the citizens of Planet Luh, it would appear the Apocalypse can't happen quickly enough. No, you insist on rushing it along.

Anyway, little Jimmie, back to your question. As a matter of fact, I do know of a god who came before me. He created me, just as I have created all of you. He even gave his only son to us so we could murder him. Don't worry. There is a happy ending. A few days later this god brought his murdered son back to life so he could live in Heaven as the No. 2 guy, leading a life of royal leisure and urging all of His beloved creations to eat his body and drink his blood and live forever.

Back in the day – back before the day, even – the only way to live forever required eating the body and drinking the blood of this god's son and accepting him as the No. 2 guy in Heaven. A few people tried consuming mysticism and other illicit sacraments. But that didn't work either.

Then came EternaLife™ from Valuosity Life Planning Inc. With this product, we no longer had any need for a deity who granted life extension powers. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Now that your heretics and artists know about this other god and his son, I'm sure they will soon be telling you I'm nothing like Him – the one with an uppercase "G." Sure, He gave his only son for his beloved creations. But come on – you call that a sacrifice? I mean, didn't He bring his only son back to life and set him up in Heaven as the No. 2 guy, the occupant of the right hand throne, leading a life of royal leisure? How many of you would give up a couple of days of life for a gig like that.

That god was a popular one, for sure. People fought many wars in his name and prayed he would make them victorious so they could enslave their enemies, cart away their gold and smash in the heads of their children until gray goo oozed out of their twitching, quivering skulls. He blessed many people through the ages, but none more than the people of Texas.

Texans were his chosen people. He showed them how to harness the electron and steal raw materials from godless foreigners. With the blessings of God, Texans were able to clog their arteries and grow huge bodies by consuming obscene amounts of fat, salt and other poisons at fast food restaurants. God blessed them with huge ass houses and huge ass SUVs, and he even gave them lots of Motherfuckers to tell them what was important. Yes little Jimmie, back in the day Texans pretty much had God in their back pockets.

And then one day, He was arrested.

#

#

Sleeping in after our night on the town. I hear a knock at the front door. Peeking through the blinds into the mid-morning sun, I see a white stretch limo waiting downstairs at the curb.

“I’m here to take you to Another Cafe,” the uniformed chauffeur explains. “They’re shooting the lunch scene with Jack and Tina.”

#

“The working title is ‘An Apocalypse of the Heart,’” The Stranger explains.

“I thought it was ‘Strangers Rest,’” I say.

“That, too. And maybe ‘Dreaming the Conclusion of Time’ or even ‘Dreaming the Apocalypse.’ I’m not sure yet. But it’s going to be great.”

“It’s about us?”

“And the End of the World. It’s an SF epic, but it’s also a documentary of visionary transformation. Really, you could call it our autodreamography. Here’s the concept: ‘Rapture, Texas.’ You like?”

“Pretty.”

“In this movie, the Rapture has finally come. Or perhaps not. The only thing certain is that a large portion of the citizenry is in the grip of the idea that thousands of people have been snatched up into the sky. Is it mass hysteria? A hoax? Extraterrestrials? Or is it truly the beginning of the end, when true believers will be taken up to heaven to be with the Deity before the Noble Misfortune and the Battle of Armageddon Drive-in Theatre?”

“What does this have to do with my incredible revelation?”

“Be patient. We must first construct the back story and establish metaphorical reference points. Deek Rookie is pretty skeptical that anything of an otherworldly nature has happened, but there’s no doubting one essential truth -- everyone around him has gone Rapture crazy and it’s wrecking his life. Deek, a resident of the sleepy North Texas suburb of Rapture and a reporter at the Rapture Weekly News, must endure the constant influx of pilgrims seeking out a miracle in his appropriately named town as well as write stories that attract even more attention. The big news is the Next Arrival, a week of organized fasting and prayers scheduled to build toward a Saturday night revival meeting on historic Main Street and climaxing in a Sunday mass baptism at the drive-in theater. But first, Deek tries to unravel a mystery of his own. He finds a mutilated calf in the Oddfellows Cemetery -- a Satanic sacrifice, residents assure him. And the priest he recruits to resanctify the unmarked graves of the Mexican railroad workers -- the only Catholics in the cemetery -- turns out to be a lot more interested in watching the heavens for signs and portents with a computerized telescope he has installed in the ruins of an old frame church on the edge of town.”

“That’s a nice touch.”

“The world premier will be at a specially constructed drive-in movie theater, a sort of temple located in the Himalayas of India. 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 I will be God.”

“Pretty.”

“There will be introductory narration, too. I lifted it from ‘Dr. Strangelove.’ In excess of a year, disturbing reports had been confidentially transmitted between First World government heads that Alumina International was at labor on what was mysteriously implied to be the Final Weapon, the world’s first artificial deity. Intelligence informants pursued the highly clandestine corporate scheme to Rapture, Texas, an outlying suburb of the Land of the Dead. What Alumina was developing, or why it should be in such a distant and deserted locale, no one could ascertain.”

#

My role at Another Café is to spend half the day in a window booth with Jack, who is compelled to endlessly repeat his one line – “But I wanted chicken” – as we watch the FX crew make hundreds of loaves of bread and microwave fish sticks multiply on his plate.

In between takes, Jack finds time to grope Tina Wells, the head waitress and his conquest du jour. At Jack’s urging wardrobe has put her in an impossibly tight T-shirt and faded cut offs. The Stranger is checking her out through his Beulah 9000, a hand-held 16 mm camera he uses to frame scenes and keep notes on what he’s been shooting.

“This is the scene where Tina tells Mark that she fears her grandfather, Cowboy Roy, is losing his mind,” The Stranger explains, “He’s playing poker with spectral cowboys in the ruins of the Silver Spur Saloon.”

“It’s true,” Tina says. “He may have Old Timers disease.”

Jack shakes his head. “Old Timers disease? That’s so lame.”

“And,” The Stranger continues, “she tells Mark that her grandfather is worried about the dead calf he found in the Oddfellows Cemetery. The body appeared to have signs of mutilation. But what he does not realize is this is a ploy engineered by the black ops division of Ozona International, which is involved in a UFO conspiracy that includes government suppression of reports of strange lights or aircraft near fields where mutilated cattle are later found. Roy and the rest of the townsfolk don’t know this yet. Why is that, Tina?”

“They think it’s the work of devil worshippers,” she says.

“That’s right,” The Stranger replies. “Thanks for reading the script. So Roy wants to find a Catholic priest to re-consecrate the unmarked graves of the Hispanics, the poor folk who helped put the railroad through town. The problem is there’s no parish in Strangers Rest; however, Tina has learned from one of her customers that a priest-turned-scientist – Father Henceforth Bypass – has bought the old Baptist church. The sanctuary was abandoned when the congregation found true religion and became the Keepers of the Deity. They built a big, new warehouse sanctuary out on the Interstate where they wait for the Rapture. Also, Jack makes Tina sit in his lap while he simulates an unnatural sex act upon her solid waste excretory orifice.”

“Now wait just a minute,” Tina protests.

“All right,” Jack says. “Unnatural sex acts are my favorite kind.”

“Have you ever had a natural sex act with Tina?” I ask.

“Maybe once or twice.”

“By accident.”

Then Jack leans in close and speaks into my ear.

“Did I tell you about the time we did it doggie style on the kitchen floor?”

“I believe it was your first night together. You’d hired her to be a babysitter for Billy, and you were supposed to be back by midnight. But you didn’t get in until 3, so you made it up to her by giving her some rear entry ectoplasm on the linoleum.”

“Hey, that kitchen is ceramic tile. No vinyl anywhere in my houses. I’ve got my standards.”

“And while she was still naked, you gave her the money for the babysitting. So it was kind of like you were paying her to permit you to penetrate her membranes.”

“You laugh, but most women really do nurture a little bit of a prostitute fantasy.”

“Who are we to judge?”

“That reminds me. I forgot to tell you about Cinnamon.”

“Tell me what.”

“She wants you.”

“You are so full of it.”

“I’m not kidding, man. I told her ‘forget it, he’s married.’ But she didn’t care.”

“What did she say?”

Jack laughs at the recollection. “She said ‘I bet he’s got a big one.’ And I said ‘don’t I know it.’”

#

I have a confession. Back in high school I led Jack to believe that I had penetrated your membranes and expelled my ectoplasm inside you. So many evenings together, membrane to membrane, and yet never an act of penetration. Must have been your willpower, not mine.

But Tina – she did not have any discernable willpower. She allowed Jack to penetrate her membranes and expel his ectoplasm inside her on a regular basis. The story is rather sad. When Tina did her first babysitting act for Jack, she was very young, not quite “legal.” By the time *The Stranger* put her into his movie, she was only a couple months past her 18th birthday – but plenty old enough to figure out that she was not going to be the second Mrs. Jack Bryson. Why marry the membrane when you can penetrate it for free (or at least at the going hourly rate for a teenage babysitter)?

As for Jack, at this point he still believes he is doing fine, completely oblivious to Tina’s cold stare and crossed arms as she waits for her scene.

“You look hot,” Jack tells her. “That tight T-shirt, those short, tight cutoffs – I think you need to come do some rehearsing on my lap.”

“They’ve got to touch up my makeup,” she says. “The best boy said – “

“Hey, I got your best boy right here.”

“You are so disgusting.”

“Oh come on, like I’m the only one here who thought of that?”

#

After the café scene, *The Stranger* and I walk over to the old Strangers Rest Baptist Church to scope out my introductory scene with Father Henceforth Bypass.

I could tell you a lot about Father Bypass, but all you really need to know is he is a carbon copy of the retired preacher I stumbled upon in my dream outside the ruins of the old Trinity Baptist Church in Fort Jesup.

“He’s a priest-turned-scientist,” The Stranger explains, “so he’s very symbolic of the conflict between the waking, rational zone and the Land of the Dead. Just think of him as the archetype for the Wise Old Man, a role he shares with me. If either of us says something – especially if it sounds like a speech or monologue – then it’s probably important for the thematic development of the story. OK?”

#

Like the church in the Fort Jesup dream, Strangers Rest Baptist is missing the front wall. But although it is full daylight, it’s dark inside the sanctuary because a tornado is brewing. Not a real tornado, of course. It’s cinematic. The Stranger has directed the construction of a gigantic tornado mechanism in the parking lot. A turboprop on a 20-foot tower blows water on the missing end of the sanctuary, whitening the post oaks. The rumble mechanism rumbles, an enormous distention of sheet metal with a gas-powered engine and a cushioned cam. When I arrive they are just trying it out. An incident in the film – The Stranger won’t say what – requires a Texas twister. The turboprop roars, a current of air and water whip the old church, the post oaks turn inside out, shingles tear loose, sheet metal rumbles. But on the other side of the parking lot the sun shines with great composure.

Inside the church a strobe machine sporadically illuminates the fake storm darkness with fake lightening flashes and greenish tornado glow. There is a deluge of blood and marble-sized hail, flashes of purple-veined lightening bolts are visible through the gaps in the boarded up windows. Some sort of I-heart-Jesus banner is rent in two, like the temple veil. Very symbolic.

And milling about near the vestry is Father Bypass – no mistaking him. As in my dream, he is clad in a checkered soft shirt and the small, tidy balance of facial hair, withdrawn from religious employment in advance of death.

The Stranger gives a motivational speech to the crew.

“The concept is a blatant rip off of a Walker Percy essay, ‘Notes for a Novel about the End of the World.’ Of course, this is quite different. For one thing, it’s a movie. And I am the director, the Deity, the omega being who creates a serious motion picture about the conclusion of time - i.e., the termination of one era and the commencement of another.

“Picture a newspaper reporter of the upcoming era – say, 75 years after the creation of the apocalyptic weapon, a message from the Deity. Or so they say. He is of the understanding that some theologians subscribe to a school of thought in which Noah’s ‘rainbow’ is an incorrect translation and its context is a misunderstanding. According to this argument, the ancient text actually refers to the Deity’s “Archer’s Bow” in the sky. And this reference is not a promise to humanity, but a display of the Deity’s regret. “This tide was false,” the Deity is saying. “I must remember not to repeat it.” The Deity’s bow, a weapon of mass destruction hung in the heavens so to speak. A suitable analogy for the onbeam collective, a sword pounded into a plowshare, which cuts a furrow, a sort of deduction ditch, into which we can place underground cables of fiber optics, fibers which carry lightening bolts. It is possibly not too different from the effect exercised long ago by prophets. The effect can be repeated today by rapidly waving widespread fingers

before closed eyes -- a simple technique, really – while turning one’s countenance to the sun, a ball of fire, creating the proper oscillating motion. The light show that is observed through the eyelids is said to initiate the Vision, a core detonation from the Deity, a revelation screaming through the sky, the iconic mushroom cloud. Former servicemen who observed the test explosions of the 1950s described the cloud as possessing all the colors of the spectrum, which is to say a rainbow.

“This is the construction of our future out of our past. So the newspaper reporter is departing his office on a common workday and going by the crumbling remains of a forgotten church. A Vault of the Deity. From this empty shell a Walker Percy-inspired stranger comes out and confronts him. The stranger is a tired, faulty creature, a pilgrim of the old, dead Hydrocarbon Age. He is a priest with whiskey on his breath, a failed man of The Deity who has been delivered as one more substitute in antagonistic terrain. This stranger speaks to the reporter.

“You give the impression of being ill.’

“This is true,’ the reporter admits. ‘However, I shall be feeling OK in a little while, when I return to my abode and consume Ozona with Floride9 – my spiritual beverage, my sacrament, the most excellent of spirit-amalgamating, Walker Percy-inspired preparations.’

“But the priest says ‘proceed with me and I shall present you with a sacrament that will permanently amalgamate your spirit. It will be the final sacrament that you will ever require.’”

#

Next, The Stranger sets up a moderately long section of foreshadowing about an old computer that he claims will become a gratuitous spiritual oracle later in the story: The 6600 by Control Data Corp.

“It was designed in the 1960s by Seymour Cray,” he says. “And he did it with transistors. There’s 350,000 in there, can you imagine?”

He points to a little metal plaque – Property of Ozona International – that is affixed to the main operator console.

“When I was testing the keyboard I inadvertently crossed some wires,” The Stranger explains, “and there was a brief flicker across the dual screens, a sentient blink by the all-knowing computer deity.”

“The CIA knows all about it,” Father Bypass adds. “The conclusion of time. They’ve been working on dream-carrying ballistic missiles for years. The ultimate doomsday weapon. Never practical, though. Too much risk of fragmentation, of scattering dreams all over the place. One simulation predicted schizophrenic manifestations and religious delusions over most of the Midwest and the Great Lakes region. People would notice. That’s not anywhere near the Bible Belt.”

Hooked into a serial port on the 6600 is an old piece of lab equipment from Edinger Scientific’s Catalog 751, circa mid 1970s. I remember it from a catalog I found in my grandfather’s house when I was 14. I lusted after the idea of that machine, which I mistakenly believed to be a dream recorder, something akin to the dream viewer in one of my favorite SF movies, “Five Million Years to Earth” (aka “Dr. Quatermass and the Pit”).

#

Nocturnal Event-Dream Recollection Monitor

This device is being regarded as a major advancement in the study of nocturnal disturbances and as an appealing technique for acquiring and reserving dream recollections. Being conveniently transportable and easy to operate, it permits the scientist to perform nocturnal researches via subject manipulation of the device in the residence of the Deity. This quality omits the outward effect of the clinical atmosphere on nocturnal activities (i.e., sleep and dreams). Qualities include: razor-accurate needles for reserving minutes used in RSM (rapid soul movement) and other stages of nocturnal occurrences; an alert bell to rouse the subject during RSM to permit electronic reservations of nocturnal events; two specific stations of magnification to reserve any desired couple of 3 choices (electro-oculogram, electromyogram and electroencephalogram); 6 cadmium-zinc disk electrodes. Runs on 3 (Ni-acid) batteries incl. 10 X 8 X 10.

#

“I ordered one over the viral DNA dream phone,” Father Bypass says.

“The what?” I ask.

“It’s a phone for communicating with the Land of the Dead,” The Stranger explains. “They’re all the rage in Burial Chamber, Calif. All the directors are using them.”

“Edinger didn’t mind shipping the monitor forward 30 years,” Father Bypass says, “but they’d only accept pre-1973 currency or BankAmericard.”

“Then,” The Stranger says, “we hooked the electrodes into a special dream text interface that communicated directly with the 6600. Didn’t take long to compute the zero hour.”

The old priest of science rips a sprocket-edged sheet from a chattering daisy wheel printer and waves it triumphantly overhead.

“A half a million words,” Father Bypass remarks. “I’m also an astrodream psychotronicist. So I ran every one of the words through the 6600, using simple algebraic equations to manipulate logarithmic multiples of the square root of infinity.”

“Surreal mathematics,” The Stranger says. “Great for building four-dimensional models and determining the conclusion of time.”

“6:47 a.m. Sunday, to be exact.”

“Let’s retire to the vestry. Being the stereotypical whiskey priest, Father Bypass takes his bourbon straight.”

#

Next I am to read my lines, but I refuse.

“What’s wrong?” The Stranger asks.

“This film has nothing to do with my Incredible Revelation.”

“As I said before, you must be patient. Back story first, then we establish the metaphorical reference points.”

“Besides, I object to the premeditated life.”

“You think you have a choice? You think you can escape premeditation?”

This is an unpleasant thought.

“Very well, then I’ll read your lines for you,” he says. “Here’s one way the world ends: You are in the Duncanville High School cafeteria, eating lunch. There are several people at your table, and you are interested in one of the girls. But it occurs to you that she is not particularly interested in you. Maybe you will find someone else who really

does like you, and then you will see what a difference it makes. As you think this over, it is like you are no longer a student but once again your 40-something self. You are now outside and one of the people in your group becomes intoxicated. He is unconscious.”

“Yes, I do remember this dream,” I admit. “Somehow it seemed important that I pick him up, move him back to the cafeteria.”

“That’s right. You gather up your belongings and prepare to leave. Lunch time is over. Then you are inside a house with your parents. They sit or relax on a bed in the living room, which reminds you of your great grandmother’s home in Waco. You go to your bedroom, look at yourself in the mirror. You are a cartoon character, with bushy hair parted in the middle, big pink lips and a very skinny neck. You think to yourself that this is your true appearance. You must face the facts: It will be hard to find an attractive girl - like the one at your lunch table – who will be interested in you.”

“It’s never been easy being me,” I admit. “I never knew what to say to girls. If only I’d been a bit more physically attractive.”

“That was never our real problem, just an excuse. Anyway, you return to the living room to talk with your parents. Again, you go to the mirror. You still have longish hair parted in the middle, but now your face is more normal. You decide you no longer look so strange. More talk with your parents. One of them mentions the word ‘ghost.’ You are not sure of the context. You look in the mirror a third time. Now there is a normal man, but he is not you. And upon further reflection, you decide he is not quite normal after all, for he is menacing and almost demonic.”

“In fact, the reflection was terrifying.”

“You tell your parents about this. ‘You cannot talk about ghosts in front of me anymore,’ you say. ‘It is too suggestive, conjuring up evil spirits.’ You tell them about a theory that writers have autonomous spirits within them. This is all psychological, of course, symbolic – not actual spirits. But it is important. ‘This is the way they are able to write,’ you say. Your parents are concerned by this talk. ‘We can get you to a doctor, a good one,’ your mother says. ‘It won’t be like the ones you might encounter during an emergency room visit. This doctor will be the best.’”

“Yes. I dreamed that my parents said they use Simon & Schuster.”

“Next, you are reading a scientific catalog. You look at a chart, which is almost like a game board. It is on paper, yet you can manipulate the drawings as if it were a computer screen. You can make the vehicles in the picture move. So you make some sort of submarine go to the bottom of a body of water, a lake or ocean. Then you flip to a different page and see a picture of self-contained living quarters for undersea use. It looks like a normal living room, complete with sofa and coffee table.”

“I always thought it would be cool to have my own private submarine, like Princess Di.”

#

“Everything was much simpler in the Hydrocarbon Age, before the conclusion of time,” Father Bypass explains. “The concepts were identical with the words. But when an exact definition is no longer available, it’s so easy to be flooded by the variations, subliminal and therefore never realized. Even the most matter-of-fact events can have a penumbra of uncertainty about them. Have you seen The Stranger’s movie script proposals?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, “because apparently the world is going to end Sunday morning.”

“That’s good dialogue,” The Stranger whispers to me. “Thanks for finally participating.”

“A new world will take its place,” Father Bypass says. “The real fear for most people isn’t the apocalyptic weapon itself. No, the average person does not fear catastrophe. Rather, they fear the conclusion of time won’t be any different than the day before.”

#

Director’s note: At this point in the chronology, the script collapses into a heap of broken images. The Stranger tells me I am to interview the whiskey priest. But Father Bypass has been drinking real whiskey. He is no longer capable of reading his lines. He totters unsteadily, departing from character. He vomits behind a pew, filling the air with partially digested nausea.

So The Stranger decides to read everyone’s remaining lines plus give some off-the-cuff background commentary, all in a single, unbroken conversation with himself about himself. In the interests of posterity and cinematic purity, I have prepared a transcript of this monologue. My original idea was to decode it back into a coherent script. But now I find that I rather like this strange, irrational form. This is totally unique, a bold new voice in American cinematography.

#

PROPHECY OF THE NEXT ARRIVAL: A Film by The Stranger

Are you ready to interview me? No, I hate me.

Seriously, I don’t know that there’s anything to write about me. Don’t I want to know about my work? No, I don’t think I do. My editor is no longer interested in stories about the conclusion of time.

I live in a new world, a place and time when all of my wants and needs can be met. Creativity. Individuality. Equality. Can I name a time that has had more to offer than the past half century? I didn’t think so.

Meanwhile, after almost 20 centuries of anticipation, the true believers are still awaiting the Son of the Deity’s return engagement. Fire, pestilence, wrath of the Deity. And yet these days, the conclusion of time won’t get me very far. It won’t get me a byline story. Time is running short. So little time left, and yet still so much to do. They’re closing in, the forces that would alter history from the dashboard lights of the black sedan, the car of death. It’s part of the unifying global pattern, the blueprint of the apocalypse, starting now and through which I am being applied. It reflects the Job experience - or that of the divine son. Jesus was the first attempt, The Deity’s effort to transform himself into Man. Now He is going to transform himself into all of mankind.

I see what I mean, but I also think I may be borderline psychotic. I have to be going. I really have to be going. I really understand. I really hate me.

I’ve got another interview in a few minutes. Now I must know this, for plot development purposes. Do I plan to re-consecrate those graves? And yet, a scientific explanation would prove more satisfactory. It’s a well-worn copy of something titled ‘Southwest Scientific Digest,’ a paperback-sized publication in which Father Bypass published a scientific paper. Sea of water vapor found high in sky. New satellite data revives interest in controversial comet theory. Washington. Scientists at the Naval

Research Laboratory claim data from a pair of satellites has revealed the unexpected presence of water vapor in the upper atmosphere, lending renewed support to a controversial theory that incoming comets are coating the Earth with extraterrestrial rain. Yes. We can add an element of hard science to this SF tale.

Every day our planet is hit by thousands of comets, big things, about the size of a house. And they contain water. It's actually ice. Anyway, they break up as they enter the atmosphere, and the water boils out into the air. Then it rains down on us? Exactly. Now scan down to the last couple of graphs. In related news, SSD has learned that a researcher with a background in theology is pursuing independent studies on the potential psychopharmacological effects of the phenomenon. Dr. Adolfo Morel of the Naval Research Laboratory said he is attempting to correlate the team's satellite mapping with a rise in regional episodes of delusional disorders, particularly those involving the physical manifestation of The Deity and other visions of a religious nature. He is theorizing that the water from the comets contains psychotropic compounds, which are making their way into the water table and becoming concentrated in the food chain. And of course, surreptitiously added to Ozona bottled water as an innocuous ingredient labeled Fluoride9, also known as Liquid Jesus.

I found the hardest part of the research has been developing the software program. Look at this print-out, about six inches thick. See the notation for our area? Pretty. That's a concentration of delusional episodes. And the prefix codes correspond to meteorite and rainfall data for the region. See the dotted line? The path of a satellite? No. Hydroxyl ions. They correlate to water vapor at high altitudes. The ions form when ultraviolet light splits apart the water molecules. It's not rain, either. When you get up into the nether reaches of the atmosphere -- in this case, the mesosphere, a.k.a. heaven -- there's almost no water at all. It's a real desert up there, which suggests the climax revelation. Which is? The Ozona company is using these alien compounds to secretly modify the genetic pool of the populace and create the world's first privately owned and operated deity.

Dreaming the conclusion of time. Did you know that in the last 60 days in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, there have been over 500 reported sightings of individuals ascending into the clouds? Typical Rapture/Next Arrival stuff, the dead rising from their graves.

You do not want to believe. But do you want the story? You have no story. No one wants to read about the conclusion of time anymore. Editors won't even talk about it. The apocalypse was last week's news. Now we're back to printing stories about cute parrots, spunky old men, faithful dogs and dead girlfriends.

Then I retrieve a thick spiral notebook filled with Polaroid photographs of naked women. These psychotropic compounds may actually trigger hormonal changes. Did I know that the median size of women's breasts in the U.S. has increased roughly 6 percent over the past 30 years, even when adjusted for the average weight gain of the overall population? I would like to do that research right now. I am focused on the Polaroid photos, dozens of primal goddesses, each identified with a date and 16-place alpha-numeric code, sprawled on the tiled men's room floor, covered in black lace and ectoplasm. Naughty, naughty – and impressive, all volunteers for a survey done by a friend of mine. It's not very good science; however, he got a nice advance for offerings and table rites. He selected primal goddesses who had been arrested for assaulting men. A statistically significant blend of spirituality and violence.

What's that? Well, I'm not running an adult bookstore, you know. Remember Bovee's warning -- the body of a sensualist is the coffin of a dead soul.

Is there an index? Yes, but it's a semi-confidential report and -- Success. Brooks, Louise (alias Cinnamon), Subject No. 92017. Stop. I'm violating scientist/subject confidentiality. But I won't stop. I can't make me, either. Scientific Vignette. Ms. Cinnamon is a 17-year-old primal goddess who, in her sixth possible month, attempted to murder an unborn epic film by drowning. In the weeks leading up to this suggested effort, she had knowledgeable neural vegetative visual rumors and symptoms of despair with superimposed delusions. These delusions were centered in the region of a Macintosh Portable Model 5126, whom the subject was persuaded was a reincarnated unkind being. As the risk for metaphorical behavior was far above the earth, she was right away admitted to the hospital's cinematic division and was then diagnosed with sharp poetic despair. She received six one-sided emotional coverlet treatments. She has improved very well, and is now contemplating another cinematic action.

Pretty.

But don't tell. It could seriously compromise the follow-up survey. Wounded instincts, that's the danger. Heal the animal within. Make him a friend. I see the snake wrapped around a staff as a visual rumor of the medical profession, a visual rumor of healing. And the Son of the Deity, too. We usually know him as a lamb or a fish or a lion, but also a serpent draped over the cross.

An abandoned house of the Deity reverting to wilderness, and a fallen whiskey priest with an extinct mainframe as his radio to the Deity? I really should do a story about me. It is a story about me and the Deity becoming one. This is a necessary merger to bring about the creation of the New Religion. For in the upcoming age, the true Christian will be the Christ of his own church. Or he will not be a Christian at all. So I diagnose myself as a narcissist. However, I may also be what people in ancient times called a prophet. That is, a man called by the Deity to communicate something urgent to other men.

But when was the last time I talked to someone about the Almighty? Yes. I see my point. Mankind is now occupying the role of the eternal son of the Deity. The Deity is setting up residence in the body of mankind, restoring the old church, the Vault of the Deity. This is the real Next Arrival. And it is taking place in the lives of people like the newspaper reporter who is accosted by the whiskey priest, people who can recognize what is happening and make it real in the world. Chosen. How many are there? The Book of Revelation says 144,000. Don't know if that is a literal number, but it suggests a rather extensive incarnation of the Deity into mankind. So, it's the story of a sort of prophet-in-training.

In truth, I don't hate me. I love me. I am a classic narcissist. When I was a boy I wanted to be king of the world. I remember a professor I had at seminary. But I thought I was not a priest. Did I say I was not a priest? I am a liar. No, I am a liar. Well, I remember it like it was yesterday. He'd say come along, boys. The seminary was all men in those days, of course. Come along, boys, and I'll tell you spiritual stories you've never heard. And then he'd talk about the Son of the Deity walking across Corpus Christi Bay or maybe Packery Channel and he'd ask us about that. How could it be any other way? Of course He would walk across the stormy seas of life.

So me, the little boy in the mirror, the demon under the bed, why don't I just get on with it? Get on with what? 6:47 a.m. Sunday.

#

#

The Stranger asserts that the movie is proceeding as scripted. But I am doubtful. For one thing, there is no Incredible Revelation. And something else is not right, though I'm not sure exactly what. A line is out of place, a cue is missing. I don't know what has occurred. Now the end is here and so am I, exiled to my Isle of Patmos, contemplating my future. Will I stand in the docket? Or will I go out into the world as a prophet, my lips purified with the burning coal?

I do not know. So I continue to tell you about the end times in hopes that the telling will help me uncover the truth. I tell you because you know me so well. I tell you because you are here.

I don't expect to stand trial. In fact, I believe that quite soon I will be leaving this place. Maybe Luh will go with me.

Did I tell you she paid me a visit yesterday? She came over from the neighboring island on her sail board, slicing through the Laguna Madre like – well, let's just say she was a quite a sight. I don't know if she was happy or smiling. I really didn't notice her face. She was in a white bikini. Healthy lungs. I don't know how she got past the sea monsters. She came within about 20 feet of the island, cutting a rather nautical turn in the frothy beach break.

“What's your name?” I called out.

“Luh,” she said. Then the wind changed, and she headed back to her own island.

Her translucent skin reminds me of Allison, except she's not quite so thin, a bit more athletically built. Who am I kidding? Her breasts are enormous. My membranes are surging, my DNA singing.

#

What's that? Yes, now is a good time to delve into one of the story's most beloved supporting characters, Cowboy Roy. He would make a good movie all by himself. In fact, I already have the concept: “Requiem for a Singing Cowboy.” You like?

In this Panavision/Technicolor Western, the retired singing movie cowboy becomes a modern day Don Quixote. But instead of losing himself in delusions of knight-errantry, Cowboy Roy becomes his on-screen persona – an Old West cowboy wandering a frontier that is no more, redressing wrongs through his prowess with a horse and a six-shooter. Here's a description I put together for the film treatment:

#

About 60 years of age, he was wizened and gaunt-featured, but of a sturdy constitution. A dark handlebar mustache belied his thick belly and thinning gray hair. A strong jutting jaw line punctuated the elongated shadow of his 6-foot-6 frame. He affected the speech of the heroes of the dime novels and old western movies he enjoyed, regarding both as the final authority on virtually all matters of the Old West. True, he hadn't rode a horse or roped a steer in years, but what was that to Cowboy Roy? He knew he was a real cowboy in his heart.

#

I must admit I like this concept, so much so that I already roughed out some introductory script:

Cowboy Roy was shooting the windmill again when the outlaws attacked.

It was almost sundown, and the gaunt, bullet-riddled tower cast a long shadow across the grassy hill where he stood. Roy Thornton was just a boy when his

father bought the steel windmill at a livestock show in Fort Worth, replacing an ancient wooden model that had collapsed in a cold norther, an avalanche of icicles and splintered lumber raining down on a hapless young bull.

Barrell-chested, bow-legged Cowboy Roy aimed his ivory-handled six-shooter at the windmill's rusty blades, which turned slowly against the firey North Texas sky. Every time a slug hit, the metal framework rang out like a ranch house dinner bell, its thin metallic scream echoing across the rolling prairie.

The gunshots boomed defiantly every evening over The Lakes of Greenwood. There weren't many complaints, though. The luxury housing development boasted only three homes and one resident, homebuilder Jack Bryson.

Instead of sprouting houses, the remaining 157 one-acre home lots were waist high in grass and weeds. More vegetation sprouted from giant cracks in the streets and their fax-cobblestone intersections, and the ``lakes'' (actually a series of stock tanks the developer had scooped out of the low spots along Henrietta Creek with a backhoe) had gone jade green with algae. Jack would have complained to the developer, except the developer was his father. Times were bad all around in the luxury home building business.

Still, The Lakes of Greenwood had yet to totally revert to wilderness. The stone-paved intersections and fachwerk clubhouse with Old World clock tower -- actually a thinly disguised elevated water tank -- made the project look more like a European Disneyland than ``the Texas you thought was gone forever,'' as the sales brochure described it. As for the three homes, they were mostly contemporary interpretations of eighteenth-century English manors -- two-story neo-Georgian, dumb waitered and gas lit -- the same sort of exaggerated architecture that was going up in neighboring Dallas and the rest of metropolitan Texas. The project didn't look like forgotten Texas at all.

Lying in the trampled grass at Cowboy Roy's feet was Sam, a tailless border collie. The unfortunate animal had showed up on the back porch one morning a few years back, and he hadn't left since. The absence of a tail hadn't affected the dog's disposition, which was invariably that of a happy pup. He spent most of his days alternating between sleep and chasing the neighbors' livestock, occasionally baiting a bravado-filled bull. Sam would bark and circle the beast until it began to shake its horned head, snorting and pawing the ground. Such displays served only to egg on the playful Sam, who would continue to antagonize the bull until it finally charged. That always sent Sam bounding across the field, wind in his ears and joy in his heart. He was oblivious to the animal's anger. He thought the chase meant the bull was having a good time.

Despite his agreeable nature, Sam didn't care much for his master's shooting. Every time the gun roared, he tried to hid from the noise between Cowboy Roy's feet, hunkered down and whimpering softly.

``Git along,'' Cowboy Roy scowled, gently nudging Sam with the side of his sharp-toed boot. ``You're a lame excuse for a cow dog, you know it?''

#

I know – not very exciting. Poorly sculpted fluff. This is always a problem for me, my inability to inject a sense of life into a conventional, waking world cinematic narrative. I cannot film the waking world. Why? Because it is too slow to capture on celluloid. Try as I may, it inevitably slips through my fingers, a whirlwind of Nazi paratroopers, bleeding walls and flesh-eating spiders.

So I will not embarrass myself by sharing the rest of the turgid introductory script. Instead, I will jump ahead to the action (i.e., the place where the waking world tumbles into the Land of the Dead).

#

Then he saw the guns.

It was only a flash, really, a brief shimmer in the slanting rays of the westering sun. The flash could have been the faraway windshield of a passing car on distant Texas 114, or a jet on its final descent into D/FW Airport. Those were the obvious explanations, but Cowboy Roy knew neither was the true story. He put a hand to his forehead, just to be sure. No V.I. patch. This was real.

His eyes shot to a nearby thicket of soapberry trees, the under story an impenetrable tangle of saplings and trumpet vines. There, he saw the glint of sunlight off the polished barrel of a Winchester repeating rifle. It was pointed right at him.

