

## MARIENBAD MY LOVE - PART 3

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Sincerely,  
**Mark Leach**

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### Death to Anna Enruckus and the New York Agenda.

Anna Enruckus has destroyed me. Her promise to write about my Vision, my incredible revelation, the most important story of the modern world, dreams of the end of an age - all a lie. Can you believe it? A newspaper reporter who lies!

Turns out she wasn't working on a story about Incredible Revelations at all. This is an expose on onbeam abuse. Pornography. The New York Agenda says I am a purveyor of porn.

Allison has already called. I pretended to be out so she'd have to leave a message. But she does not sound entirely displeased: "I always knew you were twisted, but I never expected to actually read about it in print. My parents are appalled, maybe because I told them how much I like a well-oiled cam in the hot shower. Mother's face went pale. She and daddy refuse to even talk about it. First time they shut up since we got here. It's great! Call me!"

Anna even gave me my own sidebar: "A Roman Holiday: The Misogynic, Homophobic and AntiSemitic Movie Dreams of Mark Leach."

#

### Dream No. 1

Manifest Content: I am watching a movie, but I'm in the movie, too. The scene involves dangerous men, bad guys. I am there with a girl. We are all inside a gas station. The woman who owns it is involved with someone's boyfriend. Details are unclear, but it's clearly sexual. The bad guys like this.

There is red graffiti on the walls, like cave drawings. One of the pictures makes me think of some piece of primitive phallic art.

I identify the bad guys as a threat to the girl. We have a discussion in which I point out to them the potential for police involvement. But I tell them not to worry about the girl. She'll be no problem for them.

"If necessary, I'll cut off her head," I say.

This satisfies the bad guys, who immediately leave. But the girl is not happy about the decapitation talk.

"I'm sorry if it disturbed you," I say, explaining that it was just my attempt to identify with - and thereby protect us from - the bad men.

"That's the way you have to deal with these Dionysian cults," I add.

Analysis (Mimi Ottoploytor, dental psychiatrist, University of Pintle Minaness Southwest Medical School): "We call this syndrome the Female Castrato. Like many classic misogynists, Mark Leach clearly wishes to deny women their identity as rational

individuals. So in his dreams he attempts to elevate his own importance through the amputation of critical portions of women, specifically their intellect. Decapitation allows him to transform women into mere receptacles for his own primitive phallic drives. It is also possible he is an unrealized latent homosexual.”

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Dream No. 2

Manifest Content: I am a Secret Service agent, waiting outside a hotel for the arrival of an important dignitary. I am providing covert security, dressed in plain clothes to blend in with the crowd. We all stand curbside, leaning into the street to see if the motorcade is approaching. I lift up the lapel of my overcoat and speak into a hidden microphone. Of course, this is noticed by at least one person in the crowd, so I realize I have blown my cover. I am no longer covert.

Then I am watching a movie -- and I am IN the movie. The protagonist (me) is a rich man in his mansion. I am in a crimson smoking jacket, holding a drink in a highball glass. A bad guy has broken in. He is there to rob and kidnap me. But he does not manhandle me or tie me up. I am free to move about. So as we are standing together, I surreptitiously punch an emergency code into an alarm panel, a row of 4 round buttons set into a cut stone wall. The bad guy doesn't notice what I've done, nor is he alerted. This is a silent alarm.

Then we descend a set of ornate stairs. On a landing midway down the staircase there is a little table with a phone, which is ringing. I answer and as the person talks (I don't know what they are saying) I begin talking very fast.

“Call the police, I am being robbed,” I say, then hang up.

The bad guy looks at me in disbelief, but I just laugh it off.

“It was just a recording,” I explain.

We walk a short distance on this lower floor, perhaps 20 feet, then he suddenly knocks me down and grabs me from behind. He is clearly unhappy about the phone incident. He wraps his legs around me, and I realize he is going to attempt anal sex. I cry out in panic.

“No, no! I have lots of money, we can buy you a beautiful woman.”

Then, like a movie, the scene cuts to a couple of English detectives, no doubt from Scotland Yard. Now I am only a viewer, and the rich man and bad guy are not present.

The detectives stand in front of a desk, which may be in their offices or somewhere else. One detective is showing evidence to the other. It is a crude drawing, black on white paper, almost like a woodcut. It is a list of items to take on a trip. The drawing depicts shorts and a T-shirt, surrounded by roughly a dozen objects that I as the viewer instantly recognize as condoms. I realize with horror that the bad guy has kidnapped the rich man and abducted him for some sort of cross-country sex trip in which he will use the condoms during his anal rape of the rich man.

But the detectives don't understand this yet. They only know the rich man is missing. The accepted explanation is that he has left voluntarily with the bad guy on a trip, but they are still checking it out. The first detective tries to decipher the drawing.

“I believe it is a sort of sock that printers use to keep their ink pens in,” he says.

He is groping about for the proper word, but it won't come to him.

Analysis (Peter MacArire, author of “The Transsexual Narcissist: Men Who Love Themselves Too Much”): “This is clearly a classic case of projection. Mark Leach’s dream mind starts out casting him in the role of the macho hero, the Secret Service agent, but this façade quickly falls away as he reveals his true hidden desire to go on a homosexual road trip with a stranger – that is to say his unknown ‘self’ - who penetrates him with printer’s ink, thereby ‘rewriting’ himself as a passive love toy of his own misguided passions.”

#

Dream No. 3

Manifest Content: It appears that my wife’s house hunting activities have finally borne fruit, for I find that we have purchased a new home.

I study a room that I understand was a holy place for the former owner, a Jewish man of some local importance. There is an exposed wooden beam overhead. It is clear from several rough, unpainted patches that decorative pieces have been removed, leaving a piece of raw, unadorned lumber.

I am talking loudly to someone about the house, but then we realize that the family of the former owner is outside the open window and can hear our conversation. The former owner recently died. I look out the window and see a billboard that has something to do with this man. Perhaps he was a businessman.

Meanwhile, I remember that I own a Ford Model A. I had forgotten about it and haven’t driven it in a long time. What a thing to forget! So at once I decide to start it up, drive it again. It is a fun vehicle, and this will be like getting something new for free. It has really been that long.

I go to look in the garage, wondering how I could have been blind to its presence all this time. But it is not there. The garage is now furnished as our bedroom. Then I remember that the car is still in the detached garage at my parent’s former house in Duncanville.

Although my parents sold this house years ago, I arrive to find a family gathering in progress. The car is still the garage, parked backwards just as I remember it.

To get into the car, I must go through a contortionist’s route, squeezing past the floor-mounted gearshift and even unhooking a black radiator hose that comes up through the floor into the passenger compartment. Once I get to the seat, though, my dad steps in with no trouble. He sits at the wheel.

He drives us out of the garage and idles in the driveway. The car is a convertible and the top is down, so we have a big view of the world. He looks at the dashboard and taps at a small, three-digit gauge.

"I’ve been working on this, but I’m still not getting cool air out of any of the cylinders," he says.

I assume he is referring to air conditioning, and I am amazed to hear that such an old car even has AC. But I think again of the radiator hose, and I seem to know there is not enough water. Perhaps the gauge refers to the engine coolant system, not the AC. At any rate, dad explains this is not actually a problem. For this particular vehicle, it is normal.

“For some reason, the car just doesn’t hold water” he explains.

But the car is running, so we take off. We come to a traffic light at a rural highway. As we wait for the light to change, dad comments that the car is running "cool

and dry." He has tried to fix it, even looked up some information in a repair manual. But he hasn't been able to change it.

The light turns green and we start up, but a car is coming toward us in our lane. I let out a cry of alarm, but dad is not concerned. He maintains his course, and the other car gets out of our way.

We cross the highway, which looks a lot like the old intersection of Texas 114 and Frederiksbad Street in Strangers Rest, before the highway was modernized. This is Bonnie and Clyde country, just a few miles west of the spot on Texas 114 where they killed a highway patrolman on Easter Sunday 1933.

I realize that our car has now become an old pickup, vintage '50s Ford, suggestive of one my father restored when I was a boy. That was a magical vehicle; the moon followed you wherever you went.

This truck is not magical or restored. It is old with faded, rust-stained paint. A new truck pulls up beside us. It is filled with teenage boys.

"The sheriff won't be around tonight," one of them tells us, "so everyone is looking forward to a fun night."

It is a Saturday. Dad laughs.

"This is sure to be a lively evening," he says.

We soon come to a stop, and we are in the Piney Woods in Louisiana. It is Fort Jesup, and we are at the home of an uncle who lives near the old Leach family homestead. Several people are busy, burning mounds of pine needles and branches. There are piles of logs. I don't see my uncle's trailer in what I know is its usual place. Apparently, it has been moved.

While the pine burners work, we sit on the opposite side of the road and visit with family, including my wife and our boys. Several children are carrying long sticks, poking at various objects as kids like to do. This worries me; someone will be hurt. My youngest son is carrying a very long stick, maybe 8 or 10 feet. This stick branches at the end into a V - sort of a two-pronged pitchfork

"Put that down," I tell him. "You'll poke somebody's eyes out."

And in fact, the two tips of the V are the proper distance apart for such an accident to occur. My mother is with us, too, and she suddenly jerks to life in a panic.

"Mark, I think I hear someone stealing your car."

But when I look up I see that it is only a group of passers by -- soldiers by the looks of them. And time travelers. This is not so strange. During the Second Earthly Conflict, thousands of soldiers engaged in training maneuvers in this very area.

So I laugh at her. Then we roll around on the ground together, wrestling as if I am still her little boy. This sort of conduct is totally out of character for us. Strangely, though, she does not mind that I am laughing at her. She thinks it is funny, too, and is not the least bit angry with me.

Analysis (Sestron Amorey, M.D., executive director of the California Dionysian Analysts Cooperative): "The anti-Semitism in this dream is noteworthy; however, I am primarily interested in the reference to the old jalopy running 'cool and dry.' This corresponds to the ancient Greek description of the black bile humor called melancholy. Mark Leach sees himself as the car, a vehicle in which others travel and control his movements. He feels unresolved issues with a father who cannot get the car to run at the proper temperature (i.e., a son who does not operate at the proper psychological

temperament). And clearly Mark has unresolved mother attachment issues in the form of a panic-imparting anima image. We see an interesting contrast between Mark as conventional adult and as the 'puer eternus,' playing with his mother (i.e., a mamma's boy) in close proximity to Second Earthly Conflict soldiers (i.e., real men). He is probably an unrealized latent homosexual."

#

I arrive in downtown Strangers Rest amid swirling rumors that Willie Nelson will be making a guest appearance on Cowboy Roy's Radio Ranch.

"Imagine it, Willie singing right here on Frederiksbad Street," the mayor says. He collects my \$3 for parking and directs me to the far end of the vacant lot behind city hall, where I park next to a weed-choked stack of rusted iron pipes.

Tina arrives behind me, but drives past the mayor and is stopped by the constable at the barricaded intersection in front of the old saloon. She rolls down her window, and I can see from her frustrated gesturing that she is having no luck convincing him to let her pass. Watching him wave through a satellite dish-topped van marked with radio station call letters does not appear to improve her disposition, either. Toots leaves his post to investigate.

"I live on that street," she complains. "I have a right to go to my own home."

