

The Plain and Honest Truth

by Laughin Jude

Being a completely, 100% factual account of the events surrounding 9/11, the Iraq War, and everything after.

Everything in this story is absolutely true and in no way, shape or fashion made up.

All individuals described herein are real people, depicted as objectively as humanly possible, especially when being critical.

The Plain and Honest Truth

Part One: With No Power Comes No Responsibility

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Yeah, I know that flies in the face of what it said on the title page. Try not to worry about it too much.

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Robbie “Bigs” Johnson stands on a street corner in downtown Philadelphia, PA, USA, Earth, the Boonies, Milky Way, Universe 213906...39784 out of infinity (give or take), smoking a clove cigarette. The metal box he’s looking at holds free copies of a left-wing paper. Written on the metal in some sort of purple crayon is

WE’RE JUST THE SIDE-EFFECTS

He wonders what the hell that’s about, but it won’t keep his attention long. Bigs turned on the tube this morning hoping to see the weathergirl with the perky nipples on channel five. Instead he got the same damn footage playing over and again, a blend of gravity, thermodynamics and religious fervor. A substantial percentage of the planet’s population thinks of this particular full rotation in space as September 11, 2001 CE.

Like most Americans, Bigs wonders what the hell is going on this morning. Unlike most Americans (or homo sapiens, for that matter), Bigs is unaccustomed to this sensation. Bigs was recruited out of basic training by an organization called the Council of Overseers. The Council runs the United States of America now, just as they have since the nation’s inception, having counted luminaries such as Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson among its founding members (or so the Council claims; Bigs has seen and heard enough in his years working for the Council that he doesn’t doubt their version of history, different as it is from what he learned in school).

It’s been pounded into Bigs’ frontal lobe for decades that nothing anyone does in America is beyond the Council’s influence, and that anything big that happens only happens because the Council wants it to happen. All of which explains the only thought Bigs can keep in his head for the next few days, a thought that will only fade once the so-called War on Terror begins and the United States’ course for the first decade of the twenty-first century is irrevocably set:

Who the hell gave the order for *this*?

Osama bin Laden rests comfortably on a cushion, propped up on an elbow, surrounded by food, opium and (off-camera) underage concubines. He grins and leans toward his host, making sure the camera has him framed just right.

“I had nothing to do with it,” he says. “It must have been an inside job.”

“All right,” says Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. “Who was supposed to be watching them?”

The Beast gives Rumsfeld a nod. Faces are grim around the room, and no one seems willing to look straight at anyone else. "They must have the WMD," the Overmaster says. "There's no other explanation."

Heads bob in quick submission to and instant agreement with the Old One, the United States of America's secret Methuselah and oracle, who in this case is utterly wrong. But that's getting a bit ahead of things.

Part One

With No Power
Comes
No Responsibility

This Won't End Well

There's a frantic knocking at Cindy Cathaway's apartment door in the middle of the night. Cindy drags her dainty sweatpants-clad ass to the door with eyes full of sleep and pores full of facial mask. She has neither boy- nor girlfriend and so is sleeping alone. Only Cindy and her immediate neighbors are awakened by the racket, and Cindy alone fails to fall back asleep.

Dominia is at the door. Well, her given name is Emily Dulce Thomas, but right now she's dressed as her alter-ego Dominia: black leather thigh-highs, a black vinyl v-neck bodysuit, black latex gloves, Revlon midnight black lipstick. The leather and latex squeak whenever Emily moves; it sounds like someone's making balloon animals. Cindy isn't used to seeing Emily dressed as Dominia outside the club, which means she either came here straight from work or she's been making some below-the-table cash victimizing a willing businessman.

"Hey, Cindy. We're leaving." Emily pushes her way inside and locks the door, then peeks out the blinds. Cindy feels a sudden rush of inexplicable terror that sends her into a laughing fit. Emily glares at her. "Hurry. Pack."

There's something about Emily-as-Dominia barking orders that sets Cindy laughing again, so Emily rushes to the bedroom and throws open the closet. Cindy follows, not quite sure she's really awake. Could this be a dream? She tries flying to test that hypothesis, but her feet remain on the floor.