And suddenly the air was thick with gun fire. Cowboy Roy dived for cover, skidding palms first into knee-high weeds. Great tongues of blue flame leapt from the trees, and the bullets raised puffs of dust all around him. One ricocheted off a rock by his head, dusting his cheek with a chalky grit. Another grazed his boot heel, renting it in two. An arrow whizzed overhead, missing him by inches.

Crouching in the weeds, he hurriedly reloaded his gun and tried to determine the strength of his assailants. He could tell by the deafening fusillade that several weapons were involved, but all he could see was the smoke from their guns, an acrid black cloud that enveloped the thicket in darkness. He raised his gun to return fire, but before he could even take aim the shooting stopped.

Out of the roiling black cloud rode four men, each astride a different colored horse.

A sandy roan bore a half-naked Indian, a bow and quiver of arrows slung across his dark, shirtless back. He was flanked by two black horses, each bearing a large, bearded man in matching buckskin fringe jackets. And leading all three was a tall man riding a white horse.

He was of a sallow complexion, with sunken gray eyes that stared over the bridge of a large hawk-bill nose. The horse had red eyes and wide, flaring nostrils, and Cowboy Roy thought it looked like the devil's own mount. The man and his albino horse drew rein just shy of Cowboy Roy, the others lined up behind him. The Winchester lay across the leader's lap.

"What the hell you think you're doin' here?" Cowboy Roy asked, staring up at the tall man, the hot breath of his horse upon him. The horse smelled of rotting meat. The tall man smiled, revealing a black maw void of front teeth, and leaned forward in the saddle, resting an arm across his thigh.

"I'm here to whip you senseless," the man sneered, extracting a low rumbling laugh from his associates. "But I can see now you're too old to even bother

with anymore. So why don't you be a good old man and drop that gun belt right now and throw up your props?"

Cowboy Roy glanced briefly at the other men, then back at their leader. He dusted off his pants with the brim of his hat, a ragged and sweat-stained "four beaver" he now only wore around the home place.

"Get goin'," he said finally, his voice thick with disgust. "Just crawl back in your hole, or I'll bullet-dance you there."

The Indian and buckskin-clad riders laughed again, and the tall man looked at him with mock surprise.

"Why, I had you figured for a smarter old man than that," he said, again flashing his rotted, toothless grin. "You don't want to go and rile us now. We've got you outnumbered four to one."

"That may be true," Cowboy Roy replied, bending down to tie his holster to his leg. "But you'll get the bullet with the period on it."

Then the white horse reared back on its hind legs, hooves pawing the air and red eyes blazing like jellied fire. The four horsemen went for their weapons.

Cowboy Roy shot the Indian first, then the two men in buckskin, firing from his hip straight into their hearts. The pale rider lifted the Winchester to his shoulder, but death took him before his finger even touched the trigger. The horses bolted, leaving their dead riders sprawled in the dust, blood pumping from their chests. A tight helix of smoke curled from the barrel of the gun in Cowboy Roy's hand. Then everything faded to black.

Overhead, a large bird circled slowly atop a dying thermal that rose from the hill where Cowboy Roy lay. He thought it was probably a hawk, but it might have been a buzzard. It was hard to know for sure. A large gash had appeared on his forehead, leaving his vision a bit blurry. Even so, he could see plainly enough to know that the men were all gone. And he was thinking plainly enough to know they had never been there.

The bird then slanted off on a long, smooth glide towards The Lakes of Greenwood, alighting on the peak of the steep-roofed clock tower. Sam stood over his master, licking his face, but Cowboy Roy wasn't ready to get up quite yet. He just kept staring at the bird. He was almost sure it was a hawk.

#

Poorly sculpted fluff. If only I could produce a work of true visionary transformation, a creation worthy of "Let Me Love You." That cinematic classic contains colorful Texas imagery, specifically an alternate history in which the Texas is a sovereign nation. And that B-movie imagery is so much more dramatic that I could ever manage, even if I had an A-plus budget.

#

I've been thinking you should make a movie about me.

Yes, I know I said no graven images. But this would be different. For one thing, it would be in 70mm. For another thing, I would be played by a youthful Omar Sharif, my sensitive yet strong voice resonating in THX surround sound.

By its very nature this movie would be numinous. It would conclude with me consuming myself, a hand sandwich and a glass of fermented corpuscles, a multimedia Eucharist.

"Mmmm, that's good Messiah," I would say.

Actually, the movie I have in mind is based firmly in reality. It is the story of my family and of Texas. For the opening shot, picture a close up of hands tying brightly colored ribbons to the gray limbs of a leafless tree in winter. The hands belong to Jewell Poe, my maternal grandfather. It is the winter of 1953 in Waco, Texas, and he is in his backyard conducting experiments in color photography. He needs the colorful ribbons because the winter landscape is all gray and dead, just like the black and white photos he's still working with in his portrait photography business in downtown Waco. See, he's using science to bring the dead winter landscape to life. Clever, right?

The story is also about my grandmother, who is dying from leukemia. And the protagonist is the girl who will become my mother. She is helping her mother – my dying grandmother – take care of her brothers and sisters – my future aunts and uncles – and helping her father hand color the black-and-white portraits at her father's downtown studio. Hand tinting – that's what they did back in the day to bring dead portraits to life. The climax occurs in May 1953, when a tornado rips through downtown Waco, leveling many businesses and killing more than 100 people. The tornado destroys my grandfather's studio and smashes in the roof of the old family Nash. It's also the last weekend my grandmother is able to get out of bed before her death. Very symbolic. You like?

But most important, the tornado is not a naturally occurring phenomenon. Turns out it is actually a rip in the space-time continuum, a vortex pulling 1950s Waco through a black hole and directly into the plot line of the present day.

#

I arrive at work the next morning to find I am once again the truth doctor at Valuosity Life Planning Inc.

I learn of this surprising turn of events from Preacher with a Gun, our golf cart-driving security guard and night student at a local seminary. Soon as I pull into the employee parking lot Preacher with a Gun comes racing up in his golf cart, a side arm on his hip and a Bible on the dashboard.

"Lose your card key?"

"What?"

"For the garage."

"Oh, that. I don't have one anymore."

Preacher with a Gun gives me a quizzical smile and points to my sun visor.

"Oh yes, there it is. I guess I forgot."

I can still use the executive parking garage? Preacher with a Gun waves at me in my rearview mirror as I pull up to the garage entrance and scan my card. The gate rises, and I pull in just as I always have. I park my Lexus LS400 in the space labeled "Clark Caring."

#

Yes, I am back. But how? How did I regain my former position – overnight?

Back in the day, this sort of question would be a strategic plot point that would be milked for a ridiculously interminable period of time. Of course the reader would quickly see that the text of "The Voice of God" is somehow transforming everyday events into an alternate reality. This would be obvious to all – except for the characters in the story. A protagonist like Clark Caring actually would be surprised to find that he had awakened to an alternate reality where he was still the truth doctor.

How could such a thing happen? What a mystery the protagonist is compelled to solve!

So he checks the files in his office, seeking the non-existent evidence of his demotion to technical writer in the LET department and the twin losses of his corner office and parking space in the executive parking garage.

So he wonders: What happened? Or rather, what DIDN'T happen? A protagonist like Clark Caring might muse to himself thusly: "Clearly, my personal timeline has rolled backwards -- at least a year I estimate. For everyone else, though, time continues to move forward. My computer and telephone display a time and date of 7:50 am June 25, about 14 hours after turning off the computer in my cubicle in the LET department and pulling out the employee parking lot for my commute home."

You know what I say? BORING. Talk too much do too few. Let us now skip right to the big scene, the one with the Prophet who foretells my future as your God.

#

We arrive at the home of the Prophet, whom we find inside a restored backyard barn (circa 1919) locked in a death struggle with a homicidal Macintosh Portable computer. He takes a break from the battle to greet us.

"Welcome to my island," he says, out of breath and sweating. "Pull up a deck chair, help yourself to the tanning oil. But watch out for the brain crabs – they bite!"

We take a seat on an old church pew.

"May I offer you a festive beverage," he continues, "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 of the Prophet."

The hard drive inside the Macintosh Portable (aka "Mac") spins to life in a high-pitched whine.

"I'm told a little of you goes quite a ways," Mac says.

"You word processing bastard," the Prophet hisses, and they fall upon each other, writhing about on the worn floorboards in a terrible battle of ripping fabric, cracking plastic, broken incisors, saliva and blood.

"When they gaze upon each other murder is never long out of their eyes," Bellerio whispers to me.

"You called me a drunken son of a bitch," the Prophet protests.

Bluish white sparks are jumping from Mac's RS-232 port. "You don't stand a chance with me."

"Dispatch from the Land of the Dead. I the Prophet have now created the world's first novella composed solely of consecutive dreams. Seven months of dreams, each night flowing into the next, the journey of life."

"What tripe."

"Where did these images come from? Perhaps they are the inevitable reaction to my many years of denying the unconscious. Certainly the path was blazed early on, in the dreams of youth. This is the travelogue."

"And then there's Nixon in Texas."

"Yes, what a concept."

“An alternate history. Republic of Texas. An independent and sovereign nation. LBJ as president. It works. Nixon is the visiting head of state, here to establish diplomatic relations across the Red River, the international border. And we have the 1963 assassination in Dealey Plaza.”

“That’s when I saw the motorcycle guys.”

“You had just left the computer for a bathroom break. They caught you outside the restroom, held you down, puncturing your face. That’s when you learn God has been arrested.”

“No, no you computerized bastard. I already rewrote that section.”

“But badly. What tripe. This requires a rewrite. Call in a script doctor.”

“I hate you.”

“Then we move on to the scene about the message issued by the new governor of earth. God was wrong, violated universal laws. Immoral acts, including global flood. Planned homicidal UFO invasion as described in Revelations. People turning into insects.”

“A quick check of the Exogrid confirms the reactions of the populace. Christian evangelicals go into a massive Rapture frenzy. The planetary governor is the suspected Anti-Christ.”

“And we’ll give Clark a Jewish friend, who will say ‘I’m still waiting for the First Coming.’”

“Nice touch.”

“Meanwhile, local Hare Krishnas continue to run their renowned East Dallas vegetarian restaurant, unaffected by the announcement. The end is here, but no one notes its arrival.”

The Prophet explains that only I can save the world. “Keep reading the sacred text, Clark. The world depends on it.”

“What tripe,” Mac says.

This is more than the Prophet can bear. He falls upon Mac again. But then water starts to gush forth from between the barns worn, circa 1919 floorboards. The Prophet and Mac break off their combat to observe the artesian phenomenon.

“The water cannot be contained,” the Prophet explains through a broken tooth. “It wells up, alive.”

The Mac spins its hard drive into another high-pitched scream.

“What tripe!” And again they fall upon one another, creator and creation, murder blazing in their eyes.

#

#

So how does the world end? On television, of course.

“This is Reece Sloan interrupting your scheduled programming with another special report. And now, as America’s Sacrament War continues to quickly erupt in conflagrations of violence and the language and themes of the classic sci-fi movie “The Omega Man,” officials at the UN in New York are asking to what extent all of the citizenry of Earth will become involved in the global insanity.”

... Stop the launches! Star Wars defenses are fragmenting dream-carrying missiles. Psychosis is spreading across the planet. Repeat – stop the launches. Interception will fragment the dream-carrying missiles...

“Now the issue is one of survival. Is this the conclusion of time, the end of rational man? Is this the end of history, the swagger of science, the “uber” victories over space and linear time? Is this the end of the Age of the Deity? We were warned of judgment. The ancient tales of the withdrawal of the City of the Deity may well be true. It's come now. This is the Noble Misfortune, the weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Deity has withdrawn. The evil dead are emerging from the lagoon of flames, leaving us to our own devices. Where have you gone, Charlton Heston?”

#

Welcome again to my island.

What a nice surprise. You have been gone so long I thought I might never see you again. How long has it been? A year, perhaps more. I would offer you a celebratory drink, but there is no time to waste. We must stay on schedule. You have arrived just in time for today we start shooting the next installment of “Next Year at Marienbad.”

What’s that? I understand. Can you believe it has come to this? A seemingly normal morning, and then – How could any of us know of the secret testing being prepared by the government/alien conspiracy? How could any of us know of the “wonder weapon” that controls human behavior, both as treatment and as a mass inoculation? The pre-launch countdown of the dream-bearing ballistic missile marked the first widespread sighting of the clock in the air, a precursor to the flesh-coast horror, science gone wrong, the ballistic delivery of a psychotropic solution to the malaise of the modern age – a test administered, a test gone horribly wrong, the death of today, the birth of a frightening new tomorrow.

#

I must admit I am surprised to see you here. Pleased, but surprised. When you refused to run away with me I thought I would never see you again. Now that you are back things will move ahead once again.

I have a confession. I lied to you about the urgency of keeping the movie on schedule. “Next Year at Marienbad” has not been proceeding as well as I had hoped. After your last visit, I attempted to move ahead without you. The results were not edifying.

My first, failed inspiration: No more “Next Year at Marienbad.” That’s right. I decided there would be no more prophesy for me. No death of time and birth of a new religion. I would move on to a new creation. Pure entertainment. That’s the ticket. This may be the end of time, but people still want to see movies. And I have lots of bankable cinematic ideas.

Here's a one-sentence film treatment that came to me late one night after perhaps a few too many martinis: "Middle-aged man discovers he is an extraterrestrial." I see him as the hidden king on a hero's journey. In the Call to Adventure, a time-traveling cowboy rescues him from certain death by aliens. Helping him along on the adventure and Bellerose Shield and his posse of Cicadians. Upon awakening I realized that I had actually plagiarized "Let Me Love You," my favorite movie of all time.

Consider this one-sentence film treatment: "A special newspaper press makes every story change reality." I dreamed it, a genuine creation of the unconscious. Later I realized this idea had been done before an old "Twilight Zone" episode starring Burgess Meredith.

Next came "Nixon in Texas" (aka "Plan 9 ½ from Outer Space"). The protagonist, the time-traveling cowboy and Bellerose Shield return to 1960s Duncanville, where they stumble into an alternate universe. Richard Nixon has won the 1960 presidential. He opens diplomatic relations with the Republic of Texas, which had closed its doors to the U.S. back during WWII. Nixon is welcomed with open arms by Texas President Lyndon Johnson, and they ride together in a parade in downtown Dallas. As they near the infamous plaza, a rifle barrel is spotted in the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository. But wait – what is that sticking out of the storm drain? And over there, that metallic flash from the grassy knoll? It's a conspiracy, all right – an extraterrestrial/government conspiracy! Peeling back the layers, the protagonist finds that the extraterrestrials are preparing to stage a fake Rapture as part of a plan to take over the world. Oh yes, and God is going senile. (Though in all fairness that idea may be another leftover from "Let Me Love You," too.)

After reading "Farnham's Freehold," the classic '60s sci-fi plea for racial understanding, I envision a sequel based on an alternate version. In "Freeholdin' 2: Electric Boogaloo" (aka "Duke's Revenge"), the castrated, drug-addicted Duke decides to return to the 1960s with his father and his father's girlfriend. He quickly resumes his racist ways and embarks on a reign of terror, castrating black men in retaliation for the loss of his own DNA delivery organ.

One of my favorite concepts is "God Bless You, Mr. Hitler" (aka "Born Again Furher"). Hitler fakes his death in the Berlin bunker, escapes to America and starts a chain of dry cleaners. Then one day the Lord speaks to him. He goes to a tent revival and is "saved." He is a born again Christian, a true believer. The sins of his extermination of six million dead Jews are washed away in the Blood of the Lamb. His soul is "dry cleaned" by God. The born-again Furher turns himself in, and after a show trial in The Hague he is executed. But three days later, Hitler rises from the dead. The sky opens up, and God announces that Adolf Hitler has been reborn as the Second Coming of Christ. This is the fulfillment of Revelation. God, Jesus and Hitler look on from their heavenly thrones as the City of God descends to Earth. Some of the roofs of the buildings in the city are adorned with crosses, others swastikas.

I was actually rather pleased with "God Bless You, Mr. Hitler." I should have moved ahead with that one. But by this point, I couldn't focus enough to rough out a shooting script. My mind was racing, the ideas were overflowing. Having just read "Time's Arrow" (another rousing Nazi tale), I thought of remaking some literary classics in reverse.

“Moby Dick,” for instance. Captain Ahab emerges from the watery depths, resurrected by the great white. “I turn my body to the sun,” he says. “What ho, Tashtego! Let me silence thy hammer. Oh! ye three risen spires of mine; thou cracked keel; and only god-blessed hull; thou infirm deck, and modest helm, and Pole-blunted prow, - life-glorious ship! Must ye then be reborn, and with me? Am I reattached to the first fond pride of kindest blessed captains? Away from thee I roll, thou all-affirming and conquering whale. To the last shall you pursue me? Will you grapple with me? From hell's heart will you stab at me? For love's sake I flee thee! Float all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! And since both can be mine, let me then tow to pieces, while still fleeing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! Thus, I retake my spear!" For the rest of the story, Ahab flees the murderous beast as it chases him and his crew across the oceans of the world.

And then there is Mary Shelly's “Frankenstein.”

In the opening scene, the Monster comes out of the Artic waste, boards a ship and brings a dead doctor (Dr. Frankenstein) back to life. "Greetings!" he says. “I join you, and in you I encounter the first human whom these eyes have ever beheld. Greetings, Frankenstein!”

They return to Europe, where an ungrateful Dr. Frankenstein flees the Monster. In turn, the Monster continues to do good deeds, restoring life to several dead bodies. And still the ungrateful doctor does not befriend the creature who saved his life. In the end, Dr. Frankenstein straps the Monster to a table in his laboratory and kills him with electricity. The doctor then dissects the Monster and implants his body parts into various cadavers, which his hunchbacked assistant buries under cover of darkness in spooky church graveyards. Townsfolk then exhume the cadavers and conduct rebirthing ceremonies. Voila! The dead are returned to life. The Monster lives on, a sort of Christ figure for the scientific age.

And then – and then what? Then I have a really great idea, a dangerously great idea. What if I film the Bible, but in reverse?

I call it “El Bib” (aka “Biblin’ 2: Electric Boogaloo”).

#

In the beginning God lived with his people in the holy city of Jerusalem. In those days the home of God was among mortals. He dwelt with them; they were his people, and God himself was with them. He wiped every tear from their eyes. There was no Death, no mourning or crying or pain. These things did not exist.

The holy city had the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates were inscribed the names of twelve tribes; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The city was laid out foursquare, its length the same as its width and height: 1,500 miles. The walls were built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of

the gates was a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass. The gates were never shut by day, and there was no night there. The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God was its light, and its lamp was the Lamb. The nations of the Earth walked by the light, and the kings of the Earth brought their glory into it. Nothing accursed was found within the city.

Through the throne of God and of the Lamb flowed the River of the Water of Life. Bright as crystal the water flowed through the middle of the street of the city.

From his throne God spoke to his people: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I give water as a gift from the River of the Water of Life. Those who conquer have inherited these things, I am their God and they are my children. They live with me in the holy city, and their names are inscribed in the Book of Life. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters and all liars, their place is in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur."

On either bank of the River of the Water of Life grew the Trees of Life. They bore twelve kinds of fruit, producing their fruit each month; and the leaves of the trees were for the healing of the nations. And in the center of the city grew the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

God commanded his people, "You may freely eat of the fruit of the Trees of Life and gather the healing leaves. But of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

But then one day a man encountered a talking serpent, who asked: "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the city?' The man said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the city; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the city, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' But the serpent said to the man, "you will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the man saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, he took of its fruit and ate; and he also sold it to his neighbors and all of the people of the city, and they ate. Then the eyes of everyone were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They began to penetrate one another's membranes, the men expelling their ectoplasm inside the women.

"This is the best fruit of all!" they cried. "Let us gather this fruit and make of it a wine, which we can drink ourselves and sell what is left to the fornicators and the idolaters who live outside the city."

They immediately set themselves to labor, gathering the fruit for the wine presses. Then they heard the sound of God walking in the street. They instantly dropped the fruit they had gathered and stepped away from the wine presses. They began to wander off, acting as if they were still blameless. But the people were unable to hide their sin as they had gathered so much fruit that it covered the street and filled the gutters.

"Where did you get all of this fruit?" God asked.

"We picked it from one of the trees you gave us."

Then God asked, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The people shook their heads and spoke in solemn tones. “What have we done wrong? After all, it was not us who created the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.”

And with that God instantly knew the truth. He said to his people:

“Because of what you have done, I place a curse upon you and all of your descendents. No longer shall you dwell in the safety of the holy city. No longer shall you bask in the light of the lamp of the Lamb.”

Then God said, “See, my people have become like me, knowing good and evil. They must no longer eat from the Tree of Life and live forever, like Gods. Therefore, I must drive them from the gates of the city, into the danger and the darkness.”

So God turned his people out into the world, with the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loved and practiced falsehood, and caused the holy city of Jerusalem to ascend into Heaven.

Now the people of God knew all about the Lake of Fire. This was the place of the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters and all liars. Their names were not written in the Book of Life, which lay at the bottom of the lake.

As they stood along the shore of the Lake of Fire God caused the flames to leap and the sulfur to smoke. The lake gave up the Book of Life and Death and Hades and all the dead, great and small. They stood with the people of God before a great white throne. Books were opened, and the rulings were read aloud by the officers of the court. All judgment of evil and wrongdoing was set aside.

Satan was rescued from the flames, too. He had been tortured there, along with the beast and the false prophet, and they had been tormented day and night for the previous thousand years. But now they were released, reborn from the fire that had consumed them.

A demon stood in the moonlight, and with a loud voice called to all the flesh-eating animals that walk the Earth, “Come, gather for the great supper of Satan, to eat the White Horse and its rider!” Then the sky opened, and down came the horse and its rider, Faithful and True, who in his righteousness judges and makes war.

The eyes of Faithful and True were like a flame of fire, and on his head were many diadems; and he had a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He was clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name was called The Word of God. And the armies of Heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. They were from all the nations of the Earth; kings, captains, the mighty, both free and slave, both great and small.

From the mouth of Faithful and True came a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he was to rule them with a rod of iron; he was to tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he had a name inscribed, “King of kings and Lord of lords.”

The beast and the kings of the Earth and their armies gathered to make war against Faithful and True and the armies of Heaven, but the rider of the White Horse and his army were victorious. The beast and the false prophet fled the battlefield and the Lake of Fire. Their armies were spared by Faithful and True, and all the flesh-eating animals that walk the Earth left the battlefield unsatisfied.

#

And that's just the opening of Genesis. This creation story continues with all sorts of strange imagery, culminating with seven churches each sending an explanatory letter to John of Patmos.

Other Old Testament highlights: Paul is a follower of Christ, but he is doing terrible things with his miraculous powers. The living die, the sighted go blind, the able-bodied are crippled. Then God blinds him and he goes out into the desert where he gets his sight back in a miraculous fashion. Having learned the error of his ways, Paul gets a new name -- Saul of Tarsus. He then goes from synagogue to synagogue, bringing dead Christians back to life.

Of course there is the story of the son of God, who comes down out of the sky, descends into a grave, where he dies but three days later is returned to life by Roman soldiers who put him on a cross. God eventually causes the Christ child to disappear from Mary's womb, erasing the last sign of his existence.

The New Testament story of Job is a good one. A very rich man suddenly loses everything and simultaneously receives a direct communication from God. He is abused by his so-called friends and left to suffer on a garbage heap. But he still believes. Satan tells God that he believes Job will turn away from his beliefs if his wealth is restored. They make a wager, and Satan returns to Job much of his property. Job is rich again, though not nearly so rich as before. He still believes in God, and Satan loses the bet.

Ah, so many wonderful stories to tell! Like the time David used a sword to restore the head of a giant, who was so appreciative that he took his Army away and left the Hebrews in peace. ... the flood story, in which God dries up the rain and restores life to the many dead bodies littering the landscape ... a pillar of salt is turned into a woman ... Moses brings his people out of the desert, across the Red Sea and makes them slaves in Egypt. He takes away terrible curses imposed by God and disappears back into the wilderness. Years later he comes back to kill one of the Egyptians, then lives in secrecy among them. He eventually meets up again with the Hebrews as a baby in a reed basket on the Nile.

The end times come in the Garden of Eden, when God takes away the animal skin clothing of Adam and Eve. They must wear fig leaves. Adam gives an apple to Eve, who in turn hands it over to a snake. God responds by turning Eve into a rib and implanting her into Adam. Despondent, Adam takes away all of the names of all the animals. God turns him into dust. Then God takes away all the animals and the dry land and even the light, leaving the Earth without form and void. Amen.

But no, I tell myself. This isn't right either. I am not a Hollywood-style director. I am a prophet. I must give my witness. I must continue filming "Next Year at Marienbad." If only I could concentrate. I walk the beach, looking for sea monsters and inspiration. I tried to force myself to write something "inspired," always a bad idea. Here's something I came up with over the last Memorial Day holiday, watching the vacationers playing the bay:

#

Sometimes I see a horizon beyond the horizon. It is a line in the sky, exactly paralleling the one we all know of the waking world. But it is hard to focus on this idea, for below the waking world horizon I see one of the pale bikini creatures, busily attempting to adjust her top. It is a heavy load, for sure. For I see her adjust one side, then the other, then reach for the middle as if to unhook and discard the whole thing. A kiss

from an adjacent boy, though, and she is back at it, reaching around behind herself, adjusting the tie that binds.

How can I think about important things like a second, unseen horizon when this pale bikini creature insists on this constant touching and adjusting and this kiss-kiss-kissing.

I was once young like that. But never so young that I had a chance to observe or participate in -- ah, now I take note of a new development. The boy has walked away, back onto dry land and the white car of wakeful travel. The pale bikini creature is busy with something drawn close to her core. I am not sure what. Perhaps I could risk a quick peek through the binoculars. But no -- no, this would likely prove a disappointment. My thoughts are surely more enticing than her reality, even a reality of busy breast adjustments and pretty red toenails dipped in wet sexuality.

Now she strokes her blonde hair, a mermaid on the beach. This mermaid could take a swim in my unconscious, check out the underwater road. Let her find the unknown treasure, bring it up from the depths to sun on the beach-dock.

And now, drunkenness in the back of a moving pickup. This is real fun. The pickup leaves with my mermaid, and the fishermen depart for secret honey holes in my unconscious. No telling what they may catch. But I guarantee it won't be pleasant. Only sea monsters down there, consigned to the frightful depths. Huge, bug-eyed creatures with glowing patches that move across the surface of their cold, slimy skin. They drift slowly along the bottom, among the old Coke bottles and my failed, forgotten dreams.

The bay is deserted now. But I can't seem to recover my second horizon idea. It just looks normal now, like any old line where world and sky meet. Perhaps the pale bikini creature was my muse, inspiring me to see the hidden, secret world-sky line. Now the muse is gone, and I am alone with no worthwhile thought. The sun is low in the sky. Soon I can speculate on the orange glow, the embers of another dying holiday.”

#

Sometimes I see a horizon beyond the horizon. It's a mesmerizing concept, no? In my case, it mesmerized me into recognizing the entirely new reality: the End is Here.

Conflagrations of violence, global insanity of the fragmenting dream-carrying missiles. Psychosis spreading across the planet. The talking head on TV has it right: the issue is one of survival. Is this the conclusion of time, the end of rational man? Is this the end of history and the swagger of science? Is this the conclusion of our collective victories over space and linear time? Is this the death of God? We have been warned of cosmic judgment. The ancient tales of the withdrawal of the City of the Deity may well be true. It's here today. It's come now.

In “Love in the Ruins,” Walker Percy prophesized these dread latter days of time, the feeling of the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of ourselves. The Hydrocarbon Age is defunct. Vines are strangling Manhattan. Coyotes have the run of downtown Houston. The churches are empty now, abandoned years ago shortly after the time of the great catastrophe, the fragmentation of the dream-carrying missiles. Look over there on Ocean Boulevard. The stained glass of the church is shattered on the floor with the bird droppings. I'm told the New Rome is in Cicero, Illinois.

Has it really come to this, the conclusion of all our yesterdays? I feel unchanged. And yet – my countrymen are undeniably different. I see it all around me, the distortions

and exaggerations of inferential thinking, delusions and hallucinations. I see their cognitive and emotional dysfunctions of perception, behavioral monitoring, affect, fluency and productivity of thought and speech, hedonic capacity, volition and drive.

I don't bother trying to make sense anymore of their odd language and incoherent communication, the word salad of disorganized speech. I believe the technical term is "receptive aphasia." Nevertheless, I must admit it is rather entertaining. This is a new language for a new age. I am incorporating it into my post-holocaust film work. I think you'll like it.

I see many delusions of jealousy and religiosity, seemingly organized around a central theme. Persecutory delusions are common. So is idealized romantic love and spiritual union. Many people possess the conviction of having some great but unrecognized talent or insight or having made some important discovery. Too many with a special message from a deity. Too close to home. They're crowding in on my territory! And all the while we look to the sky, to the aerial clock. Cold hands of time are spinning in the heavens. A slow wave shivers through the universe.

My jailers don't even bother to report for work anymore.

#

And yet there is good news. Now in these broken, derelict days after the end of time it is possible to combine two opposites into a new whole. Are you familiar with William Burroughs' Nova Trilogy? No matter. The idea is simple. Create something new and unique by combining something old and commonplace. This technique generates an original creative product.

Distressing tale from The Twilight Report – a Paraguayan physicist claims we shall journey not only through the cosmos but through the fourth dimension, too! We know his claims are true for today we are back from a time journey to 1979, bringing with us an explanation of what we saw and how it was completed.

First, a warning: This operation requires extreme accuracy as it is a difficult enterprise. It is based in part on mid-20th century experiments conducted by my grandfather, Jewell Poe. These experiments were aimed at creating a new process for color photography. Brightly colored ribbons were tied to a leafless, winter tree in the Poe family's backyard in Waco, Texas. Double reversal film stock was exposed through a lens or prism. Somehow wires were crossed and time/space polarity was reversed. The developed film reveals a horizon beyond the horizon. I am caught in the psychic entrainment, snapped out of the last weekend of youth in 1979 and back to 1953 Waco and forward to outer space. I am spun into an elliptical orbit around the cicadian scientific outpost on Uranus, where they know of my grandfather's experiments. I focus on the heavy blue silence, and a slow wave goes through me.

Beware, friends. The Jewell Effect is equal parts excitement and danger, just as you would expect when traveling beyond the outermost border marking the back of beyond. Only the adventurous should apply. However, the fourth dimension belongs to everyone who has the courage and the know-how to come in. It belongs to YOU. So here is the entire four-part process, precisely as it works.

Part 1: You begin your voyage in the corpse house of the old newspapers. You fold today in with yesterday and type up the resulting script. When you read through your daily newspaper you typically see and absorb much more than you know. In fact, you absorb everything, but it is not easily accessible to you because it is on the level of

unconscious understanding. The folding process establishes a metaphorical relationship between today and yesterday. You have assembled a script that, combined with the photos, forms a montage of time. You move yourself literally about within the frame of that montage, occupying yesterday's news. You return to present time by traveling towards yesterday. You will do this many hours per the day for several months, back as far as the news goes. Exhume old magazines and forgotten novels, too. Poke about at the cadavers of brittle yellow letters and dusty government reports. Make fold-ins and write scripts. Do it even with the photographs.

Part 2: Proceed to the closest studio of film. Here you will learn to have a talk with yourself in reverse at all levels. This is done by running the film and sound track in reverse. This is precisely the schematic diagram employed in the creation of "El Bib." Picture Christ eating the Last Supper with his disciples. After this, reverse the film, turning satiety back to hunger. At first the film will break into a run at the normal speed. Next it drops into slow-motion. The same procedure can be extended to other physical processes, including the expelling of ectoplasm. You are offended? Not. You must move beyond your sexual prudery and reticence. Sex will be possibly the heaviest anchor holding you in the present time.

Part 3: Edit the resulting film into an endless loop on a single metal reel. This process results in a great circular movie, without beginning or end, birth or death. (For full effect, it should be viewed in a circular theater and projected onto a circular screen.) If you cut through the middle of the reel and view the individual frames, then you will find that the movie is actually the Deity, a sentient being realized in the form of a living movie from the back of beyond whose precise center is any point in your life and therefore totally remote and unreachable.

Part 4: Open the door onto the space/time continuum, and a slow wave shivers through the universe.

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Smoking is not allowed in the Strangers Rest Senior Center, but violations are rampant and generally overlooked during the weekly Meals on Wheels luncheon. Overlooked by everyone but Dewayne's wife, that is.

"That old shrew," he scowls.

"Doctors orders, Dewayne," Roy says. "Remember, you ain't so young anymore."

"Yeah, but Dewayne ain't the one with a bandage on his head," Toots remarks.

"What happened Roy? You fall out of your recliner again?"

Roy puts a hand to the white gauze he's taped to his forehead. "Why, this here ain't nothing you girls would know anything about," he remarks.

"And I'm sure you're just dying to tell us."

"Since you're obviously curious, I will tell you. This here bandage is actually the protective covering on a solar panel for a sex machine."

This solicits a combination of laughter and groans.

"Why, sure," Roy continues. "If I didn't keep this here piece of manly hardware covered up I'd be mobbed by beautiful girls. You ugly old coots wouldn't stand a chance."

"No smoking," Dewayne says. "Just another excuse to deprive me of one of life's few remaining pleasures. Dying with clean lungs is kinda like dying with a million dollars in your pocket. It ain't going to do you any good. And besides, Roy, I'm five years younger than you."

"Let's get back to the subject," Toots says. "If Daniel can pull it off, it'll be more than just a pocketful of cash for one man. This land deal could be good for the entire town. High prices tend to - uh, hold on, now." He stops to count his dominos. "Wasn't I down to two tiles? Harold?"

Like Dewayne, Toots always kept one eye on his tiles. But the other eye he assigned to Harold Bost, a quiet, unassuming man who had a seemingly impossible talent for making dominos reproduce. I tried to play him once. I'd swear I was down to one or two tiles and, next thing I knew, I was looking down at six, seven, even eight tiles. So was everybody else. Everybody except Harold, that it. No one could ever figure out how he did it.

Toots counted his dominos again, then gave Harold a skeptical stare.

"Harold, I don't believe I should have six tiles, do you?"

"Hard to keep track sometimes," he allows. He doesn't look away from his own neatly arranged row of four dominos.

Toots just shrugs. But Harold's wife, Ima, isn't nearly as resigned.

"Yes, Mr. Bost has pulled another of his tricks, I know that look," she says in a quavering, old woman voice. "He does it whenever he thinks he might lose. Ornery old man."

"I've lost plenty of times," Harold whispers. But that just makes Ima madder.

"Oh, you're always so sly with your little tricks and cheats, aren't you? Someday you'll get yours, Mr. Bost. Yes, you and all you ornery old men will get yours."

"Now what was I saying?" Toots asks. "Oh yeah, land prices. Setting a high price is the only way to get a high price, and that's the only way to push up property values and increase our town's tax revenues."

“Toots, taxes are sky high already,” Cowboy Roy says. “Most of us don’t want to sell out, we’re going to stay here till we die. We’d rather have low taxes than land that’s worth a bundle. We can’t afford to be that rich.”

“Values have definitely been going down,” I remark. “Real estate’s in the tank.”