"Darlin', nobody's keeping you out of your little apartment," the mayor says. "We're just keeping out your car."

"It's not fair."

"Even if we let you past the barricade it wouldn't do you no good. The cafe parking lot's been requisitioned for the fair. Can't have a celebration in Texas without a fair, you know. But you can park right over next to Mark in the press lot."

Tina silently fumed as she handed \$3 to Toots, then kicked up a little cloud of dust as she rolled across the vacant lot.

"So, Willie Nelson is really coming here?" I ask.

"Can you imagine it?" Toots marvels. "Right there on stage with Roy. We could become the next Luckenbach. Take a look."

The mayor jerks a thumb over his shoulder, back toward the old rock saloon. A coat of white paint has been applied to the boarded up front door, where someone had spray painted "George Strait Rules!" a few years back.

"Looks nice," I say.

"We took care of that this morning. Roy said he wanted to give the old girl a facelift for the show."

The paint goes well with the fresh-cut lumber of the stage and the radio station banner that hangs from the cornice across the second floor windows, billowing softly in the twilight breeze: "Texas Saturday Night is made possible by a grant from Ozona Water, maker of Mentine toothpaste with Fluoride9 in Original and Narcissism Control. Ozona Water. It comes from the sky."

"Course, Roy's right," the mayor continues. "We do need the town to look especially nice tonight. I have it on good authority we're going to have some big news announced from that stage. Say, and where is The Stranger? He said he was going to shoot some footage here tonight. I've got an idea for a promotional video. Where is he?"

I have been wondering the same thing. The Stranger disappeared after we rolled back into town about noon, and I haven't heard from him since.

“He’ll be around,” I assure him.

“Hope he gets here in time to film Willie,” the mayor says. He returns to the parking lot to continue collecting parking fees.

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Sticking out from behind the saloon is the back half of a 30-foot RV, borrowed from Dollar Bill Buckstop for use as the dressing room for Cowboy Roy and the band. Roy spots me through the rear window and waves me inside.

“No, Willie ain’t coming here tonight, nor any other night,” Roy insists. “Sure, we played on the same radio show once, but that was 30 years ago. He don’t even know me.”

“This feeling like old times yet?” I ask.

“I mean.” Then Roy snaps his fingers. “Oh say, I almost forgot. I read about you in the paper.”

A surge of panic. I had hoped the New York Agenda would not be well read in Strangers Rest. Perhaps he means another story, another paper.

“No, I mean that one with the three dreams,” he clarifies. “They really gave you heck about the gays.”

“Well, you know that’s not exactly what I mean for people – ”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. We don’t make a fuss here in Strangers Rest.”

“Yes, but I’m not a – what?”

“Don’t get me wrong. If one of them homosexuals comes down this way we’ll be polite, but that doesn’t mean we have to love them. Homosexuals just aren’t natural. Ain’t that right, Jimmy?”

One of the Wramblin’ Wranglers – a clarinet player recruited from NTSU in nearby Denton -- looks up from his instrument and gives Roy an uncomfortable stare.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Roy asks.

“I’m gay,” Jimmy says.

“Oh. Well then, you’re fired.”

Then Roy breaks into a fit of laughter. “Hell. I love ya, Jimmy, but you woodwinds are a squirrely bunch.”

A knock at the door; it’s one of the technicians from the radio station.

“We’re ready for a sound check, Mr. Thornton,” he says.

Roy exits to converse with the technician; I head for the fair.

#

The first booth is an Ozona Water truck with a vinyl sun shade extended along one side, shrink wrapped cases of plastic bottles stacked in the trapezoid of gray the sun shade throws across the dead summer grass. Many of the townsfolk, I notice, have already received free bottled water from Dr. Adolfo Morel, who is feverishly distributing his wares. And yet, perhaps not so feverishly. For despite the heat and his black suit, Morel is not sweating. His porcelain albino skin isn’t even flushed.

Morel watches over the townsfolk with silent insect eyes, pausing occasionally to jot a note in a spiral notepad, silently working his blood red mouth like a set of mandibles.

“Don’t drink it,” someone warns. I look up to see Father Byrd, bounding across the road toward the startled water drinkers. “That’s bottled rainwater, the worst. It’s like pouring gasoline on a fire, especially for women. The psychic disturbances may be cataclysmic. Just ask the so-called ‘doctor’ Morel.”

But Morel is gone, replaced by a bored looking young man in a white golf shirt with a little Ozona “cloud” and “Yo, Ozona Man!” stitched over his heart.

“Free water,” he announces, to no one in particular. “Get your free water.”

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Walking through the fair. The constable whistles me over to the barricade.

“Thought you were going to be one of my deputies tonight,” he says. “I got your uniform and shotgun waiting in the trunk.”

“Oh, I guess I forgot to tell you. My editor nixed it. Said it would be a conflict of interest.”

“That’s what I figured. He was probably jealous I didn’t ask him instead.”

“Probably. He’d do it if he thought it would help him pick up girls in the parking lot at Bennigan’s.”

“You going to be around for a while?”

“Till closing time.”

“Tonight may be the night for that other matter I told you about.”

“The devil worshippers?”

“Nice, real nice. Maybe you could say it a little louder next time, put up a billboard or something.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyway, I have it on good authority a bunch of them will be at the cemetery tonight.”

“No kidding.”

“And I’m going to grab them. You still want to come?”

I give him my home phone number.

#

I run into Reece Sloan, the editorial assistant from the bureau. He has been relieved of Coke machine-tending duties for the evening to roam the streets of Strangers Rest, collecting quotes and color to feed into a page one piece about the wagon train, which has left the airport and is now camped a few miles to the east. My job is to write up a couple of grafs on the concert.

“I have found the story of the evening,” he tells me. “A couple of old ladies over there are getting ready to have a pony wedding.”

“They’re getting married on horseback?”

“No, it’s a wedding of ponies. That is, two miniature ponies are getting hitched. So to speak.”

“So to speak.”

“They’ve got a pony veil, a pony tuxedo, pony flowers, pony bridesmaids and pony groomsmen. They even snagged a couple of cow dogs for the ring boy and flower girl.”

Just then, one of the women calls out at Reece from across the large gravel lot, waving for him to join them.

“The pony wedding people seem to know you,” I observe.

“They’re paying me \$100 to write up the wedding announcement. Can you believe it? And then they’re going to run it in the paper. Display advertising. I asked them ‘do you know how much that’s going to cost?’ But they didn’t care. They even hired a professional wedding photographer.”

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With the exception of the odd equine nuptials, the town fair is shaping up as a fairly typical Texas affair. There are a half dozen or so cheesy carnival rides, including the "Flying Jenny," a mule-powered contraption that takes its occupants on a slow, flat circle around a post every minute or so. And of course, there are arts and crafts.

Teddy bears are undoubtedly in vogue this season. Several vendors are hawking bluebonnet landscapes, some painted on canvas, most on scraps of weathered picket fencing and rusty tin roofing.

Now I come to a booth with a neon sign: "The destiny of epidermis - and everything under it." A local woman has purchased a franchisee of Rev-9, a cosmetic and plastic surgery undertaking. I flip through the corporate capabilities brochure, titled "Let Us Love You."

#

"Constant admiration, adulation -- you may secure the envy of others with our patented Rev-9 system. This kit contains four feelings of shame and worthlessness. The feelings often react within and between others, who can then be covertly threatened with personal apocalypse and manipulated to serve your needs. They may be the cyberneticists, man transformed to smoothly functioning feedback mechanism, shaping a technological imagery of religious and erotic feelings. Crucified via a vale of tears, the self-contained machine sanctified in the endless quest of personal meaning, too busy to notice the stench, the meaninglessness as the value. A clean, eternal balance of emotional control. Erotically curious, adorned with golden feet and a glass eye. Always young, always plastic, glass corneas containing photoelectric cells connected to gold-plated co-electrodes to optic nerves, the intimate membranes reproduced in polyethylene, pressure relays leading to a single silver cable linked to the correct register of the digital skull, cracking in the orgasm of virginity lost to the gear shift of her MG (the well oiled cam), an autoerotic machine and profane fulcrum for applying vulnerability's conquering force. The ever-ready erotic tool, deletion of tenderness and love."

#

The chili cook-off has attracted an assortment of a half dozen cooks looking to amass points that may help them qualify for the big championship cook-off in Terlingua in November.

There is even a domestic dispute.

I am looking over a booth of thoroughbred swings - old car tires gussied up to look like saddled horses - when I hear somewhere behind me the first murmured signs of consternation between the man and woman. It isn't until they raised their voices a bit that I realize the couple is Jack and Tina.

"Don't tell me to calm down," Tina says. "I don't have any calm left. I've used it all up on all your lies."

"People are starting to stare at the crazy girl," Jack warns. All smiles, he takes Tina by the arm and tries to lead her toward the stairs to her apartment. Bad move.

"Go fuck one of your strippers," she suggests. "Cause you're sure not going to do it anymore to me."

Tina spins on her heel and starts up the stairs, a nice exit - but not nice enough to escape the slings of the town gossips.

“Good riddance,” one of the women from the pony wedding party comments.  
“That boy was bad news.”

“I’ll say,” another woman remarks. “I know that Wells girl’s crazy about him, but he ain’t never going to marry her. Why buy the cow if the milk’s free?”

Tina leans over the railing, glaring down upon the women. “And never call me a cow!” she says. She climbs the remaining steps to the landing and slams the door behind her.

“What a little bitch,” Jack remarks happily, undisturbed by the spectacle.

“She didn’t mean it,” I say. “She had a bad experience earlier with a police barricade.”

“Yeah, but she’s still a bitch,” he repeats. “And she’s boring. Let’s go to Plato’s Palace.”

“Can’t. I’m on the clock.”

“I thought they were going to fire you.”

“Me too. But it turns out that I’m still less of a pain in the butt than the other reporters. ‘Please don’t quit,’ my old boss said. He even said they may bring me back downtown.”

#

OK, I have a confession: The “please-don’t-quit” conversation never took place. Why? Because I have another confession: I didn’t speak at the “Year of” meeting. The Stranger wasn’t there, either. Like everyone else I just sat in silence, wishing I was the sort of person who could speak out.

But for this film, I think it is important that I do assert myself. Today’s moviegoers require their protagonists to be men of action. Take my phone conversation with Allison, for instance. I was such a man of action that –

No? You’re right, of course. I confess that conversation didn’t happen, either. Not even today, safe on my island prison, would I say anything like that to Allison. She’d kill me.

#

After we fill up on free chili samples, Jack heads for the car and I wander toward the stage. I am caught short by the sight of dozens of dominos running down the sidewalk on little legs, trailed by Harold Bost and his angry wife.

“It’s impossible,” someone marvels.

“Yes, Mr. Bost has pulled another of his tricks,” Ima replies, on the run. “Ornery old man.”

Next I notice a booth I’d missed the first time, a table with a stack of books and a banner: “The Divine Marketplace of Benign Ideas - As Seen on Les TV!” And behind the table, a familiar face.

“Hello Mark,” she says.

“Hello Magnetica.”

#

“Don’t worry,” Magnetica says. “I’ve really changed since the old days. No more Barbie toys, no more sharp instruments. Your DNA delivery organs are safe.”

That is a relief.

“I saw the story in the Agenda,” she adds. I guess if you live on one of the coasts, like Magnetica, then you don’t have to say “New York.”