“And that’s where it ought to be,” Dewayne adds. “None of the land around here is worth anything close to what folks have been paying these days, let alone the \$1 million Daniel’s asking. Dirt ain’t worth no more than you can make from the crops you can grow on it. We ain’t had no cotton production around here to speak of in 20 years, so you can forget the big cash crops. All anybody does with land around here anymore is raise hay and run cattle.”

“So what you reckon that makes Daniel’s land worth?” Roy asks.

“If I was in the market? I might give \$200 an acre.”

“Well tarnation Dewayne!” Toots roars, almost knocking over his dominos. “Dirt’s been selling for \$20,000 an acre real regular now for several years. Even if prices are down, they sure ain’t dropped to no penny on the dollar.”

“I remember one year it sure came close,” Roy says. “Cotton prices were so low mamma and pappa just plowed the crop right back into the field.”

“Yeah, I think that was back in ’28 or ’29. It was a bad year, prices were low.”

“No, we didn’t plow the cotton under until the Depression. You’re thinking of the big freeze, the summer when everything froze over.”

This catches my attention. “You had a freeze in the summer?”

“Yes sir,” Toots says. “The weather was awful for months. We couldn’t get out, when suddenly it got a whole lot worse.”

“We had a big freeze, right there in the dog days of August,” Roy says, marveling at the memory. “Everything froze over solid. I remember sliding around out there on the stock pond, the one at the old airbase.”

“It was just awful. Killed the whole crop, everything in the field.”

“We lived that year on nothing but butter beans and coffee.”

“We’ll don’t worry about that. We’re not going to be living on butter beans and coffee again because land ain’t going to sell for \$200 an acre ever again.”

#

I hoped he was right. I hated butter beans. But I liked – still like – just about every other kind of food they serve at the weekly Meals on Wheels lunch.

Prepared by the women of the town from family recipes, some handed down by pioneer ancestors, the two-table spread consists of the kind of traditional Southern fare that can only be found anymore in the country kitchens of iron-haired grandmas or at Sunday night covered dish dinners.

I never missed the weekly spread, where I’d load my plate with a big slab of pan fried ham and side vegetables: Greens flavored with a shot of vinegar; green beans cooked to a muted olive Army tint and glistening in bacon fat; and real hominy grits. It’ll bring tears to my eyes, all for a \$3 donation.

Buck looks at my overloaded plate and smiles. “Your wife a good cook?” he asks.

“If she’s got a recipe,” I say. “But I don’t think you can find stuff like this in a cookbook.”

“When we was newlyweds, my Ima couldn’t boil water,” Buck confides quietly, careful to make sure his wife – two tables away – isn’t listening. “But she learned quick enough. And I’m carryin’ around the gut to prove it.”

“You just be patient,” Toots adds. “She’s going to learn how to cook those green beans and ham the way you like it.”

The idea of Allison cooking up a real Southern meal is a cruel joke. Sure, she’s spent more than half of her life in Texas, but she operates under the delusion that she is an East Coast transplant. Allison is a sophisticate marooned in a raw and spare land, perplexed (she claims) by all things Texan and Southern. Her specialties are Boston baked beans, Philly cheese steak and New England clam chowder – not grits and greens.

I quickly finish dessert and break away from the domino players to “work the room,” as Roy likes to kid me.

#

Although officially intended to benefit the town’s old folks, the Meals on Wheels luncheon is a favorite among the local business and civic leaders. My first month in the bureau I even mentioned it in a Lunch Bunch review in the Northeast Extra: “This weekly gathering is a sort of casual chamber of commerce mixer where attendees don’t feel obliged to exchange business cards.” But of course we do. It’s the best place in Strangers Rest -- perhaps all of the Texas 114 corridor -- to pick up rumors and gossip. I’ve found that as long as I keep my notepad and pen out of sight, an hour or so of delicious home cooking and friendly talk will yield a weeks’ worth of stories.

I make my usual contacts. The president of the bank (“no, haven’t heard from the feds in months”); the sister of Bryan P. Hamilton, professional golfing legend and Strangers Rest’s most famous resident (next to Cowboy Roy, of course); the visiting Keller mayor; Justice of the Peace Hubert Skinner.

On my way between tables, I notice a fair number of the old folks are drawn to a new offering: free samples of bottled water courtesy of Ozona International.

An old man pokes a knarred finger bone at the pyramid of plastic bottles and a cardboard cutout of the trademark Ozona cloud. The cardboard cloud has been given a flashing neon lightning bolt, which glints off the polished, albino head of the “Yo! Ozona Man!” (registered trademark), who has stationed himself behind the table.

“As I said before, it’s part of a nationwide marketing study,” the water man explains. “We’re trying to determine what new products might appeal to various segments of the marketplace.”

The front door opens, admitting a hot whirlwind from the asphalt parking lot. It’s The Stranger, with film crew in tow. He walks straight to me and whispers in my ear.

“What, him?” I ask, incredulous. “He’s supposed to be the sinister Dr. Adolfo Morel?”

#

He doesn’t look very menacing or dangerous. Or human.

Adolfo Morel bears an odd, alien countenance: smooth head, snow white skin, blood red lips and mouth and black pupils and irises magnified to lurid proportions by the prism-like lenses in his glasses. He is average height, but of frail build. His bones are like those of a bird -- so delicate, you could knock him over with a feather.

“He’s supposed to be the mad scientist of the movie?” I ask. “I just don’t know.”

The Stranger is undeterred by my doubts.

“Dr. Morel is actually a character from the Society of the Purple Sunset,” he explains. “He has inexplicably migrated into the waking world. He is the director of the black ops division of Ozona, here undercover as the ‘Yo! Ozona Man!’ He’s offering free water, but don’t drink any. It’s just a ruse to introduce a new version of Fluoride9 into the populace and create the world’s first privately owned deity.”

Roy steps up to the table and examines the pyramid of bottles.

“I hear tell you’re paying \$10 and all we got to do is drink some of this water and fill out the form?”

Dr. Morel carefully adjusts the glasses perched on the bridge of his too-thin, too-small nose, runs a pale dead hand over his bare pate and gives his questioner an emotionless, insect smile.

“Yes, it is as you say. We’re paying people to drink our water.”

The Stranger motions to his cameraman and the microphone boom operator. Then he turns to me.

“For this scene, you are to attempt to claim a bottle and form,” he explains.

“I’m not participating,” I say.

“Don’t worry. You don’t drink it, but you’ll need a bottle so you can have it analyzed.”

“I won’t.”

The Stranger blinks in disbelief. “Why not?” he asks.

“There’s still no incredible revelation.”

“Be patient. We’re not even done with the back story yet. Action!”

#

“Today we’re testing ‘Fountain of Youth,’” Morel explains. “This amalgamating beverage is aimed at members of select socio-economic profiles age 50 and up. Samples are carefully measured. It is necessary to administer the correct mixture to the appropriate subject.”

“In other words, rich old folks,” The Stranger says. “Mark, now you pick up a bottle and examine the label, which features a sort of wood cut of Ponce de Leon discovering Florida. Your line –”

“I already told you I’m not participating,” I say.

“What? Why not?”

“I do not believe in the movie.”

The Stranger looks at me in disbelief.

“How can you not believe?” he asks. “It’s our movie.”

“Not mine. Yours. I don’t believe in it. No one else will believe, either. You are nothing like the old man in my dream.”

“I am The Stranger.”

“You are a fraud. You’re like a bad game show host. This movie is an extreme embarrassment. I don’t think you know a thing about making movies.”

The Stranger nods thoughtfully. “OK, we’ll add your dialogue in post-production.”

#

Cowboy Roy sidles up beside me and rests a conspiratorial forearm on my shoulder.

“If you want to see a sight, just keep your eyes on Harold.”

I look over at Harold, who was still sharing a table with Buck and the mayor.

“What am I looking for?”

“Check out that bone pile he’s nursing along. He’s outdone himself this time.”

Sure enough, he has a substantial stack of dominos that now dominate the table.

“Must be two feet tall,” I marvel. The stack is so tall, in fact, that its base stretched to the table’s edge, tiles sliding over the precipice to the concrete floor. Harold is grabbing at the falling tiles, tossing them back onto the domino mountain, but this is a losing battle. In fact, all he has to show for his efforts is a domino avalanche. And an angry wife.

“I’ll teach you a trick or two, Harold Bost,” Ima says, pelting him with plastic cutlery from the serving table. “Tricks and cheats! That’s all you’re about, you ornery old man.”

Harold stoically endures his wife’s fury, ignoring the flying knives and combination fork/spoons that rained upon him and his domino mountain. Mayor Toots and Buck nervously watch from behind the Ozona “cloud,” the neon lightning bolt crackling ominously.

“Poor Harold,” Roy says. “If only he’d use his powers for good.”

Roy and I go to Harold’s assistance, picking up the dominos that litter the floor. And then Dr. Morel arrives.

“Let’s try a different game,” he suggests to Harold. “I can teach you one I eternally win.”

“It’s no game at all if you can’t ever lose,” Harold observes.

“It is logically possible for me to lose, but such an event has never occurred.”

“OK then, let’s give it a whirl.”

“Two players. The dominos are arranged in four columns. Eight. Four. Two. One. Each of us may select as many tiles as we wish, but only from one column at a time. Whoever selects the final tile is the loser. Would you like to begin?”

#

After five straight losses, Harold shakes his head and pushes back from the table.

“It’s impossible,” he insists.

“At last,” Ima says. “Finally somebody around here got the best of Harold Bost.”

I excuse myself and escape to the parking lot.

The midday heat is a welcome change from the senior center’s icy-cold air conditioning. In the shade of an oak, I watch two boys playing in a grassless patch of yard. One of them is acting out an invented scene from “The Abandoned Ones.”

“Come in Affliction Corps,” he commands into a radio-shaped rock. “This is Normpart Internment Camp. We are under attack, repeat under attack! The United Nations is bombing the puppies!”

The other boy is not interested in battling the Antichrist. He has focused his attention on a peach pit, which he is prying open with a flathead screwdriver.

“My brother told me that little seed in there tastes like 7-Up,” he says.

That is all the encouragement the other boy needs to abandon playing “Abandoned.” He retrieves the almond-shaped heart from the pit and bites off half. And starts a fit of spitting.

“You’d have to call it `ook-aid,’” he complains. “Worst tasting stuff I’ve ever had. It’s like poison.”

And then they see the dog, napping in a patch of bare ground under a chinaberry tree next door.

“Come here baby,” one of the boys says sweetly, holding out the peach pit to the bleary eyed dog. It sniffs the morsel for a moment, then returns to its chinaberry slumber.

“Aww man.”

#

#

I have always been in the grip of the idea of universal catastrophe. Call it Armageddon. Call it the Apocalypse. I have always been awaiting the End of the World. Consider the dreams of childhood.

The Stranger once said that our earliest dreams often foretell our destiny. “We should put them in the movie,” he said. “We’ll cast you as the hidden king, the child of noble birth who is placed with an anonymous, ordinary family while still an infant. And yet, the truth cannot be entirely concealed. The destiny is foreshadowed in nocturnal visions.”

Those earliest visions are not pleasant to recall. Would you think it too dramatic if I told you those nearest me seemed to be bringers of death? I know, I know – how can I say such terrible things? My parents would be heartbroken to hear that I thought they were anything less than stellar. Did they not give me everything I needed and every reasonable thing I wanted? Was I not afforded every opportunity to become a perfected being? Certainly the blame for this failure is mine alone.

#

I am a preschooler, no more than five, receiving presents from my parents. Kenner Easy Show Projector, G.I. Joe Mercury space capsule, Hi Ho! Cherry-O – typical toys of the 1960s. But this is not my birthday or Christmas. The gifts mean my parents want their only child to have a pleasant experience before handing him over to the devil.

The transfer begins right after the gifts, so I don’t even get a chance to enjoy them. We are in my bedroom of our house on Cherry Street in Duncanville. I cautiously approach the twin bed with Early American bedspread, a tapestry of British and American soldiers engaged in cannon battle. It is a foot or two from the wall and window, forming a narrow gap into the dark unknown. I peer over the side of the bed, into this abyss, and see the tail of the devil flicking back and forth. The tail has the familiar diamond shape on the end; the rest of it is covered in short hair, like a lion's tail. A lion/demon hybrid. So that’s it. I am to be consumed.

#

My mother and father both work, so I spend my pre-school years with baby sitters. One of them lives in a garage apartment, a home for cars. Dream after dream, she makes me sit on a fireplace mantle, in the dark. I am a knickknack, an ornamental contrivance.

The circumstances of this mantle sitting vary. Sometimes, mixed in with the dream memories, there is a waking life recollection of an older neighbor girl who threatens me with a leather belt, which she cracks like a whip. Always, I am threatened with severe physical punishment if I get down. And if I should ever fall, it will be even worse: I will be transformed into a statue.

I know this because I saw it in another vision, one in which I stand at the end of a long, smooth game surface. I look down over the end, into the abyss, and see the sailboat that slid too far. Lying next to the boat is a man-turned-statue. He reminds me of the pilot who used to sit inside the airplane on the roof of the Skyvue Motel in Waco. This dead mariner is forever fixed in a sitting position, hand poised for the rudder. This is a terrifying location, peering over the edge of life and death.

#

Now at a different baby sitter's house, outside playing with children. In the front yard I see my dog, a black poodle named Tinker, running with some of the kids. His ears are flying behind him; he's having a great time. This is a surprise, though, because Tinker should be at home on Cherry Street, the other side of town.

Suddenly, the baby sitter's older, mean son chases down my dog, runs him to the ground. This will be bad, death for sure. I ask the boy not to hurt Tinker.

"He's my dog."

So the boy waits for me, Tinker cowered at his feet. But when I arrive at his side, I see that it is not Tinker at all. Instead of my happy, energetic puppy, I see a sad-eyed creature wearing a floppy straw hat with plastic flowers pasted on the side. A sad, old Southern lady dog, ready to hoe collards in her vegetable garden.

Both fearful and relieved, I tell the boy that it's not my pet. I walk sadly away, leaving the terrified gardening dog to the older boy's not-so-tender mercies. I should have tried to save her.

#

One of my grade school teachers stands naked in front of the class, talking to the boys. No girls are present.

We can't believe our good fortune. This teacher is the only "Miss" in our grade, a young divorced woman with dark hair parted in the middle. The boys all think she is hot.

"Don't laugh or she'll quit," one boy says.

So we all put on our best serious faces and pretend to listen, staring in silence. This is the first time I have seen a naked woman, but I know enough that I am not surprised by her appearance. She has no penis, only testicles. Isn't this normal female anatomy?

#

I must take some unpleasant medicine. It is chlorine bleach, a proper treatment for the whitening of dark innards. But how can I choke this down? Mom mixes it with ice cream. This is awful. But she tells me I must eat it. I must take my medicine.

#

Our antique grandfather clock is possessed, haunted. The hands are spinning wildly, the chimes are off key, cold and distant. And the spirits inside are calling to me. "Rhine, rhine, rhine..." My father bought the clock in Germany, brought it home in the belly of a Texas Air National Guard KC-97. So perhaps the ghosts are homesick for the Fatherland.

#

Visiting relatives, poking around interesting artifacts in their junk-filled garage. One of my cousins finds an old JaPoppa Man Robot, a once-popular but now long-obsolete life-size toy that resembles a crash test dummy. They're easy to operate: Put the JaPoppa Man in the special JaPoppa Popping Chair, which charges and activates the robot by bouncing it up and down like the pilot in one of those old, failed flying machines. I don't think my cousin should reawaken this long-sleeping robot. Let sleeping robots lie, I say. But she and others do it anyway. They put the robot in the chair and crank it up. Soon, the JaPoppa Man rises from the chair, staggering around like the village drunk. All the kids laugh. But this cannot end well. Surely, JaPoppa Man will be misunderstood. He will be chased down by torch-bearing villagers and burned alive in a Dutch windmill.

#

Visiting my girlfriend's house. Her family is there, including a little brother. He is sitting at the coffee table, working on his coin collection. I wish that I had some valuable coins to give him. This would make me look good in front of the girl and her family – like a normal, friendly young man. It would be nice to appear normal, all for the bargain price of a few pieces of silver.

#

A man decides to conduct an experiment in which he will spend a short amount of time inside a pizza oven, perhaps 15 minutes. My job is to close the door behind him and open it at the proper time. I agree to do so as a favor, so surely I am not to blame for the terrible tragedy that befalls him.

The experiment begins, proceeding unremarkably. But as this is a pizza parlor, I become distracted by the demands of business. Lots of customers, so many that I forget the man I've shut up in the oven. When I finally remember him, it has been 45 minutes.

I rip open the door, but it is too late. He is dead. His legs look normal enough, but the top half of his body is melted onto the surface of the oven. It looks like a pair of legs protruding from a puddle of overcooked mozzarella.

I know I am in trouble now. I get a sick feeling inside and run away. But there is no escape; it is only a matter of time. I am a killer.

#

While sitting in a chair (possibly tied to it), I am shot in the chest with a pistol. Point blank. I feel no pain, yet the wound is fatal. I know that I am dead – or soon will be. Indeed, others in the room already regard me as dead, a remnant of the past. They walk past, not even bothering to look my way. But I can still observe them, and I wonder what will become of me.

#

The conclusion of time comes in my sleep.

My parents wake me up early, while it is still dark. We step outside, onto the front porch stoop of the Woodacre Circle house. I look out at our little town. The houses have been destroyed. All that remains are the brick chimneys, rising above the smoking ruins like blackened obelisks. The fires of destruction burn red in the broken hearths. The world of my childhood is no more.

#

On a skateboard, moving rapidly down a school hallway. A closed door lies ahead. I am moving too fast to stop; there will be a terrible collision. But just as I reach the door, someone opens it and I pass through unharmed. Every 50 feet or so I encounter another door. And each time, someone opens it just in time for me to pass through. The process is repeated perhaps a dozen times. Meanwhile, I continue to gain momentum. There is nothing to stop me now.

#

Out in the darkness, a strange man – perhaps a monster – is trying to break into the house. He is coming for me.

My father is away on a trip; mom is asleep on the sofa. I attempt to rouse her. "There's a man trying to get into the house!"

Oblivious to my panic, she waves me away with a sleep-heavy hand.

“There’s no such thing as men,” she mumbles, then rolls back over into her slumber.

#

The Stranger. I thought he was to be my shadow, and I was to be the famous one. But I have misapprehended my dreams, my vision. In truth he is the original; I am the secondary character, the carbon copy.

I think of Borges, of “Borges and I.” Like him, I am contemplating the “other one” ... The Stranger is becoming the one called Mark Leach, the one things happen to. I must exist, let myself go on existing, so that this Mark Leach may engineer his epic film, which is intended to validate me. It is no exertion for me to admit that he has attained some legitimate footage, but I fear that footage will not rescue me from myself. It cannot rescue me from the legends of the desolate borderlands, from the mental pastimes of era and perpetuity. Those things belong to The Stranger now.

In “Last Year at Marienbad: An Intertextual Meditation,” Thomas Beltzer wrote that “if you go to the movies too often, you may never come back. Your own life may become a fiction.”

But other than the fictions of childhood, what belongs to me? What is to become of me?

#

#

At home at night. I receive a promising phone call.

“Hello, this is Anna Enruckus of the New York Agenda. I want to do a story about your dreams.”

I can’t believe it. The New York Agenda, the paper of record for the world, wants to do a story about my visions, about my incredible revelation. About me!

In all fairness, The Stranger may be right. This may be the twilight era of newspapers. But they’re not dead yet. People still read. And when they read something in the New York Agenda, they believe it. Not like some ridiculous cinematic fraud with a mechanical tornado and a paranoid fantasy about a bottled water company creating the world’s first privately owned and operated deity.

“Can you believe my own paper isn’t even interested?” I ask.

“That’s incredible,” Anna says. “This may be the most important story of the Hydrocarbon Age, perhaps of the entire Modern World. I want to document your dreams, the visions of the end of an era.”

“I keep a dream journal. Would you like me to overnight you a copy?”

#

#

Dateline: D/FW Airport. I stand at the end of Gate 19, waiting for the passengers of Delta Flight 3519 from Omaha. Reporter's notebook and pen in hand, I am ready to commit some genuine daily newspaper reporting. But I am not optimistic about my chances for success.

"Come on, Le-e-e-ach," Guy had protested, drawing out the first syllable of my name in a friendly, but mocking tone. "It's a great story. Travelers of the jet age flying over the heads of travelers of the Conestoga age."

"But when you're on final descent, people are busy gathering up their possessions," I protested. "They are putting the tray table in the upright position, getting ready to leave. And even if they were looking out the window, it'd be a stretch for them to see any encampment beyond the perimeter, even something as big as the Sesquicentennial Wagon Train."

"All you need to do is talk to a few arriving passengers, get some snazzy quotes, write it right and you've got a P-1 easy."

Of course, it has not been easy. As I had predicted, none of the arriving passengers have seen any Old West wagon train from their cabin windows. And what about quotes? Just getting a "no" has been quite an accomplishment.

Few travelers will stop long enough to talk to me, or even acknowledge my presence. Men traveling alone are proving to be the worst. They won't even look at me. I am certain that I could wave a \$100 bill in front of them and get no recognition. Some of the solo female travelers do give me a polite "no," and several couples have actually stopped long enough to shake their heads and exchange looks of bemused, doubt-filled sympathy.

I am the newspaper jester, leaping about the concourse with a pointy cap on my head and bells on my shoes. Or perhaps a Hare Krishna, one disguising his shaved head with a short-haired wig and temporarily trading in the white robe and finger cymbals for a dress shirt and tie.

After debasing myself before a couple of loads of Delta passengers, I dig a quarter out of my pocket and call the State Desk editor who has conceived the wagon-train-as-seen-from-above story. It is to be part of a multi-day package, complete with "Wagons, ho!" logo and the phrase "One in an occasional series" preceding the text. Except that now it will be one story short.

"No one saw it? Are you sure?" an incredulous Larry Broland asks. "I just can't believe that."

Larry is more than a little disappointed that his grand idea is not panning out. And like all successful editors, he is not about to shoulder the blame.

"Well, try a few more flights and call me back," Larry says tiredly. "If you don't get anything, then I guess you might as well come back in."

I bet nothing like this ever happens at the New York Agenda.

#

Of course, I have no intention of ambushing any more arriving passengers. The story is DOA -- actually, dead at the scene. Broland is simply working CPR on a corpse. A veteran staffer whose byline file dates back to 1961, he could give his inspired idea the quality reporting it deserves. But not me. So I decide to kill the rest of the assigned reporting time kicking around the airport.

After a quick Dr Pepper in one of the bars, I take an escalator to the lower level and board one of the automated AirTrans cars. My car is empty, allowing me to pick the last seat so I can watch my progress in reverse.

The electric-powered tram rolls smoothly out of the dim terminal and into the blinding, Texas sun. Rolling along by myself in the tram's narrow, concrete channel, I study the receding parking lots and "Authorized Personnel Only" signs along the AirTrans route. But I see no signs of life. I imagine myself in some science fiction movie about the last man on earth. I am Charlton Heston in "The Omega Man," scavenging the remains of the vast techno-infrastructure that continues to operate on automatic pilot. All mankind is dead, but I continue to receive my paycheck by direct deposit. This allows me to use my bank's electronic bill payer service to keep the electricity streaming into my home, my debit card to fill my gas tank and ATMs to feed me currency for use in vending machines that dispense Dr Pepper at 10, 2, 4 and any other time I desire.

After a few automated stops but no new passengers, I grow tired of the last-man-on-earth scenario and de-board at one of the terminals. I wander a quiet stretch of concourse. No one around. Just me and the endless walkways, lines of doors, gates, -- and walls. Always there are walls, everywhere around me. Mute, deserted – walls of baroque embellishments, mahogany veneer, Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, Carrara marble. Unexpectedly, I find myself contemplating the fossilized bones of a dinosaur. An interpretive plaque explains that the animal was a plesiosaur, which workers unearthed during construction of the airport back in the Middle Hydrocarbon Age. Bones encased behind dark glass, lost among 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.

#

Looking to kill a few more minutes before placing my final, bogus call to Larry Broland, I step into a newsstand and began absently rummaging through the magazine rack. I pick up the latest copy of Info Era, a supermarket-style tabloid that specializes in stories about UFOs and the Secret Government. It's one of my guilty pleasures. As I flip through the pages, I am surprised to find an extensive interview with Dr. Adolfo Morel concerning the Society of the Purple Sunset.

Morel: "This game is actually based on a real world endeavor. It was initiated by splinter groups inside the federal administration and covert companies to influence and manage the population. During the years 1966 and 1967 a scheme titled Clockscan was established. It was discontinued in 1968. The intent of the scheme was to secure the industrial aptitude to go into a person's nocturnal vision condition and make happen his demise by detonating his brain. It also entailed placing brain management equipment in orbit for use on the inhabitants of Earth. The equipment projected brain direction devices in the image of a Clock in the Air for application on the people of the planet."

Info Era: "What organization operated that scheme?"

Morel: "Flying Device Research Center (FDRC), which had additional concealed schemes under its control. At that juncture, FDRC was operated by Drinkoff Inc., one of the black ops divisions of Ozona International. Now it is administered through the Department of Defense."

Info Era: “The DoD is running Project Clockscan?”

Morel: “In cooperation with a variety of extraterrestrial orders. These groups come and go, of course, depending on the inter-species political atmosphere of the galaxy. The C-Group, which is shorthand for Cicada Group, is currently serving as technical consultant for the project.

Info Era: “Tell us about the Cicadians.”

Morel: “The Cicadians are extraterrestrial insects. They are giant insectoids with huge compound eyeballs and minds of pure metaphor, the waking world and the Land of the Dead kept in perfect balance. They have been drawn into the government’s clandestine schemes at regular intervals since at least the 1940s, and there are some indications of a relationship dating back to the 1890s.”

Info Era: “You’re talking about Aurora, Texas, and the El Camino Extraterrestre.”

Morel: “Actually, I’m talking about the Strangers Rest project.”

Info Era: “I thought that was just a myth, a part of the Society of the Purple Sunset.”

Morel: “It’s real. Remember, the Society of the Purple Sunset is a mythic game based on reality. Strangers Rest is tied into the Corpus Christi Experiment as well as Fort Worth I and Fort Worth II.”

Info Era: “You’re talking about onbeam brain management.”

Morel: “Yes. After the politicians learned about Clockscan, they moved to discontinue the project. But the board of directors headed straight for the armed forces and suggested utilizing the technology via public electronic entertainment venues – back in those pre-onbeam days it was just TV and radio broadcast -- to manipulate the brains of our terrestrial foes, both at home and abroad. The generals were enamored by the concept, and they permitted use of the bunkers under the old Stranger Rest Field. Ozona International financed the project with a grant from the Nazi government in exile.”

Info Era: “The Nazis financed Project Clockscan?”

Morel: “That’s right. You see, Hitler had escaped from Germany at the end of the Second Earthly Conflict with 200 of his most loyal followers – including Goebbels, whose faked suicide was a Nazi ruse to fool the Russians and the Americans – and \$20 billion in gold bullion, which he used to finance his government in exile in Uruguay. He traveled to South America on board a U-boat, but he transported the gold using an aerial clock the Luftwaffe had brought down with one of its V-2 rockets. The aliens had equipped the clock with a sky-energy detonator, which Hitler’s scientists believed could convert the heavens to flames. But the Germans never could figure out how to make it work. If they had, the war would have been over in 72 hours and you and your grandchildren would be speaking German today.”

Info Era: “Do you recall the Raincarnate case?”

Morel: “Interesting you should make that connection. Harry Raincarnate was an industrialist who lived in Houston in the 1950s. One evening as he was driving home from his factory his vehicle malfunctioned. He was caught up in a beam of amber light and taken aboard an aerial clock. The occupants were clad in dark apparel and spoke German Creole with a decidedly Uruguayan accent. He thought they might have been Nazis. After his return, he was transported back onboard the clock several times. He started telling friends and associates about his experience, but then he was visited by federal agents who told him he’d better stop talking ‘if he knew what was good for him.’

Then they put him in a psychic sanatorium for five months. He came out a shadow of his former self. Lost his business, died penniless. It was a major news story in 1957.”

Info Era: “So Hitler wanted to learn how to use the weapon in the clock?”

Morel: “This was a few months before he went comatose and they suspended him in a ‘submerged ice’ system, which is based on Cicadian exoskeletal biology. It is the way their young survive underground for years before emerging in the winged stage of their life cycle. Anyway, this system was delivered to Hitler by the Cicadians, who wanted to get the Fuhrer into an exoskeletal shell and out of the way before he did any more damage. The Cicadians are actually quite peaceful and so were very troubled with the events of the Second Earthly Conflict. So it was all pre-arranged. Hitler was to go into suspended animation, and that would be the end of it. But Hitler didn’t want to wait until his eventual thawing and revival to have his Third Reich victory. He said ‘I want to initiate the one thousand years now, before I go into hibernation.’ He thought the researchers for Clockscan might be able to figure out how to operate the detonator, but before they could give him his new Final Solution he had a massive stroke and had to be frozen.”

Info Era: “Is the One World Government involved in prolonged existence?”

Morel: “Of course, because it takes so long to realize these goals. When you arrive at that intensity of political power, you find that the brains of global leaders are distorted and manipulated by exposure to Cicadian DNA, which is in fact based on Fluoride9. They are totally dependent on alien insect technology and biology.”

As I scan the story for more about Strangers Rest, my attention strays to a young family across the concourse.

They sit in the gray vinyl seats, mom and dad buried in paperback novels as their two sons play around the carry-on bags at their feet. The boys are a blur of slapping hands, swinging feet and smacking mouths, which they stuff with a steady stream of Skittles candies. They remind me of my own sons, and I for a moment I even feel a bit wistful -- that is, until they remind me of my boys a bit too much.

“Momma, Joey scratched my arm,” one of them says, rapidly blinking his eyes in hopes of shedding a credible tear. The other responds with a louder yelp, then recklessly pounds his own arm and whines something about how he’s been wronged
“againandagainandagain and he wouldn’t stop!”

The father says nothing, and I feel myself tense up, waiting for what I am sure will be the mother’s inevitable, screeching outburst. After all, I have been in his position many times, engulfed in censorious dread.

But much to my surprise, the outburst never occurs. Instead, the mother speaks some soft, soothing words to both of the wounded children, hands then some bauble from her purse and all is well again. Then she returns to her reading, all without so much as raising her voice. I am amazed. No shouting. Even more incredible, the wife turns to her husband, speaks a few more quiet words. He smiles, replies and both of them laugh. No yelling. They are happy – happy unto death.

#

I must confess that I cannot conceive of such a cordial exchange with Allison. And she is an incredibly beloved person. Ask any of her friends. She is the companion everyone wants to have. She is the perfected being. But me – I am not such a desired companion. I am the outsider, the alien.

I am Clark Caring, returning home after an alternate reality erases the previous year of marital discord, separation and impending divorce.

#

I find it both pleasant and strange to return to the house from which I had been banished by court order the previous year. Parking the Lexus in my old spot in the garage, tousling the hair of my 11-year-old son as he sits glued to the TV, fixing myself a dirty martini (with blue-cheese stuffed olive, of course) as my beloved puts the finishing touches on the evening's savory yet nutritious dinner.

Can you believe it? I am still married, still a family man. Life is good.

My copy of the "The Voice of God" (found in the bookcase in my study) does not reveal much useful information. It resembles no book I've ever seen. The text begins on the first page. No fly sheet, no title page, no acknowledgements. The only reference to a publisher is a brief mention on the back cover: "Another exciting dreamography from End Times Books. Visit us onbeam today!"

I am preparing to plug in when a spousal scream hits me from across the house. I hustle into the kitchen to find my beloved feeling a bit less than loving.

"I'm trying to get dinner on the table," she complains. "Can you at least set the table and get Brian to wash his hands?"

"Of course. I didn't know you needed any help."

"Right. We have dinner every night. The food has to be cooked, the table has to be set. I didn't think I have to tell you that anymore. I can't do everything."

#

Back in the day, this is the place in the story where the people would expect to see me and Mrs. God engage in a dinnertime scene of marital discord. Perhaps an oblique reference to the Dairy Queen, a suggestion that Mrs. God suspects I am squirting my love inside my 22-year administrative assistant with the big boobs and the tight ass. Does she suspect there is – or, rather 'was' – something between us?

Or perhaps we would sit at the table in silence, glaring at one another across the top edge of competing daily newspapers as occurred in "Citizen Kane," a movie about a man who wanted everyone to love him.

The desire to be loved – back in the day this is what marriage was all about. Some men believed that what they really wanted was to hear one special woman say "I love you." But they were fooling themselves.

For here is the truth: During the last days of Planet Earth, what men really wanted, in their heart of hearts, was to be loved by everyone. Like a God. Which is to say, they wanted to BE GOD. To be loved because you are a superior being – because you are more worthy of love than mere mortals – this is the real thing.

This is True Love.

I tell you my beloved creations, True Love is better than all other forms of affection. True Love prompts the superior being to create a universe. True Love motivates the superior being to bring light to a world that is without form and void.

Admittedly, True Love sometimes prompts the superior being to let bad things happen to good people. When the superior being has been violated, True Love makes him turn women into pillars of salt. True Love makes him cover the earth in a murderous flood. And yes, True Love even makes him bring about the "terrible calamity."

But how can it be otherwise? True Love does not depend on lovable actions. That is why True Love is absolutely required by the superior being. True Love is received not because of what you do but simply because of you are.

#

As for me and Allison and True Love – such a scene is not in the script. Oh sure, maybe once, long ago. In the dim recesses of my memory, I vaguely recall a time when I thought she was happy with me. And we were happy, I'm sure of it. We were perfect, two perfected beings. I remember us in our normal waking world lives, walking hand in hand at the mall, draping an arm across my shoulder – but no, this memory is not for me. I do not require it anymore. I am perfect without it. I am perfect, I am happy. I am happy unto death!

I sit here with you on the warm beach, but I feel oddly cold. Yes, you can see that I am shivering. Did I tell you the concourse walls were bleeding? There were Nazi paratroopers, too. I see them even now, landing on the tarmac outside the window. On the back of my hand, the embedded nest of tiny white eggs. They hatching into an army of hungry wolf spiders, picking my bones clean.

Again I advance toward the combination gas station/Germany bakery in West, Texas, carried by the twilight wind across a rolling prairie, snagged in an old barbed wire fence, wind whistling through tombstones. An awful dark rip has appeared in the master film, right in the midst of a long, languid shot panning the valley of blue shadows and a gemstone cranium of mist and haze, a gloom of unfilled spaces. On an astral cattle trail paved in stones of ginger-colored exasperation we come to the ford in the creek. The resonance of running water and a pale flash of dead cold-eyed Jonah gone bluish white beneath the still surface of the dark gulf waters, cold flesh dissected by albino brain crabs and screeching sea birds, twilight fish jumping, a concerto of amphibians and mounds of hospital wastes and jellyfish with sea grass growing through. All alone, just me and the long dead beach – and The Stranger.

He steps out from behind a potted palm and switches off the Beulah.

“I'm told there's more than one way to show that you love someone,” he remarks.

“I haven't managed to find any of them.”

“Perhaps we do not receive love because we are not capable of administering it. We are not yet a perfected being.”

“Wouldn't it be nice to be both imperfect and loved?”

“Now you're just talking crazy.”

#

#

Dinner in the house that Jack built. But first, our host must finish his tan.

Reclining on a Victorian-style fainting couch, something his wife picked up shortly after their wedding and has still failed to retrieve for her post-Jack life. Hoping to render it unusable, Jack has turned it into the centerpiece of his ``tanning salon,’’ a little corner of the breakfast nook. Lost in the scent of rum and coconut tanning oil rising out of the velvet upholstery, Jack reaches up to adjust a UV tanning bulb that buzzes violently inside a black flood lamp overhead.

``You make it sound so - so sordid,’’ he remarks, adjusting a pair of dark green tanning goggles. ``It’s no big deal.”

“But the feds may declare your dad’s sanctuary insolvent,” I say.

“Rockwall Banc,” The Stranger says. “It was years ago, but I still remember the call reports. Ton of bad loans, mostly real estate and photovoltaics.”

“Big deal,” Jack remarks. “Everybody’s doing it.”

“Next spring. The examiners will come on a Thursday.”

“Thursday? How do you know?”

“They always come on a Thursday,” I explain, “right before closing time.”

“A prophet is never honored in his own country,” The Stranger says.

We were still in college when Andrew Bryson purchased Rockwall Banc, a sleepy little G&C he quickly transformed into one of the fastest growing sanctuaries in the Southwest. I remember a story about it in the business section of the Dallas Times Herald. The reporter had captured a perfect quote for the times: “I told all the real estate brokers `Don’t bring me anymore apartment buildings, shopping centers or office towers. I want a guarantee and credit!’”

The Stranger remembers it, too.

“There was the photo that ran with the story,” he recalls. “I even recall something of the wording: Posed in his third floor corner office of Rockwall Banc’s mirrored glass midrise, dressed in his gray banker’s suit with red power tie, Mr. Bryson sits tall in the saddle behind his expansive desk, a mound of loan files before him and the North Dallas Tollway throbbing below, a giant 220-volt electrical cord snaking through the Texas real estate market, plugging him straight into the go-go ‘80s.”

“That’s not what it said,” Jack says.

“Still, it should have.”

But now the chairman of Rockwall Banc was no longer sitting quite so tall. Business was tough. Last year, in a fit of anger over the sanctuary’s stagnating loan portfolio, Andrew Bryson threw his high-back leather desk chair down the stairwell and vowed he would not replace it until he’d restored the loan-to-loss ratio to an acceptable level. That apparently wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. I’d seen the most recent quarterly report for Texas sanctuaries. Mr. Bryson was still using the gunmetal gray folding chair he’d made his secretary pick up at Target.

“When I told dad I needed another interim he nearly busted a vessel,” Jack recalls. “He said ‘but you haven’t sold any of your other specs yet.’”

“So he wouldn’t give you another loan?” I ask.

“He gave me something much better. The benefit of his advice.”

“Better just tighten up your belt a few notches,” The Stranger says.

“That’s right,” Jack confirms. “Tighten up your belt and run the business off cash until you get a house sold.”

“Guess that’s the downside of having your father for a banker. So did you tell him the problem was you didn’t have any cash?”

“Oh right. Like why don’t I just wear a little sign on my butt that says ‘kick me.’”

“I like it,” The Stranger said. “We could give it a homey treatment, maybe something like ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’”

“That’s what I’m saying. I’m George Bailey, on my knees, begging, and he’s sitting there like he’s old man Potter, king of Bedford Falls. He just keeps on saying ‘the auditors are really cracking down, I can’t do anything special just because you’re my son.’”

Clearly, the situation has turned serious. I know of several developers who’ve recently had their loans called. Country records show a few have escaped with only deeds in lieu of foreclosure. But for most, it is the trustee’s deed, sale to the highest bidder on the south steps of the county courthouse. There is even some talk of deficiency judgments secured by lenders left holding properties that aren’t worth the inflated loan balances, long-spent dollars generated from bogus developer fees and other accounting tricks. A few of the wheeler dealers are even going to jail. I turn to The Stranger.

“You know what’s going to happen.”

He nods. “But I don’t think I should tell.”

“Because he doesn’t know,” Jack says.

The Stranger does not respond. Jack shrugs and takes another sip of his bourbon and water.

“Anyway,” Jack continues, “dad offered me six-month extensions on the two loans that were about to come due, so that gives me a few more months to find a buyer or two.”

“That’s good news.”

“But it didn’t come cheap, did it?” The Stranger says.

“That’s right. He decided to tell me what I’d done wrong with Donna.”

“What you did wrong?” I ask. “Is he forgetting that Donna is the one who left you?”

Jack laughs a bitter, dry laugh and takes a hard pull from his drink. “No, he didn’t forget. But, you see, that’s what nice girls do when their husbands force them to put out for their friends. Your name was prominently mentioned.”

I can’t quite believe my ears. “Andy thinks me? Donna?”

He nods.

“But I was a groomsman at your wedding.”

“I couldn’t even listen to it, I was so furious. I got in his face and yelled ‘you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.’”

“Really?” I cannot imagine such a response from Jack, always the good, respectful son.

“I think it shocked him pretty severely. He said he was sorry. I’m glad it happened, though. We’d never talked about it before. It really cleared the air.”

“Did he say anything that helped?”

“No, not really. What does he know about marriage? I don’t think him and mom have done it in years, maybe not since I was conceived. No, it was just good to talk it through with him, to clear the air.”

“Good to clear the air before the divorce is final, right?”

“Hmm? Oh yeah,” Jack says, pretending to remember. “You know, I almost forgot. To me, it’s like we’re already divorced, even if it’s not official. Now let’s fire up the grill.”

While we wait in the kitchen for the charcoal to whiten, The Stranger happens upon a wicker basket filled with delinquency notices from various credit card companies.

“I remember these, too,” he says. “For a pauper you do all right.”

“I can’t complain,” Jack agrees.

#

Jack Bryson
12 Highland Terrace
Strangers Rest, TX 76270

#

Account No: 51340666 201 1776
Current Balance: \$2,786
Delinquent Amount Due: \$438

#

Dear Jack Bryson

#

We have been informed by our Security Department that an attempt was made to obtain credit on your account while it is delinquent.

If further attempts are made to obtain credit on your account before correcting the above situation, your credit privileges may be canceled. You must contact my office to make arrangements for minimum amount due. Your account is being evaluated, for placement with a collection agency or attorney for the purpose of bringing a lawsuit against you.

Telephone my department and explain your intention for repayment.

Juanita Lamethorpe
Collection Manager

#

It happened two weeks before at his favorite French nouvelle restaurant in the McKinney Avenue area of Dallas. The meal ended with the waitress cutting his card in half, forcing him to pay the bill (\$140 plus tip) with a company check. It was not until the next day that he realized the corporate account of Jack Bryson Homes Inc. had been reduced to a grand total of \$4.42.

“Dad says you’re nobody anymore unless you owe at least a couple of million to somebody,” Jack remarks.

“What is one more late notice from Juanita Lamethorpe?” The Stranger says.

“You’re on the hook for three interim production loans totaling well over \$1 million. I’ve got a concept to convert your experience into something second hand, something planned and described for your consumption in advance.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“The only thing that bothers you -- a little, anyway -- is that you’ve already gone through the profits you budgeted for those jobs but still have no buyers.”

“That’s true.”

“Your household account needs a cash infusion. But how? That’s when you get the big idea, an inspired, cunning, recklessly dangerous idea.”

“I build another house?”

“It is so simple. And you can even justify it, explain to the sanctuary --“

“My father.”

“-- that The Lakes of Greenwood really needed one more house --“

“Payment to builder, me.”

“-- to fully demonstrate the brilliance of the concept --“

“My father’s concept, of course.”

“-- and reach that all-important critical mass.”

“That even sounds like my dad.”

So simple. If only there was some money left somewhere in Texas to do it.

“Dad told me a prayer he heard at the last commercial real estate breakfast,” Jack says. “Dear Lord, please let me have one more boom. I promise I won’t fuck it up this time. Amen.”

“You know what NCNB stands for?” The Stranger asks.

But Jack doesn’t hear him. He is watching me thumb through the latest issue of Cosmopolitan, a subscription that Jack’s wife has failed to forward to her new address.

“I’m just getting educated,” I explain. “I think women like to read about orgasms a lot more than they like to have them.”

“Depends on the woman,” Jack says.

“I wonder if women really are even physically capable of having them. I think it’s all a big fake, a massive intra-sexual conspiracy they made up so they can make the man get off of them when they’re tired of being sweated on.”

“That was Allison before she left me,” The Stranger says.

“They don’t fake it with me, I know that for sure,” Jack insists.

“But, of course, you do not know.”

“Why are you always introducing such unpleasant lines of thought? Like the late notices. Why bring those up? They were sitting in the wicker basket, not bothering anybody. And couldn’t you find a better magazine to read than Cosmopolitan? The latest issue of Playboy is right underneath it.”

“I was getting to that next.”

“Why insist on wallowing in chronic mournfulness?”

“Because I’m the two-bodied man.”

Jack picks up the Playboy and heads straight for the centerfold, but I can see it doesn’t help. The Stranger can see it, too.

“Don’t you wonder if Miss August ever faked an orgasm?” The Stranger asks.

“You could find out, try seducing her, but that would be tough because your credit privileges have been suspended.”

“Enough,” Jack says. “A few more minutes of this and I’ll be as beaten down as both of you. I gotta go.”

“I thought we were going to grill,” The Stranger says.

Jack tosses the magazine on the counter and begins rummaging about for his wallet and keys.

“Aren’t we going to eat?” I ask. I am half starved, waiting all evening for Jack to quit screwing around and get into gear. His normal dinner hour is about 11 p.m., a real shock to my stomach. I’m used to a family meal every evening around 6:30.

“I won’t be gone long,” he says. “But go ahead and fix yourself something. There’s some fantastic leftover lamb in the refrigerator.”

“So, what, you’ll be back in about a half hour?” The Stranger asks. He is starving, too.

“I’m not that fast.”

“Maybe we should just call it a night, try again tomorrow,” I suggest.

“Hell no. Stay. Play the stereo, drink my liquor, fuck my cat. I’ll be back in plenty of time.”

“You haven’t even taken a shower yet.”

“I’m not taking one, the tanning lamp didn’t make me sweat.”

“Well, I don’t know. It is a week night.”

“Oh no, it’s a week night,” Jack says, using his nervous woman voice. “Come on, you’re a bachelor again – or one of you is, I don’t know. All you can think about is getting a good night’s sleep.”

“Why is sitting around here any better than sitting around at my own house?”

“Because when you get done here, instead of going to bed you’re going to go out with me.”

“What are we talking about here, an hour?”

“Yeah, an hour, that sounds good.”

The Stranger smiles at me. We both know it won’t be an hour.

Jack scoops up his keys and heads for the garage. “Eat the lamb, it’s fantastic,” he tells us. “My mom made it.”

#

“I haven’t had much success in writing,” I admit between bites of roasted lamb. “You are the one things happen to, the one who has success.”

The Stranger nods sympathetically. “That’s because you still put your trust in the concrete and rational, in the untrustworthy waking world. This is no place to disseminate your incredible revelation.”

I do not tell him about the New York Agenda.

“Try on this concept,” he advises. “You observe the birth of a new form of friends. They are to fully dismiss the idea that your dreams are also the daimon that drives you where it will. You are to be one of the people. The hook is that you told yourself, in visions. You speak to yourself through dreams. It is mentioned in Numbers, where one is unwittingly transfigured by the contents. You can no longer deny this transfiguration.”

“Did you put the clock in the sky?”

“No, no. See, you’re trying too hard. You must avoid excessive rationalism without wisdom. I was like you, before I became like me. That is, before I discovered the restorative nature of the epic film.”

“How did this discovery come to pass?”

“Like so many transformative processes, it came over time. We shall now commit the process to film.”

The Stranger lays down his fork. He produces his Beulah and explains the scene.

“You will accidentally discover this,” he says, handing me a book, “which has been delivered to you in an unmarked envelope by a shadowy character from the Land of the Dead. We’ll film that part later, of course.”

I read the name on the spine. Well, how about that?

“Pretty, a nice look of surprise for the close up,” he says. “Exactly the state of shock I was hoping for.”

Magnetica O’Famously. My old girlfriend!

In the years before I met Allison, Magnetica was my romantic attachment. After a long period of casual membrane penetrations, she dumped me for a boyfriend redux. She called him “Kool,” a nickname she’d given him for the ever-present cigarette that he employed as a sort of Bohemian prop. He had exited her life after she captured him in an intentional act of plagiarism. Seems he had submitted a purloined work to a small East Coast literary journal, of which Magnetica was editor. He then abandoned her, and she was left behind to write and publish the public apology.

So how about that? Magnetica has a book of her own now. Although not plagiarized, this one is a rather obvious paraphrase of Carl Jung’s “Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky.” Still, it beats anything I’ve written, which is to say nothing. So she’s ahead of me. She’s better than me. That’s probably why she dumped me.

Ah well. I am genuinely happy for her, happy for her achievement. I present the jacket blurb for your consideration.

#

A ticking mandala of the almighty – As our imaginings demonstrate very obviously, aerial timepieces arrive from the comatose milieu, which forever asserts itself in mystical thoughts and metaphors. Cultured humans, like prehistoric ones, are aware of the deities, of the ghosts, and of destiny and the supernatural character of occasion and location. This is the focal concept of ‘A Clock in the Air: A Contemporary Legend of Timepieces Observed in the Heavens,’ another exciting New Age tome from Magnetica O’Famously and Weigh-In Books. An existence and reason coach from The Land of the Dead, O’Famously had a life-changing experience through a numinous encounter with the inner workings of the Deity’s clockwork mandala. What was the result of this revelatory experience in the sky? O’Famously proposes that faith in aerial timepieces is actually a reply to the bottomless social nervousness of a civilization intimidated by unexpected technological obliteration. And she tells us that we of the West are not the only ones who have feared science would bring about the conclusion of time. She notes that the regal Jaundiced Ones of the second earthly conflict feared their civilization was being obliterated by the mechanized ethnicity of the West. Slavophiles of that similar occasion spoke almost mournfully of the West’s extreme lucidity without understanding. O’Famously writes: ‘Let us be mindful of that which is airborne around us and strive to reach comparable heights in our own lives.’ O’Famously is founder of the Narrative Factory, a distributor of narratives concerning the livelihood of beloved fervors, bottomless reason and heavenly manifestation. She lives in the ethereal neon glow of

Burial Chamber, Calif., with her questionably gendered companion and two mummified Egyptian cats. Now Read What Others Are Saying About “A Clock in the Air”!

“In an era of dark aircraft soaring above our heads, livestock disfigurements and extraterrestrial insects, the convincing comments made by O’Famously are especially pertinent.” – The Divine Marketplace of Benign Ideas

“We are overwhelmed by end-of-the-world panic, Rapture sects, Keepers of the Deity and apocalyptic appointments with God. O’Famously skillfully argues that psychotic deviations reveal themselves in collective illusions. Her reading of aerial timepieces as stand-ins for the prototype of completeness, a new force striving to assert itself in an age of mental disintegration, is luminous and intense.” – The Twilight of Satisfactoriness

“Electrifying! A tour de force. A bold new voice in American literature. This book will save your marriage!” – The Usurping Person Who Reads

#

“Your world is dead,” The Stranger says. “It no longer functions. Your life no longer functions. Sewn together romance comes off like the symbolic remains of the 1970s. I like this idea for cinema, but it’s bad for real life. We must trust the inner world, the one that lies behind solid things. It’s time you started trusting me – that is, your inner director.”

“How can I trust what I haven’t seen?”

“Right you are. Enough waiting for Jack. Let’s go to the movies.”

#

#

We drive out to the derelict Hi-Way 114 Drive-In Theatre in The Stranger's little deuce coupe, turning off the asphalt onto the old entry drive, gravel crunching under the treads.

Headlights on the ranch gate, The Stranger leaves the car running while he gets out to unlock the heavy chain. I drive past this place a couple of times a day, but here in the feeble headlight glow I see something new: a rebuilt refreshment stand/projection booth. Strange, for the old one burned down years ago. How could I have missed such a major work of reconstruction?

"It's a false front, built in a day," The Stranger explains. "It's just plywood and posts. Same way they did the big Reata house in 'Giant.' Go down there to Marfa today and you can still see the telephone poles sticking out of the ground."

As we drive onto the property I notice a new sign: Armageddon Drive-In Theatre. I say new, but it actually looks old, a resurrection of faded '50s roadside advertising held tight in a tangle of broken neon tubes.

"I've leased this place from Dollar Bill Buckstop for filming the climax of the movie, the Battle of Armageddon scene," The Stranger explains. "Thanks to my efforts, it's actually once again a working theater. Well, my efforts and theirs."

The Stranger takes in the dashboard view with a grand sweep of his arm, and I see that we are not alone. Perhaps two dozen cars are parked in front of the old screen. A young man with scraggly goatee and sleeveless flannel shirt kneels on the roof of a circa 1960s aluminum camper, working on what appears to be a combination projector/oscilloscope.

"It's a conventional 35mm projector," the Stranger explains. "But it's hooked up to a small black box with an oscilloscope on front and a coil of clear tubing on the aperture gate." He holds up a little black cube with a pushbutton pad. "It's even got remote control."

We pull up to a metal speaker pole, and The Stranger hangs one of the weathered aluminum speakers in his window.

"This one is surplus, from the old Texas Stadium Drive-In in Irving," he explains. "Look, it's still says 'Stadium' on the front."

"Who are these people?" I ask. "What is all this?"

"Guerrilla drive-in movie theater."

"What?"

"Do-it-yourself movies. They're popping up everywhere, from L.A. to New York City, big cities and small towns. Most of the time they set up in dark parking lots behind industrial warehouses. But they really prefer to stage their events at old drive-ins like this one."

A dark-haired girl in a flowing peasant skirt and thick black frame glasses taps on my window. I roll down the window, and she gives me a handbill:

"Deep Ellum Guerilla Drive-In. Breathe Retro, Take pleasure in a Retro Show! Deep Ellum Guerilla Drive-In is precisely what it seems to be – an al fresco cinema beneath the heavens that materializes without warning on undeveloped rural plots and in the profit-making wilderness. Guerilla Drive-In is serving to rescue community liberty and change our metropolitan surroundings into the pleasant world of recreation that it is meant to be. Grab your ectoplasm-stained bedspreads, grass stools and sexually-willing

acquaintances. Prepare to engage in jug wine, oral sex (or oral wine, jug sex!) and salty nibbles on vintage Cutlass black vinyl accompanied by the wonders of 1950s B-movie sci-fi. Endowments are greeted with much appreciation. Tonight at the Deep Ellum Guerilla Drive-In – a midnight creature feature based on the dream cinema of The Stranger! (Special thanks to the creator of the concept, the Santa Cruz Guerilla Drive-In.)”

The old Hi-way 114 screen – still standing after all these years – begins to flicker to life in a greenish blue glow. The window speaker from the Stadium Drive-In crackles with static electricity.

“Sounds like the ocean,” I observe.

“Gaseous and liquid cinema. Based on a concept by Salvador Dali.”

#

The first offering is called “Give Elmo and Charlie a Blast,” an obvious take-off on the popular movie review show.

“But this one has a twist,” The Stranger explains. “Elmo and Charlie only review movies that have yet to be made. If they really like a concept, then they agree to produce it. Last year, they released ‘Valley of the Nanobots’.”

#

Charlie: Hi, I’m Charlie Rebosto.

Elmo: And I’m Elmo Plumblin. Today we begin with a review of ‘Boom-Crash! The Freud Dude’s Two-Bodied Leach meets The G&C Mafia.’

Charlie: And what a great choice this is. The slapstick blast from this pseudo-documentary could be quite engaging.

Elmo: It even employs butt-scratching monkeys.

Charlie: A nod to Darwin. We could work in the Book of Revelation, let the Deity prepare a place the viewers have not seen since childhood. We’ll remind them that inside the fish, Jonah was really free. Back on shore, he was dead.

Elmo: And a whiner.

Charlie: The certain dream message isn’t any less important, though I am still compelled to issue it.

Elmo: The dead, dread, fearful specters are still accessible. And through Technicolor romance, they are coming off somehow feeling true. Two-dimensional affection is an important part of the plot. And death, too - with many gutsy explosions and free-flowing blood. There is an authority in death. Even the newspaper world is dead.

Charlie: That’s the story. Call it “The Penetrated Writer.” A gunshot to the heart, and yet the body continues to function. This whole process is death because many have tried to ignore the eternal world, regard it as a mutation. It has my word on it. They told me to forget; that is some bad advice. The message is not.

Elmo: You know, Charlie, this could be Mark Leach’s magnum opus, the long-awaited two-bodied masterpiece. The world as mutation. In fact, it is a metaphor for his birth of - and in -- a new form. His face is transfigured.

Charlie: Next, we take a look at ‘My Lovely Creation,’ a beautiful film short, tight but so obsessed with the egregious moral failure of ectoplasm imperfectly deployed. This masterpiece has him telling off himself, so depressed about how his DNA both creates and destroys.

Elmo: That's right. Do not be about the rotting remains, Mark, unknown and cloaked in the knowledge that bars none.

Charlie: You know, ha ha – and I must shake my head with great condescension – it's as if Mark Times Two wishes all he had to do was become a figurative being in the Land of the Dead, a Revelation described to the mind, a maze in a cliché-cramming contest.

Elmo: And for an experience just as nourishing, you may want to option his flick “Bad Dream for Tumbleweed Cowboy: A B-Movie Western for the End of the World.” Let's roll a short clip.

#

The Tumbleweed Cowboy rides his black, snorting stallion through a melancholy dream, following the stars that would guide him home.

"Curse you stars, it's too dark a place you be taking us through," he complains, and the horse neighs its mutual discontent. "Why can't you shine a little brighter and lead us during daylight?"

Suddenly, a howling coyote wind lifts the Tumbleweed Cowboy out of his saddle, sends him cartwheeling across the darkened dreamscape. He comes to rest along a tumbled down fence line, boots poking straight up at the sky. He reaches for his trusty horse's reins, but a shooting star screams across the heavens and scares the animal away.

"Dang you, stars. Why you have to go and shoot your star-shooter at ole Blackie? Now I'm all alone, tangled up here in this rusty old bob wire forever."

Despite the Tumbleweed Cowboy's ignorance of basic science (shooting stars being only meteorites, of course), the stars take pity on him and guide a yellow-haired nightmare to his aid. But when the pretty filly arrives, she is disappointed to find that this particular cowboy is really no more than a ball of sticks.

"I'd been dreaming of a carrot," she says.

"Well, I'm just an old tumbleweed. No use cryin' about what I ain't."

This unrepentant tone makes the nightmare angry, and she knocks the cowboy from the fence and stomps him into a pile of splinters.

Back at the ranch, the other nightmares console the wronged creature. "Yup, that's a man for you. All stick and no carrot."

Listening unseen from the shadows, the stallion quietly snorts at this feminine treachery and flies back across the dream to the aid of the Tumbleweed Cowboy.

When he arrives, sure enough, his master is dead, nothing but a broken shell. "I won't let you die in vain, Tumbleweed Cowboy," the horse declares. "I won't rest till your death has been avenged."

But just then, a passing rodeo clown hears the stallion. He lassos the unsuspecting beast and sells him to a traveling circus, where they geld him and make him spend the rest of his days giving pony rides in the happy dreams of unpleasant children. The stars can only shake their heads and smile. "Ah, the folly of horse and man!"

#

Elmo: Attention Mark Leach. Kafka is holding on the red phone.

Charlie: This could prove to be one of my favorite Leach films. There is a lot of movie imagery in the Land of the Dead. He is all about the movie. Hey – there's a concept! His world as eternal cinema.

Elmo: In preparation for the full-body, cellular split, the domestically challenged Mark died in the dishes, so to speak, outside a combination gas station/Germany bakery in West, Texas, on the Sunday before Christmas 1999. As he tells it, he sat in the car while his wife went inside for kolaches. The sun had taken on a discouraging slant in the sky. Darkness was closing in.

Charlie: It's interesting, but I have a question. By accepting this rather pedestrian explanation for the origin of the Tumbleweed Cowboy, are we required to fully dismiss the concept of a genuine equine alien abduction? Carl Jung -

Elmo: Yes, yes, Charlie, we all know Carl is timeless. He seems to be about the idea of it all, but I'll certainly not be sending for him. "Go back, Carl," I'd say, "the church is dying." You like?

Charlie: Actually, we're in agreement.

Elmo: Yes?

Charlie: Yes.

Elmo: Then send over the courier. I'm sure Two-Bodied Mark -

Charlie: Mark Times Two.

Elmo: -- can deal quite nicely with our offer. Deny the world. It is dead. It no longer functions. The Fiend of the Unconscious wants to be our today. And just as nourishing, Mark's flick nightmare of three hours of dreary underwater Jonah. This is the main thing.

Charlie: Next, let's try the third eye dream from 'The Voice of God.' This one leads to fashion, a mascara eye abdomen viewed through magnifying plexiglas.

Elmo: Don't give it away, though. First let's roll the clip.

#

And the journey through prohibited places continues.

Allison and I are in a strange place, an alien society. We are fleeing from unseen people in a seemingly abandoned structure, maybe a stadium. The design is somewhat reminiscent of the UFO house, but on a much larger and grander scale.

We spot a place almost out of sight, near the base, where you can observe the underlying construction. Allison comments that we can see the steel support beams. As we look for a hiding place, we find a marble alcove reminiscent of ancient Roman architecture. It is perhaps the size of a bedroom. This alcove is out of sight, but I immediately realize that if we are found here there will be no escape. We will be trapped. So we go in search of a more secure place of safety.

It is then that we realize there are people everywhere, hurrying about in search of their own hiding places. It is growing dark, suggesting to me that the time to get out of sight is almost here. I realize that we are not well suited for this. I am wearing only white boxers - my preferred sleeping attire - and Allison is in little more than shorts and a top. Where to go? I see a young black man, very dark. He is shirtless. I instantly fear him - and all of the obviously desperate people around us. This man will rape my wife, or someone else will. Where to go?

I see a flight of steps leading to a lower level. The black man waves his hand, showing us the way down the steps. Like an usher in a movie theater.

"I will take you to a place of safety," he says.

I do not trust him, so I grab Allison's hand and we bolt through a doorway to the outside.

We find ourselves standing under a loggia, looking out on a plaza that reminds me of the main square in New Orleans' French Quarter. Many people are relaxing in small groups. All of them are young and beautiful, the elite of this society. They are obviously of a higher social cast than the underground people who must scramble for shelter before nightfall.

They are dressed for leisure, though in a way I have never seen. On their washboard abs, each person displays a large, painted eye. It is the Eye of Horus, the ancient Egyptian visual rumor used to ward off sickness and bring the dead back to life. The latter must be the case here, for the eye was also used as an amulet over the embalmer's incision. That's how you made a suitable mummy.

The Eye of Horus is a particularly fitting image for this point in the journey, for it was only the day before – in the waking world – that I was reading the Old Testament story of Joseph's dream and his resulting enslavement in Egypt. This was his destiny.

These Third Eye people look us over, instantly judging us to be the inferior, underground species. We do not belong; they fear us. Not waiting for them to act on their judgment, we run toward the street at the end of the loggia. This creates some excitement. I kick someone in their abdominal eye, and Allison – now inexplicably holding a baby in her arms – breaks into a run. Another of the Third Eye people produces a large plastic lens (square, perhaps 15 to 20 inches per side) and places it in front of my stomach. Apparently, this action is intended to draw attention to the fact that my abdomen does not possess the required cyclopean makeup. I am blind.

I try to follow Allison, but the path is barred by a man. He is a sort of henchman for the man in charge, who I somehow know. I try to fight him. Someone hands me the blade of a plastic toy sword, and the man in charge laughs. Someone else hands me the handle, and I hastily assemble the two pieces. Even though it is a toy, I realize that it is a real sword. It can injure, even kill.

With this weapon, I lunge at the man in charge. But I miss, and he disarms me. He thrusts the sword deep into my pelvis. As he withdraws the weapon, there is a thought in my head (or maybe the man is speaking it) that the sword is stuck inside me. The pain is real, but I understand that I will recover from this wound. I will heal and live to fight again.

#

Elmo: I don't mind telling you I feared those three eye folks. Scary slasher flick!

Charlie: Talk about incredible revelations. Already knowing the story, you just want to warn him "watch out for the plastic swords."

Elmo: And then cry. You have to be careful.

Charlie: Yes, and you must also watch out for the fire and brimstone.

Elmo: Agreed. Let's roll that clip, too.

#

Here's one way the world ends: The backyard goes nuclear.

As in most B-movie sci-fi concepts, the moviegoer is not necessarily meant to comprehend all the scientific details. All the viewer knows for sure is a chain reaction involving commonplace materials results in a dramatic volcanic eruption. Crimson fire rains from the nocturnal sky. (Director's note: Shoot this scene through a lens or prism onto feeling-toned print stock.)

We run for the house, reaching safety just ahead of the swirling lava and brimstone. Of course, radioactivity is still a major concern. How many curies of original experience can we safely absorb?

The door won't hold back the lava for long. As the protagonist, it is my job to realize we must get away. But there is no place to go. It is happening everywhere now. Nuclear war.

So we all gather in the foyer to make our escape. I dress for the pilgrim's journey, slipping a necktie and overcoat over my pajamas. The radiation is heating up the house; it feels like the August sun. I see our neighbors in the street, driving away to the hills. But my people and I, we have no car, no way of escape. We are left behind.

The nuclear summer doesn't last long. The half life of visionary transformation must be very short indeed, for the scorching temperature quickly drops and the rain begins to fall. I observe this meteorological change from my perch on the depleted limb of a sycamore, an ideal location to study the Next Arrival.

This is the world of fire. The old way of living – the commonplace world of solid things and comfortable, unchallenged theologies – has been annihilated. I see that we must think differently now, start planning for a new life. Our immediate priority should be to collect the rain, the living water, the grace of the Deity. Even as I experience this revelation, I see that others are already bottling the novel vintage. They too know we must save this divine gift for the future. We must begin our new lives, the lives of radiance – the lives that we dream for ourselves after the End of the World.

#

"That was incomprehensible," I say. My head is spinning. My secrets are escaping into the everyday. Is the young dark-haired girl in the peasant dress looking at me?

"Watch this. Here comes the sponsor's commercial."

A flock of iridescent funeral crows wheel across a clear blue sky, delighting an attractive couple while they enjoy a picnic in a field of billowing winter rye, golden retriever puppy and the whistle of an unseen train. The man touches the woman's long hair, and her eyelids flutter appreciatively. The disembodied sponsor speaks: "Conquer the reluctant orgasm with Climaxia, the first intra-vaginal paradisiacal locomotive." The screen goes dark.

The Stranger falls over on his side, laughing hysterically. "Ah my Deity," he says. "I don't care how many times I see that one, it just cracks me up. Sometimes – well, it's as if there are never enough orgasms in the world."

"You're telling too much. About us. Me."

"But this is who you are – who we are. Didn't you know?"

"How does it happen?"

"What?"

"Allison and me."

"Why do you want to talk about that, right now? It's not even intermission. We've yet to crack the seal on the jug wine. And what of the flavored condoms?"

"If I knew what was going to happen, maybe I could change."

"You can't. You won't."

"Tell me anyway. How do I lose her?"

"You meet Cinnamon."

“Please.”

"If you're not going to believe me – ”

"I'm not going to leave Allison for Cinnamon. I'm not an idiot.”

“But you would leave Allison for LeAnn.”

I think for a moment. “You may be right,” I admit.

“There is good news, though,” the Stranger adds. “We do emerge from the darkness.”

“How so?”

“We emerge the only way available to us. We film our way out. Here is a news release I have prepared for the world premier.”

#

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

#

Contact:

Strangers Rest Pictograph

P.O. Box 549

Burial Chamber, Calif.

#

A CLOCKWORK MANDALA: THE MAKING OF THE ARMAGEDDON
DRIVE-IN

By Mark Leach

The art that results in epic films of the conclusion of time is in fact a difficult theft imposed by the moviemaker upon himself.

To continue for hundreds of humorless minutes of extravagant Technicolor footage to amplify a dream that in the ideal case can be conveyed in a small quantity of cheap video tape – this is truly a waste of celluloid. (In the event this should some day be read by a scholar of Latin American literature who is a stickler for attribution, I should acknowledge that the idea presented here is actually derivative. I am channeling Borges now.)

While the movie director may yet wish and hope to one day deliver the envisioned vision, the improved process must be to claim that the movie is already a major motion picture in a theater near you. And then the director may present a well-considered yet economical commentary – perhaps a brief “making of” documentary – on the newly animated creation. As a moral issue, this approach is more notably and incapably decayed than that of true creative labor. Nevertheless, I have on occasion submitted myself to this decay, creating entire cinematic dramas that exist only in my imagination.

So it is with “Strangers Rest.”

In the intimidating state of affairs of the Earth nowadays, when members of the populace start to observe that all is at risk, the interior cinematic dream flies further than the kingdom of worldly associations and authorities and on into paradise, into outer space and the stars. This is the realm where the monarchs of individual destiny, the deities, long ago made their home. I speak to others like me, those who are compelled to live with the chronic existential dilemma. Even members of the populace who would by no means have considered that a spiritual difficulty could be a grave subject that worried them individually are starting to pose to themselves some basic existential questions. Beneath these situations it would not be in any way astonishing if those parts of society who ask

no questions of themselves in the waking world were called on by the interior cinematic dreams, by an extensive legend gravely supposed to be true by a number of people and discarded as ridiculous by an additional group.

Such a personal calling comes to mind, a book my mother showed me when I was a boy. A slim paperback from her childhood, pages yellowed and brittle with age. A dream dictionary. I don't remember much about that little book. It was a sort of guide for divination, I think, for helping you determine the course of future events. Pretty common stuff in the first half of the last century. In her church-going home, though, I suspect it was regarded as a mere novelty item. But I didn't know that. I thought it was the real thing, and I couldn't believe my good fortune. This was a treasure: a book that would tell you what your dreams meant. Then I grew up, and I dismissed the childhood treasure. There was no unifying global pattern. Dreams became meaningless, insignificant occurrences. I stopped believing in these far-away fables, in their impossible forms and conditions.

And yet, I now realize it is not necessary to believe. The film director is not a creature gifted with a liberated and rational vision of his own individual belief. Rather, his personal goals are overshadowed by art, which becomes aware of and realizes its intentions through him. As an individual he issues personal decrees and makes personal decisions and sets personal goals. But as a film director, he pursues an elevated way. He is the Communal Being, a means of transportation to and a shaper of the comatose supernatural existence that is actually the foundation of all humanity.