“It wasn’t one of my prouder moments,” I admit.

“Don’t worry. People who know you know that you’re not a misogynist.”

“Thanks.”

“Remember the time I got you to try on my panties?”

“Uh, so what are you doing these days?”

“I am now known to the world as a fully-certified Existence-Reason Trainer. I’ve even written a book about it.”

Miss Barbie Girl is all smiles as I examine her latest tome, “Calling Doctor Deity: How to Create and Use Curative Prayers.” I peruse the jacket copy:

“Sincerely engrave the thoughts of your life into your life. That’s the message of hope offered by Magnetica O’Famously. She shares a novel tale of devotion to study, to description and to expansion of the unrestrained condition of our personal possibilities. Once a defunct, disfigured creature lost in the landscape of the phantom, she found her calling and began the process of peeling away the aged, obsolete and vague notions. The result was a radical transformation - both of herself and of her bond with the Marvelous One. Discover for yourself the richness and the plentiful potential of curative prayer. Read ‘Calling Doctor Deity.’ Magnetica O’Famously is a former edict-maker for several nationwide periodicals, including ‘The Twilight of Satisfactoriness’ and ‘The Usurping Person Who Reads.’ She is now the creator and chief of the Total Alliance of Existence-Reason Trainers and Direct Originality Nuns. She lives in Burial Chamber, Calif., with her questionably gendered companion, two mummified Egyptian cats and an Art Deco flea market urn containing the ashes of her father, who always called her ‘princess’.”

“Congratulations,” I say. “Looks like you found your calling.”

“I’d love to tell you about it. Maybe we could have dinner, catch up on old times.”

“Ah, I don’t know about that. I mean, I am married now.”

The smile instantly vanishes, replaced by a metallic insect stare.

“I want to have dinner with you, not your wife,” she replies.

“OK. I didn’t mean anything by it. Yes, yes. Let’s get together soon.”

I try to give Magnetica a smile, but she seems even more offended by this attempt than she was by my “I’m married” comment. Her eyes flash with the tempered glint of surgical steel.

#

No Cowboy Roy’s Radio Ranch for me. A few minutes before air time Sam’s tipster calls: The Satan worshippers are gathering for a Black Mass at Midnight in the cemetery.

So instead of attending the show, Sam and I spend about 45 minutes camouflaging the Toyota bubbletop, covering it with vines and limbs we tear and pull out of an overgrown fence line. Nightfall comes, and we spend another couple of hours sitting in glow of the dashboard lights, the silence of the night broken only occasionally by the hiss and pop of the dispatcher’s radio. Every few minutes a set of headlights rounds the bend in the road as it curves past the cemetery, twin beams glinting across the polished granite headstones interspersed among ancient, crumbling monuments. But the lights always pass by.

“Soon as those devil worshippers light the first candle, I’m hittin’ the lights and siren and tearing out of this thicket. There gonna think they’ve conjured up the devil himself.”

“You really think this is the real thing?” I ask. “I mean, not just kids on a dare.”

The constable shrugs. “All I’ve got to go on is an anonymous phone call. Come Midnight there’s going to be a black mass with another animal sacrifice. Maybe it’ll be kids. Maybe it’ll be devil worshippers. Either way, they’ll be trespassers. That’s going to be the minimum charge, anyway.”

“But if they don’t do anything – ”

My voice trails off. Sam has a pained, disapproving look on his face. It is a look that I am accustomed to, commonly displayed by those who do not appreciate my devil’s advocate approach to journalism.

“And if they’ve got a calf with them,” Sam continues, “they better hope they can produce a bill of sale. Because I’ll call the cattle raisers association, and if their investigators say the calf is stolen, those kids on a dare are looking at a felony. The whole bunch of them, no exceptions.”

#

A few minutes before Midnight, two sets of twin white dots approach. The headlights slow as the drivers eased off the road into the bar ditch, stopping just short of the cemetery gate. The doors open, filling the night with carefree laughter. No candles, no black robes, no calves - just normal, bored teenagers.

“Looks like you’ve been had,” I say. But Sam ignores me. He quietly summons the radio dispatcher and describes the situation.

“Do you want me to send a deputy to your location?” the dispatcher asks.

“Negative on that dispatch, Dora,” Sam says. “But I may need some help later, running all them all into town. This could be a busy night.”

A busy night indeed. I immediately find myself rooting for the devil teens.

A new set of headlights approaches, sending the teenagers scrambling behind the monuments. As the headlights swing around, the teens rise from their hiding places and march toward the road, stiff kneed and arms outstretched, like “Night of the Living Dead.” One of them is wearing a sombrero.

“Look at me, I’m the Corn Chip Hombre,” he says. “Chit, mon! I want to keese your seester!”

The other teenagers think this is very funny.

“Quick, shoot him in the head,” one of them says. “It’s the only way he’ll die.”

And then the fun is over. Sam flips on the red and blue rooftop lights and guns the car out of the thicket. We cross the road mere feet off the rear bumper of the passing car, and I can almost see the wide, terrified eyes of the driver. The Toyota bubbletop noses hard into the bar ditch in front of the cemetery, coming up the other side like a boat cresting a wake. We slide to a sideways stop a couple of car lengths shy of the teenagers’ cars.

“Stay right where you are.” Sam’s voice booms out of the loudspeaker inside the front grill. The laughing teens immediately fall silent, zombie arms drooping to their sides. Somewhere in the blue and red flashes, a girl moans and begins to cry.

“Oh god, we’re going to jail,” she wails.

While Sam lines the kids up along the cemetery's cyclone fence, I look over their cars. One is a van, a big Ford Econoline model with a V-10 under the hood and four or five rows of bench seats. Stenciled along the side is the name of a local church. I pass on the name to Sam.

"Presbyterians, I should have known," Sam scowls. "You'd never catch a Baptist kid out walking all over graves at midnight."

"We didn't walk on any graves," the crying girl asserts.

"Why, how would you know girl?" Sam says. "It's too dark to see nothing. How'd you like it if somebody started walking on your grave?"

That question sets the girl to crying anew - and it sets me to wishing I'd declined the constable's stakeout offer. Clearly, there will be no story of any importance. At most, I might get a un-bylined police brief reporting that a dozen or so minors have been arrested for trespassing at the Oddfellows Cemetery.

But just then, an as-yet undiscovered teenager suddenly comes running out of the underbrush. Rail thin and pale, his face glows terrified in the moonlight.

"Somebody else got here first," the boy hisses, churning his friends into an immediate uproar.

"What are they doing?" another boy asks him.

"Freaked me out," the boy replies. "They're not talking, just making weird noises."

"Oh god, the devil worshippers are here," one girl moans. "Sheriff, help us!"

Trespassing and grave walking are instantly forgotten. Sam reaches for his holster.

"Point me to them," he orders the boy.

The boy sets off into the dark unknown, and we all follow him through the unmarked Mexican section (presumably walking all over the graves), into the shadowy underbrush. Sam is crouching down low, peering into the darkness. We hear rustling and grunting, unintelligible, then a snap, like someone stepping on a twig, breaks the silence. The milky-faced boy spins hard on the constable.

"He's got a gun," he warns.

This sends the other teens into instant panic. "Quick, shoot 'em!"

I also see the gun, but I see who is holding it.

"Sam, don't shoot!" I yell. "That's Roy Thornton."

Too late. The great tongue of blue flame leaps from the constable's revolver, lighting up the darkness. The blue flash is reflected back at us by a half dozen bovine retinas, and the night erupts in wailing and fearful cries.

A wall of sweet smelling teenaged bodies rushes past, almost knocking me off my feet. The thud of bodies falling and crashing through the undergrowth, a mix of crying and laughter.

"Roy!" I call out. "Are you there?"

He's there. Fortunately for Roy, Sam is not much of a shot.

"That damn Sheriff spooked my herd," he complains. "It'll take me all night to round them back up."

I can just make out the longhorns loping down the bar ditch into the night. A farmhouse porch light snaps on in the distance. More wails and screams - and laughter. Turns out there is more to the story than I first realized.

“That idiot shot a cow!” one of the teenagers reports. The laughter is suddenly outpacing the crying.

“Stop, you sons of bitches,” Sam rails at the fleeing teenagers. “You’re all under arrest.”

But the Presbyterians keep on running, right out to the road and into their cars and van. Taillights pop on and disappear into the night. Sam fires his pistol into the sky and calls for me to get back to the car.

“They’re getting away,” he explains. “You’re going to have a real story now – a high speed pursuit. You coming or not?”

#

I do not come. Instead, I join Roy on his trail drive. He equips me with his spare mount, no doubt pilfered from the same ranch where he rustled his herd.

“This is great,” he says. “I’ve been needing someone to ride drag.”

“Roy, what’s this all about?”

“We’re driving the herd up the Chisholm Trail, of course. What you think it’s all about?”

#

Despite my best efforts, I am unable to convince Roy that this is not the 1880s and he is not driving cattle to the Kansas railhead.

At one point, Cowboy Roy becomes convinced we are surrounded by Indians. He unholsters Grandpappy Thornton’s Bisley and draws down on an old windmill, shooting the “injun” off the top. The rusty Aeromotor rings like a ranch house dinner bell, and my horse almost throws me out of the saddle.

“Greenhorn,” Roy mutters.

After an hour or so of negotiating dark, uncertain bar ditches, we emerge from a thorny mesquite thicket to discover the headlights of Interstate 35 West and the giant metal warehouse of a roadside bar called the Outlaw Saloon.

I am immensely relieved that we have found a place to rest. The saddle has rubbed the insides of my thighs raw, and the salty sweat has set the flesh to a slow burn. I try standing in the stirrups, but the animal’s jarring gait makes my knees ache. Alas, Roy is right. I am no cowboy.

However, Cowboy Roy couldn’t be happier, riding between the cars in the Outlaw parking lot. I am slouching over the saddle horn, trying to look inconspicuous to a bleary-eyed couple staggering out to their cars.

“As old Gus would say, there’s nothing like riding a fine horse into a new country,” he remarks. “How ‘bout we go in for a drink?”

I make a quick check of my watch. Ten minutes till 2 -- last call in Texas. Why not?

“Cowtown,” Roy says, chuckling softly as he nods to himself and strokes his chin. “Why, I bet it’s been 20 years since me and the Queen of the Prairie shared a Saturday night together. Lots of good memories, lots of good pokes. Mighty friendly whores in that Fort Worth. And Hell’s Half Acre -- say, did I ever tell you about the time I played faro with Sam Bass?”

#

We take two stools at the bar, and Roy is still talking a mile a minute, spinning his Wild West tales.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I almost rescued that little settler girl from the Comanche?” he asks.

“No, you never did.”

“Well, it was down there in DeWitt County, and they got her when she wasn’t but a hundred yards from her family’s cabin, picking up pecans along a little creek. They grabbed her and hauled her off to the Guadalupe Mountains. The squaws made her into their slave, beat her and pulled her hair. They even burned the soles of her feet so she wouldn’t run off, poor thing. I was out on a surveying expedition when we stumbled across them. There was six of us and about 50 of them, so we cut a hasty retreat. Didn’t learn till a year or so later that they had hostages with them. Had I only known, I’d have chased them murderous savages across the Llano and straight into Hell if need be to have rescued that little girl.”