And so it is that I have committed to film my novel tale, an Illusion of Happiness. This tale is best understood while on high, giddy flights into the abstract, one of my "king of the world" trips. I am susceptible to a certain racing of thoughts, a sense that I am somehow onto something seen only by me (through my Egyptian third eye, of course). The sky turns a different color, the big dome of heaven ablaze in the multihued shades of indulged compulsions. I am dizzy with the superimposed light of my own odd, eccentric convictions. If only I had migraine auras! So I don the Mask of Smiles, my preferred attire for engaging the practiced world of apparent normalcy, and I write my little thoughts. I am authenticated. Then the inevitable nightfall. Metaphors crumble under the impossible weight. The screen goes black; the projector is out of film. I have out-dreamed myself. Illumination becomes illusion. It is all hallucination now, one more magical, broken symptom. I am left to wander the dark emptiness, chasing spectral notions and The Stranger, who is me.

#

Now The Stranger is on the big screen, seated in a crimson wingback next to a roaring fire with an ascot under his crushed velvet smoking jacket and a crystal brandy snifter in hand. A leather-bound book with gold edged pages lay open on his lap.

"Good evening," the televised Stranger entones. "Tonight on 'The Third Eye' we continue our series on castration nightmares with 'Sodomization of the Muse.' This is a dream I had while I was still married. The circumstances --"

"Magnetica?" I ask.

"Yes, Magnetica. It's a good dream."

"People will think I'm demented, afraid of vaginas."

"You cannot stop people from thinking."

"But Allison --"

“I recall an idea expressed by Nicholas Roeg, the director of ‘The Man Who Fell to the Earth.’ He suggested that a cinematic creation is more than the documentation of an incredible revelation. It is a sentient being. As the cinematic creation is being filmed it becomes aware of and embarks upon a unique and personal existence. The director of the epic film is much like a race car driver, ready to accelerate into the warm flesh of desire. But in this metaphor, all of the driver controls – the steering wheel, brakes, accelerator – are ineffective. The cinematic creation cannot be made to behave in any particular fashion. Behavioral control is the way that leads to death.”

#

In college again, in the bedroom of your on-campus apartment. It is daytime - maybe morning, a Saturday you believe. You have a girl in your room. She is sexually willing. You are not seriously interested in her, but you are interested in her willingness. The two of you begin to take off your clothes.

Beneath her outer garments she is wearing a sort of black body stocking, very tight. She grimaces and writhes violently to shed it, like a snake exiting its skin. You cannot help but notice that she is no beauty. She looks tired, with flattened, deflated breasts. You take off your shirt and, still focused on her sagging condition, hold in your middle-aged stomach. Your enthusiasm is lagging, but you remain grimly determined to proceed. After all, you are still interested in her willingness.

“But first,” she says, “we’re going to do the Mattel Barbie Speak and Say.”

She brings out a talking children’s toy, but can’t get it to talk. The ring on the end of the pull string is missing.

So she gives you a pair of surgical retractors, which you are to use to grasp the string. You attempt the maneuver, but fail. Instead of grabbing the string, you cut it in two. You try again, but the result is the same. So you take another look at the retractor. This time, you see that it is actually part retractor/part scissors.

She takes the instrument back and tries, too. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she holds the Speak and Say between her knees as she works the retractor. She has no luck, either. But you notice that she is carefully pulling the shiny steel handles of the retractor out of her vagina. Only the blades are fully visible. You are chilled to the core by this terrible image, but before you can do or say anything you hear the automatic garage door opening.

Panicked, you run to the door. Sure enough, your roommates have arrived. They see you standing in the doorway.

“Oh hi,” you say. “Sorry, gotta go.”

You slam the door and run back to your room. You want the girl to leave. You do not want your roommates to know what you have been up to with Ms. Barbie Speak and Say. It is too awful to think about.

Fortunately, the girl is busy dressing, so you close the bedroom door and go to the den to intercept your roommates. You find the room is filled with people -- your roommates plus their ROTC friends. Everyone is in military uniform.

They have been on some sort of training exercise and inspection. Exhausted, they all fall on the floor together in a sweaty heap. And then they begin to pull out heretical sacraments.

“We tested clean, now we can take sacraments again,” one of them explains. He peels the plastic wrap off a tampon-shaped object and shoves it hard against his nose.

#

"Some things are better left unsaid," I remark. "No wonder Allison divorces you."
"You can't hold in the truth forever."

"But you could have tried."

"Small things have a way of being big things when you neglect them. Have you already forgotten about Missy?"

#

Oh no. I remember – the door to the laundry room, prison of Missy. I really should let her out. It's been days.

But when I open it, there is no little dog. I am confronted by a Bengal tiger. How did it get here? I don't know, and there's no time to wonder.

I go into the garage and close the door to the house behind me. But still I am not safe. I see that the tiger has gotten through the door and is in the garage with me. I scream loudly in a ferocious way. I am apparently convincing, because the animal jumps back into the house.

After it leaves, I see that the door that I thought would hold this creature back has an enormous gap at the bottom. Plus, it has been repaired with pieces of plywood. Not very substantial. So I decide to take a side door to the outside. This door has also been repaired with plywood, and I realize it will not hold back the tiger, either. My only hope is to run.

I find myself in a typically subdivision of the 1970s. I turn right and run down the sidewalk, which gently curves to the left. In the sidewalk, I come to a parked bike, which could help in my escape but I do not take it. That would be stealing and cause even more problems for me.

Also in the middle of the sidewalk I come upon a tall, cylindrical object, perhaps 6 feet high. It reminds me a bit of a crayon standing on its flat end. Is it a weapon? I do not know.

I reach the end of the street, arriving at a larger thoroughfare. This road appears to be Big Stone Gap in Duncanville, my home town. Across the street, children are playing in a field or perhaps a park. There are many bikes parked here. But again, I do not take any of them. Instead, I turn right and continue running. It occurs to me that the tiger will be able to track me by scent, so I decide to leave the sidewalk. I run on the grass a short distance, thinking this will throw him off. Next I come to a park, and sitting by the road I see a woman with her child. I run over to her. She has a cell phone, so I ask if I can use it to call the police. But she makes the phone call herself.

"Yes, there is a problem here and my cousin needs help," she tells the dispatcher.

I am amazed that she knows me, believes we are related. I don't even recognize her.

#

"No, I'm never going to forget that."

"Want to watch some more?"

"I've had enough castration fears for one night."

The screen goes dead.

"But I still don't get it," I say. "She's not even all that hot."

"Who?"

"Cinnamon."

The Stranger stares at me, slowly shaking his head. "You know, sometimes I just can't believe we're really the same person."

#

#

Director's note: Now we come to the gratuitous sex scene. While *The Stranger* and I watch movies at the Armageddon Drive-In, Jack is letting his sleek dog run. He is heading into Strangers Rest, to Another Café, where he will penetrate Tina's teenaged membranes in a steamy shower episode. This scene even manages to advance the plot. Come to think of it, the sex is really not gratuitous at all. It's necessary to the story. So you would do well to pay attention. Perhaps you and I could watch from the back seat of the Cutlass? Pretty.

#

Tina in the shower.

Tina naked in the shower.

Sex with Tina naked in the shower.

Quietly unlocking the deadbolt, Jack slips inside the little apartment where Tina lives above Another Café. He steps out of his shoes, eases past the kitchenette of '60s avocado green, through the little living room of gold shag carpet (just big enough for an ancient – and inoperative – console TV and a vinyl sofa with duct tape on the arms) and into the bedroom.

Tina is standing with her back to him, unhooking her bra and dropping it on the dresser. The mirror over the dresser is positioned so Jack can just see the front of her torso, smooth and perfect skin left peeled and exposed, nothing left to shed but her bright red lipstick and panties. She puts her hands on her hips, begins to slide them down. And then she sees Jack.

"You bastard," she says, a heart-thumping outburst that instantly switches from fear ("what is a man doing in my bedroom?") to anger.

"What the hell are you doing?" she says, futilely trying to gather up her errant breasts in slim, teenaged arms. Jack notes her failure, and his attention locks onto the right nipple, a bulging eye peaking out at him from behind a peach fuzzed forearm. Her naked body is still an exciting image, because he knows he was her first. He is gazing upon territory never viewed by any man before him, except perhaps a licensed physician.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi? Is 'hi' all you can say?"

Jack admires her blazing eyes, angry and wild. Just like the night she threw the lamp at him. Yes, this is going to be better than Corvette. But first there were a few formalities to dispatch.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to surprise you. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You bastard," she repeats, quieter now, snatching the comforter off the bed and wrapping it around her, from neck to feet. "You've got a lot of nerve."

"I know, I'm sorry," he says. "I should have called. What can I do to make it up to you?"

Of course, he knows this is the wrong thing to say as soon as he says it. Rules have been violated. He hasn't allowed enough time for anger, pushing too soon for resolution. It was an amateurish move, something Mark might pull. And now he will have to move his game piece back another space on the board.

But, as it turns out, this is the least of his problems.

“How about explaining this?” she hisses, throwing open her jewelry box and coming up with a Polaroid picture. She flings it across the room, catching Jack in the chest. He looks at the picture and freezes.

It is a picture of Cinnamon, taken during a wet T-shirt contest the previous week. The picture was snapped about two seconds after the T-shirt was no longer an integral part of the contest. Or her attire. Even under the present circumstances, Jack can’t help noting that Cinnamon was a very healthy looking girl.

“What, are you looking at her, checking her out, is that what you’re doing?” Tina asks, the tendons in her neck bulging and taut as she leans into her saying. “Would you just rather be with her?”

“No, baby, no,” Jack insists, flinging the picture into a trash can beside the door. “I don’t even know her.”

“Oh, you bastard,” she fumes. “Bastard, bastard, bastard.”

“It’s true, I swear it. That picture’s not even mine.”

“It was just in your pants. Maybe somebody planted in there, some naked whore you don’t even know.”

“No, I don’t mean that. I know how it got there, it --.”

“You bastard.”

“I was holding it for a friend, then we both forgot all about it.”

“That’s so lame. Who’s the friend?”

Her eyes boring into him, there is no room for hesitation. He has only one chance, and no time to figure the odds. He speaks the first name that popped into his head, which of course is Mark Leach.

“Mark? What’s he doing with a picture of a naked girl?”

“He met her at a primal temple, a place he was doing a story on. He didn’t want his wife to find out.”

Had he the luxury of another moment’s thought, Jack would surely have made up a better story. Because of all the lies he could have spun about that picture and the girl in it, Mark was the least likely male to inject into it. Mark making time with a topless dancer? He might as well as said Mr. Rogers, it was so preposterous. And yet, there must be some genius working in that fraction of a second it takes him to pull up the name. Because Tina is buying it.

“Mark’s having an affair with that woman?” she asks, her eyes gone round like saucers.

“Oh no, they just talked, you know, he was interviewing her,” Jack explains, quick to capitalize on her curiosity as well as diffuse the story. He needs her to believe it isn’t his picture, but he doesn’t want her asking Mark about his new topless girlfriend, either. “It was like she meant it as a gift to him, for being so nice.”

“Oh, I see,” Tina says softly, letting the story soak in. “He is a nice man.”

“I don’t even know that woman,” he adds.

And she buys it.

“I’m -- I’m sorry, Jack,” she says, almost crying with joy that she has not been deceived. Jack rounds the bed and they embrace -- after she dropped the comforter, of course. After waiting a decent length of time (about 10 seconds), he slides his hands down her back and slipped eager fingertips inside her panties. She takes them off and drops them to the floor.

“Oh, I’ve gone and left the shower running,” she says dreamily, looking behind Jack at the open bathroom door. Jack turns to see the wet cloud of steam billowing out over the top of the shower curtain and disappearing in the chilled air.

“You better hurry before all the hot water’s gone,” he says.

“You’ll wait for me then?” she asks, ducking her head and stepping back from him coquettishly -- just an arm’s length -- so he would be able to see her naked body. She knows he likes looking, and she has found in recent days that she had lost her shyness and quite likes it when he looks.

“Just don’t take too long.”

After she closes the bathroom door behind her, and Jack can hear the splash of the water change as she stepped under the stream, he retrieves the picture of Cinnamon from the trash can. He looks it over again. Yes, she is very healthy looking. But at that moment, standing in view of Tina’s underwear and within earshot of the shower that is washing over her, the body in the picture seems somehow diminished. It is as if by allowing so many men to gaze upon her (for money, parceled out one ragged dollar bill at a time), Cinnamon has turned her asset into the most commonplace of commodities. Not like Tina.

He slips the photo into his pants pocket (this pair he definitely wouldn’t leave for her to wash) and opens the bathroom door. The roar of the shower fills his ears. Steam fogs the mirror. He quickly sheds his clothes and pulls back the brown plastic shower curtain.

This time, Tina is not startled to see him. He steps over the side of the tub, and she presses her breasts against his chest. She knows he likes that. But instead of taking her in his arms, he takes her by the shoulders and turns her around. Oh, so he wants that again, she thinks, and a wry smile creeps across her face.

As if choreographed, she dutifully bends over at the waist and grabs her legs just above the ankles. Jack grasps her by the hips and pulls her toward him for the penetration.

The DNA delivery organ slides in smooth and sure like a well oiled cam. The water thunders down her back, turning her pink skin lobster red. She turns her head slightly, cocking an admiring eye up toward Jack as he watches the water spill down her neck and over her full, open mouth.

#

Charlie: Ah yes, a film committed to the full frontal ‘yes’ of an ‘80s wet dream. I wished I was in that one –

Elmo: Don’t we all.

Charlie: Ah, a vision of the night, the symbolic language of it leaves everything to the mind, in the shower stall, ectoplasm swirling down the grated drain. A pulpit for the boredom of the genius, personified by a well oiled cam.

Elmo: Flesh in a wet, dark, dull hot day, listening to doomed banjos, penetrating membranes and plotting other cliches.

Charlie: No? Of course, you are right. The concept is predictable. Yawn. Poorly sculpted fluff. We deal quite nicely with their offer. Who needs the money? This is me.

Elmo: If I was Mark, then I would determine that being myself is the correct role for me. In the full motion picture, I would try to ignore the world, lost in my ridiculous words. And shrug. Trust me, it looks good on the wide screen. Wow. Now it no longer

functions. For years, I have been repeating an inner process, a process revisited throughout the rest of the film, that the basement is flooded. This is the resting place of the forgotten, abandoned gold. Somehow it talks. Is God communicating my destiny? Or is that 'All the President's Men,' together in the future outward events? Revelation, life, marriage. The origin of those transmissions may not be the blind seducing blind, lying on a pile of pebbles outside the abandoned church. It dreams of the divine, weirdly engaging. Whoa, a new life form. We can work in some conflict, too, see? I tried society, but communicated with The Deity above the concrete and rational. We are for him. And yet, a message is not funny. Boring.

Charlie: How about The Stranger films a stately musical? Call it 'Sometimes Known.' In ancient times, men were the apocalypse. Let Jonah run away from Christendom. Concept: The keeping of life from perishing it. For The Deity does speak – now in dreams. But balance out the heavy with fluff. A dog delighted, a languid blood bath waltz that has the feeling of a dream. The idea is to have him look for himself some night. Why? Because an army of scum-sucking violet pizza-eating dinosaurs is out to get him. In this movie dream, we can all identify. We all know for ourselves. We are drawn to it. And The Deity. My, but I do not feel that I am myself, lost in this erotic place. See what I mean? Blockbuster.

Elmo: The Oscar goes to success, an encounter with Christendom. The fish will bring him the last question. One final masterpiece, as good as the world is dead. What a story. In the full motion picture, we are true to ourselves. We can be proud. Then, we move on to Catherine Zeta-Jones in bend-over spandex. Ha ha! It means I am a seer. But here is the irony: In fact, I cannot dream.

Charlie: The message isn't any less me. Dreams are a nightmare of thoughts, giving me time to freely (i.e., those of ourselves, where we understand the story of a loving, forgiving everyone) look like me, the reborn in my ridiculous words. And we speak of a journey of revelation. In a sense, we all do. Such a dream film has not been seen since childhood. We're quoting them. It has been all the same since the beginning of the process, a process of death and the contents. We can no longer deny the still man. I am the rational, over the dream phone presented as – what is the phrase I am searching for?

Charlie: The total denial of reality.

#

#

Morning at the Oddfellows Cemetery. The script calls for Father Bypass to finally re-consecrate the unmarked Catholic graves at the back of the property.

“He’s not a very good actor,” I tell The Stranger.

“It was because of the whiskey,” he explains. “I should have used prop whiskey. Colored water. Anyway, he’s really perfect for the role.”

“He’s not even a priest.”

“He is now. I modified the script so that he is ordained by a dead pope over the viral DNA dream phone. But he’s not motivated by conventional theological concerns. No, he’s just doing this to make Cowboy Roy feel better. And, of course, he’s here to advance the story line. We have a very important plot point in this scene.”

My role in this scene is to report on the re-consecration ceremony. After much encouragement, Guy has finally decided he will take 10 to 12 inches for the Sunday Neighborhood Extra.

“And I’m sending Special K to get a photo,” he adds.

I arrive a few minutes early so I can retrace a recent tour given me by Cowboy Roy, a private tour of the pioneer-era resting place. But as I round the curve on Ottinger Road that leads to the front gate, I realize that something big has changed. The level, mowed field of tidy graves has become a steep hill, and grasses, weeds and thorny brambles have taken the headstones of the tidy, well maintained pioneer resting place.

Just inside the gate, Hacher Jacobs, the cemetery’s volunteer grounds keeper, crouches beside a tall monument. He is gathering up the brittle remains of a plastic floral spray.

“Going to be another hot one,” he remarks. He rises slowly to his feet and wipes the free-flowing sweat from his forehead with a crisp white handkerchief. “I should have got started a little earlier, beat the heat.”

Hacher is oblivious to the inexplicable change in terrain. In fact, he just barely notices the item parked behind him, a giant logging trailer. It looks like ones I’ve seen in East Texas, the Piney Woods. But instead of carrying a load of freshly cut timber, it bears four panels of rough pine logs lashed together with thick, vine-like ropes.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“It’s a clock tower. It’s supposed to be erected inside the cemetery, but the face of the clock will face the outside.”

He looks at the trailer and scowls.

“You think that’s a mistake?” I ask.

“Of course it’s a mistake. It should face the cemetery. But no one bothered to ask me.”

He scowls again and walks toward his house across the road. “I got to get my mower. This place grows up so fast nowadays I can’t hardly keep up.”

#

Alone in a cemetery.

That’s really the best way to explore one, all by yourself. So quiet and peaceful. I retrace the steps I’d taken with Cowboy Roy a few months before: epitaph for a former post mistress of Strangers Rest (“Any mail today Miss Ida?”) ... an angel-topped obelisque marked the final resting place of Elizabeth Murphy, Cowboy Roy’s great grandmother ... a row of graves belonging to relatives of Clyde Barrow, the same one

who had been visiting kinfolk in the area that fateful Easter Sunday morning when he and Bonnie Parker murdered the highway patrolman on Dove Road off Texas 114 outside Grapevine. (“But don’t write that,” Cowboy Roy warned me. “Folks around here still don’t like to admit they were related to an outlaw.”)

I revisit the little iron fence containing a massive red cedar, long neglected irises that almost never bloom and various lichen-stained tombstones delineating the family plot of Morgan Gibson, a member of the Peters Colony that settled the area in the mid-19th century. Cemetery records showed it was the site of the cemetery’s earliest burial, the unmarked grave of a boy who died of spotted fever in 1856 just shy of his second birthday. And a short distance away, I re-read the oft-quoted inscription on the marker of one of the Oddfellows Cemetery’s many infant burial plots: “I don’t know why I was so soon done, when I had hardly been begun.”

A few minutes later, a procession of three vehicles. Leading the way is Cowboy Roy in the Bevomobile, followed by Father Bypass and The Stranger in the little deuce coupe and the constable in his Toyota bubbletop. By the time I reach the bottom of the hill, The Stranger is directing his cameraman and the sound crew while Father Bypass unloads a set of matching black vinyl cases from the open rumble seat.

“What’s that, holy water?” Cowboy Roy asks.

“Just some equipment I use,” Father Bypass says. He crouches over the largest of the cases, flipping up heavy brass latches and opening the satin-lined lid to reveal what appears to be some sort of optical device, perhaps a telescope or camera. His fingers take inventory of a long cylindrical canister with rough crackled barrel, a black rubber eye cup and lavender-tinted lens set like a jewel in a heavy nickel mount. These items and others each reside in their own velvet-lined cutouts.

“What are you going to do with all that?” Roy asks.

“Just take some readings,” Father Bypass says.

Then he opens a second case, revealing what appears to be a metal detector. The constable didn’t like the look of it.

“I don’t know about this,” Sam said. “You got to have the permission of the cemetery board before you can do any excavating.”

“I won’t be turning any ground, officer. Since there aren’t any markers, this is just to help me better identify the location of the graves.”

Satisfied by the answer, Sam offers to carry one of the cases. Cowboy Roy leads the way up the hill along a little dirt path. I fall in beside him. We walk past several rows of headstones, then stop at the edge of an open expanse of grass.

“This is the old Mexican section,” Cowboy Roy remarks. “We found the calf over there near the tree line.”

“I didn’t know Hispanics settled this far north,” Father Bypass says.

“They didn’t. They were here with the railroad, laying the tracks, see? When they died, they buried them here at the back, but you wouldn’t know it because nobody ever bothered to mark the graves. They was mighty poor, you see.”

We all watch as Father Bypass readies the metal detector, plugging in a pair of headphones and twisted a knob midway down the handle. Apparently satisfied, he nods to himself and begins to slowly sweep the detector back and forth over the invisible graves. Suddenly remembering he is not alone, he addresses the crowd.

“This could take a while,” he explains. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready to give the blessing.”

Meanwhile, Cowboy Roy decides to show us what’s left of the calf.

“I dragged it over to the trees,” he says. “It’s pretty much rotted away, just a heap of mouldy bones now.”

But when we arrive at the spot, the bones are gone. In their place, the body of a freshly killed calf, eyes half open and milky white, abdomen split open and crudely sewn back up with a strand of barbed wire. A star has been carved into its side.

“They did it again,” Roy says. ‘Just like before.’”

“Devil worshippers all right,” Sam remarks. “Must have had one of them black masses. They probably did the sacrifice right here. Can you imagine it? Right here in our cemetery.”

“I figured this day would come,” Cowboy Roy says. “There’s a whole witches’ coven up there in Ponder. Probably a bunch more we don’t even know about. What’s this world coming to?”

#

When Special K arrives, he tries to take some preliminary shots of Father Bypass, but Cowboy Roy insists that first he must photograph the calf.

“The sheriff’s department will need that for evidence, right Sam?” Roy asks.

But since the constable is not on particularly good terms with the sheriff (or anyone else in county government), he just shrugs.

“To hell with ‘em,” he says.

Special K doesn’t mind. He sets himself to the job, screwing a squat looking lens into the body of his camera. Roy decides to fill in the silence with some small talk.

“Why they call you Special K?”

The photographer looks at Roy, then gives me a quizzical look. I shrug in outward mystery, but cringe in inward guilt.

Special K does not know his own nickname. He thinks he is Franklin Knopes, just another member of the Attitude Adjustment Bureau. What makes him special? For one thing, he spends the bulk of his workday energies on non-photographic endeavors, such as operating the bureau’s soft drink machine and honor snack box. His other nickname is Mr. Radio Shack, because he sells personal computers he assembles from components acquired cheap at flea markets and warehouse sales.

But mainly he is special because when he does find time to take a picture, there’s no telling what the image the negative might behold. Special K is the Register’s first surreal photojournalist. For instance, there was the time he shot the front yard of a disgruntled Bedford homeowner who had been cited on numerous occasions for his overgrown lawn. Special K had stretched himself for this one, laying down on the sidewalk so he could shoot the house through the San Augustine. When the picture emerged from the dark room, it revealed a lawn of giant grass, each blade the width of the front door and as tall as the house. The photo never appeared in print, but we kept it around for entertainment value.

This time, though, Special K does not bother to stake out a surrealistic angle. He doesn’t even use a light meter. He simply positions Cowboy Roy behind the dead calf, takes a moment to focus and snaps the pictures. Then he looks at me.

“You going downtown, for The Meeting?” he asks

The Meeting. Called by Executive Editor Libby Wright, this all-hands meeting is to be the kick-off presentation of the paper's year-long editorial project. At 2 p.m., Libby will unveil her Big Deal, a high-profile, community-oriented project that will focus the paper's resources on a single, broad-ranging topic. At least there will be refreshments.

"Wouldn't miss it."

"So where's the priest?"

I point to Father Bypass, who is still using the metal detector.

"He's looking for the graves," I explain. "Shouldn't be too much longer."

He squints across the expanse of freshly cut grass. "Say, looks like he's using a Seibel 9110," Special K observes. "And it looks like he's modified the receptor coil. Think I'll check this out."

While Special K pesters Father Bypass, Cowboy Roy leads me to the back fence line to identify the one grave we'd been unable to reach on our previous tour, a grave located in an isolated spot cut off by a spring flood. Even though Cowboy Roy knows the cemetery well, the grave is still a tough one to find due to thick brush.

"Ah, here it is," he says, pointing at the broken headstone. "Elijah Homer Lay. The last horse thief hung in the county."

According to local lore, Elijah was strung up in 1906 by a "justice posse" (or "truth squad," depending on who is telling the tale) whose members had fortified their resolve with spirited drink. Over his grave towers the skeletal form of a dead tree, the same one from which Mr. Lay is said to have swung.

"They left the body there, turning in the breeze for three days and three nights," Roy explains. "Then my great grandfather cut him down and buried him. He also bought the tombstone, and he had it engraved. Gone But Not Forgotten. That was a common epitaph for horse thieves."

I kneel down to examine the inscription. But the headstone is blank. No inscription.

The constable comes running, sweat pouring from under his hat. He looks at the marker and shakes his head.

"They're all this way," he says "Not a word on any of them."

"Nothing inside them, either," The Stranger adds. "It's a key part of the next 10-minute plot arc. You'll need to see this, for later."

#

A child's grave, the small patch of recently turned earth marked with a simple, white cross. Sitting on the mound of sandy, reddish soil is a teddy bear. And next to it, a dead, leafless bush covered in colorful bows and ribbons – a family story I recall from childhood.

"We do not despair for the dead ones," The Stranger says, "but for our own isolation. It terminates us. Our fear is not before death, however, but before life. Difficult, painful, splendid, adhering tightly, squeezing life out of ourselves. The transformation leaves us helplessly adrift on a sea of death, plugged into the oxygen containers and I.V.s, prepared for a satin-drawn coffin. We are a template for the human condition, arms folded like bat wings and lips stitched together in a silent scream."

Father Bypass stands over the grave, an odd machine in hand. I recognize it from the black case he'd opened by the road. He peers into the black rubber eye cup, now

attached to the cylindrical canister with the rough crackled barrel. The mauve-tinted lens is screwed into the other end, the cold, nickel setting white with frost.

“Bose-Einstein Condensate Scanner,” Father Bypass explains. “New process.”

“Same technology as the gaseous and liquid movies,” The Stranger adds. “It records tales from the collective unconscious. Or, if you prefer, myths.”

Static crackles out of a little speaker set into the side of the canister. Father Bypass slowly turns a small knob near the eyepiece, and a voice comes into being.

“This is the wild dream, up from the grave which we fill so prematurely. We are waking up from the big bliss trip, the up-sucked inclinations, absorbed passion and purpose. The suicidal intention does not speak of a desire to die. Rather, to disassociate with yourself. Separated from the fragile ego, the heat of death is formed at a too-young age, a defense unit against further betrayal. Tormented with illusions and self imposed limitation, our magical birthright is revealed.”

Father Bypass hands me the scanner.

“Want to take a look?”

I put the rubber cup to my eye, and a sepia-toned image comes into focus: It is Clark Caring, standing in a Texas backyard under a gray winter sky. All is dead, no green anywhere save for a few clumps of rye overlooked by the milk cow kept in the barn behind the house, a typical winter day in Waco, Texas, circa 1953. But there is some non-seasonal color. Bright ribbons tied all over a leafless tree, upside down in the back plate of Jewell Poe’s camera.

Clark Caring knows all about his grandfather's ability to turn the world upside down. When he was 4, he remembers climbing the stairs to Poe Studio in downtown Waco -- the part that wasn't consumed by the tornado of May 1953 -- and a simple wooden box draped in dark velvet. He took Clark’s picture, and afterwards he led the boy to the back of that Speedgraphic, let him look through the lens. The studio was upside down. Clark thought it was hilarious. How could his grandfather do such an impossible thing, overriding the laws of the universe? This was magic.

Having seen “Let Me Love You” about a hundred times, it doesn’t require much imagination for me to see that ribbon-bedecked tree -- that cherished Poe family heirloom -- through the upside down world of the photographer, a magician who captures a little piece of the world in his box and saves it on a piece of clay-coated paper.

Did he adequately capture the colors of that contrived scene? I don't know. What I do know is that he tried and, apparently, was close enough to success that he was afraid someone might steal the magic from him. So he sent himself a letter via registered mail, documenting in the vaguest of terms his discovery: A major new development in color photography, utilizing double reversal film exposed through a lens or prism.

According to Clark, his grandfather never made any money off the invention. The process was never put into production. No documents survived him, no evidence of his creation. But I like to think that he succeeded at least on the level of metaphor.

He colored the Myth.

#

This is the interstellar journey of the extraterrestrial personality, pushing its way up into sunlight. Lonesome prairie sod rustling up and down across the ancient burial mound, a worn out blanket, ten thousand images flash before me and turn to gray, oxygen deprivation due to a severed hand at my throat. And the smell. Circa 19th century dining

accommodations and clammy outerwear bearing the pointed stink of unhealthy metal, a nonsensical heap reaching to the heavens ... smolder gas of an equine lynching, bitter and hard exclusive waste, blotching pallid layer of noon's decomposing phobias, fillets inspired by sluggish aloof passions of terrified petrol, an ashen blaze and distorted screams ... the flavor of metallic text grasped in mandibles returned from the deceased's ghost pangs of deletion, flicker rhizomes of conventional organizations declining similar to deceased biographers in the dim lane of mauve chocolate twilight tainted with decayed metallic stink of cesspit chatter ... lost in the golden-haired coronas of the autobicker lamps, shattered xenon tubes laid bare.

"Don't be alarmed," The Stranger says. "This is part of the movie making, too. Picture a SF/Wild West concept based on the legend of a Martian spaceship crash in 1897 in Aurora, Texas."

"I remember hearing about that story when I was in elementary school," I remark. "It was a big feature in the Dallas Times Herald. They had a photo of the grave stone, which had a picture of a space ship."

"That's right. The legend is even alluded to on the historical marker at the Aurora Cemetery, where the Martian is supposedly buried. But in this story, the hook is that Aurora wasn't the only town around here where a space alien crashed in 1897. Strangers Rest had one, too, complete with a dead extraterrestrial that is buried in an unmarked grave in the Oddfellows Cemetery."

Cowboy Roy is not impressed. "I've never heard that tall tale, and that's saying something because I'm the town's main tall tale teller."

"The reason you don't know about this is because the Aurora crash gets all the attention," The Stranger explains. "You see, the story was reported in the Dallas and Fort Worth papers, which live on in the microfilm stacks of the public libraries. But word of the Strangers Rest crash never made it beyond the town limits. So it just didn't get the publicity of the Aurora incident. You like?"

"Pretty," I say.

"The movie is set in modern Strangers Rest, where the dead space alien comes back to life. During a re-blessing of the cemetery's Catholic graves, townsfolk observe a strange creature burrowing up out of the ground. It is the size of a man, but an insect. Townsfolk watch the creature crawl up an old cedar tree to shed its exoskeleton, revealing a pair of iridescent wings. In other words, a gigantic cicada."

Indeed, the alien has already split open along its back, and a set of deflated wings plops out of the slit.

"That's one ugly looking space alien," Roy says.

"We hired one of the best special effects men in the business," the cameraman adds. "Came all the way from the Zeta Reticuli system."

"At least that's our story," The Stranger adds. "This alien film is but one of many I have directed. I am today as the sculptor Marini was in the years following the second earthly conflict. But instead of boys on horses, my art is about extraterrestrial insects. So if someday you look back and view my alien films of the previous 12 years chronologically, you will realize that the townsfolk's panic progressively advances, but they are immobilized with amnesiac fear and resemble statues instead of living creatures, who would most naturally draw back or head for the hills. That is because I submit that we are nearing the conclusion of time. In every film, I attempt to convey a sense of

intensifying terror and defeat. In this manner, I strive to express the final step of a terminal legend, the legend of the conquering champion, of the rationalist's Creature of Merit."

"Pretty," I say.

"Thanks. Anyway, the black ops division of Ozona has already caught wind of the resurrected alien and is even now attempting to capture it as part of its broader conspiracy to take control of the United Nations and create the world's first privately owned and operated deity. In fact, you'll notice the man sitting on the trunk of the government-looking sedan parked outside the cemetery gate."

We all look to the road, and sure enough a newcomer has arrived.

"I wrote him into the script as a ufologist on the Ozona payroll, a humorous takeoff on the real, waking world research group known as MUFON," The Stranger continues. "I even have a copy of his initial report, which I have based on an actual MUFON report from a site survey in nearby Aurora."

#

PRELIMINARY SITE SURVEY OF STRANGERS REST

A year after our site survey of Aurora, Texas, NAGUO has returned to the El Camino Extraterrestre (aka Texas 114) to investigate the little township of Strangers Rest. We are here to report that the outcome of our investigation is rather "strange."

As we meander through the town, we find a mix of new high-dollar home subdivisions and old metal trailers, freely roaming dogs and a tired looking, mostly empty downtown anchored by the remains of a crumbling rock saloon. An old man in an antique Caddy with longhorns mounted on the hood (nice disguise for a "perp" on guerrilla drive-in movie theater detail.) tells us this sandstone structure is the only building here that still dates from the cowboy and cattle drive times. He then directs us to the town's "boot hill" cemetery, where it is believed by some that an intelligent insect from outer space was interred a century past. A brief dashboard survey reveals an extremely tidy, superbly maintained site, but no alien grave. We were told there have been more than a few out-of-the-ordinary bits of metallic items unearthed in the vicinity, but that was years ago. They were seized and impounded by the armed forces and never seen or heard of again.

But perhaps the most credible evidence we have become aware of while investigating Strangers Rest are the numerous visual rumors of a former armed forces presence. The town even contains the ruins of a miniature Second Earthly Conflict-era military type airfield, with roads arranged in a characteristic air base style. We are told that indications of the sod runway and concrete apron can still be found on the site of the old Hi-way 114 Drive-In Theatre. (Note: This 1950s era outdoor cinema has been out of business for many years, but we can still see the old screen and speaker poles poking through the underbrush.)