Caught up in the tale, I momentarily forget my goal of reining in my deluded friend.

“So what ever happened to the girl?” I ask.

“Oh, eventually they got her back. Pretty soon after that we made a treaty with the Comanche, and they delivered her up to the commissioners in San Antonio. She was returned to her family, but she was never the same. Her health was ruind by the hard living and the tortures visited upon her by those savages. You know, there was not a place on her body that wasn’t scarred or burned by those monsters. I tell you, the Comanche were cowardly, inhuman beasts and I, for one, do not mourn their passing.”

#

I leave Roy at the bar with a \$20 bill and go off in search of a pay phone, which I find in the little plywood-paneled vestibule that leads to “Bulls” and “Heifers” restrooms.

“Hello?” a sleepy-voiced Tina answers.

“Hey, this is Mark, Mark Leach.”

“How nice. I was just laying here, waiting for your call.”

What a smart aleck. And here I am, trying to help.

“Well, sorry to bother you this time of night, but I though you might want to come collect your grandfather, otherwise known as Capt. Augustus McCrae of the Texas Rangers.”

#

After Tina agrees to meet us in the parking lot, I quickly dispatch my bathroom business and return to the bar to collect Cowboy Roy. But the old man isn’t here.

Instead of enjoying the much-discussed shot of “redeye,” Roy has left his glass and barstool to engage one of the bouncers -- a well-groomed, rather rotund specimen who resembles a fat Garth Brooks -- in a spirited debate over the wisdom of packing a six shooter in a licensed drinking establishment.

“You got to take that thing out of here,” the bouncer insists. “This isn’t a right-to-carry state, and it’s a violation of TABC regulations.”

Cowboy Roy won’t cotton to that, though.

“I’ll only check my gun with the sheriff, not some dawdling, snot-nosed barkeep,” he says. “Now bring me a bottle of Dr. Dickfer’s and two glasses.”

Not good. I make my way toward Roy, but I’m not quick enough. The argument has already caught the attention of the Outlaw Bar’s more intoxicated patrons.

“That’s right, you don’t give your gun to nobody but the law.”

“Hell, let’s make him the law.”

“Yeah, old man, you be the sheriff now.”

Then somebody pours a beer down the back the bouncer. He spins around in a rage.

“Which one of you bastards did that?” he says.

Meanwhile, two starch-shirted, crew cut types have cornered a “wetback” on the floor between Zaxxon and Ms Pac Man, where they are administering a vigorous ass kicking.

“You all done lost the Alamo, go back to Mexico.”

“Why, Kevin, he ain’t no wetback,” one of the men remarks. “This one here’s an A-rab.”

Kevin stops kicking.

“That right, boy? You an A-rab?”

“I am from Tehran,” the beaten man replies. This is not a wise admission.

“Sand nigger.”

Kevin and his friend resume their attack. A thick, dark liquid oozes from a horseshoe-shaped laceration on the Iranian’s olive-skinned forehead, but neither the wound nor the continuing blows seem to have much effect. He is ranting about his homeland, something political. Marxism-Leninism is prominently mentioned.

“It is will of people that has endowed the misguided Ayatolla with this mandate to rule.”

And then he suddenly shifts subjects, starts talking about the guerrilla drive-in movie movement. “The will of the people rejects the twenty dollar experience and embraces the do-it-yourself cinema.”

“Shut up, commie Jew boy,” Kevin says. He pounds on his victim’s left ear, instantly transforming the fleshy appendage into a violet-tinged cauliflower. Except it’s not an ear - it’s a broken piece of exoskeleton.

So that’s it. The genetic transformation has begun.

#

Dark liquid violence pours from the man’s scalp and down the neck of his white shirt, open wide to reveal a gray thorax of gold chains. His left eye turns inward, like a Picasso, and glazes over in a metallic grid.

“Here’s what you need,” he hisses, filling the room with a mangled cicada cry of summer. “A big blank wall of darkness. Bad things happen in the dark, an odd corner of creation and unsanctioned sex –“

“You better watch your mouth, boy,” Kevin warns.

“Check for areas full of weirdness. Warehouses of prostitutes, billion watt concrete retaining walls of educational malls. Keep in mind that you will need batteries. Religion is simply the tool of and camouflage for a decadent bouleversement. Death to America. You are all fucking cocksuckers.”

Bad craziness. No self respecting, red-blooded Texan male can last more than 10 seconds after such an insult without responding with at least token fury. This is especially true if the epithet is delivered by a giant extraterrestrial insect.

“I’m going to slice off your pecker,” Kevin says, waving a broken bottle. A surge of fear crashes over me. I am unable to take my eyes from the jagged glass. The terror in my chest says a throat has been cut. I reach for Roy’s arm. But the old man is gone.

Cowboy Roy stands behind Kevin, taking aiming at his tailbone with the tip of his pointy-toed boot.

“Don’t,” I say. Too late. Roy’s kick sends Kevin crashing into Ms. Pac-Man.

“What the hell?” The man is scrambling for his feet, his face an angry blur. “I’m going to --”

Roy draws, catching Kevin midway up with the heel of the Bisley. A red bubble instantly sprouts from his forehead. He stumbles again into the video game.

“The cowboy must never shoot first at a smaller man,” Roy says, “or take unfair advantage. He must never go back on his word or a trust confided in him. He must always tell the truth. He must be gentle with children, the elderly.”

Kevin regains his footing and squints at Roy through a swelling, purpled-ringed eye.

“That ain’t fair,” Kevin scowls, his gaze settled squarely on the Bisley.

Roy considers this remark and slips the gun back into the holster. “You got a point,” he admits. “I’ve never been one to let my pistol freeze in the holster.”

Roy takes off his gun belt and hands it to me. “Let’s settle this outside.”

#

The fight doesn’t last long.

Kevin throws the only punch, a drunken fist arcing lazily through the vapor lamped night and falling a couple of feet short of Roy’s chest. Apparently only sober enough for kicking, his attempt at using an upper extremity results in a listing stagger and loss of balance. He stumbles to one knee. Cowboy Roy stares down at him in morally triumphant disgust.

“Get up so I can whup you good,” he says. This solicits a friendly mix of applause and laughter from the stragglers who’ve stopped to watch on the way to their cars.

“Boyd, where are you?” Kevin bellows out to his accomplice. No one comes to his aid.

Shame rallies the fallen Kevin to his feet, but he doesn’t stay on his feet long. Quietly watching from the doorway, the newly emerged cicada uses his middle legs to deliver two small, quick kicks to the back of Kevin’s knees. The drunken cowboy collapses on his hands and throws up, his face washed green in the florescent sheen from the billboard across the parking lot. I glance up at the sign and laugh: Don’t Let Impotency Ruin Your Life.

“You can’t make stuff like that up,” I remark to Roy, handing him his gun and holster. Roy buckles on the gun belt; however, the giant cicada is not done yet.

“Death to you,” the cicada says. He delivers a spirited kick to Kevin’s heaving ribcage. “You are useless. Useless, weak and a coward. Insect politics demand that you be absorbed by the hive. Absorbed, then we will project you on a smooth light surface. We’ll bake some cookies, get to know our neighbors. Invite others into your unused spaces.”

Then the constable arrives.

A quick blast of siren and the familiar blue and red strobe of law enforcement lights up the gravel parking lot. I am instantly engulfed in the white dust and headlights of fleeing cars and pickups. I catch a brief glimpse of Sam Cunningham’s hawk-nosed profile in the open window of the Toyota bubbletop, a tendril of woody vine dangling

from the rear door handle as he punches the accelerator in pursuit of the last of the vehicles. I watch his taillights disappear into the night.

“That was pretty exciting,” I say, turning to Cowboy Roy for agreement. But he is gone. A quick check of the light pole confirms that the horses are gone, too. I squint into the darkness. Cowboy Roy is nowhere to be seen.

“He headed north,” the giant cicada hisses, continuing to kick the now-unconscious Kevin.

“North to where?” I ask.

“North on the Chisholm Trail, to the railhead, the point of departure to the Land of the Dead. He should have waited for the pause before the second feature. Good neighborly relations, you know.”

“What?”

“The intermission. It’s a chance to mingle, to get to know each other and ourselves under the stars. Ah, I wish I had my numchucks. If only my dorm mates could see me now, they would not be so quick to laugh at me later.”

He spreads his iridescent wings and disappears into the night.

#

#

Stars are falling from the heavens.

“Look, there’s another one,” Tina observes. She points her finger at the spot where a blue-tinged flare extinguishes itself against the iron gray sky.

“What did you wish for this time?” I ask.

“Same as before – for all men to lose their peckers.”

The meteorite shower has been under way for a good hour. Although I am no authority on shooting stars, it strikes me as a rather extraordinary display. And I’m not the only one. Late night radio has been actively noting the celestial activity, now blazing across a wide swath of the Southwest sky. A fair number of the flaming rocks have made it to earth; one is even believed to have ignited a grass fire near Azle.

“Men are crap,” Tina says.

“You know, Jack’s not a bad man,” I remark.

“What would you know about it? Men aren’t the ones who get bent over in the hot showers. How do you think you’d like it, grabbing your ankles while some bastard shoves it up your -- ?”

“All I’m saying is not all men are crap.”

“Oh, not you, right? Well, I got the photos to prove it.”

“What are you talking about?”

Tina shakes her head. “All I’m saying is women would be a lot better off if all men would lose their peckers.”

“And what would women do then?”

Tina scratches her chin, pretending to think.

“Maybe we could stitch them onto ourselves,” she says. “Yeah, we’d stitch them on and then we’d bend you over in the hot shower. See how you like it for a change.”

Harsh. Maybe Jack really is a bad man. Clearly he must have done quite a number on her. I find my thought absently wandering southward, ensuring myself that the DNA delivery organ is still in place.

“It’s been an hour now,” I say. “Maybe we ought to take another swing through town.”

“Whatever. Grandpa might have gone back to the saloon.”

#

Frederiksbad Street. A crowd of women has gathered in front of the Silver Spur. Some are holding torches. Others are passing out bottles of Ozona water. They are all facing someone who is standing alone on the stage, talking into a megaphone.

“Isn’t that your old girlfriend?” Tina asks.

Sure enough, Magnetica is center stage. I recognize the glint of surgical steel flashing in her eyes.

#

“It’s time we take back the night,” Magnetica exhorts the crowd. “Time we take it back from the purveyors of onbeam pornography, men who would use the collective unconscious to demonically possess women in a virtual world of real sex and real violence wrapped in kinky cinematography and grape leaves. They desire to consume a passionate, violent love lunch where sensual busloads of soldiers who divine our forbidden hair roll through the sound stage and plumbing, unforgettably terrifying as they destroy the purity of our own sweet creation. They desire to incite real violence again

women through real sex against women. When we as women consent to sex, the onbeam world becomes an everyday subjugation in which women are accomplices in their own rapes.”

“That’s right,” one of the torch-wielding women responds. “I read about them in the New York Agenda, those perverts.”

“That’s a man for you,” another woman says. “All stick and no carrot.”

I sense a disturbance at the far edge of the crowd. Father Bypass is confronting one of the women.

“Don’t drink the water,” he pleads, pointing to the Ozona bottle poised at her lips. “I’ve seen preliminary results of a clinical trial that shows we’re in the terminal stages of a Fluoride9-type psychotropic epidemic among women of childbearing age. Incidents of psychotic rage are up ten fold. We’re also seeing signs of massive hormone imbalances, perhaps related to the psychotic episodes but disturbing in their own right. Bra manufacturers report that average cup sizes are growing at an exponential rate, a sort of super feminization, if you will.”

I circle around the perimeter, stopping Father Bypass just as he is about lecture another water drinker. I lead him away from the crowd, over to the darken front door stoop of Another Café.

“This is not a friendly audience,” I counsel him. “Doesn’t it all seem a bit strange?”

“You’re going to see a lot of strange things from now on,” Father Bypass says. “It’s because of the water, the rainwater. I ran a spectrum analysis of an ambient air sample through my Runcible coil not an hour ago. Came back with a point eight millivolt reading.” He pauses for a suitably impressed response.

“I don’t know what that means,” I admit.

“Well, it’s a clear indicator of a massive surge in the background exo-toxin level.” He is severely agitated, hopping from foot to foot like my sons do when they need to urinate but are too busy playing to take a potty break. “I mean, it knocked the top end off the female pheremone signature. The usual spike of the graph is gone. The graphic relief had looked like the Mount of the Divine. Now it’s just a no-account mesa.”

I look at him, still hoping around on one foot. I have another thought.

“Say Father, when was the last time you slept?”

“Three days ago, but no time to rest now,” he insists, savagely grabbing his crotch. “Ozona International knows all about it. They’ve got the data, but they’re sitting on it. They’re under pressure from the government. I call it the Hystero conspiracy. Fertile women of childbearing age might be going crazy, but they’re still qualified voters. Can you believe it? They have a right to be crazy. We’re talking major psychotic episodes, Mark, and it could potentially reach a planetary scale.”

I start walking away. “You should really go home,” I tell him. “Get some rest.”

“At least take a case of Ozona with you. In men it has a temporary counter response when consumed in large quantities in a short time period. Confidentially, Mark, there may be many more symptoms that I can’t see, either because I don’t know what I’m looking for or because the psychotropic compounds have begun to affect me, too. I can no longer fully trust my own perceptions of reality.”

“Well, that could be a sign you need to take a break.”

I see that he is now looking past me. I turn around. The Stranger has joined us.

“This has been some good movie making,” I say. “I particularly like the torches. Gives the whole thing a primitive tone, like the villagers going off to burn Frankenstein’s monster in the windmill.”

But The Stranger doesn’t smile. In fact, he looks positively morose. His eyes are red, like he’s been crying.

“The church is gutted,” he says. “No pews, no vintage super computer, no movie making equipment – no floor. Nothing here but a warm Texas breeze troubling the waters of a flooded basement.”

“Like our dream?”

“Yes. They were clearly utilizing the Clockscan network. And they took it all.”

“Who took it all?”

“The BODs. They took all the equipment, the research - everything.”

“BODs?”

“Beings of Darkness. They rolled in about Midnight, a squad of government men in black suits driving a fleet of big black Caddys and - get this - one 1958 Galaxie 500.”

“The car of death?”

“Trust no one, Mark.”

#

Now in a state of terminal agitation, Father Bypass is gesticulating wildly at the crowd.

“Psychotropic compounds are making their way into the food chain,” he says, “depositing in our fatty tissues. It’s making us crazy, I tell you.”

Snickers of derision, torch lights flickering crazily.

“Don’t you laugh,” he chides them. “If we don’t find a way to slow this epidemic soon, we’ll soon be a nation overrun by psychotic women.”

But it’s already too late. Magnetica now has the crowd under her control.

“We must confront the Mark Leach’s of the world,” she says to roars of approval. “I for one am not afraid of this confrontation. I do not fear risk. Nor am I afraid of arrogance or error. So now we take back the night so we may free ourselves from this demonic possession. Shall we finally dream our own dreams?”

“Yes!”

“Shall we be compelled to live out the dreams of the likes of Mark Leach?” she asks.

“No!” the crowd responds.

“I bet she’s been drinking Ozona,” Father Bypass says.

“We know these men, these inhuman, cold-blooded creatures,” Magnetica continues. “We know these alien entities, these shadow beings with their skeletons on the outside and black hearts on the inside. They pluck the wings off women’s hearts. Men like Mark Leach, they are the vivisectionists of the modern age. You ask them to have a simple dinner, and they get all crazy. ‘Oh no, I won’t have sex with you.’ And what about his own mother. Did you read that piece of onbeam trash?”

The crowd begins to chant. “Take back the night! Take back the night!”

“Take back the night is right. No more will men compel us to be the containers for their muses and warm globes of ectoplasm. We shall be our own muses, expel our own ectoplasm, inspire our own onbeam work and our own creations of the collective

unconscious. No more shall men say ‘no’ to an innocent dinner invitation with the excuse ‘I’m married.’ That’s a man for you.

“All stick and no carrot!”

And from somewhere near the back, “And I am not a cow!”

Tina. She is one of them now, a bottle of Ozona thrust high above her head. Those around her laugh and clap their approval. Someone hands her a flaming torch. I take a step back into the darkness, my backbone bumping against the café door.

“Shame on Mark Leach,” Magnetica says. “A terrible onbeam creation to have about your mother, the woman who brought you into the world with grand hopes for a perfected being. Think of the wings this odious creation has plucked off of her heart.”

“He’s a mother plucker,” someone says. The crowd laughs and picks up the chant.

“Mother plucker! Mother plucker!”

“And there he is,” Tina says, waving her torch my way.

The crowd goes into a fury. “Take back the night!” the women roar.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” The Stranger says, shoving me toward the alley. We run in the direction of the church, but it is too late for sanctuary. I look around; we are one short.

“Where’s Father Bypass?” I ask.

We spot him a half block back, relieving himself against the side of a building. The crowd is closing in. I turn back to help, but The Stranger catches me by the arm.

“No Mark, a rescue is not in the script,” he says.

We watch helplessly as Father Bypass is pursued across the street and into the church. A minute later he reappears on the roof next to the louvered belfry. Torches are tossed inside. So it’s come to this: The creature is trapped in the Dutch windmill, surrounded by the bloodthirsty burgomaster and lederhosen-clad crowd.

Father Bypass paces back and forth along the roofline, peering over the edge at Magnetica and her followers. Flames and smoke pour from the rafters. To his credit, Father Bypass does not attempt to leap to a safety that is not there. Instead, he climbs higher and grimly stands on the very peak of the roof, engulfed in orange flames and swirling smoke, a condemned soul. The roof collapses in a terrible cry, and Father Bypass disappears in a shower of sparks.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” The Stranger says.

We dart behind the stained sheet metal bay of the car wash, where we take perhaps a half dozen steps. Suddenly, we are engulfed in a blinding light. Little rocks and sticks swirl and ascend around us. I feel my feet lifting off the ground, floating on a beam of electric blue.

#

Onboard the aerial clock, a prisoner.

“Can you believe it?” Young Einstein asks. “The world’s first two-bodied man.”

“Fully human and fully divine,” Dr. Morel says. “We’ll still need confirmation at the molecular level. I’d like to see a full cortical scan, psychotropic biopsy, Cytochrome P450 analysis - the works. Mr. Leach, I’d like to run a nucleic acid sequence analysis.”

Young Einstein reaches inside his lab coat and withdraws a blade of surgical steel.

“I require only a small genetic sample,” he says.

I take a small step backwards, immediately up against the locked door.

"Nothing to fear, really," he continues. "We only require a small tissue sample, a forearm will do. A quick run through the food processor, filter through a bit of cheese cloth to keep bone chips from clogging up the aerosol spray gun, and I'm ready to coat the spaceship."

"That's where you'll find me administering to my flock," Morel says. "I do it on the weekly trip to Zeta Reticuli, inoculated against the spreading bio-doom of the eschatological era."

"Then we'll quick freeze you and The Stranger," Young Einstein explains.

"At absolute zero, we'll reintegrate your DNA – and that of the others – back into that of a single being."

"With bits and pieces of Jack and Cinnamon and Corvette spliced in, of course. A total re-integration of your split-off personalities."

"Yes, we cannot ignore the need for a Deity equipped with a muse or two. After all, many of the ancient gods were hermaphrodites."

I cast my eyes around the room, looking for a weapon - a piece of glassware, another surgical instrument. Anything. But all I can find is a jar of tongue depressors.

"So you see, it's a small thing we ask," Dr. Morel concludes. "A small piece of forearm. Why would you want to deny us this one simple thing?"

I grab the jar of tongue depressors and raise them over my head with all the menace I can muster. "Come and get it," I say.

Apparently, I am not a very threatening person for Young Einstein just laughs and puts the knife away. I shrug and toss the jar into the corner.

"And then," Young Einstein adds, "we reformat in time machine mode for a quick run to 1979, back when people were satisfied to take only their share of oxygen and kept their exotoxins to themselves."

I have heard these words before.

"You've been reading my private journal," I say. "You break into people's homes, too?"

"No, but we do have access to your lovely creations via the onbeam infrastructure," Dr. Morel remarks. "Don't worry. It's been ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court."

"Who are you guys?" I ask. "FBI? CIA?"

"American Psychiatric Association," Young Einstein says. "Hard to pick through the psychic discards without being seen, what with your followers now ranked in the hundreds, lost pilgrims gathering daily outside your little North Dallas Special, turning the antique brick and gaslights into a 24-hour-a-day shrine. And trampling the neighbor's lantern, too. So sad. I hear they've even petitioned the Pope to make you a saint."

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Oh, sorry. We've been working from an alternate script, something created by The Stranger. Working title, 'Doubting Tommy.' In this story, you are a stigmatic agnostic who is being worshipped by the true believers."

"You've really nothing to fear from us," Young Einstein says. "In fact, we just might be your best hope."

I shake my head. "I'd rather stay hopeless," I remark.

“And a word of advice,” Dr. Morel says. “Under-aged girls are usually unreliable, particularly in matters regarding middle-aged passion. Do not be fooled by the potency of Tina’s smile.”

“It’s not like that!” I protest. “I only called her so we could find her grandfather. I was only trying to help.”

“Oh then, if you were only trying to help –”

“Besides, I’m not middle aged. I’m still far, far away from 40. The big four-oh is not even on my radar, no way. And Tina’s 18 and three months.”

Morel thinks this is very funny.

“You think that distinction will mean much to your wife?”

Tina Wells. Even in the blue ethereal glow of the dashboard lights, her perfect, nearly 18-year-old complexion took on a radiant glow. So peaceful there, a buxom teenaged woman-child asleep in the passenger seat, she had reminded me a bit of my two young sons. That resemblance had served to briefly temper my arousal with regret. I hadn’t seen the boys in two weeks. But the feeling of regret was hard to maintain. As we drove, searching for Cowboy Roy, I kept stealing glances at Tina’s breasts, the uppermost portions just visible above the top of her scoop necked shirt. Jack had shown me a Polaroid of her naked, stretched out on a tropical print towel, as if tanning on the beach. The brown nipples ride a bit high on her breasts, upturned you might say, a good detail to hold onto for fantasizing. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t help mentally adjusting her appearance to match the picture. Even in a world where scorned women stitch on amputated DNA delivery organs it wouldn’t be a bad way to greet the conclusion of time, staring into the dashboard lights with a beautiful girl with perfect skin and upturned brown nipples. Except for one small complication.