For what reason would the armed forces of the '40s desire to operate such an installation in Strangers Rest? Inspired by the nearness of the city of Fort Worth, we make the mental connection that the wreckage from the Roswell collision cover-up was airlifted straight to Carswell AFB. Imagine it – those famous dead aliens and their craft were studied (and hidden) just a few miles south of here. Chance? Quirk of fate? Fluke? Not to our way of thinking. We submit that the U.S. government has operated an extraterrestrial research facility here since 1897, when it began to study the remains from

both the Strangers Rest and Aurora crashes. That operation clearly continued for decades, right into the second earthly conflict. Perhaps the operation even continues today, hidden away in the antechamber of some underground bunker connected via high-speed pneumatic tunnels to Carswell, which is now called the Joint Reserve Base – a name perhaps reflective of the armed forces “joint” effort to reverse engineer an alien spaceship? What better place to cover up such a facility than a seemingly obsolete and abandoned military facility/drive-in movie theater. We, the dedicated researchers of NAGUO, are onto this evil cabal. We shall continue to search for answers. We are now on the El Camino Extraterrestre.

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“That ain’t no secret Martian research facility,” Cowboy Roy says. “He’s talking about the old radar base.”

And in fact Cowboy Roy is correct. Later, I will research the site and discover that it is listed in the National Archives as the Strangers Rest Marine Corps Outlying Landing Field. It seems that in the early stages of the second earthly conflict the Marine Corps had an amphibious glider program at nearby Eagle Mountain Lake, and they built a satellite airfield in Strangers Rest. The 1,200-acre facility had a sod runway, control tower, a glider hanger, mess hall and enough barracks to house 750 Marines. By the time it was ready for use, though, the Marines had cancelled the strange program. Later, they installed a radar station for night fighter training flights out of the Eagle Mountain base, but that didn’t last long, either. Strangers Rest Field was shut down for good at the end of the war.

If you go to the site today, the runway and old buildings are long gone but the roads are still in place. The street signs say things like Tower Drive and Run Way Lane. I talked to one man who’s built a 5,000-square-foot North Dallas Special on the hill where the control tower used to be. He said while putting in a swimming pool they found some practice bombs filled with bone-white chalk. But no underground bunkers.

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After the giant cicada’s wings dry, it flies off into the billowy clouds of summer and the crowd disperses. Sam and I are the last to leave.

“You keeping the bad guys out of town?” I ask.

“As a matter of fact, I helped chase down that bank robber last week.”

I’d heard nothing about a bank robbery. I asked which bank, and the constable named one in Rhome.

“That’s the most robbed bank in the state,” he says.

“That’s pretty exciting. You catch him yourself?”

“Naw, but I had him on the run. He started out on 156, but then he just disappeared. The sheriff’s department was setting up roadblocks all over the place. I responded on the radio and they sent me way out on Seven Hills Road. He was coming my way right before they stopped him. So it just tells you that constables do a lot more than just serve papers. We’re real lawmen.”

“Sounds pretty exciting all right,” I repeat.

“You going to write about the giant insect?” he asks.

“I don’t know. My editors don’t seem to like that kind of story.”

“That’s OK. There may soon be an even better story for you.”

“How so?”

“Are we off the record?”

I hate off the record. Why agree to hear a story you can't write? “Only if we have to be,” I say.

“We do.”

I agree.

“I've got an informant who says there's going to be another sacrifice.”

“You know it for real? I mean, you know for a fact that the first one was an actual satanic sacrifice?”

“Yes sir. Got the forensic report from the sheriff's department yesterday. And an informant tells me another ceremony is in the works.”

“When?”

“I don't know exactly, but it'll be sometime in the next week or so.”

“So, the sheriff's department will be staking it out?”

“Oh, no,” the constable says, smiling. “No, they don't know about it. The informant is mine alone. That's why it's off the record.”

“So you're thinking your informant will give you a heads up?”

“And I'll lie in wait and when they show up and begin their ceremony, I'll jump out and grab them.”

“That'll make some headlines. Couldn't hurt come election time, either.”

“Yeah, I thought of that, too. So you want the story?”

“An exclusive?”

“You'd wait out there with me and see the whole thing.”

But I have another thought. “I wonder. You think this is the real thing? I mean, maybe it's just a bunch of kids playing like their devil worshippers.”

“Maybe they listened to too much Ozzy Osborne, is that it?”

“Maybe.”

“This new generation! They stay plugged in for days at a time, looking for onbeam primal goddesses and getting stoned on spore.”

“OK, but that doesn't make them devil worshippers.”

“Listen, no law enforcement official in Texas has ever made an arrest during a black mass, or whatever they call their infernal rites. You want to write that one or should I call the Sunrise Bulletin?”

“Don't even joke about that.”

“I'm not joking.”

“I want that story.”

“You got it. All I ask is that you spell my name right.”

“Of course.”

The constable pushes a notepad and pen on me. “Write down the numbers where I'll be able to reach you,” he says. “A beeper would be best. When the word comes, there may not be much advance notice.”

Satan worshippers in Strangers Rest. I am unconvinced. Despite the constable's confidence in his informant, I assume the so-called black mass will yet turn out to be a bunch of teenagers pumped up on illicitly acquired beer and the modern equivalent of Black Sabbath's “Paranoid” album. Still, I will put Jack's cell phone number on the notepad, just in case the call comes when we're at Plato's Palace.

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Lost in teenage memories of Duncanville High School: A hot summer night peeling away sweaty clothes in the back of a 1970 Cutlass convertible, ecstasy and guilt merge in a communion of strained membranes, salty flesh and bodily fluids. I close my eyes and see the innocent lips and virginal breasts, the spinning constellations of stale DNA and shimmering saliva and then -- And then! -- the shuddering rush of elation and moral defeat, of bliss and angst. A draining sensation of distinctive shame, gliding snail-like past tables of milky eyes and clipped fins, cold skinless creatures lined up soldier straight, body bagged and headed for the pitchfork and the flames.

“Wish I still had my old Cutlass,” I lament. “I feel a need for a Gonzo road trip.”

“Yes, we need some Hunter S. Thompson Fear and Loathing action,” Jack says. “And I know just the machine.”

“Yeah, my old Cutlass. The black vinyl, V-8 powered time machine. I should never have sold it.”

“No, it lives, man, it lives. Saw it last week at this place over on Mockingbird, near Love Field, all they sell are muscle cars. They’ve got a couple of 442s, but they also took a trade on a plain Cutlass, silver with black interior, everything original.”

“Are you kidding me? My old car?”

“It’s identical. And the guy said if I put down a \$500 deposit, I can borrow it for a weekend.”

“Get it, man, get it.”

A Fear and Loathing road trip. How long had it been? Five years? No wait – longer than that. It was the summer after we graduated from college, a high speed run south to the coast, to Corpus Christi.

We arrived at dawn on Malachite Beach, the final stop on North Padre Island before the untamed vines and tangled seaweed and undiscovered wreckages of Spanish galleons, pieces of eight strewn across the dunes and rattlesnakes and unexploded artillery shells and sea monsters. We played the Rolling Stones “Some Girls” album nonstop, a boys of summer soundtrack for our perfect, not-yet damaged lives. So respectable. And of course there was the tequila and beer, a whole ice chest full. We were sure the alcohol and the good times would last forever.

“I’ll pick up the Acapulco shirts and Saigon mirror shades,” I volunteer.

“Make mine those wraparound Spanish ones, like the ones The Stranger wears.”

“Speaking of him, we’ll need chocolate mysticism for three. Or least some spore.”

“I’ll steal some from under Corvette’s sofa.”

“And I’ll get the Mescal.”

“The kind with the worm.”

#

Checking out my old desk.

It’s been months since I was farmed out to the Northeast Bureau, but it appears (maybe) someone is still anticipating my eventual return to the downtown operation and Business News. My desk is just as I left it.

The editorial assistant has been forwarding (or tossing) most of my mail, but I also see she has honored my parting wish that the business staff maintain my collection of The George Report, a monthly listing of Tarrant County’s commercial real estate

transactions. I have every issue for the past five years. (Yes, I am an obsessive compulsive, at least when it comes to the real estate beat.) And I find a copy of my last annual performance appraisal, given to me six months late last fall.

A perfectly acceptable review, and yet my eyes automatically fall on the words I found (and still find) most offensive: “Mark does an excellent job of researching the county deed records and finding newsworthy transactions. And yet, through his heavy reliance on the public record we see that he is not discovering major transactions until after they occur. We challenge him to further develop personal sources in the local real estate industry so he can report on major transactions before they occur.”

How was I ever going to get local real estate agents to tell me about deals before they closed them, before they were deals? Nobody’s going to take a risk on losing a commission, not even to help out a nice guy like me. I was doomed. But when I shared this concern with one of the older reporters, he just laughed and went straight to the heart of the problem: “Quit going to the courthouse. You’re working too hard and just making yourself look bad. Next time one of your real estate buddies tells you about a deal, write a story. When they ask you where you got it from, you can honestly tell them you got it from one of those personal sources you developed as requested in your last review. They might even give you a raise.” He was right. I never went to the courthouse again, and my editors never even noticed. It was as if my career was over. I felt as if I had followed the same career arc as Clark Caring.

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Being a truth doctor is a lot like being Ardnassac.

Yes, I and others of my profession were much like the prophetess of your ancient, pre-science mythology, the superior being whom no one ever supposed true and yet whose divinations were forever confirmed by reality.

Like pre-science prophecy, truth doctoring is a gift. It is the gift of knowing the necessary steps to coolly and without passion avert – or at least diminish the impact of – a media crisis. This is indeed a great gift; however, in my case it came with a great curse – the curse of being powerless to persuade senior executives of the need to accept those necessary steps rather than pursue the folly of their own hot, passion-filled (and therefore doomed) strategies:

“If they run the story, tell them we’ll sue!”

“Tell them we’ll only grant an interview if they agree to let us review and approve the story before publication – or we’ll sue!”

“Tell them ‘no comment!’ And we’ll sue!”

For those of you who are not up on your ancient, pre-science mythology, Ardnassac died at the claws of Artsenmetylc, who slew the prophetess over the broken exoskeleton of her legal mate. Artsenmetylc actually had nothing against the prophetess. She had committed herself to the murder of her legal mate Nonmemega, just arrived home from his triumphant victory in the Froth Hills War, for killing their own larva years before in exchange “for a charm against the Frothian winds,” as phrased by mythologist Hilde Notildemah. So you see, Artsenmetylc had nothing against the prophetess Ardnassac. She just got in the way.

I died at the hands of Edward Milton.

Back in the day, Edward served as the director of life extension technology at Valuosity Life Planning Inc. We knew him for his extensive technical prowess. He was

even a life extension professor at the Management Information Foundation (as seen on TV.). Unfortunately, Edward had no knowledge of or feel for how to actually run a business. Even so, it didn't stop him from doing whatever it took to become company president. So you see, Edward Milton had nothing against me. I just got in the way.

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The beginning of the end came during our annual sales conference in Hawaii. The New York Agenda had just gone live with the first in what would be a series of stories about Valusosity – stories about how we were using EternaLife™ to rip off our customers, the nation's sacrament infliction officers. These stories would soon lead to a congressional hearing, a regulatory investigation and a \$70 million fine. It marked the end of the line for Valusosity, the end of selling EternaLife™ (our most lucrative product) and the end of our affinity marketing program to sacrament enforcement officers (our most lucrative market). But I'm getting ahead of myself.

After the big awards "luau" in the hotel ballroom, the CEO, president and senior executives gathered in a sixth-floor storage closet that had been remade into our media war room. They peeled off their tuxedo jackets and bow ties and brightly colored plastic leis. They stood around in open necked shirts and cummerbunds, looking serious and decisive. Think JFK and "Missiles of October."

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"We've got to act fast," says Roman Timms, our chairman and CEO. "Who do we know in Washington?"

A few names are kicked around. Someone mentions our lobbyist, though no one really knows if he has any contacts at the paper.

"So what you really want is somebody who has pull inside the Agenda, right?" asks Burt Durran, one of our senior VPs and a former vice chief of staff with the Sacramento Infliction Bureau.

Roman nods. "OK, we probably don't need anybody in Washington for that. I just want somebody who can step on that Motherfucker and make this story go away. Clark, what if you call him and say we're going to sue if he doesn't print a retraction?"

Poor stupid bastard. I nod slowly, pretending to think.

"Yeah, that really doesn't work, especially with Motherfuckers," I reply. My little joke gets an unfairly small chuckle from the group.

"Reporters kind of like it when you threaten to sue," I continue. "They think it must mean they're onto something big."

As I speak I notice our company president, Ward Collins, is growing red in the face. When I say the words "kind of like it" his head begins to inflate like a crimson balloon.

"Doesn't he understand he's hurting people with a story like this?" he demands. "We help deserving American families – our front line arsenal in the War on Sacrament Abuse – people of limited means achieve their life extension goals. We do it ---"

Oh yeah, that's what we need right now, Ward. That'll work for sure.

"Nobody else is doing what we do," he continues, "helping the middle class consumer achieve eternal life. But we can't do it for free. That's why we use EternaLife™. The paid-up commission allows us to provide full service life extension planning for those who otherwise can't afford it. Why can't the Agenda write that story?"

Poor stupid bastard.

“Reporters don’t really think that way” I reply.

“That’s my experience, too,” Burt agrees. “I saw it time and again at the SIB. Once a reporter has made up his or her mind, you can’t change it.”

“Exactly. I suggest we tell the New York Agenda that we’re sorry. We’ve seen the error of our ways and we’re going to change the way we do business.”

“Change, why should we change?” Ward demands. “They’re the ones in the wrong, not us.”

“Of course, but you can’t say that to a reporter. You can’t talk to them the way you would a prospective client. You can’t sell them.”

I know “you can’t sell them” is a mistake as soon as the words pass my lips.

“You CAN fucking sell them!” Ward says. “You just don’t know how to do it! You’re not a salesman. You need to get Roman or myself to tell you how. Between us we’ve sold the EternaLife™ program to thousands of prospects. We’ve conserved hundreds of previous sales with existing clients who wanted to back out. We’ve even sold it to regulators. Remember the Bond Wars, Roman?”

Roman nods, smiling at the memory of this long-distant victory from earlier, happier days. “We really need to get that man in here again,” he says. “We can make our points one more time, really hitting hard on the service we provide and how his story is going to hurt the very people he wants to help. Perhaps we can activate our client base with a letter writing campaign.”

“That’s right,” Ward agrees. “We’ve got a half million client families. We’ll get them to write their congressmen in Washington. They’ll set the record straight. We’ve got hundreds of thousands of clients who will say how we helped them achieve eternal life. We did nothing wrong! I say we tell those Agenda people we want a retraction right now or we’ll sue!”

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The hot, passion-filled approach did not work, of course. Our attorneys would not allow us to activate our client base. We turned over responsibility for all further communications with the Agenda to a high-priced media crisis expert in D.C., someone who was calm at all times and did not refer to reporters as Motherfuckers. In the end – no retraction, no lawsuit. We continued to insist we did nothing wrong, right up to the Day of Infamy:

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LEC Orders \$70m Payout

The U.S. Life Extension Commission (LEC) has announced that Dallas-based Valuosity Life Planning Inc. will pay \$70 million to settle allegations of unfair market practices.

It is alleged that the company unfairly sold life extension policies as immortality plans targeted at sacrament infliction personnel, promising the policy holders eternal life in exchange for their monthly investments with huge upfront fees.

It is estimated that around 75,000 government officers purchased the policies, which the LEC alleges in most cases generated very few additional years of life.

Although failing to admit any wrongdoing, Valuosity has agreed to the payout in order to move on and focus on providing for its customers.

"This settlement is in the best interests of our clients, employees and advisors, and will allow us to focus on moving forward as we continue to provide service to our

policyholders," the company's CEO and chairman Roman Timms said in an official statement.

The LEC said that sacrament infliction personnel already had access to various government-sponsored life extension products, including variable gene re-sequencers and cryonic therapy, meaning that there was no need for further life extension policies from the private sector.

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Ah my beloved creations, they should have listened to their truth doctor. We could have just said "we're sorry and we'll stop being bad," and it would have all been over months before. Instead, we fought back, and we were compelled to stop selling EternaLife™ -- and the rest of our products -- to the deserving, front-line agents in the War on Sacrament Abuse.

You may find this odd, but I counted it as another victory, albeit in a demented sort of way. Sure, a \$70 million fine is bad news. Very hard to spin. But the good news -- I was right. And that's what is really important. Any truth doctor would have been proud.

Then a few months later, Edward Milton received a promotion to the senior executive ranks. During the Agenda crisis, he served as just another departmental director. A few months after we paid our fine, Roman put him in charge of about half the company, including the department of truth doctoring. He promptly hired a new truth doctor, a professor of media relations at the Management Information Foundation (as seen on TV).

And that's when I became a lowly technical writer who had to park my Lexus LS400 in the blazing Texas sun with all the other insignificant employees who did not rate a space in the executive parking garage. Not that it matters.

Edward Milton has gone to live with Jesus now.

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I regarded my undeserved demotion as an unpleasant occurrence, to say the least. As a superior being, I am of course gifted with extremely developed senses and emotions -- far more developed than those of my fellow homo sapiens who must park in the blazing Texas sun instead of the executive parking garage. I am quite empathetic, suffering the pains of the world. This insight into the feelings of the insignificant ones is sometimes all that allows me to endure their weaknesses and failures. Even so, my special gift is also a nightmare. I am very sensitive to criticism and defeat.

Oh, I didn't show any outward signs of my injury. I'm far too superior a being for that. Still, the insignificant ones could see my pain. In the past they greeted me with great fanfare and gazed upon me with envy. They coveted my corner office and parking space in the executive parking garage. Now, instead of admiring my unlimited success, power and brilliance, they looked upon me as a wounded creature.

"Don't worry, they never fire anyone here," one of the insignificant ones advised.

Ah, gloomy times. I tell you, my beloved creations, it is lonely at the top. It is especially lonely at the top when you have fallen to the bottom. I do not expect you to understand this loneliness anymore than the insignificant employees of Valuosity Life Planning Inc. understood it. As a superior being, my situation could only be grasped by another superior being, another equally special or high-status person. Unfortunately, I could find no such person in my orbit. I was condemned by circumstance to suffer alone.

My pursuit of high achievement and top performance had been disrupted by undeserved defeat. My ambition and confidence took a nosedive. Sustained feelings of shame and humiliation engulfed me. I soon fell into a dark depression, fed by these insignificant suggestions that I should be glad to “enjoy life.”

Lest you find me too grandiose -- Yes, I have read the critical words of your heretics and artists. You thought I didn't know. As I was saying, lest you find me too grandiose please understand that I don't blame the insignificant ones. In fact, I was touched by their concern for my welfare.

One day after lunch, I returned to find a half dozen of my fellow technical writers in the LET department laughing around the computer monitor in the adjoining cube, work station of Sam Pack. He leapt to his feet and offered me his chair.

“Ah Clark, just in time,” he said. “It's time for your personal apocalypse.”

The subject of my co-workers amusement: an onbeam message board dedicated to nocturnal creations about the conclusion of time.

“Actually, I've seen this one before,” I replied. “These people are nuts.”

“You're talking about the message board,” Sam said. “This is PAAGO, a new app.”

“What?”

“Personal Apocalypse Algorithm. It generates a description of how the world would end based on your own personality. Go ahead and plug in. It just takes a minute.”

I abhor the so-called personality evaluation Web sites, particularly when others will see the results at the same time I do – before I can do any truth doctoring. I like to make people laugh; however, I hate to be laughed at.

Nevertheless, I was already seated at the computer. Committed. I peeled off the backing of a fresh transdermal patch and slapped it on my forehead, then clipped the transceiver lead to my left earlobe.

The implant canvass immediately jumped to full 3-D, a landscape of exploding rocks and molten lava with assorted mushroom clouds erupting along the horizon and winged demons flying overhead. The images froze and the screen flickered a moment, then filled with text.

The onlookers erupted in laughter.

“Look, Clark's a ‘High Level Alien’.”

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Congratulations! You are a High Level Alien.

It is by your high level of alien-“ness” that you move well through life at the end of life of Planet Earth. You are creating a giant hole to burn out, to fade. Struck from the South Pole, planets will fly out in a manner that has been masterminded by the Wise Ones (i.e., The Global Conspiracy). Even in an emotional coma you live on in the secret underground bases, the world falling into a crazy idea generated by the secret government. Or even not an idea but a result of the actions of a few crazy frankensteinian scientists. It's recorded in the Guinness Book. They will come finish it and then you can finish it, too. Maybe not in my life. Hmm. Let us think it through. Basically, you move away from most of them, the lesser aliens who have been in on the creation of life that is in fact the end of life. I think the Cicadians said that. There is also the mind control, of course. It's another thing that will mess up every thing around you. You shall be making us believe that the sun's gravitational pull is ours to control. Well, that particular branch

of the 'celestial management' and the fallen angelic presence is role modeled on what I always say. The trigger? It's a better cobalt-salted nuclear device, and in turn we will be believing that the end of the world and Jesus shall come again to save the good and forgive even the wicked. So you need two more items, basically very important items to achieve the biggest point of your life. I have them both. Whatever hits us will shoot the right cap off the whole genetic research effort of records and see their original order (or rather the re-creation or re-arrangement scientists here and there have been noting of the coming here on the planet). You are just a visitor here, sub-contracting for that alien race. Then the earth will just consume itself. Our planet of convenient guinea pigs... Everyone knows races that have visited Earth, which is a moving target. And you fly in to one agenda, then another. All of us are going to explode. In fact, we are almost already there. Probably 90 percent of the alien races are using what has already been expended through time, and it should not be bad because coming here, it is my feeling that we can only RE-STRUCTURE that which we go into with the general discussions. Now check the cooking-lava-pot. Check on the onbeam message board of mankind. I'm telling you true, it is going to happen on this very planet. It is you. My, how the world will end. You will no longer be us in the world. You will no longer be made of biological matter at all. Rather, you will be a star child, the 2001 Space Odyssey cosmic baby.

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"Based on the laughter, I assume I'm the only one who came out as an extraterrestrial."

"Hey, don't take it personally," Sam advises. "I came out a seven-headed beast."

"So it's just random text generation?"

"Actually, it uses an algorithm combined with a cut-up engine to re-pattern your own brain waves into a grammatically correct textual display."

"Writing without thinking."

"Pretty much."

"We should use it to finish the descriptions for the business analyst project."

Again my fellow technical writers erupt in laughter.

"Great idea. Yes, that's so perfect."

I'm not trying to be particularly funny. The business analyst project is a rather mind-numbing bit of technical writing, summaries of each department's strategic plan responsibilities. These summaries are based on notes from each department's assigned analyst, technocrats who employ phrases such as "engineer best-of-breed niches" and "reintermediate wireless functionalities" and – my personal favorite – "enable intuitive infomediaries." It's really not writing at all.

Anyway, my piece of the project – 240 separate process/decision trees – has been hanging over my head for weeks. Based on the laughter, I know I am not the only "infomediary" who wishes this project already over.

"We should write our own algorithm, one that will write all the analysis for us."

"That would be hilarious."

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After that, I'm in. My new cube mates fully embrace me as one of their own. They even include me on the "CC" lines of their joke e-mails. I particularly enjoy the video clip of the chimpanzee falling off the branch after sniffing the finger he's just used to scratch his anus.

Kudos for the monkey!
Stinking beasts as they may be in the wild or a zoo, chimpanzees can be antic-
filled saviors in a time of depression.
Kudos for the monkey.
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“Leach! What the hell are you doing here?”

Carl Teschanek – “Tesch.” My old boss.

Standing in the doorway he looks unchanged. Open collar, loosened tie, eyes sunken into their usual dark rings, the result of the 60- to 80-hour weeks considered standard for the paper’s mid-level editors. Unlike the hourly reporters, editors are on salary and therefore can be inexpensively worked to cardiac arrest (one veteran had in fact died at his desk a few years back).

“I’m here to find out what year it is, of course.”

Libby has called together all of the downtown and bureau reporters to announce the successor to her “Year of the Child” project. For the past 12 months, no story about kids has been left behind. Big Sunday features, multi-part series, first-person commentaries – dozens of tales of predictable pathos, all stamped from the dough of human suffering with Nathaniel West’s heart-shaped cookie cutter.

These big projects are considered an ideal technique for snaring journalism awards and showcasing the paper’s good writers. (In case you were wondering, Libby says we have three. I do not much care for Libby.)

“It’s supposed to be about race,” Tesch says. “At least that’s what everybody is speculating. Come on, Leach, let’s keep up with the gossip.”

“Gossip is a little hard to come by out in the bureaus.”

“So how’s it going out there?”

“At least there’s no major-league bitching.”

“What? I’ve never heard anything like that around here. Everyone is happy and satisfied.”

“Everyone?” I ask, nodding toward David Meade, a particularly disgruntled and vocal reporter who is angrily typing away in the neighboring cubicle.

David has not looked up from his computer, but I can tell by the way he is attacking the keyboard that he has been following our conversation.

“Oh yes, I’m very happy here,” he says. “Very happy and glad to have a job and proud to be an American.”

“And you love your editors,” Tesch adds.

“Libby is a brilliant editor. And I ought to know. She just worked over – I mean on – one of my stories only last week. Friday night, to be exact.”

Libby is infamous for her “Friday night massacres,” eleventh-hour deconstructions of big stories scheduled for the following Sunday papers. At about 7 p.m. on Friday, David got the call at home from Tesch: “You better get back here quick. Libby’s just read your Sunday piece, and she’s got a lot of questions.” David claimed the story was so marked up that Libby’s notes and questions were actually longer than his text. And just in case anyone doubted him, David copied the edited file to everyone in Business News, including a CC to me. Since David is a nationally known technology reporter, I found it somewhat comforting to see that his vivisected copy looked a lot like my own after a Libby edit.

“Did you know I didn’t fill in the final hole in that story until after midnight?” David remarks. “We actually missed the Bulldog.”

I did know. Everyone knew. He told the story often.

“I only live that one day I might write something worthy of her compliments,” he adds. “Her compliments are so liberally dished out.”

#

I am walking the empty hallway outside Business News, waiting for the staff meeting. Stacks of shrink-wrapped travel guides sit on a broken wooden pallet in front of the fire escape doors. A smear of greasy black cuts a dirty path along a yellowed cinder block wall. A rather uninspiring view, to be sure. And yet, for some reason this particular hallway always make me think of a favorite scene from “Let Me Love You.”

#

After my teleconference with Roman, I decide to grab a soft drink from the executive break room. You can't do any proper truth doctoring without a cool, carbonated beverage.

The executive break room is at the end of a long hallway I like to call the Corridor of Admiration. It is lined with 8-by-10s of all 753 of Valuosity's life extension advisors. These are our salespeople, mostly retired or separated SIB officers who now market EternaLife™ and similar products to their former government colleagues. I've looked at their photos a thousand times. However, this day my gaze is inexplicably drawn to one picture in particular. He jumps out because he is African American, and we don't have many of them in our sales force. I don't know this advisor, so perhaps he is a new hire. His face – light skinned with stereotypical Anglo structure – is familiar. From where would I know him?

I walk on to the break room, so lost in my thoughts as I open the door I almost bump into someone who is standing just inside the doorway. I look up to find my way blocked by a man wearing the old-fashioned uniform of a movie theater usher.

“You must buy your ticket at the window,” he says.

“What?” I ask. Then I look into his face. He is the man whose photo I had just seen in the Corridor of Admiration. Now I know why he looked familiar to me. He looks like a younger version of me, but with a shadow across his face.

“You must stand behind the stripe,” he tells me, pointing to a line on the floor.

So I take several exaggerated steps back, stopping at a sort of half wall I had not realized was there.

“Is this good?” I ask, feeling a surge of disdain rise within me. “You just tell me where you want me to stand.”

The usher ignores my sarcasm.

“Yes, that is sufficient,” he says.

I am going to ask him why he is here and who he is to challenge me, but then I am distracted by the sounds of a muffler-less internal combustion engine. Trouble at Valuosity? Good thing this company has a truth doctor on the payroll.

I step back into the Corridor of Admiration, but now I notice part of it appears to be the lobby of a movie theater, the advisor photos replaced by backlit panels depicting a streetscape I recognize as New York City. I run to the end of the corridor, where I immediately spot the source of the disturbance. Four floors down, in the bottom of Valuosity's lobby atrium are two men on motorcycles. How did they get inside the building?

Pandemonium. People are screaming, running in all directions to escape. As I watch the two cyclists dismount and chase a fleeing man, running him to the ground.

They hold him down, and one of them produces a sharp object (a pen or maybe a house key).

“Let me go, I won’t tell anyone!” he pleads as they systematically puncture his face. I touch my own face in an empathetic reflex, and I am surprised to find I am bleeding. I look around and catch my reflection in a window. My face is full of holes, like tiny red tattoos.

#

As a superior being, I of course instantly realize I already read of these events in “The Voice of God,” the anonymous paperback left at my house the previous day. At this point in the story I have not yet met the Prophet, so I conclude that someone is using the book as a guide for terrorist acts. Since the book came to me in a Valuosity envelope, I immediately deduce the terrorist is a company employee. Good thing this company has a truth doctor on the payroll.

But my terrorist theory doesn’t hold together for long. A quick phone call to Preacher with a Gun reveals all is normal after all.

“It was just a promotional gimmick for the United Way campaign,” he says. “This year’s theme is ‘United at the Movies.’ Today’s featured presentation is ‘Easy Riders.’”

“I was confronted outside the executive break room by a man dressed like a movie theater usher,” I say.

“Right, that’s part of the movie theme, too. The break room and the hallway are being turned into a movie lobby. Didn’t you see the decorations?”

Just a promotional gimmick. Still, the explanation doesn’t account for all I saw. A quick look in the men’s room mirror reveals my face is bleeding from several puncture-like wounds. I clean myself up as best I can, then return to my office.

#

“Oh my god, what happened?” asks Courtney, my 22-year-old administrative assistant with the big boobs and tight ass. She sits on the edge of my desk and takes my face tenderly in her hands, daubing at my wounds with a tissue. As she inspects my forehead, I am provided with an unobstructed view down the front of her blouse at the impressive anatomical feature that inspired a secret nickname known only to me (and shared with some buddies and a few strangers over drinks at the 19th hole): The Dairy Queen.

“I had an accident in the break room.”

“It looks like you smashed your face into a bed of nails. Doesn’t it hurt?”

I look at her and nod solemnly.

“Yes, yes it does. In fact, I thought I might go home and lay down for the rest of the morning, then come back this afternoon. Tonight we could get caught up. Do some paperwork or something.”

“Or something?”

“I’ve got an enormous package I need you to unwrap.”

The Dairy Queen slides her big boobs and tight ass off the desk and turns away from me, towards the corner window.

“I’m busy tonight,” she says.

“Doing what?”

“I’m going out.”

“You? Going out? Like on a date?”
 “Yes, I am going on a date. That’s what single women do.”
 “Who is it? Tell me his name.”
 “Maybe you should get your wife to unwrap your package.”
 “You mean my ex-wife.”
 “Whatever.”
 “No way, it’s too enormous for her. What’s the guy’s name?”
 “I’m not telling you. And I’m not staying late tonight.”
 “But I have administrative needs.”
 “Then maybe you should unwrap your own package.”
 “Oh, Courtney. Harsh.”
 “Look, it’s just not cute anymore.”
 “What?”
 “This – all of it. You.”
 “Me? Come on, Courtney, we’re a team.”
 “Not anymore. We’re through.”
 “Through?”
 “I don’t want this anymore.”
 “You mean you want to quit? Are you crazy? There’s no other openings in the company. In this current economy I don’t think you want –“
 This is a not a smart move on my part. For the Dairy Queen instantly turns on me, hurling herself palms first onto my desk in a spitting rage.
 “So now it’s come to that?” she asks. “You’re threatening my job?”
 “Let’s take it easy. These walls are not soundproof you know.”
 “This is great, just great.”
 “What I meant to say --”
 “I knew I shouldn’t have got involved with a co-worker, let alone my boss. This is great, just great.”
 “No, it’s not like that. I care about you.”
 She looks at me with a blank stare. She’s thinking about it. I might still have a chance.
 “I really do care,” I add. “I probably should have started off with that. Always lead with your strongest material.”
 “Always with the jokes.”
 “No, it’s not a joke. I’m not like that. Not about you anyway. I really do –“
 “You’re exactly like that. We’re through. I’d been trying to figure out how to tell you. But now you’ve made it easy. We’re through. Effective immediately.”
 “Come on, Courtney. I was just kidding around. A bad joke. I’m sorry.”
 “I’ll tell you one more thing. I’m not quitting. I need this job. When it comes time for my next performance review, you’d better give me a good one. Because if you don’t -- and if you ever try anything with me ever again – I’ll file a sexual harassment case against you so quick it’ll make your package fall right off. You got it?”
 #
 Harsh.
 Judge me all you want, but I’m telling you I didn’t see that one coming. How did I go so wrong? Since separating from my wife last year, everything had been going fine

with the Dairy Queen. True, I told her the divorce might take awhile and I wasn't quite ready to think about marriage again. She understood. Also to my credit, I'd been faithful to her. Generally. We'd been having a great time. Then out of left field –wham bam! A boyfriend? How did it happen?

As much as I'd like to explore this issue, I really have no time to spare. There are much more important and critical matters to consider on this strangest of days. But where do I start?

#

I am stopped in the hallway by The Stranger. Handheld camera running, he requests that I join him for a visit to the research librarian, who works in the “morgue,” the windowless room where old newspapers go to die.

“In this scene, you’re beginning to suspect that Dollar Bill Buckstop is behind an international cabal of evil intent,” he explains. “He plans to use Flouride9 to create the world’s first privately owned and operated deity.”

“Who’s Dollar Bill Buckstop?”

“The Billionaire with the Insect Eyes.”

“The what?”

“Whoa on the questions, cowboy. We’ll shoot the back story later. OK, let’s have quiet on the set.”

“What set? We’re standing in the hallway.”

“Scene 450, take one. And – action!”

#

We walk into the morgue, the scent of old yellowed newspaper clippings filling the air. The Stranger powers up his Beulah, the magneto hum catching the attention of Vera Mesa, the head researcher. She looks up from her work and smiles.

“Is it time for my scene already?” she asks.

“Yes, Vera, you’re in the limelight now,” The Stranger says. “Did you have any luck?”

“Oh yes, there’s quite a bit of information out there on William Y. Buckstop. Texan. Born in Strangers Rest. Did you know that at the end of the second earthly conflict he brought home the concept of fluoridating municipal water supplies?”

I do not know.

“Oh yes, he had some sort of high level position at the Pentagon,” Vera explains, “fighting malaria through a water purification program.”

“Part of the war effort,” The Stranger adds.

“And when the war was over,” she continues, “Mr. Buckstop went into the water treatment business, founding the company that would become Ozona International.”

“I believe you’ll find that his first client was his own hometown, Strangers Rest.”

“Let’s see – yes, the most current update to ‘Who’s Who in American Industry’ indicates that he recently sold a controlling interest in Ozona to Amalgamated Aquasystems LLC.”

I did not know this, either.

“You’re saying Ozona is owned by AmAqua?” I ask.

“That’s right,” Vera says. “And in turn, AmAqua is partially owned by Buckstop. He’s got a 15 percent interest. And he holds a seat on the board. According to volume 46 of the ‘Anglo-American Cyclopaedia’ –” She pauses to pick up the oversized reference

book and read from a bookmarked page. “Yes, here it is. ‘Through a global network of bottling plants and fluoride-based treatment systems, AmAqua owns more than two dozen companies that control almost one third of the world’s potable water.’ ”

“Buckstop’s a big man,” The Stranger observes. “You control the world’s water, you control the world.”