“My wife is not a woman given over to distinctions.”

Dr. Morel makes some reply, but I don’t listen. Instead, my eyes fall on a tattered briefcase lying open on the combination sofa/bed.

“That belongs to Father Bypass,” I say.

“You’re right,” Young Einstein agrees. “He’s loaning it to us for the night.”

I step over to the briefcase, pick up a paper from the top of the stack. It is an old-style computer printout, detachable tractor feed holes along the sides. Titled “Enhanced Satellite Telemetry,” the report tracks the rate of incoming meteorites against reports of psychotic episodes.

“Father Bypass is dead,” I say.

“We knew that,” Young Einstein pipes in.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Dr. Morel replies.

“You don’t put a man on the Moon without burning up a few astronauts,” I say.

Dr. Morel shakes his head sadly. “Harsh. You don’t seem to understand. We are the good guys. There really is no call for prejudice or fear. Sure, we took a few liberties, skirted the old genetic taboos. But it was all for science.”

“Dr. Morel, it’s 45 minutes to sunrise,” Young Einstein says. “Perhaps we should be getting on with the transformation.”

“Agreed.” Dr. Morel steps over to the video monitors and presses a button. A voice comes through the speaker.

“Talk to me.”

“We’re ready to initiate the transformation.”

“I’ll be right down.”

#

The bulkhead door hisses open. A tall man in cowboy boots, ludicrously oversized hat, dark Wayfarer sunglasses and a fringed rawhide jacket steps into the room. I recognize him from his pictures: Dollar Bill Buckstop.

“Howdy, Doc,” he says. “I’m told the shuttle is fueled and ready to go. You got all the parts ready to finish my man-made deity?”

Dr. Morel nods.

“Then let’s get this show on the road.” Buckstop takes off his Wayfarers and casts a metallic electronic insect gaze upon me. He reaches inside his jacket, producing not a scalpel but a nickel-plated revolver.

“What’s this about?” I ask. I am trying to sound calm and steady, but it is difficult when staring down the barrel of a gun and into Buckstop’s dead gray eyes.

“It ain’t nothing personal, son,” Buckstop says. He lowers the gun and lays a hand on my arm. “We’re a lot alike. We’re both Texans, both white, red-blooded American men. Good ole boys, right? Hell, son, I like ya.”

I can’t believe it. He’s appealing for my understanding!

“But the thing is,” he continues, “this is science. The myth of the man turned deity requires a death followed by a resurrection. You know, like they taught us in Sunday school.”

“It’s the only way,” Dr. Morel agrees. “After the cessation of life signs, we shall resurrect you in the bunker under the old Strangers Rest Field.”

“And get this, we’re going to do it with film,” Buckstop says. “Can you believe it? Morel here will use his invention to convert you to celluloid, to turn you into a cinematic fiction, an anonymous creature projected eternally in the present tense, dead or living no one can say with certainty.”

“You shall be reborn as a dream-carrying ballistic missile,” Morel continues, “your thoughts and memories downloaded into the guidance system. Then I shall initiate primary ignition while simultaneously using the clock in the sky to project a holographic face of the Deity visible across the entire Northern hemisphere. We will play a hypnotic message through the wind machine, make people think it is the voice of the almighty. Certainly that is a superior role to any that The Stranger could ever write for you.”

“You and me is going to have big fun,” Buckstop says. “You’ll be Dollar Bill’s Fluoride9 divine being. A remote controlled godhead, the world’s first privately owned and operated deity.”

“The result will be total cultural psychosis,” Morel adds, “the conclusion of time.”

“And I’m going to make a fortune,” Buckstop says.

“How’s that?” I ask.

“Lots of people will be praying for psychiatric assistance. And you, my remote-controlled Deity, shall tell them that the only effective treatment for the psychic fallout is Ozona’s patented Fluoride9.”

“Sounds like you’ve got it all figured out.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I got big plans, son. I’m aiming for – what do you call it again, Adolfo?”

“Complete Disheartenment of the Populace,” Morel says.

“I like that phrase,” Buckstop remarks. “That’s exactly true. First, I’m taking full control of the onbeam industry. Forget flying cars and personal jetpacks. The future is onbeam. For starters, I’m putting an end to the meditation sites. I’m be employing accumulation seizures and dark affliction via the Nova Effect. We’ll use flesh-coated Markov chains and cut-up engines to scramble language into a literary stew of constantly-switching tenses and subject/object disagreements, resulting in a non-linear, sub-logical form of communication. And the onbeam channels – I already got those wrapped up thanks to my recent stock purchase of Summons Replisystems and subsequent integration of Fluoride9 technology into the public network – will be broadcasting Society of the Purple Sunset all day and all night, all the time. Except it won’t be called that anymore. It’ll just be the World. I’m taking the whole planet back to some old time religion. My remote-controlled godhead will take away the animal skin clothing. Everyone must wear fig leaves. Adam will give an apple to Eve, who in turn will hand it over to a snake. The Deity will respond by turning Eve into a rib and implanting her into Adam. Despondent, Adam will take away all of the names of all the animals. The Deity will turn him into dust and take away all the animals and the dry land and even the light, leaving the Earth without form and void. Amen.”

“Then we unveil the autonomous nanobots,” Morel adds.

“The what?” I ask.

“Billions of tiny robots,” Buckstop explains. “They’ll be swimming through your bloodstream, conquering infection, cancers and free will. And when you are at last freed of the limitations of your frail physical body, the nanobots will digitally copy your brain and upload the contents to a vast intergalactic marketing network that will determine the precise, individualized ad campaign that will most effectively compel you to buy the entire line of Ozona products. I’m telling you, son, this one has virtually no bottom.”

“You’ve gone mad,” I say.

“Have I?” Buckstop asks. He raises the gun again, striving directly for the center of my being. “Goodbye old paint.”

“Wait!” I plead, lifting my hands as if to stop the bullet.

Buckstop pulls the trigger. This is it – the End. I am knocked backward by a blast of heat and cordite. I stumble and grab my chest. But the End does not come. I find no hole, no blood. Buckstop is equally perplexed.

“Well what the hell?” He fires again. And again, I feel the heat, smell the gunpowder. But I remain unharmed. A look of horror flashes across Young Einstein’s face.

“Look at The Stranger,” he says. “He’s been hit!”

We look over at the examination table. Sure enough, two red splotches are spreading across The Stranger’s chest.

“I can’t believe it,” Dr. Morel says. “How could you miss?”

“I couldn’t,” Buckstop insists. “I shot at point blank range. How could I miss this one and hit the other?”

“Could be psychic entrainment.”

“What?”

“It’s been done before with photons. You start with a spooky object, then –“

“Listen,” Young Einstein says. “I think he’s trying to talk.”

The Stranger is looking at me, moving his lips. I go to his side, lean down to hear.

“Run Mark.”

Buckstop laughs. “Run? Where you think he’s gonna go?”

His question is answered by a shudder, a deep rumble that shakes the metal floor plates. The overhead lights flicker.

“What’s that?” Young Einstein asks.

“Sounds like another shuttle,” Dr. Morel says. “But that can’t –” A flicker of doubt crosses his face. “Did anybody activate the security lockout?”

Too late.

The bulkhead door shatters in a white flash, knocking me to the floor. Smoke pours into the room, followed by a high-pitched siren and flashing red lights. Sparks jump from the severed end of a high-voltage Telex cable, dancing crazily in the gaping hole. Then, a second explosion -- no, a gunshot.

Through the smoke, I can just make out Buckstop, Morel and Young Einstein. They are running away, disappearing down the steel-clad, smoke-filled corridor. A few moments later, there is another, smaller shudder. Explosive bolts fire, and their shuttle breaks away from the aerial clock.

I look at the table where The Stranger lay, but it is empty now. All that remains is his sweater, neatly folded on the pillow. And a note. But I don’t have a chance to read it. Cowboy Roy is holstering the still-smoking Bisley, pulling me to my feet.

“Let’s move!” he says, hustling me through the broken door. “It’s almost sunrise.”

#

#

The next scene will be a natural for the movie trailers and the lobby poster. Picture Cowboy Roy and me flying through space, back toward Earth and Strangers Rest in the "Bevo Saucer," the Bevomobile encased in a transparent egg-shaped space ship glowing crimson and indigo on emergency re-entry.

"How did you pull all this off?" I ask

"I'm a professional actor. The script and this vehicle were delivered to me while I was still on the trail drive. Can you believe it? After all these years I get my first sci-fi role."

"So what's next?"

"Back to Strangers Rest. The script says Buckstop and Morel have already landed at the Joint Reserve Base and are taking the underground pneumatic tube to The Stranger Rest bunker, where they will launch the dream-carrying missile. You have to get to the drive-in before sunrise, find a way down into the underground bunker and stop Morel and Buckstop from initiating the final launch sequence."

"How do I manage that?"

"Maybe this'll help," he says, handing me a folded piece of paper. "It's the note from The Stranger. Maybe it's your part of the script."

I unfold the paper. No script, no instructions, no guidance at all. Just a poem:

#

Sometimes a man stands up during supper  
and walks outdoors, and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.  
And his children say blessings on him as if he were dead.  
And another man, who remains inside his own house,  
dies there, inside the dishes and in the glasses,  
so that his children have to go far out into the world  
toward that same church, which he forgot.

-Rilke

#

Cowboy Roy pretends not to see me hiding my tears.

"I just can't believe he's really gone," I say.

"Maybe he's not as gone as you think," Roy remarks. He switches on the Muse Sound System. The Stranger is on the air.

"America's Keepers of the Deity possess a unique revulsion for relinquishing power, for allowing events to occur in their own way devoid of intervention. Bill Burroughs once wrote that they would prefer to leap downward inside their own digestive tract and process the masticated groceries and hose out the resulting excrement. I suggest this revulsion for relinquishing power masks a deeper fear, which infuses the entire life of our era. Christian existentialist Paul Tillich regarded it as the fear of existing beneath an incessant danger, the looming hazard of a worldwide and complete psychic disaster. Only the Deity within can award us the confidence that the world and humanity has experienced an existence of success, even if that success should end today and tomorrow should bring the conclusion of time."

#

The eastern sky is already glowing pink and amber when we reach the drive-in.

Townsfolk are gathered for the filming, their cars lining the highway shoulders and filling a neighboring pasture. Roy aims our glass egg toward the back of the screen and settles onto a stretch of brown grass, unseen by the assembled crowd. (The script had called for Roy to switch on the Cicadian-designed cloaking system.) He turns off the engine, and the glass “egg” disappears.

"There's the old storm drain conduit," Roy says, pointing to a clump of mesquite. "It's all that's left of Strangers Rest Field."

"You think it really leads to the underground bunker?"

"If this was my movie it would."

I nod and start out the door. Roy grabs my arm and I turn back. He offers me his gun.

"No, I can't take it," I tell him. "Besides, I'd just wind up shooting myself. You carry it."

Cowboy Roy shakes his head. "I'm not going in," he says.

"What do you mean? I thought we were going together."

"That conduit's a 42-inch pipe. Big enough for crawling, but my old knees would never make it."

"But it's your granddad's gun."

"Exactly! This old Bisley got Grandpappy Thornton out of many a tight jam. Cleared out Pancho Villa and a whole passel of other pistoleros and bad hombres. I suspect there's still enough of him left in this old gun for one more fight."

I tuck the gun into my waistband, like in a movie. The hammer pokes me in the abdomen. I say a little prayer: Please, God, don't let me accidentally shoot off my DNA delivery organ.

#

Entering the drain pipe.

On hands and knees, I push through a curtain of ancient spider webs and my own barely contained phobias of confined places, down into the dark unknown. The belly of the whale.

I am relieved to find that the entrance is not guarded by poisonous snakes or small rabid mammals. But as I go deeper, the fear of confined spaces intensifies. I begin to imagine stress fractures in the concrete and a cave in. Before these phobias grow to full irrational size, though, the drain pipe empties into a sort of corridor.

There's still plenty of spider webs and dead insects, but now I can stand up. And there's light. Industrial light fixtures are set into the walls every 20 or 30 feet.

Always walls, hallways, always doors.

I follow the light fixtures to a steel door cracked open a couple of inches, just enough so I can peek inside.

Sure enough, Buckstop, Morel and Young Einstein have already arrived.

"Tell me again how we're going to pull this off without Mark Leach's DNA?" Buckstop asks.

"Relax. We already got enough genetic material from The Stranger, who is just a more aged version of Leach."

"They have the same genetic makeup."

"Exactly. The missile will launch as scheduled."

They are gathered in front of yet another Control Data Corp. 6600, which is configured with a bank of video monitors just like the one on board the aerial clock. One screen shows the orbiting timepiece, floating somewhere over Southeast Asia. The others display various scenes of the drive-in theater directly overhead. There's even audio, a voice coming out of a speaker set into the concrete ceiling.

The voice is familiar. Once I locate the appropriate screen I realize we're listening to the Rev. Ida Purelife, a nationally syndicated televangelist who encountered some recent embarrassment when his predictions of the Rapture failed to materialize as scheduled. Now he is here, among his loyal fan base doing damage control. A group of the Keepers of the Deity from the Exogrid church have gathered around to listen.

"As you know, for a number of years I predicted that the Noble Misfortune would be starting last year," he says. "I transmitted a variety of diagrams and structures illustrating my point of view. Now that last year is past and a new year has arrived, what are my present considerations? Have I altered my point of view? No, I still accept as true that a number of time-periods in Ezekiel and Revelation are factual and others need the process of the day/year computer – better known as the Jubilee Almanac – to be decoded. You may recall Judgment Day Decree No. 7: 'The attendance or nonattendance of the Jubilee Almanac decides how the Deity calculates visionary time-periods.' For me, May 7 of last year works as the date when the Jubilee Almanac came to a conclusion. Therefore, all visionary time-periods happening after May 7 of last year must be calculated in factual time."

Oddly enough, there are murmurs of appreciation. The crowd actually seems to understand – and agree – with what he is saying. A woman steps forward to speak.

"I really appreciate – and I'm sure I speak for everyone – we thank you for taking the time to come out here this morning and set the record straight."

"Yes, let Satan run with that."

Appreciative, yet incomprehensible laughter. (Maybe I'm the one who's crazy. After all, I was raised a Methodist.) The Rev. Purelife smiles. He has the group now.

"But I do still have a question," the woman adds.

"Please ask."

"Do you accept as true that the 5,313 days of Ezekiel 19 started last year?"

"No. The 5,313 days of Ezekiel 19 will start after the extraterrestrial insects are thrown downward as described in Revelation 44. This occasion will be celebrated with a worldwide planet shake, a collapse of global magnitude. Now some of you have heard me say I accept as true that the Son of the Deity will celebrate His homecoming during the 17,000th year of membrane penetration. When do I believe the 17,000th year will occur? I find sufficient evidence in the Bible to believe that the Son of the Deity will return during the 17,000th year of membrane penetration. According to my calculations, the Deity created Adam and Eve about 14,000 B.C. and I assume they could have lived in the Garden of Eden about 10 minutes before penetrating one another's membranes."

More laughter.

"But seriously, because the lineal records of the Bible are not precise, there is a gap of some years during which the 17,000th year of membrane penetration will transpire."

"Care to hazard a prediction?" someone asks.

“The first achievable year is this year and the last is about 2021 A.D. Keep in mind that this year does not remain a high-quality candidate for the 17,000th year since particular visionary time-periods must happen before the Son of the Deity can come into view. Yes, I know that the Son of the Deity assured us that the end days would be cut down, so this year could possibly be the 17,000th year - even if I don't believe it probable. It would be very exciting, in view of the universal wave of end time passion, if the Nobel Misfortune began next year. Now some of you heard my colloquium in Burial Chamber, Calif., last spring. Regarding the conclusion of time, I made a statement about the days being abbreviated on the front end of the Nobel Misfortune. Therefore, the Nobel Misfortune could have started two years ago and still end next year.”

Another question: “How does that belief go with your present view on visionary occasions now that this year has arrived?”

“To exemplify how the critical era could be abridged, I suggested how next year could still be the 17,000th year, even though visionary occurrences had not started at the time of the colloquium. I made three arguments: (1) The 5,313 days of Ezekiel 19 stand for an utmost amount of days for the Nobel Misfortune, (2) the selected amount of days – 5,313 – will be abridged for the benefit of the chosen ones as described in Luke 377: 1-14, and (3) the decrease of the Nobel Misfortune obliges the decrease of all visionary time-periods that are operating at the same time. For example, if the 5,313 days are abridged 38 percent (or some other percentage), then other time-periods in service during that period are also abridged by the same ratio.”

“Are you disheartened that the 144,000 have not yet come into view?”

“No. The conclusion of time is the Deity's commerce. I am sure He is correctly onbeam, and the consequences will be wonderful. I look for proof of this pending event each day.”

“For the previous recent months, you have not given you visionary examinations on the Daytime Celebrity. Why not?”

“After extensive discussions and prayer with my financial partner, William Buckstop, I determined it was critical to immediately unveil the seven major dogmas of the Bible. You may recall that I enumerated these dogmas in the first episode of my cable show. The premier was titled “Caution! Revelation is Ready to be Satisfied.” The seven dogmas – my ‘Seven D's’ – are essential to visionary divination. Consequently, I thought it critical to broadcast these dogmas today so that our viewers can see the life-size image of what is to come - perhaps this year, certainly no later than 2021 AD. Any other questions?”

Polite and appreciative silence.

“OK, then, I'll end with a bit of housekeeping. Some of you lately sent a payment to Come Around World! Colloquiums Inc. My printed acknowledgments state that you did not take delivery of assistance or merchandise in exchange for your payment. What does this denote? The Domestic Income Bureau now insists this declaration be located on the printed acknowledgment of all non-profit payments. It just denotes that the wealth you transmitted to me was a contribution - that you did not take delivery of assistance or merchandise.”

“Oh, I was wondering what that was about.”

“This is why we uphold a difference between acquisitions and gifts. A gift is tax deductible. An acquisition is the reception of assistance or merchandise and is therefore subject to taxation. So in the ideal tax situation, it is better to give than to buy.”

Buckstop nods. “So far so good,” he says. “The world’s first privately owned and operated TV preacher is spinning like a top. Now let’s check out the snack bar.”

Morel switches the audio several screens to the right, where the Methodists are having a grand time inside the snack bar (an air conditioned canvas tent pitched on the “inside” of the false front refreshment stand/projection booth), playing the roles of the heaven-bound true believers and eating popcorn and other movie treats. The abandoned Keepers of the Deity are furiously milling about outside the open door.

“So,” one of them asks a member of the Methodist contingent, “are you an amillennialist or a postmillennialist?”

The Methodist shakes his head with great condescension.

“We don’t read the Book of Revelation in quite that way,” he says, almost laughing.

“Oh really. Then how do you read it?”

“Truth be told, John of Patmos articulated his belief within the reflective structures of his time, one of which – just one, mind you – was the revelatory expectation of the approaching homecoming of the Son of the Deity. But our modern study of olden times has revealed that this structure of the Christian expectation was misguided and –

“Misguided?”

“Yes, it should not persist in modern repetition. Just as contemporary Christians can translate John’s erroneous knowledge of the form of the earth without ignoring his communication, so also contemporary Christians can sincerely accept John’s communication of expectation stated in the revelatory structure, which incorporated the pending anticipation of the conclusion of time, without proceeding to replicate it in his historically-appropriate – but now entirely outdated – idiom.”

“I see. So what updated idiom do you propose we misguided contemporary Christians use to spread the Word of God?”

“Certainly the modern day equivalent of the ancient apocalyptic genre is science fiction and the epic film of the End of the World.”

Buckstop looks at his watch, a thick gold Rolex with a dial surrounded in diamonds. Morel shakes his head.

“Don’t worry about it,” Adolfo says. “The psychic warhead is fully operational, and the missile will launch in --” He consults an overhead monitor. “It will launch in eight minutes.”

Time for action. I reach for Roy’s gun, but am caught short by a gun barrel against my spine. “Care to watch with us, Mr. Leach?” Young Einstein asks. “We’ve got a place that’ll give you a perfect view.”

#

Inside the concrete missile silo, strapped to the titanium fin of an ICBM.

Buckstop and Morel are watching me through the blast-proof observation window. Young Einstein is playing with the Bisley, spinning it on his finger just like Cowboy Roy did for the boys at the store the morning the clock first appeared in the sky. (Was it really only two weeks ago?) On one of the twin circular screens of the 6600 I observe the countdown: 6:44 a.m. Sunday. Three minutes to Armageddon.

“Comfy?” Buckstop’s voice crackles through a gray metal speaker mounted next to the window.

“I know I’m not a rocket scientist, but won’t I throw off the trajectory?” I ask. My panicky voice echoes against the concrete walls, returning cold and dead. “I mean, I’ve not very aerodynamic,” I add.

“That’s true,” Morel agrees. “But we can compensate for the balance and drag. The important thing is we need a resurrection. We were going to do it metaphorically, but this is much better. You can’t have the world’s first privately owned and operated deity without a resurrection.”

“And you can’t have a resurrection without a death.”

Buckstop nods. “Everybody wants it to be easy,” he says. “Well, this ain’t like the movies. Progress is never easy. You’ve got to fight for the future, son. After all, you don’t put a man on the Moon without burning up a few astronauts.”

#

Over the speaker I can hear fingers tapping on a computer keyboard. Through the glass, I can just make out the image on one of the video monitors. It’s the wind machine from the church. The turboprop begins to turn, shaking the tent/snack bar with a 90-mile wind. The crowd of extras struggle to remain on their feet.

“And now for the Vox Dei,” Morel entones, adjusting a pair of black knobs. A voice booms out of the speaker.

#

**WHO IS THIS THAT DARKENS COUNSEL BY WORDS WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE?**

#

The voice is familiar. It’s The Stranger! Young Einstein and Morel exchange shocked and troubled glances.

“What the hell?” Buckstop roars. “Morel, you said they’d be listening to ME!”

“I -- I don’t know,” Morel says, furiously working the keyboard. “Sounds like something from the Old Testament.”

In fact, I recognize it as Job 38 – the Lord’s response to Job.