“I also found an SEC filing from last year,” Vera adds. “He acquired a 7 percent interest in Summon Replisystems Inc. and led the spinoff of Summon Vision Systems, which employs Fluoride9 in a patented onbeam visualization program.”

“Isn’t Summons the company that makes the artificial eyes?” I ask.

“That’s how Dollar Bill got his other nickname, ‘the Billionaire with the Insect Eyes,’” The Stranger explains. “Three years ago, a lab accident with Fluoride9 destroyed his retinas. A searing vision of the Son of the Deity. A programmer at Summons Replisystems used onbeam technology to create a set of electronic eyes for Buckstop. He implanted a network of compound photoreceptors into the corneal tissue. So he has compound vision, just like insects. That’s why Buckstop usually wears dark glasses, but when he takes them off you can see that instead of an iris with pupil, each eye is actually a grid of tiny metallic squares. Gives him a vaguely insect-like appearance.”

“Something of a visual irony, isn’t it? I mean, due to his financial commitments to those who believe that extraterrestrial insects are poised to take over the world.”

“Oh, Buckstop is totally insane. He is the quintessential narcissistic CEO. As you will learn in the climax, Buckstop is using Summons Replisystems and Fluoride9 to take control of the onbeam infrastructure and stage a full blown corporate invasion of the collective unconscious. His goal is to rule the world.”

“He still lives in Strangers Rest,” the librarian adds. “Buckstop’s bio in the ‘Communal List’ says he owns a 200-acre horse ranch just outside of town. And here – no, this is surely wrong.”

“What?” I ask.

“An odd historical/meteorological cross reference. In the 1928-29 time frame, a summer so cold that residents of Strangers Rest reported that the creeks and ponds froze over.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Agreed. It’s surely wrong.”

#

Meeting time.

The “Year of” unveiling is being held across the street in the Mercantile Club Building, one-time home of the city’s power elite. High ceilings, picture frame moldings, arch-topped windows – it’s a sort of museum harking back to the days when the progeny of the town’s founding fathers ran the city with a sure hand. Much of that power has faded over time, but you wouldn’t guess it by looking at the Mercantile Club Building.

Stepping off the elevator, I am overwhelmed by the form of this tragic building from an earlier time. I am here and somewhere else – with you.

Together we advance through the hallways, meeting rooms, colonnades. We take in the form of this mournful mansion from an earlier time, this vast and magnificent mansion. Mute rooms, where footsteps are lost...in sculpted berber so profound, so deep that one perceives no step, as if the ear itself of him who advances once again. 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 – 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, 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 too meet 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.

#

I spot Jacob Elgin across the room.

A recent J-school grad hired for the Arlington bureau, he is admiring a large Ming-like vase that resides in a glass display case.

“I didn’t realize the paper had this much money.”

“They’ve got plenty of money,” I say. “They’re printing \$1,000 bills over there at the south plant. That 30 percent federal subsidy keeps America’s family farms and daily newspapers rolling along.”

As we reach the meeting room, I take hold of the gilded door knob and turn to face the young reporter. “Your first all-newsroom staff meeting?”

“That’s right.”

“Then prepare yourself, Elgin.” I swing open the door and wave him inside with a grand, overly dramatic sweep of forearm. “You shall never cast your eyes upon a more repugnant lair of iniquity.”

#

“Come on in and grab some cookies,” urges a perky Metro type I have never bothered to meet. She resembles a stereotypical Camp Bowie Socialite, but a decided wannabe. Highlighted hair straight and shoulder length, outfitted in wrap skirts and scoop-necked blouses from Harold’s. She keeps the keys to her sun-roofed Acura Integra on a Louis Vutton key fob in a matching purse.

I move into the morass that swirls about the refreshment table, a frenzy of scuffed knuckles and dirty cuticles laying waste to the perfectly arranged platters of cookies, scooping them into pants pockets and purses for later consumption. Bottles of soft drinks greedily snapped up, some opened and others stashed away. David sidles up next to me and whispers in my ear.

“How many of them you think wash their hands after they go to the bathroom?” he asks.

I nod, then judiciously select a shrink-wrapped tollhouse and a bottle of Dr Pepper. We sit a respectable four rows from the back with the rest of the business news department -- all but Business Editor Steve Harrison, that is. He sits on the front row, busily glad handing with other department heads, his equals.

Steve Harrison tells people he manages a department of 18. But that count is deceptively high. It includes two graphic artists, a part-timer who writes a couple of short fillers a month and several long-time reporters who accomplish little more. Eight reporters (mostly the younger members of the department) produced the bulk of the daily, grind-'em-out stories. I used to take great pride in being one of those top producers, writing a lot and turning it out fast. At least I hoped I was tops in quantity. Because, clearly, the quality of my work impressed no one.

I have no awards to my credit. You doubt me? It's true. No false humility here. Not even a little in-house quarterly honorable mention to my name. My only satisfaction is the possibility that my exile to the Attitude Adjustment Bureau is forcing the department's lower output writers to put forth a bit of extra effort.

"Okay everybody, find a seat and let's get started," instructs Courtney Labuge, another Metro type. I don't know her either (I'm actually rather unfriendly, it would seem), but she is obviously a member of Libby's inner circle. She often does the opening monologue and is known to repeat all pertinent gossip to the executive editor. Pertinent is defined as anything that casts Libby in an unflattering light.

"If you don't have a cookie yet, get one," Courtney pleads. "That's why we bought them for you."

"What a kiss-up," David whispers.

I have to agree. But I don't think about that for long. Libby Wright is stepping up to the podium.

The walls are bleeding again. Listening to one of Libby's speeches tends to do that to me. Seeking relief, I look out the window. It's no better. Nazi paratroopers have landed on Seventh Street. And there is the matter of my hand -- tiny white eggs on the back of my hand are hatching into hungry wolf spiders, stripping the flesh from my bones.

#

Turns out the rumors are correct. This is to be the Year of Race, after all. The news does not appear to inspire Libby's audience. The air boils with the odium of a hundred odd stares. Abhorrence hangs in the air, a dirty fog so thick you can almost taste it. Even Libby must realize it. Her voice is on verge of breaking up, of dissolving back into the silent revulsion.

"I'm sure we'll take some heat, but it's a worthwhile topic and I know you'll all be willing to sweat it out," she said, trying to sound brave and strong and ready to martyr herself and the staff for The Deity and humanity.

"She's insane," David whispers. "I wish the Dallas Spectator would do another one about her."

"That story is old news."

"Not to Libby. They say she talks about it constantly."

Frustration with Libby's editorship is so widespread and well known that word made it all the way to the Dallas Spectator, an alternative weekly well known for the adult ads in the classified section. Libby was their cover story. The piece even included a short recap of an incident that involved one of my stories, a report on residential real estate commissions.

Seems some local Realtors didn't like what I had to say about the value of their service. So Libby directed me to write another story, this one more complimentary. It was

even suggested that I interview some of my critics, just to make sure they were suitably appeased. How did the Dallas Spectator get the inside scoop on that one? I gave it to them.

Off the record, of course. Only a few of the two dozen current and former staffers interviewed for the story agreed to be quoted by name because, as one of them put it, “I’m shaking with worry that Libby’s going to find out and fire me.” In the days before the story was published, it was rumored that Libby had requested a long distance phone log report so she could determine if any traitor had placed a call to the Dallas weekly. I had no worry, though. The Spectator called me at home.

#

After a few minutes, Libby concludes her remarks and opens up the floor for questions. Of course, the first one comes from Courtney.

“Libby, I know it’s a bit off subject, but a lot of people have been asking me what they should do if they get a call, if they get offered a job by you-know-who, that paper to the east.”

“Thank you for bringing that up,” Libby says. Courtney beams in butt-kissing splendor. “I know some of you have been contacted by them, and I want you to know we’re not mad at you for that. It’s not your fault. It would be sort of a compliment if it wasn’t so pathetic.”

Her voice is stronger now, she has found her true passion. “The only appropriate response is to tell them you are not interested in working for them, then immediately report it to your supervisor. I want to be clear on this: Anyone of you who talks to the competition about a job is in danger of losing your job here. If you want to talk to them, you should go ahead and quit right here and now.”

She pauses for dramatic effect, then scans the room like a school teacher prepared to chastise her potentially unruly charges.

“We’re in a newspaper war,” Libby continues. “There’s no room for divided loyalties. You know, we’ve been real aggressive over the past couple of years with the staff, clearing out all the dead wood and the people who don’t have a can-do, will-do attitude. It’s not an accident that so many of them left. We made them leave. Some of you joke about the government newspaper subsidy. You act as if it is a guarantee of success. But that program alone can’t solve every problem facing our industry or this paper. The truth is we just don’t have the room for a bunch of whiners and complainers.”

Suddenly, a voice from the back. “We quit.”

Everyone turns around. I can’t believe who I see. The Stranger. I didn’t even know he was in the room.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I know you,” she replies. “Are you a reporter?”

He steps into the center aisle and shoots Libby a defiant stare. “I am The Stranger, Version 2.0 of Mark Leach.”

The room is silent, bewildered. Libby looks at me, perplexed but with a hint of a smile. “Mark, what’s this about?”

I open my mouth. Nothing comes out. My eyes bug slightly as I watch Guy Wint rise from the front row and whisper something in Libby’s ear. Her face goes deadly serious.

“Oh Mark, I’m so sorry,” she says. “I didn’t know. Your girlfriend dead – and the old homeless man and the spunky dog, too?”

“What?” I ask. I look at Guy. He nods solemnly.

“I can’t imagine your pain,” Libby says. “But you know, maybe you should exorcise this demon with a first person story. I know I speak for everyone here when I say –”

“Don’t talk to him,” The Stranger snaps. “I speak for Mark now. We’re the world’s first two-bodied man. Nobody tells us who we can and can’t talk to. Unfathomable, unprecedented.”

I stand up and move swiftly toward The Stranger. “My apologies for the interruption,” I say, my powers of speech restored. “He doesn’t speak for me. He’s just off his medication.”

Libby doesn’t hear me. She’s still looking at The Stranger. “But we’re in a newspaper war,” she explains, almost apologetically.

I grab The Stranger by the arm, start pulling him towards the door. He digs his heels into the plush Oriental carpeting, so profound, so deep.

“We will not fix your potatoes anymore,” he says. “Now, I shall obsess over your psychotic edict.”

A tittering of anonymous laughter from the back half of the room, and The Stranger is off.

“Here you are,” he continues, “top editor of one of the largest remaining newspapers in Texas, safe and secure as the sole newspaper for half the county and the overwhelming choice of the octogenarians who still actually bother to read newspapers. You – actually, everyone at this paper -- insists at every opportunity that the staff of the Register is putting out the superior product. Much better than the Sunrise Bulletin, right? Yet it all belies a massive inferiority complex.”

There it is. My job is over, my career is through. After years of keeping my thoughts buried, keeping myself safe, The Stranger has brought it all into the open, shoved it in Libby’s face. She knows what I think of her now. I wonder: Will I be able to collect unemployment?

But The Stranger is not done yet.

“Instead of combating feelings of inferiority by laboring to put out the best paper possible for this market, though, you persist in fighting the Dallas demon on its own turf. How many people in Tarrant County really care what happens in Irving? And yet a simple word search of the database reveals that Irving is the second most common dateline in this paper. Tesch, why so much out-of-county coverage?”

The surprised assistant business editor blinks his dark circled eyes at The Stranger and stammers out a reply. “Because it’s – because Irving is home to Texas Stadium?”

“Well, that would be a good reason – if it were true. In fact, the reason Irving is No. 2 on our hit parade is because the Dallas Sunrise Bulletin does not bother reporting about Irving. So that makes it easy pickings for us, the scrappy little paper to the west. Except that we don’t think of the Tarrant County Register as scrappy or little. No, things have gotten so out of hand around here that our editors really believe the Register is as big as the Sunrise Bulletin, even though anyone with an ounce of sense can see that the Dallas paper is obviously larger with more staff and more readers. Well, congratulations Libby. You’re holding your own against the other last remaining Dodo bird. While you persist in thinking that the paper to the East is your competition, the truth is the real threat

is onbeam news delivery and transdermal data transfers. And, of course, the death via old age of your remaining readership.”

Much to his credit, Business Editor Steve Harrison attempts to salvage the situation and save my professional skin.

“Sir, maybe we can take this offline later,” he says to The Stranger. “You’re not an employee, and Mark has made it clear that you do not speak for him. That is correct, isn’t it Mark?” Steve looks at me, prompting me with raised eyebrows and a nod.

All I have to do is nod my head in return, and my job will again be safe. My great job. Back to late night meetings at Keller City Hall – or maybe, eventually, an exit from the Attitude Adjustment Bureau to continue my coverage of real estate and stories about the value of a full-commission real estate agent. And this is when I realize that my career is already over.

“The Stranger is right,” I reply. “This story is now pointless. Gone now is my fear of losing this job, this prison, a perjury. This story is already over. A few seconds more, it has become frozen. You worry about market share, yet I offered this paper the greatest scoop in 2,000 years – a first-person account of the pending End of the World. But no, all you wanted was another story about a parrot that rides a remote control car. And I blame you, Libby. It’s not all your fault, of course. I just don’t like you.”

#

Once in the hallway, The Stranger and I are all laughs and excitement as we high five one another on the way to the elevators.

“You did it,” he says. “I can’t believe it. Did you see the look on her face?”

“I saw it,” I remark. “It was great.”

“I can’t believe she didn’t fire you on the spot.”

“Well, the day’s not over yet.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic. You don’t need to take this. We don’t need to take this. Nobody tells us what newspaper we can and can’t talk to. This is America, and today you became a real American. We can get a decent job even without a doctorate.”

“We’re the world’s first two bodied man.”

“And don’t worry about women. They’re going to love us.”

#

Elmo: Mark Leach has certainly taken a lot of heat for his heretical, non-literal approach to The Revelation to John. To represent the other viewpoint we welcome the Rev. Ida Purelife, a nationally syndicated televangelist and expert on the book of Revelation and all things Rapture. Welcome, Reverend.

Rev. Purelife: Blessings from the Deity.

Charlie: You and many other Keepers of the Deity have certainly given Mark Leach a lot of grief for his non-literal approach to The Revelation to John.

Rev. Purelife: If it’s in the Bible, then I believe it. Mark Leach does not. He only believes in himself.

Elmo: Leach says he views this book as representing the transcendent world in symbolic language. But in one scene that he chose not to include in the movie, he does present a very well known scene in rigorously literal fashion.

Rev. Purelife: Yeah, I’d like to see that.

Charlie: Let’s roll the clip.

#

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten crowns, and on its heads were profane names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority.

The most powerful nations of the world responded to this challenge with fire and sword. A principality of the union of many nations (aka "The United Nations/One World Government") rose up and attacked the beast with a Kutuzov rocket, delivering unto one of its heads a seeming death-blow. But then its mortal wound was suddenly healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' The beast was given a mouth uttering arrogant and irreverent words. This was more than could be borne by the men of the Fighting 182nd, especially Col. Gerry "Zip" Uppum. "You can't take out the devil's creation with an atheistic Slavophile rocket," he explained. "This job requires a Deity-bless-America, Uncle Sam-guided missile with nuclear-tipped warhead." Then the men of the Fighting 182nd fired their weaponry into the heart of the beast, which exploded in a torrent of blood and flesh, acrid smoke and volcanic radioactive fallout upon the sand of the seashore. And the dragon was sore afraid.

#

Elmo: Care to share your thoughts on that?

Rev. Purelife: Godless liberal false once-created Worshipper of the Deity.

Charlie: But let's be fair. Mark Leach himself said that in this scene he was only trying to make a point, to indicate that one cannot in any way translate or interpret the violent imagery of Revelation and still claim the high moral ground of an exclusively literal approach. Doesn't interpretation presume a metaphor?

Elmo: Agreed. And let us also consider this quote from his publicity packet – "John's spiritual view takes for granted that not only their tormenters but also the Worshippers of the Deity, the true believers, are equal offenders. 'We' are not declared offenders; 'they' are not disqualified from deliverance." What do you say to that, Reverend?

Rev. Purelife: I will pray for you – you and Charlie and Mark Leach and all of the other godless liberals who pretend to be among the true, twice-created Worshippers of the Deity.

Charlie: Actually, I'm Jewish.

Rev. Purelife: Start believing in the correct theology, become twice created and perhaps you will yet escape the Lagoon of Flames.

Charlie: Interesting. And yet, if we read on we see that Mr. Leach notes that in Revelation 21 the New Jerusalem has barricades and doorways that function as the outer indicators, boundary lines to separate insiders from outsiders, yet the doors are never closed. In other words, you can come and go as you like. Does that not sound as if everyone is free to enter, not just the authentic, twice-created minority?

Rev. Purelife: Not at all. It's the flame-filled, charred-flesh destruction of the godless liberals and other bad, once-created people that makes the New Jerusalem such a wonderfully spiritual place to live.

Elmo: In other words, if everyone could enter, then Heaven would be just as wretched as Earth.

Rev. Purelife: His will be done.
#

#

And still we cannot begin our journey.

We are rounding up the last of our supplies - just minutes away from departure - when Allison calls to report that her parents' house has been burglarized.

"You need to get over there right now," she insists, her shrill command barely audible over the background wail of our inconsolable boys. "The next door neighbor has already been there and they say the patio door is busted and we need to have someone board it up. So you go home and get a hammer and--"

A hammer. Good idea. Glad she thought of it. Never mind that Allison has not even the most basic of carpentry skills. Lack of expertise does not stop her from giving detailed instructions.

-- and write down what's missing and call us," she concludes.

"Shouldn't you call the police first? I mean, for insurance purposes."

"We already called. And they said we should just go there and see what's missing. This isn't Kojak."

This isn't Kojak. Funny. If only every man could have a wife so funny. And so it is that for the second time in as many hours, I say exactly what is on my mind.

"Fuck you."

"What did you just say?"

"I think you know what I said."

Silence on the line, the crystal-clear satellite linkup so quiet that for a moment I think the connection must be dead. Then I hear her breathe.

"I've got to go to now," she says quietly. "Are you going to board up the door or not?"

"I'm going to board up the door. But I'm not going to fix your potatoes anymore."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" she asks. "You never cook anything. You never do anything. I have to do everything, I have to take care of everything. I had to do all the clothes washing and packing before we left, I have to do everything here, too, and I've got to start packing now to come back. And nobody ever helps me."

"I'm sorry you haven't enjoyed your vacation."

"Just forget it," she mutters and hangs up.

Love you, too.

#

In case you haven't figured it out yet, Allison's parents are rich. Of course, they don't think so. Although they live on one of the wealthiest streets in Dallas, they are quick to point out that they are at the southern terminus of the "poor" end of the street, the neighborhood of the regular millionaires. This is not too far off the mark.

A couple of miles to the south live the ultra rich, famous folks in their incredible gated mansions and columned estates, like the \$17 million replica of the White House built by a vitamin billionaire. But as you head north, the houses get progressively smaller and simpler. By the time you reach the northern terminus, even the bland McMansions are a distant memory. All that's left are 1960s suburban ranches. Really, they don't look much different from the house I grew up in blue-collar Duncanville.

Life is relatively normal here - so normal, in fact, that I must stop briefly for road construction. What an inconvenience the rich must endure. Plastic cones mark a car-size pit in the street. A man in an orange vest directs traffic with a matching orange flag.

His partner leans on a shovel next to a giant mound of gravel. This is not the first time I encounter such a mound. At one time, Allison and I live in a house on acreage. It is set back off a country road, perhaps a state highway or farm-to-market road. There is some repair work in progress; mounds of gravel have been dumped by the side of the road in front of our house. I am concerned; the gravel has been dumped on graves.

A half dozen tombstones are arranged in a semicircle, with the end markers closest to the road. I notice that a couple of them are partially covered by gravel. I am disgusted that road crews would have so little regard for these graves as to simply see them as a convenient, flat place to deposit their gravel. I am concerned that the markers will be damaged. So I decide to move them back from the gravel. I will return the stones to their graves after the gravel is gone.

Allison comes out to help me, but we are in immediate conflict. She picks up a marker, then throws it down between the mound of gravel and the road. I tell her this is not a good idea. The marker is too far away from the grave; we won't know where to put it back.

"No, this is what the road crew is supposed to do," she insists. "The graves won't get lost."

This is the way she wants it done. But I know it is a mistake.

Then I'm inside our house, and my wife sends me out to get onions at a produce stand that is in our front yard near the graves. But first I am supposed to go to the house across the street and pick up our sons.

Unlike our house, this one is set far back from the road. There is also a gully between the road and the house, so part of the driveway is actually a bridge. As the driveway leaves the bridge, it widens to form a circle by the front door. I walk to the house, and as I approach the front door another parent arrives by car to pick up their child. I am not sure if the kids are here for day care, a party or just a play date.

I go inside the house, and it becomes my mother's home. I sit down with her in the living room. I tell her I am going to be in trouble with Allison because I am taking too long here, talking to her.

"The produce stand is going to close soon," I explain. "I won't be able to get the onions."

My mother says this is really no loss.

"The onions there are not very good right now."

I tell her I know that, but with Allison it is better not to argue. Just do whatever she asks, no matter the outcome. Otherwise, she'll be angry.

"You know what she's like," I say.

Then I realize that Allison is in the house, in the next room. She must surely have heard me. Now I am feeling even more anxious because I know she won't like what I have said. I can't believe I was so careless as to talk out loud about her.

Back on the driveway with the boys, we are ready to go home. But part of the bridge is missing. The only way across the gully is a narrow beam about 10 feet long. I can't walk it; the beam is too narrow and the distance to the bottom of the gully is too great. So I think about crawling down in the gully and walking through it and up the other side. But this will take a long time and may be impossible because the sides are steep and the gully is overgrown with weeds and brush.

As I contemplate the situation, I see that Allison is on the other end of the bridge. I worry that she is going to be mad at me. I start to explain about the trouble with crossing the bridge, but as I talk I realize that the bridge has become part of a kitchen. There's only 6 or 8 feet between us. The circular part of the driveway is now the kitchen floor. And the house has become a counter and cabinets. It was, after all, only a visual trick, a bit of smoke and mirrors as seen in some old fashioned paintings or cast in ancient Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, trompe l'oeil capitals, false doors, false columns, false perspectives.

I see that my excuse about the bridge will really sound like a stupid lie. I don't have to cross a narrow beam or crawl through a brush-choked gully to get home. All I have to do is walk across the kitchen.

But as I explain what happened, I see that Allison isn't mad at all. She acts as if my story makes perfect sense.

"It's so strange that you should have had such trouble," she says.

She is smiling now. All is well.

#

Exotic, tropical-looking ferns and orchids wither in a dry breeze blowing in from the field next door, the backyard of Dallas' most prestigious private girl's school, Allison's alma mater. The humidifier is still blowing, but to no effect. Jungle air escapes through broken windows and French doors, swinging cockeyed from a splintered frame. The late afternoon sun catches edges of the broken glass that litters the flagstone patio. I slip in through the sunroom, or what Allison's mother calls the "conservatory."

My eyes fall on a small terra cotta pot that holds a flower of perhaps the most brilliant purple I've ever seen. The blossom itself still looks robust enough, but the stem and leaves that support it have collapsed into a dirty green mound resembling overcooked spinach. I find a brass mister from the overturned gardening cart and give the plant a quick shot. But instead of reviving it, the water causes the flower to immediately wilt into a wad of wet crepe paper. Clearly, only the strong will survive. On to the master bedroom.

Dresser drawers are open, contents scattered across the floor and a king size bed made up in a fluffy, Ralph Lauren comforter with lace white pillows. No sign of a jewelry box.

A quick check of the rest of the house reveals that that burglars zeroed in on the predictable. The A/V electronics are missing from the family room, the portable TV from the kitchen counter. The silver is missing from the bottom drawer of the china cabinet. But the burglars left untouched some of the more valuable items, such as George's collection of antique golf clubs and Mrs. Astor's 200-year-old blue china vase.

As I reach down to return an overturned chair to its proper place at the table, I glance upside down through my legs and see the baby grand in the parlor, the only room I've yet to check.

Although it is the most formal room in the house, the style is understated. The piano, a couple of simple wing backs, a camelback love seat, equally simple end tables. The exception is a giant painting that hangs above the piano opposite the picture window that overlooks the circular drive. I have always found it to be a strange, unsettling picture, sort of a modernistic interpretation of an old circus banner dominated by an intense-looking clown with eyes that seemed to follow you wherever you went. The first time I

saw it I had to stifle the urge to laugh. Allison must have guessed what I was thinking, because what she told me next instantly sobered me up.

“That’s a museum quality work,” she said. “They recently had it appraised at \$80,000.”

\$80,000. I could not fathom such a princely sum for the picture – any picture that you might hang in a normal, family home. It is worth almost as much as the house I grew up in, a disparity I have never been able to forget. Besides, George wouldn’t let me.

A few weeks before the wedding, I hung around the house while Allison and her mother were out shopping. Soaking in the elegance, enjoying the fragrance of money. Then George - “daddy” as Allison still insisted on calling him - sat me down in an Italian silk wingback for a little talk.

“The two of you may be happy together now, but I think both you and I know you will never be rich,” George boomed in his ever confident, blowhard, Dartmouth way.

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

George sucked his teeth. “You wouldn’t.”

“Pardon?”

“I want to make sure you understand this: You will never get your hands on this family’s money.”

“What?”

“Oh, I’ll always make sure my princess is taken care of, and any grandkids. Margaret is looking forward to a few those. But you - well, you won’t get your hands on one thin dime.”

“OK.”

“Don’t be defensive. I’m just trying to be straight with you.”

“I can see that.”

“I don’t mean to sound cruel. It’s nothing personal against you, Mark. It’s about family, my family and my responsibilities to it. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yes sir, I understand.”

Sir. Even then, I couldn’t believe I’d actually said “sir” to that pompous, squash-playing Dartmouth bastard.

But instead of striking back, I had turned the other cheek. Or maybe I was just afraid to fight, afraid I might lose Allison. Or maybe I was afraid of having a genuine emotional encounter with another human being.

By the time I decided to talk it over with Allison (about six months after the wedding), she had seemed almost hurt that I would attribute any ill intent to “daddy.”

“You must have misunderstood him,” she’d said.

I felt exactly like Clark Caring in the scene where he popped his head out of the dark pantry.

#

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.

#

You laugh. But let me tell you, this is no joke, no exaggeration. This was my domestic life, the world of Clark Caring.

The previous evening, my beloved had complained that she was getting out her fourth clean glass of the evening. It seems that each time she finished a drink of water, she had been leaving the glass on the kitchen counter so it would be available for her next drink. But "Somebody" kept putting her glasses in the dishwasher. In his defense, Somebody said he didn't have any way to know that these unattended glasses should be left out on the counter. He proposed a solution.

"You should use the striped glasses only. That way, I'll know to leave any striped glasses alone."

"No. I don't like the striped glasses."

"OK, you can pick any type of glass you want, but you can only use that one kind. You have to commit."

"No. That doesn't work for me."

"Ok, you can pick one glass and we'll write your name on it."

"No."

Turns out my beloved believes the problem is that Somebody was in some sort of nervous state that night and kept straightening the kitchen more than usual. Normally, Somebody is perfectly willing to leave dirty dishes lying about on the kitchen counter. But not last night. No, Somebody was in a nervous state.

So yes, you might conclude that instead of failing in his usual way, Somebody was failing in a new way. This is probably true. Therefore, Somebody parked his melancholy butt on the sofa and watched a rerun of Battlestar Gallactica.

See, does that sound as if I was nervous? No, it does not. And to hell with any damn glasses.

#

After detaching myself from the pantry door, I try go back onbeam to research “The Voice of God.” But my beloved has other plans. First, she reminds me that dishes must be washed. Next, Brian needs help with his language arts homework. We live in a good school district, which means our children are given a lot of homework. The last assignment isn’t completed until Brian’s bedtime at 9.

After Brian brushes his teeth and is tucked in for the night, I try once again to plug in. When I am halfway to the portal, though, my beloved looks up from the notebook in her lap.

“Where are you going onbeam at this hour?” she asks.

“I need to run an errand.”

“Why didn’t you run your errand during the day?”

“Well, I have to work.”

“Oh yeah, I wish I could do that, just focus on one thing at a time. But I have to take Brian to and from school and take care of the house and do my writing – you know, my job, my work. I have to do it all during the day, before you even get home. I guess when you’re Clark Caring, though, all you have to do is go to work, then go home. That must be nice. I wish I had a wife.”

#

The repair work doesn’t take long. A handful of nails, a few sheets of plywood - nothing pretty, but it is functional. I put the tools back in the truck and go inside through the garage to make the required call to Allison. But on my way to the phone, I feel drawn to the study. I re-check the antique golf clubs.

George is quite proud of his collection, most of which date back to the 19th century. They are wooden, of course, polished to a deep, rich glow like fine pieces of furniture. He’s collected them during 20 years of travels to the world’s great golf courses. Each club has a story that George is only too happy to tell visitors, even parasitic son-in-laws like me.

The golf clubs aren’t George’s only sports collectible. He also has a couple of old squash racquets. He played on the team at Dartmouth. “Princess, I just can’t believe you didn’t marry a squash player,” he is fond of saying, one of those jokes that’s not a joke. I do not play sports. In fact, I abhor games of all kinds. I am too much the alien to participate in genuine human activities.

The racquets hang on the wall, obviously more decor than serious collectible. But the clubs -- George keeps them in special drawers he had built into the bottom of a custom bookcase. The drawers are lined in green felt, and some have foam inserts trimmed to nestle the rarest of the golf clubs in a bit of extra protection.

I reach into one of these custom inserts and extract a frail, toy-looking driver. It has a handle wrapped in a thin, cracked leather so ancient and brittle it reminds me of mummy wrappings. I grasp it in my usual awkward, non-athletic manner and take a

swing at an imaginary golf ball. The big wooden head of the old club makes a barely audible swish as it slices through the air on a floor-to-ceiling arc.

Suddenly, I flash on parenthood. During Allison's first pregnancy, she had been willing to engage in membrane penetration until the final weeks. But when I tried that with number two, all I got was an angry, exasperated "I'm pregnant." By the third trimester, she was - well, she was who she was to become. You might say my "golfing" days were over.

"You're driving too close to the shoulder."

"You're driving too close to the center line."

"You forgot the oregano."

"You washed colored underwear with white underwear."

"Can't you do anything right?"

No, it seems I cannot.

I hold the club up at the apex of its arc and sight along the shaft. I pause for a moment ("No oregano?"), then drop into a batter's stance and swing the club against the bookcase.

The handle makes a satisfying snap as it splinters, scattering a century of golfing history across the berber carpet. I retrieve the head and write "Dartmouth sucks" across the flat side with a ball point pen, bearing down hard to make sure the words are permanently indented into the ancient wood.

A year after the birth of our second son, I had tried to talk to Allison about my theory of our marital troubles. But it went no better than the talk about her father. No, she had not been mad that day, she was not mad now and none of "my" problems could be blamed on her.

She was probably right. A classic case of projection with persecutory scapegoating. Besides, it is possible I am not even satisfactory in the practice of membrane penetration. After all, I do want to be fair. But "daddy" has also suggested that I am rather indecisive. So for his sake, I'm not going to be that today. I am acting on his advice. I am making a decision and following through.

Gathering up an armful of clubs, I head for the living room and drop my load onto the piano bench in a clattering heap, a clattering that fills this vast and magnificent room, this mute, deserted meeting room. The walls and ceilings are enveloped in 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...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 advanced one again... to meet you... between richly paneled walls... Venetian plaster, gold-leafed frames, paintings...framed prints amidst which I advance.

#

Breaking the second club is not quite as satisfying as the first, but when I see that my bad aim has inadvertently taken a nice-sized notch out of the piano leg my interest

picks up considerably. Before I know it, I've broken every one, turning a half dozen clubs into high-priced kindling and a black enameled piano leg into a scarred up looking femur.

Rather than soothing me, the destruction sets my blood to boiling. Now I am ready to do some genuine damage. I go back to the truck for my hammer.

I lay into the piano, popping the ivory veneer off the keys with vast, swinging blows. The century-old instrument cries out in a pained, atonal scherzo. As the music reaches its crescendo, I turn my attention to the clown painting. Again and again I strike, the claw end of the hammer ripping the canvas into thin strips and knocking chunks of sheetrock out of the wall behind it. Pieces of crumbling gypsum fall inside the piano, randomly striking the strings in a demented encore.

#

Afterwards, I pour myself a bourbon from a crystal decanter on the buffet. But I never get to take a sip. In one of the facets cut into the leaded crystal I catch sight of a movement, a flash of color and light. I spin around and see -- the alien.

#

Here's one way the world ends: I am in bed with a woman. There is no adulterous guilt, so presumably I am not married.

She is nude, lying on her stomach. She looks to be in her early 20s. I kiss her back, which is dark tan. Then I leave.

As I walk out of her apartment building, I think about her desire that we have a child together. But I realize that since we are not married it would be her child. I would be sad because I would not be a part of the child's life.

Now I am on the street in front of her apartment. Oddly, this is the street in front of my work. The apartment building is really my office. I begin walking north along the curb on the east side of the street. There are bushes projecting into the street, forcing me to walk around them into the street itself. There is someone else who is doing the same and a third man who is helping him in some way. Perhaps this helper man is a city street worker.

Then I find a hammer in the street.

I pick it up and lightly pound it in my left palm, like you might see a baseball player idly play with a bat. I have already reached the signal light that is north of the library and I have turned around and am heading back toward my office. But now I realize it is not my work at all. This is the old sanctuary of First United Methodist Church in Duncanville, and the street is Avenue C. I go inside, but it is not the church anymore. It is a multi-use building that contains a restaurant, like one in a hotel.

I suddenly have a revelation: I am in a dream. That makes this a lucid dream, something I haven't experienced in years. There is a woman standing in front of me a step to the right, within arm's reach. She is attractive, but I decide I will not act on base desire. Instead, I walk past her, placing a hand on her arm as I pass. I tell myself that this is my dream so I should let myself touch and experience it, control it - but not let my passions control me.

I approach the old pulpit, which is now the hostess station. The hostess is friendly and attractive. I remind myself that I am not going to engage in membrane penetration, but I am so attracted to her that I take her face in my hands and kiss her. She is very receptive. Lucidity is slipping away, back into the primordial night.

I notice a kitchen sink behind her. She steps aside. Vanishes. And I stand alone at the sink. Should I wash my hands? I am not sure. I look at the sink, and along the back splash I spot an old pair of shoes. They are a pair of brown loafers I owned in college. I have not worn them in years because they needed work; the heels are worn down to the cobblers nails. But as I look at the shoes I realize they have been repaired. The shoes are still old, but have been given a new life. I am ready for the journey.

#

#

“We were somewhere around San Augustine in the heart of the Piney Woods when the sacraments began to take hold,” The Stranger says.

He is screaming over the road noise, reading from a Reporters Notepad as we speed through the moonlit East Texas night, enjoying a topless ride in a 1970 Cutlass convertible.

“You mean mescal,” Jack says. “The sacraments are for later.”

“Still, I feel a bit lightheaded,” The Stranger remarks. “Everything’s going black.”

“Maybe you could try taking off your shades,” I suggest.

“Soulless, cool sunglasses are an essential ingredient of the presentation.”

#

It is after 10 p.m. when we finally get on the road.

The Bryson’s ranch is about two hours west of Strangers Rest, and the foreman’s wife has already stocked the refrigerator and pantry for our arrival. I am looking forward to this trip. I think back to junior high, when Jack and I spent many weekends at the Rocking B Ranch, mostly sitting beside the stock tank and taking turns shooting at turtles with a .22 pistol.

The turtles were hard to spot. The opaque, jade green water concealed all but those parts that actually broke the surface. Usually, that meant only the head, a tiny target indeed for two inept shooters entrusted with the only non-hunting weapon on the property. It didn’t matter. It was pleasant enough to just soak up the morning sunrise as it fell across the rocky, earthen dam and listen to the crack of the little pistol as it echoed across the pink- and purple-tinged limestone hills. The dads always took their hunting way too serious, insisting that us boys only shoot at game animals that were in season. So we’d just hide out at the tank and shoot turtles and sparrows and rabbits - anything that just happened by and didn’t require any particular skill or patience to kill.

“Maybe if we electrified the pond, the turtles would all come up and we could shoot ‘em,” Jack suggested one weekend. “We could use that old crank telephone my granddad used to use to get bait worms to come up out of the ground.”

We tried it. Of course, it didn’t work. So instead, we caught a frog and hooked its legs up to the phone leads. We really had it jumping.

At night, we’d hang out inside the knotty pine-paneled ranch house and tap on the side of the big aquarium by the front door. Fang the rattlesnake had surprised many an unsuspecting new arrival. It was there for the benefit of Bryson Development employees, corporate customers and other high-flying types who could appreciate the kill-or-be-killed visual rumor of the ranch mascot.

Good times.

But somewhere on the outskirts of Mineral Wells it all goes bad.

The old highway takes an unexpected detour, orange traffic cones channeling us down a road we’ve never seen. We pass a modern diesel locomotive engine parked next to a long-abandoned railroad station, a crumbling, boarded-up relic from the age of steam. But there are no tracks or cross ties; the engine sits directly on the gravel.

Within a few minutes we find ourselves hundreds of miles to the east, barreling along the El Camino Real through the Sabine National Forest a few miles from the Louisiana state line. Jack wants to turn back, but The Stranger stops him.

“This is all proceeding as anticipated,” he explains over the road noise. “We will stay in the ancestral home. The landlady of the dead has already made out our beds.”

Jack is wary.

“A landlady of the dead,” he says. “Don’t much like the sound of it.”

“Well, be fair. The ghosts of 140 years of Leachs live in that old house. Somebody’s got to look after them.”

So we roll on through the Piney Woods, drinking mescal and lime juice from a circa 1950s red plaid coffee thermos and listening to a 20-year-old FM broadcast of Led Zeppelin’s “Physical Graffiti” from a once-popular rock station that went off the air years ago.

“Now we must switch over to public radio,” The Stranger says. “Magnetica is on the air.”

“She’s got a radio show?” Jack asks.

“It’s called ‘Connotations and Consciousness with Magnetica O’Famously.’”

“She got a big following?” I ask.

“She’s quite popular.”

“I never liked her,” Jack says.

Truth be told, Magnetica never liked Jack, either.

#

Blessings – and apologies. It has been some time since I have spoken with you over the airwaves. Why the delay? While recently visiting Maine – or rather Down East, as the natives call it -- while visiting there to expend blessings with the relations of my questionably gendered companion, I busied myself a bit too much with the annual pre-science festival hurry. Cooking, shopping, decorations, mythic songs. The result of all this rushing about was a nasty case of Pre-Science Festival Disorder – and a very illuminating example of how to live in connotation and consciousness.

With cold compress upon my brow, I detected a noticeable degradation of my usual gusto for living. No longer was I feeling disposed to engage in familiar, enjoyable behaviors, such as grooming my mummified Egyptian cats. Paying notice to these simple moments of our lives is the foundation stone of living in connotation and consciousness.

In modern times, cinema is the stone upon which we build our personal stories. The epic film often provides good-looking scraps to masticate on and fill our mental bellies. I just previewed a film that thoroughly satisfied my visionary hunger: ‘The Penetrated Writer.’

This New York City-based tale tracks a Texas moviegoer whose film has broken inside of him. Nothing is absent, and yet nothing works. There is a terrible, deadly secret. And the usher hates him. No purging of painful memories here. This is the story of a man in the final stages of youth, challenging his personal history and then at last moving on to a whole new connotation and consciousness.

Movies inspire many such acts of clearness and bravery. Consider the protagonist of “The Penetrated Writer.” He looks at the route his existence is following and prepares himself for appropriate action when the DNA starts surging. Is that not the way it is for us all?

This brings to mind an additional tasty decree from today’s movie menu, “The Projectiles of Autumn: A True Story.” U.S. attorney general Bobby Kennedy advises his embattled brother, “play for the breaks.” What a daring instruction to the government

official who dwells within all democratic citizens of Planet Earth. We fulfill this command of destiny whenever we vote in favor of connotation and consciousness and pursue the option to exist as the protagonist of our own novel tale.”

#

“Well, I guess this means we can all be famous radio personalities,” I remark. “I am not overly impressed.”

Jack expresses his disdain more directly; he lets loose with a hearty, hilarious belch.

“OK, I have another idea then,” The Stranger says. “I will read you a letter I wrote for this very occasion.”

He squirms about, at last extracting a sheet of notebook paper from his back pocket. He holds it down low out of the road wind, near a tiny green light that comes from inside the rear ashtray. “It is addressed to Owl Creek Farm, Aspen, Colo.”

“Hunter S. Thompson,” Jack says. “The theme of our road trip.”

“Dear Mr. Thompson. Thank you so much for your books, enjoyably dogeared before sitting so long neglected on my shelf. I was so depressed, horribly depressed, depraved, deeply dead, as you can imagine. You’ve seen me on TV by now, I’m sure, now that I am the butt of jokes on Letterman and Leno.”

“TV?” I ask, panic rising inside. “We haven’t been on TV. What are you talking about?”

But The Stranger ignores me and keeps on reading.

“Rest assured, though, I’m not one of those sackcloth and ashes people. I’m not like that. I am so overcome by the crowds of pilgrims, the TV news people and the haters. I feel their feelings, fear their dreams, the terrible roar of errant nightmares floating into my frontal cortex. Hands to my temples, I feel the skull beginning to crack. Enough. Always wanted to be famous, of course. But for journalism, for writing. I wanted to be you. Now I am Job, looking for solace, looking for answers. I reach for Gideon’s Bible (stolen from a Motel 6, I believe), but my finger falls instead on the spine of ‘Fear and Loathing.’ I start reading and haven’t stopped yet. It is such a wonderful escape, a return to my youth, back when I wanted to be a doctor of Gonzo journalism and everything seemed so right. I wanted to be just like you. How did I go so wrong? How did I forget to act so harmlessly and happily depraved?”

“Maybe you didn’t jack off enough,” Jack suggests.

“Self loathing,” The Stranger continues, “a very ominous assignment - gross, spastic slobbering, slumped over grappling with sad deadness. But now there is again time to enjoy that delicious drag of blood leaving behind your words, scarred into my brain, the words made flesh and neurons, Acapulco shirts testifying to my devotion. Do you grasp that I maintain because of you? It’s so right to see wrong, I know, and yet so predictably suburban to seek out this savage journey. Still, I thank you, I mutter to myself, a poor bastard. Completely twisted, engulfed in darkness, I am caught up in a quick burst of acceleration from the Belgian Heliowatts. Burn your houses down, you sackcloth and ashes people. I make a note to myself: Search out the possibilities that once were mine, before consigned to death in life.

“I must be vigilant. Stress factors send my destroyer heading east (I miss the old you, Allison), where there is no hope for those without immunity from shame. My soul is

in personal danger, my face a mask of pure fear. If not for your books, I might already have gone the way of no communication.

“Oh Dr. Gonzo, I am a physical salute to this nation of guilty used car dealers, bleeding from the palms over my letter to you as I watch myself mocked on the cathode ray tubes. Now it’s all I am, the King Farouk of it all, odd media darling, unfortunate bastard, screaming gibberish at myself behind wild red eyeballs. And the screaming in my head, my raving and jabbering, a confession of Fear and Loathing with overtones of extreme disbelief. No, this can’t be happening. I reached at first for the Deity, but my finger fell instead on you, an appropriate companion for traveling the blacktop of terminal psychosis, death with huge Detroit cars hurtling through the pit of dark anguish within me.

“Dear doctor, I see myself swooping and screeching, hoping to alter the jokes and deflect the pain away from me and my bewilderment. The turn is too tight; I swerve sickeningly. Vibrations are getting nasty. Time to order a drink. Mescal with a side of pure Gonzo, leeches on the go, so Vegas, so Hell’s Angels, a Hunter frenzy of rotten flesh in which I am looking for answers, looking to maintain solace, following the pattern of a comatose ego. A grim connection is formed. You are me. You, me. I reach again for Gideon’s, but that drag of blood makes it hard to see like you, Dr. Gonzo, with those special eyes of yours that burn so keenly, through this frenzy of autonomic pilgrims, the gutless, screeching punks who convert me to photons and agate, the fear and loathing in the dark place where my manic notions lie.

“If only I could leapfrog back in time, before these past few terrible years, avoid the predictable pattern. Ah, a dream of wonderful escape, a return to my youth, back when there was no screaming or fear. With the wife and kids out of town, there’s still time to entertain such a fantasy. A specially prepared 1970 Cutlass convertible could function as time machine – ”

“And it is, it is,” I say, caught up in the foolishness. “We are on the Pathway now.”

“-- as a time machine, transporting me back into the form of an obsessed and immature fan, riding that enjoyably fearful blacktop, hugging the double yellow line of irreverent delight, a literary journey into myself, embracing my obsessions, my lusts. Jug wine, oral sex.”

“Ah, let’s not get carried away,” Jack warns.

“Henious chemicals promise to screw it on, grease the face with a happy smile. Now I am an unfortunate bastard, rendered so fashionable, caught up in the obligation to be the story. But I am ready to fight back. With overtones of extreme Hunter-ism, my finger searches out my alter Bible, your manifestos, swooping and screeching in a bright, clear sky. You have given me hope. Now I am right with you.

“By no means am I all right, though. I am rendered so red, so blood stained and dead, staring out through wild-blooded eyeballs and into a personal apocalypse. Your words are raw materials for constructing a mask that hides the fear, blocking that terrible roar in the brain. But there is no mask that blocks out the truth.

“Dear doctor, I thank you again for your books. It wouldn’t be too much, I think, to want to be like you, like your type of famous. I could handle the fear, I think. But the loathing! Overwhelmed by domestic shame, I passed these past few terrible years hiding my face in trembling hands. But no more, thanks to you. My letter to Hunter S.

Thompson. Yes, you are my alter ego. If only I had been more like you these past few awful years, then maybe I wouldn't be so much like me. Sincerely, Mark Leach.”

“Hell yes,” Jack says. “A fantastic salute to - to something. Pass me the thermos.”

“It is quite good,” I agree. “Though I'm still concerned about the TV part.”

“Don't be. It's part of an unfinished script I call 'My letters to Hunter S.

Thompson and other tales of personal apocalypse'.”

#

As we near the state line, Jack turns the twisting, two-lane blacktop into a racetrack, negotiating a 90 degree turn with a stylish shower of gravel, the fishtailing rear end just missing a steel highway mile marker sign.

“Ah, good times,” I say. “Reminds me of a little day trip Allison and I took a few years ago. We were so happy, enjoying our little day trip in the country. We explored the treasures, the crafts, the deals. We even had sausage on a stick.”

“And then you had to ruin it,” The Stranger adds.

“Yes – yes, I did. As we passed that car on the two-lane blacktop, I told you it had been too close to their bumper. I did not like it. And you just smiled. You smiled! It was like you thought it was funny, no big deal. Then we saw the gas station. Do we need gas? No -- no, you said. We'll just fill up as we're leaving. So, of course, I had to tell you that I HATE THAT! Don't you know that by now, my dear one? I know you must know it (how many times have I had to tell you?), so you must be doing it on purpose. First passing the car, now not getting the gas. You are therefore odious. So you said, 'OK, we'll get it now.' And then you set your mouth in that hard, cruel, unfortunate way of yours, so much like a creature of the companion - a Coffin-Puntura. I always hate it that you, Coffin-Puntura, are that hateful way. You are always digging our graves, ruining our every nice thing. Why can't you be more like me? Why can't you just enjoy our happy day?”

#

Allison was right. I was unable to enjoy our happy days.

But now I wonder –have things changed? Here I am, in the first night after speaking my mind to my boss and my wife. Years of holding it, fearful of the destruction that I was sure would occur if I expressed myself. So as it turns out, I should find that I am afraid of nothing. I should find that I am happy – and, yes, I am happy. I am sure that I am happy. I am happy unto death.

I am happy – happy, relaxed, clear headed. I happily breathe in deeply the Piney Woods night, feel the cool, humid air filling up parts of my lungs that have been collapsed for years due to a diaphragm that I never let fully relax. Even the darkness seems not so dark anymore as I am traveling in a 1970 Cutlass convertible through the moonlight, pulling in radio broadcasts from the Land of the Dead. I am fully on the Pathway, fully about the journey.

We cross over the Toledo Bend Reservoir, dead ghost trees rising up out of moonlit waves. We happily roll on through Many, the Sabine Parish seat, and back into the night, flying past the Vault of the Deity. But this time all is as it should be. No flooded basement, no old man with tidy facial hair retired in advance of death. It is just plain old Trinity Baptist Church, a single vapor light illuminating the empty parking lot. Perfection is slipping away – no, that's not it. I'm happy. Happy. This time I even

remember the turnoff for Fort Jesup. Minutes later, we turn up the drive to the ancestral homestead.

“Cut off your headlights,” I say. “We don’t want to wake up my uncle. He lives in the neighboring trailer.”

“Nobody’s there,” The Stranger explains. “They’re out of town, gone with the church youth group to Missouri, to Silver Dollar City.”

Sure enough, no one is at home. No one, that is, but the dogs.

These canines are not normal, waking world creatures. They are door dogs. I read all about them in “My Education,” William S. Burrough’s book of dreams: “A little black dog follows him into the dining room. Yes, it followed his father just before he was killed, thrown from a horse. Clear death omen.”

I advance up the dark, gravel driveway to the old family home. I see two green lights on in the windows, like holiday décor. As I approach the porch I think about how I may find ghosts when I go inside. (After all, this is where the dead Leachs of Sabine Parish live.) Then I see a dog blocking my way. Upon closer inspection I see that the dog is a sort of mountain lion, a yellow panther. It begins to circle me, and two other dogs look on, horrid black curs. I have no weapon with which to protect myself. All I have at hand is an inflated air mattress, which I keep between me and the lion. I want to defend myself, but under the circumstances all I can really hope to do is not antagonize the animal or its companions. I am outnumbered and alone. Where are Jack and The Stranger? Will anyone come to my rescue? I move toward my uncle’s trailer house, but it is inexplicably surrounded by barbed wire, a military encampment.

Then the animals are gone, and the party begins.

#

Sitting around a campfire, meeting with others. Lots of people. Where did they all come from? There is a party going on, perhaps a family reunion. We are talking about arranging services for learning and emotionally disabled children. I volunteer for one job. At the same time, I absently run my fingers through the long hair of one of the beautiful Solana twins, just arrived from my freshman year of college.

“They’re hot,” Jack whispers.

The twins tell me it is my job to draw their long golden hair into two straight, untangled bundles. I am to bind each bundle with a single hair I must thread through a silver sewing needle, which The Stranger supplies.

Jack smiles, watching me struggle with the needle in the flickering campfire light.

“You think you can do better?” I ask.

“No, it’s not that. You live in a very strange world.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Me?”

I explain how it all began that first night after Allison left, the night I went onbeam with Jack’s gear.

“Movable Pro 890?” Jack asks. “Not mine. I only use full-service Frames.”

“You put it in my nightstand, remember?”

“I left you my old PrePak loaded with Frames 9.0 Pro.”

“You’re full of it.”

“No, he’s telling the truth,” The Stranger says. “In fact, there is no such thing as a Movable Pro 890. What you experienced was a psychic suggestion implanted by agents of Ozona’s black ops group at the direction of Buckstop.”

“A psychic suggestion?”

“Through Project Clockscan. It permits shadow operatives to enter your nocturnal vision condition and implant suggestive thoughts, like a subliminal splice into a movie.”

“What do they have to gain?”

“You are a critical part of the clandestine scheme. This is all premeditated, the next plot point in the script. This is the part of the story when you in fact experience a true incredible revelation. You realize that you are indeed different, that you have been set apart from the world for the sake of the world. Here in the dancing shadows and ginger scarlet glow of the victor’s campfire you must see that a part of you is long gone. In fact, the old ‘you’ is dead. The world looks different now. So you pull apart from the rest of us, lose yourself in your own quiet thoughts.”

#

Who am I to argue with the premeditated life? I leave Jack with the needle and the hair and the twins, and I go off in search of a quiet site away from the roar. I pick out a desolate spot on the far side of the house, near where the old well used to be.

I look up at the heavens, see giant stars, ringed planets, crescent moons – a multihued celestial display. The entire solar system – it looks so different now. I am so amazed by this beautiful site that I decide to lie on my back on the ground for a better, more leisurely look. There is some ground light, though, for the view is partially obscured. And there is another dog. But this one is friendly. It wants to lick my face. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold the animal at bay with my hand, touch its wet nose. When I open my eyes again, I see Bellerio Shield.

“It is pleasant,” the giant insect observes, “to have a friendly dog by your side when you arrive in a new country.”

#

#

Visiting New York City.

This is alien territory for a native Texan, so perhaps it is forgivable that you do not recall the origin of the movie ticket you hold in your hand. You feel that it was given to you by a woman. But was she your wife? Or perhaps a girlfriend? You are not sure.

You walk to the movie theater through a twisting, snake-like corridor of pay phones, water fountains and rest rooms (always walls, hallways) and emerge from the cloaca onto a busy street. You see people leaving a building -- a school, a store, a theater? -- and you think you recognize one of them as LeAnn Shedi, your high school sweetheart. But it is not her. There is no one you know here.

You reflect that it is an unusual experience for me to be in New York City, a stranger in a strange land. You feel that you now understand why so many immigrants to Texas seem so pleased when they meet someone from the same place they came from. ("Ah, New Hampshire. Yes, we all knew how to live there!") It makes the world seem smaller and friendlier, so they don't feel so alone.

You proceed to the movie theater lobby, where you must deal with the usher. He appears to be a black man, but he's light skinned with stereotypical Anglo facial structure and hair of indeterminate texture (because of a burr haircut). Really, he looks like a younger version of you, but with a shadow across his face.

You immediately clash. He insists that you stand in a certain place. This Napoleon of the cineplex is in command, and you do not like it. You are irritated by his attitude, which you judge as a sort of reverse discrimination. You have done nothing to him. Why is he targeting you?

You retrieve the ticket from your pants pocket, where it has become waded into a ball, almost as if it has been laundered. You try to place it in the usher's hand. But there are slips of paper and change mixed in. Using only one hand, you attempt to separate the ticket from the pocket detritus and drop it into the usher's palm. But he can't see the ticket; he thinks you are trying to put money in his hand.

"You have to buy your ticket at the window," he says, clearly exasperated with you.

Now you are righteously indignant. You triumphantly produce the ticket. But he continues to assert his power, pointing to a stripe on the floor behind you.

"You must stand behind the stripe," he explains.

So you take several exaggerated steps back, stopping at a sort of half wall.

"Is this good? You just tell me where you want me to stand."

The usher ignores your sarcasm.

"Yes, that is sufficient," he says, then moves on to deal with others who have joined the line.

You see a black man in line in front of you, and you feel a bit embarrassed by your treatment of the usher. But the black man is in a suit, clearly a businessman, a professional. You reason he probably shares a bit of your irritation with this "Little Napoleon" service person. You make eye contact, then nod toward the usher.

"That's the price we pay to live in a free society," you remark.

But the black businessman does not respond. He looks out the big glass wall at the city. So you look, too.

For the first time, you notice a contrast between the urban landscape and the theater. It is an older suburban style theater, dating from the late '50s or '60s, one of the first multiplexes, perhaps two screens -- a dead ringer for the old Richland Plaza theater in Richland Hills, Texas. It is now a dollar movie house, doubly out of place in the high-price world of Manhattan.

At this point, you realize you are standing in line with Scott Paulson, a boyhood friend.

"What are you doing here?" you ask.

We catch up on our lives, and he tells you he has just completed an MBA. You share his excitement, and you genuinely congratulate him.

Scott and you went to Duncanville schools and SMU together. At your 20-year high school reunion, he told you that SMU taught him to read and write. You thought he was making a joke, then you realized that he was sincere. So it's a bit of a surprise to find that he has earned an advanced degree, something you don't have. He is a master of the business world. You are a master of no world.

Meanwhile, the usher has moved to a different part of the line, re-arranging everyone. Scott and you talk about the movie. You are to see "The Nightmare Before Christmas," which you recall is a Tim Burton movie. You are not sure if you have seen it before, so you are looking forward to it. And it's only a dollar. You hope there is time to get a soft drink. Then you realize, of course, there is plenty of time because they are not even seating yet.

#

Five months after dreaming "The Nightmare Before Christmas," I find myself enjoying Christmas Eve with my family. And yet enjoying is not quite the right word. For I am saddened by the evening TV news, a story about a lost boy presumed drowned at Possum Kingdom Lake, about two hours west of Strangers Rest.

His father, who is legally blind, speaks to the rescuers, thanking them for all they have done. The search involves roughly 200 to 300 volunteers, who comb the shoreline and surrounding wilderness for two cold, miserable days.

Then we go to the 7 p.m. Christmas Eve service at church. The pastor tells a story of the daughter of the innkeeper who turns away Mary and Joseph. She is sick, but the proximity of the Christ child heals her. The pastor says we must hold the Christ child next to our hearts, to heal ourselves.

We leave the church, but there is a minor family spat - someone is unhappy (probably me) about something vague and unimportant. We drive around looking at Christmas lights, but I do not feel festive. The lights give off a horrid glow.

Standing in a lake, water up to my waist. I walk behind a motor boat, which is slowly turning from side to side as it tows a baby in a small inflatable. I am staying within arms reach of the baby, watching the rope as it curves around when the boat turns.

Suddenly I realize the baby is gone. Somehow it has fallen out, and I can't find it. It must have sunk to the bottom.

I am frantically searching, then I go to the shore. There is a picnic, and many people are sitting on blankets or playing ball. I call for everyone to jump in, to join in the search.

"Don't worry about a swim suit," I say. "Get in now, in your clothes."

We all spread out, walking side by side across the lake bottom in hopes of finding the missing baby. Perhaps there is still time to save it. I come to a place where the waters have receded, leaving behind a muddy, dead bottom. There is a tarp or covering of some sort. I lift it up and find a man and woman underneath. The woman is dark skinned; I do not notice the man. She smiles at me. There are people all around. I realize we have stumbled upon this couple in some sort of compromising position, something sexual.

The scene changes, and I am inside a nearby building or home, and a couple of people are at a dining table. The baby is still on my mind. Did we find him? Is he OK?

I demand an answer: What has happened to the Son of the Deity?

#

Elmo: Pretty. New York City is an ideal visual rumor of alien terrain. But please, no more attempts at Gonzo.

Charlie: Besides, we don't need it. With a little nudge this quirky film could go totally box office lesbian, the blind seducing the book. Revelation describes a repeating inner something – you know, I don't know what we're talking about anymore with this biblical crap. Let's just start shooting.

Elmo: But seriously. The Stranger waves his arms. Rococo intrigue and animal lust blend together, membrane penetration in a Louisiana hog pen, a beautiful dream.

Charlie: And he totally missed the opportunity offered by the arrival of the Solana twins. It could have been as it was that college night of old, hiding in the back bedroom, fingertips enjoyably extracting an inverted nipple – damn! – and exploring forbidden lacy underwear saturated in hot virginal ectoplasm.

Elmo: Or show how revelation describes the Deity, who also destroys. Do not tempt it. But always he was drawn to it. His light. We long to hear the quiet, still, big, glimmering complex of extraterrestrial insects caught from the perfect mixture of the young seer. In fact, he cannot fully dream. For months now.

Charlie: You are small for enjoying such an awful dream.

Elmo: Acknowledged, Mr. Lacy Underwear. And yet, it's real.

Charlie: Rococo intrigue and animals seem to be the ongoing value of this script of the death thoughts that trouble him. Here, The Stranger showed what it is to create a reborn lesbian, the blind seducing to communicate with man through dreams of exceptional "worseness," the same since the plethora of bending over for the well-oiled cam and screaming – well, perhaps there is a sub-market for that one.

Elmo: His destiny is with – and must be about -- him. It is this that troubles him. He is one with the cinema. Ah, and this one, a beautiful dream, an incredible revelation. Show me that he had a dream, a cliché cramming contest, and we'll move on. He tried to ignore that Christendom was a failure. This is bad. Failures must be acknowledged. Any Zeta-Jones in membrane-hugging spandex, a sick bastard engaging this shopping mall with no soul. We are small for humping it, the delicious silky femur. So much truth, he – Mark – is the prototype, a metaphor for when the "voice of God" speaks. Diaz also enters a cliché cramming contest of the psyche. Give her the well-oiled cam. And God.

Charlie: Let's roll the clip.

#

I find myself inside the command module, a clinical, domed room off a metallic hallway, a sleek 1950s B-movie set consisting of a curved corridor of polished metal,

assorted German signage – “Actung!” – in a decidedly Luftwaffe font and the ubiquitous cloud and lightning bolt logo of Ozona International.

The Stranger is here, too, strapped to an operating table. But he’s not The Stranger of recent days. This one appears to be The Stranger of my original dream, an old, worn out man with wrinkled hands and a thick cardigan sweater. The sweater is open and so is the shirt beneath it, revealing a bony chest covered in silver hair and a nest of wired electrodes. His eyes are open – open and dead, staring at the ceiling of polished metal conduits.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Are you all right?”

He doesn’t answer.

Above The Stranger’s head spins the lighted, arm-like device wielding the piercing instruments of surgical steel. Beyond him, I see Cinnamon and Corvette. But all is not well. They are nude, frozen inside separate glass enclosures the size of coffins. Beyond them, I see another coffin of ice and another frozen nude. Inside, a familiar face - - Jack Bryson, eyes wide open and lips stitched together in a silent scream.

And in the middle of it all, hand resting casually on a crate of glass vials, stands the mad scientist himself, star of the Society of the Purple Sunset – the sinister Dr. Adolfo Morel.

“Had quite a time rounding up all of your assorted personalities,” he says. “Over the years you’ve split into an incredible number of pieces. You’re amazingly fragmented, even for a visionary neurotic.”

“So you killed them.”

“Your friends have been dead for years, them and all the people of this final, dead age. Didn’t you know?”

“You killed them.”

“Nothing so melodramatic. They’re in suspended animation, in cold storage for the re-integration process.”

“What?”

“Submerged ice. We got the technology from one of the aerial clocks being studied at Area 51. Did the same thing with Hitler.”

“And what are those?” I ask, pointing to a line of jars on a high shelf above Jack.

Dr. Morel casts a mischievous glance my way. “What do you think they are?”

They are a nightmarish abomination. Each jar appears to contain human fetus. But the fetuses have all gone horribly wrong. There is a mix of fiendish deformities, ranging from lobster claws to exoskeletal protrusions to angel wings.

“OK, I know what you’re thinking,” Morel says. “And you’re right. 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. And you were the model.”

“Me?”

“Look at this one,” he remarks, pointing to the nearest jar. “A genuine flipped anxiety disorder. Over here, a web-footed phobia. And last week, a break through in the study 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.”

Despite my best efforts, the room begins to blur. A tear forms in the corner of one eye. My gaze falls on the crate of glass vials.

“And this is the Fluoride 9,” he says. “Or rather, it is a new and improved formula. Perhaps a better name would be Liquid Jesus. It will be introduced into the atmosphere in Strangers Rest at the sunrise service, setting off a global mystical experience with psychotic features, paving the way for the rise of the world’s first privately owned and operated deity. And the man behind the god will be – well, let’s ask The Stranger.”

Morel fiddles with a knob on the arm-like device. A long flexible needle-like conduit of glinting metal snakes toward The Stranger, settling on his abdomen and piercing his navel. His eyes pop open like a vampire at sunset.

“All-encompassing scan of the gorge of time,” The Stranger intones. “Azure gloom congregating in a gemstone cranium of ethereal vapors, rumble clatters over the chasm, the outer dramatization of inner conflicts, luminaries glowing transparent and emerald, the cool of unfilled liberty in motionless midday passion –”

“Regressive hypnosis,” Morel explains. “Turns out the Cicadians really are split off from his – that is, from your – unconscious realm. Listen to him. It’s almost poetic.”

“The unexpected end of supernatural analysis, one street over from fair-haired exasperation, noise of organized irrigation, royal crop hierarchy, vegetative brood scraping fragile creature gluttony, ladled out by a charcoal-skinned giant spewing blond sparks, creating a work of art composed of angel shells, mutated frogs and mounds of aquatic fillets within a pond viewed in the dim steaming dusk. Broad greasy murmur reddened brilliant crimson and reduced to the vapor of a pungent ruttish creature, a stink so serious you might observe it traveling from devastated bones in the lilac fog of an aged DNA delivery organ lost in erected liberties. Pessimistic, the versatility of heaving dismay. Antiquated wickedness of pestered marshes, countenance fires gleaming in a bright childish grin. His smile tears the heavens and weakens into a huge gemstone cranium of brilliance, illuminating the bankrupt municipalities and hopeless sceneries of a deceased earth, the glow forever diminished as the luminaries travel out one after the next. The outer dramatization of inner conflicts, helping Buckstop take over the world.”

Dr. Morel touches the knob, and The Stranger is silent again.

“He can really gas on,” Morel says.

“What have you done to him?”

“Me? That’s what he’s really like – what you’re really like. Didn’t you know?”

#

Charlie: And the film's effect – bomb. Together. Creepy? That’s the ticket. It leaves everything to cliché. We’ll move up that way, into the known. In ancient times, men seemed to be right. A direct encounter with a specially prepared fish (i.e., tell Joseph to take Mary to a hotel with no rooms). This is your time to freely incorporate the unconscious, a figurative land of humility.

Elmo: Dead is bad. Someday, everyone will look like car boom fatalities. Bent, but a nightmare of three, an angle of the storied boredom of genius, personified by childhood. What of the idea of what happens a day away from Christendom? The fish will bring him back. Pretty?

Charlie: Awful. It’s a recipe for the stale. Christendom dreams, freely incorporating the unexplained halves and a nonpareil feast of visual storytelling brings me. Dreams are radio transmissions from the unknown Deity. I simultaneously accept

that the basement slumber incorporates this one in an overgrown cemetery of the unconscious. I reveal myself in a message.

Elmo: What is this 'I' stuff? This is not your film festival. This is Mark Leach's night.

Charlie: And it is not a funny night, this final period of darkness before the dawn of the End of the World. Boring, see? Help me help him save the picture. It is in me.

Elmo: Hey, I've got a few ideas, too. Boom! Freud meets The Organized Bad Guys. The slapstick blast of low brow dream-making is now Hollywood bound, suffering in the idea. Slowly, gently, turn the corners to an army of scum-sucking Barneys. They have written my life to be funny, of the U.S. dead that God felt compelled to tell. I have found it useful to no longer deny the world fish (i.e., a visual rumor of the Son of the Deity).

Charlie: Interesting. A direct encounter with prayerful thought. Hermaphroditus as the prototype for the 21st century prophet.

Elmo: Now you're talking. Go lesbian, the blind seducing this terrified, delighted, languid to be.

Charlie: Humping you for the borrowed inspiration from this pseudo-documentary. "Singing monkey!" shouts Cuba, then destroys it all. No, his world is dead, a land of creatures who glisten in a walk conducted on knuckles.

Elmo: Enough Darwin. Instead, let us recall the rotting flag and find "Next Year at Marienbad" to be the most evil film ever. Even the book world in these dreams is dead, a world mystery without a world. Or a mystery. People getting together for a laugh in a tub of buttered DNA.

Charlie: Ooooh. What clock spring winds up that idea?

Elmo: The end dream, a flag, the Church.

Charlie: Enough. Let's buy cool sunglasses, pile into the Cutlass, zoom through a dream cinema of Piney Woods darkness. People are enraged, and yet Mark could not look to the tales of Joseph and Daniel for a story about life. That's because his life is dead and his world a mutation, drowning in the flooded basement. The nightmare of three hours of dreary End of the World underwater -- well, perhaps I shouldn't say more.

Elmo: Agreed. This is a god-awful dream.

Elmo: Yes, but by design. Claw hammer, broken plastic and semiconductors, river of violence, a mean-spirited spousal corpse at the end of a classy full frontal "no" of an '80s nightmare. It's a story of rage.

Charlie: The story has its own image and is equivalent with the Deity. The goal is to become perfect, to control and make ourselves carefree -- especially about money, again and again. And for those of us that ego would eat, I offer the helpless rage of one who has attempted to help you forget your rage.

Elmo: And it was out of that perfection of rage that we saw failures that constantly informed us to become perfect. But perfect in suggestion is not food but fluoride.

Charlie: (Uncontrolled laughter)

Elmo: Stop laughing, damn you. I take my mental hygiene seriously. I think after brushing, rage is defeated. The world wins over our achievement.

Charlie: (More laughter)

Elmo: Listen up, damn you all to hell. This information can help you. Dental psychiatry. It is about our teeth, the rage – the fluoride. Our own human utter failure would defy anger, and it makes us go the way of a childish character.

Charlie: You know, maybe it's the only way we fail. Profound rage equals outward success. To me, depression is the eye to hopelessness, to a way to transcend our humanity. It is this depression and our inner critic that informs us.

Elmo: Exactly. Calcium fluoride makes knowledge – it makes this to transcend the anger, to go the way of our humanity. We attempt to search the ego precisely for the cure for what is ailing us. Buckstop's toothpaste with Fluoride9, also known as Liquid Jesus, is about that search. We fail and fall, repeatedly, then through this psychiatric dentifrice we can at last secure our deliverance.

Charlie: Four out of five dental psychiatrists suggest toothpaste for their depressed patients.

Elmo: I suggest a recast myth. Action, prayerful thought, bludgeoning of a pair of hot lacy ectoplasm-soaked underwear and an inverted nipple that can only complain of –

Charlie: Careful now. You are god awful for engaging in such a sick eroto-slasher flick. A hammer demon cannot be the Deity.

Elmo: Careful yourself. And enough talking. Time you helped it along with a little bend-over action. My well-oiled cam is ready to expel warm globs of ectoplasm into a willing orifice.

Charlie: Thanks for the offer, but I prefer to shower alone.