#

**GIRD UP YOUR LOINS LIKE A MAN; I WILL QUESTION YOU, AND YOU DECLARE TO ME.**

#

Presumably, this scripture reading can also be heard at the drive-in because on one of the monitors I see a couple of the movie extras peering quizzically into one of the old Stadium Drive-In window speakers. Buckstop sees it, too. Furious, he again consults his watch.

“And what about the missile?” he asks. “It’s past time.”

Sure enough, the video monitor with the “T-minus” reading is now flashing “LAUNCH PENDING.”

“Why don’t we launch? Morel!”

“I’m on it,” Morel says, coolly tapping at the keyboard. “We’ll launch manually. Let me just punch up the telemetry and --”

But he is cut short by a new development. Through the concrete walls of the bunker comes a strange vibration, a scraping like a snow shovel on concrete. Morel's self-assurance instantly disappears. He and Young Einstein look at each other in horror.

"What?" Buckstop demands. "Tell me what it is."

"Cicadians," Morel says.

#

CAN YOU DRAW OUT LEVIATHAN WITH A FISHHOOK, OR PRESS DOWN ITS TONGUE WITH A CORD?

#

A huge piece of concrete crashes to the floor, and in pour the aliens, dozens of giant Cicadians filling the bunker with a deafening insect roar. Young Einstein raises Grandpappy Thornton's Bisley, but he's too slow. A half dozen are on him at once, crazed legs flying. They instantly disarm him, then begin strapping him into an odd, backless chair.

"No, not the brain-changing stool!" Young Einstein begs.

"Think about Godzilla," the insects instruct him.

"I won't do it," he insists. "You can't send me down that time subway of death."

The control room is suddenly filled with a bluish light, and a self-sustaining ethericom tetrahedron (exactly as posited by Morel in his time equations) forms in the center of the room. Within the swirling heart of the electrical morass the subway doors slide open and out steps the psychic beast itself – the Monster of the Id, the Fiend of the Unconscious.

A strange wind sings down into the concrete silo, filling my nostrils with the salt air of 1942 and the corroded metal stench of the U.S.S. Ethan Allen Hitchcock. I can hear the ozone gas hissing and crackling from the main reactor of the ship as the green-toned Fiend steps forward, exhaling crimson smoke and bits of sparking magnesium.

The creature instantly rips into Young Einstein, splattering blood and bits of flesh against the inner glazing of the observation window.

#

CAN YOU FILL ITS SKIN WITH HARPOONS, OR ITS HEAD WITH FISHING SPEARS? LAY HANDS ON IT; THINK OF THE BATTLE; YOU WILL NOT DO IT AGAIN! ANY HOPE OF CAPTURING IT WILL BE DISAPPOINTED; WERE NOT EVEN THE GODS OVERWHELMED AT THE SIGHT OF IT?

#

Buckstop and Morel are moving slowing along the wall, headed for the door. They make it half way across the room, then the Fiend is on them, too. They are pulled to the floor, out of my line of sight. All I see of their demise are twin fountains of red mist. The window cracks, and shards of blood-stained glass crash on the concrete floor around me.

Now all of the video monitors are flashing "LAUNCH PENDING." And yet, perhaps there is still time to stop the catastrophe. I struggle against my restraints, and the straps weaken enough that I can just slip them over my head.

I head for a small steel access door set into the side of the silo, but I am stopped by a pair of giant insect legs. It's Bellerophon's Shield!

"All is well," he assures me.

"But the launch," I say. "You've got to stop it."

“We are. See for yourself.”

Through the jagged remains of the blood-stained window I can make out a half dozen Cicadians scuttling over the video panel. They expertly work the keyboard and various controls, a blur of insect legs. The bluish glow of the self-sustaining ethericom tetrahedron flickers a moment, then disappears, taking the Fiend with it. A blur of bluish-green numbers begin to scroll across the video monitors.

"This is a rescue," Belloero continues. "Please pardon my exit as we finish reprogramming the missile with alternate coordinates."

Belloero flies through the broken window to the control panel, and another cicada takes me by the arms. We ascend swiftly up the silo, toward a circle of blue sky.

"Must get Mark Leach clear of the silo," the alien says. "Must get clear before missile launches and rocket exhaust incinerates the bunker."

"No, we must stop the missile," I protest. "It'll destroy the world."

"It will rescue the world. Buckstop's vision will be destroyed with his own weapon. The missile will destroy the aerial clock."

"Jack and the girls are still up there. You've got to stop the launch."

But the single-minded Cicada does not hear me.

"Must rescue Mark Leach. Mark Leach must be kept safe."

We shoot up into the sunlight like Lucifer blasted out of Hell. The alien sets me on my feet just in time to see the tornado tower collapse. It is a horror, a tangle of metal and anguished machinery cries. The turboprop detaches from its moorings and becomes airborne, flying into the neighboring pasture.

Suddenly the ground rumbles. Buckstop's missile is screaming into the sky on a surging pillar of fire. The stuttering roar of the rocket blast shakes the earth for miles around, flushing birds out of surrounding pastures and setting off nearby car alarms. A moment later there is a brilliant flash, a tremendous explosion just beyond the tree line. It is the dramatic volcanic eruption of my dream, another incredible revelation. Crimson fire rains down upon Strangers Rest. Rooftops are ablaze – including presumably my house. I picture its multi-gabled roof exploding in flames.

I step around the movie screen and see dozens of fleeing townsfolk, a scene of panic in the post-apocalyptic, almost-science fiction kind of way. Engulfed in a shower of dirt and rocket exhaust and volcanic ash, they are running away from the flaming crater of the missile silo, away from the volcano and burning town, and towards the highway and their cars.

Chaos. I see two old men, one attempting to pull the other away from the burning pasture that lies on the other side of the barbed wire fence.

"My land, destroyed," one of them says, struggling towards the fence.

"It's all right, Daniel," the other assures him. "It's just a grass fire."

"Destroyed I tell you. \$1 million up in smoke. And look at my stock tank!"

I see a cow, struggling to free itself from the muddy bank. But no – that's not quite it. The animal is held fast by the pond itself, hooves encased in coffee-colored ice. This is surely wrong, a pond frozen over in summer. And yet – could this be 1928-29 all over again?

On the other side of the drive-in, an army of dominos running on little legs chases Ima Bost. "Ornerly old man," she says. Then she stumbles, and the dominos are upon her.

And perhaps the most gruesome sight of all in this parade of terror: a towering robot monster version of Little Orphan Annie. Eighty feet tall, she rampages across the drive in on flesh-coated metal tentacles, shooting smaller versions of herself into the fleeing crowd.

Next to the crater I see a tombstone, a white cloth folded neatly over the top.

"See, the Vault of the Deity is empty," the cicada says. "Death followed by transfiguration. Victory is achieved."

"Victory? It's total panic. Look, that guy over there just stepped on that old woman's face!"

"Victory and panic," he clarifies. "But is this not the way of visionary transformation? Instead of thanks, the people are fearful and outraged. They do not see you as the savior, but the destroyer."

"But I've done nothing."

"Yes, total misunderstanding. And misunderstanding is always the story of the sage unaccepted in civilization. The maker of epic films is often murdered in our waking world."

"Murdered?"

"There is frequent doubt, the Cassandra concept is correlated with prophets. To have the cinematic capability – the ability to craft the epic film of incredible revelations – is to have the capability to incorporate attitudes or ideas unknowingly into one's inner being that address the difficulties of the era, and develop a resolution internally. This approach has the ability to then outwardly change the civilization via paradigm reorganization."

Suddenly there is a vivid flash in the heavens. It is the Clock in the Air, exploding in a silent white cloud of springs and numbers streaking away in all directions across the clean azure morning sky.

"Fire will explode in streams of luminosity and expanses of conflagration," the cicada continues. "The venerated icon is destroyed. Victory!"

"And panic," he quickly adds.

"But what about Jack?" I insist. "What about the girls?"

Another third Cicadian joins us. It is Bellerio Shield.

"The revised script frequently endangers the existing order," he explains. "The victory is often translated as demonic by the Keepers of the Deity. The director revises the circumstance by acquiring the egregious moral errors of the populace and sacrificing himself as a sign of the resolution, such as Christ or Gandhi or Martin Luther King."

"I do not wish to sacrifice myself or Jack or the girls," I say.

"That is understandable. But a death of some part of you is necessary for a resurrection of the rest."

A light rain begins to fall, and I see some people are collecting it in bottles and other containers.

"This is the living water, just as you dreamed it," Bellerio says. "This is the grace of the Deity."

I look across the emptying drive-in and see Cowboy Roy on horseback, gun drawn as he chases the four horsemen of the apocalypse into the grassfire that has now fully engulfed the \$1 million pasture.

And I see the little deuce coupe.

I can just make out the driver. It's The Stranger! He's alive. But – but how did he get back here?

I start running toward him, then I am caught short by a chilling sight. Another car has arrived, a late '50s black sedan with bat wing tail fins. They line up for a race.

I turn back toward Bellerio and his companion. “Stop this, save him,” I plead. But the Cicadians are already gone.

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The two cars take off in a roaring cloud of dust and gravel. The black sedan immediately abandons the race, peeling off to the right. The red coupe passes close to a parked car, loses control and flips over several times.

It is a terrible accident. The coupe crumples like a soft drink can and tumbles to a stop next to a building. I run to the crash scene. A man exits the wrecked car and runs towards me, apparently uninjured but understandably distraught.

“Is there anybody else in there?” I ask.

“My buddy!” he says, choking, almost in tears.

We run to the car, and I look through what is left of the passenger side window. There he is, The Stranger. He is horribly disfigured. No blood, but the side of his head and upper body looks like a cross between a slab of brown, bloodless beef and a piece of weathered lumber. Nothing human left. The place where the eye should be looks like knothole. He is not even the right shape to be human. He's a blob, really, like a 1950s drive-in movie space alien.

“Do you think he's dead?” I ask.

The man does not answer. Then I notice The Stranger is breathing. He's alive. He is sitting on the driver's side of the car. I don't know if he was the driver; it may be that he was merely pushed there by the crash. So I walk around to the driver's door for a better look.

Surprisingly, the other side of The Stranger's face is virtually intact. He's half human, half alien. His one human eye is closed. I turn to his friend.

“What is his name?” I ask.

“Pilly Graham.”

Pilly? Instantly, I realize he must mean “Billy” Graham, like the evangelist. So that's it. The Stranger is actually a man of God.

I speak to him, try to determine if he is conscious.

“Billy, can you hear me?”

Sure enough, he drowsily opens his one good eye and looks my way.

“Everything's going to be OK,” I tell him, trying to sound optimistic. But he looks terrible; his eye is bulging from the socket, a look of terror. I give him the double thumbs up sign.

I am wondering if he can see well enough to make out my affirming hand signs. Indeed, my own vision begins to go double (actually triple!), but just the part of the field of vision that takes in my hands. It appears that I am seeing my hands through him.

He starts to close his eye again, and I fear he will go into shock and die. So I try to keep him talking.

“Billy, I'm going to pray with you now, OK?”

I am thinking I will say the Lord's Prayer, because I believe he is about to die. This is his last chance to get right with God. The call to prayer gets his attention.

“What?” he asks in alarm.

Now he is really afraid. He understands the true gravity of his situation, poised on the edge of existence, teetering between life and death. I must pray, while there is still time.

“Our father, who art in heaven...”