Emily's tossing jeans and tops into a duffle bag. "What are –?" Cindy gets out before Emily jabs a finger in her face.

"Jacket. Tennies. Put them on. *Now.*"

This is extremely confusing and completely out of the ordinary, but someone is cutting through the chaos with clear, simple directions, so Cindy, like any normal human being in the same situation, does exactly as she is told without hesitation. She even does one better and goes to wash the facial mask off in the bathroom. "What's going on?" she asks when she gets back to the bedroom.

"You're Arthur Dent. I'm Ford Prefect. The Vogons are coming."

"Um," says Cindy.

Emily sighs. "You Americans are so uncultured. Shit's about to go down that only tangentially relates to you, but through no fault of your own except time and place you'll suffer as a result. I'm a third-party observer who was hiding her motives from you, but I'm still your friend and want to help you escape harm. Get it?"

"Was that the movie with the towels?"

"Good thinking." Emily runs to the bathroom and stuffs Cindy's sundries into the bag's last open pocket. "Do you have any herb? Oh, and grab any weapons you have."

"I guess I have some aerosol mace and weed in the bedstand, but –"

"You'll want to be packing both."

Sindy imagines she can feel her eyes glazing over. Absent any natural instincts or premeditated tactics to use in this situation, she has only the zombish shuffling of following orders left to rely on. She pockets her greens and mace, grabs her duffle bag and keys and follows Emily to a 2010 Volkswagen minivan running curbside.

Sindy has never seen the man impatiently tapping his fingers on the steering wheel of the minivan before, but one glance at his clay-red skin gives Sindy a dose of White Guilt™. White Guilt™ is a concept handed down to Sindy by her parents, old even in their time. It's not as old as Jewish Guilt™, though in large part that's where its origins lie (or more to the point, in the Stone Age mysticism of ancient Hebrew theology passed through Roman hands). The two Guilts have intermingled and generally made people of various backgrounds feel like shit about themselves and others since at least the Dark Ages, and that's exactly the effect it has on Sindy in her current state of confusion and sleep deprivation.

"She is a cutie," says the man at the wheel. He looks like a young Chief Joseph, or would if Chief Joseph wore a ten thousand dollar pinstripe suit. His stringy black hair hangs in braids down either side of his face, and there's a picture of a golden apple on his silk tie that looks like it may be made of actual gold flakes. The sleeves of his suit are rolled back to expose a pair of working man's arms to the night breeze; Sindy guesses he could probably pick her up with one arm and hold her in the air while he drove with the other. Is he Emily's secret boyfriend? Or maybe a client?

"I told you she makes bank," Emily says and pushes Sindy into one of the spacious back seats. Emily slides the ergonomically balanced door shut behind herself, and the van lays rubber. No one is around to see them go, though a few groggy neighbors half-hear it. The man at the wheel starts them on the fastest route to the freeway.

"Okay, seriously," says Sindy (though only after fastening her seatbelt), "what the fuck is going on?"

Emily shrugs. "You have your weed?"

"What?" Sindy takes a Ziploc baggie from her coat pocket. "Uh, yeah?"

"Got a piece?"

"No."

"Hey, AJ, you see my coat pocket?"

"His name is AJ?" Sindy says low enough that only Emily can hear. Emily nods. "Is he your boyfriend?" She shakes her head. "Um... pimp?" Emily laughs and takes the piece from AJ, whose eyes remain on the road. Sindy hopes he didn't hear that last part.

AJ's glass pipe is blown and glazed to resemble a hotdog; the carb is a tiny golden apple like the one on AJ's tie. "It's tradition for the inductee to load the first bowl from her own stash," Emily says and hands Sindy the pipe. "Begin the ancient ritual."

"If we get pulled over —"

"Sindy, don't piss off the Indian. Smoke the peace pipe."

AJ laughs. Sindy gives him another glance, hopes he's too busy driving to notice her stares. Satisfied, she loads and lights. A few passes back and forth later, she's feeling much calmer and a bit more rational. And thirsty. But she still has no idea what the hell's going on, and Emily still doesn't seem in a mood to explain. She's about to ask again when Emily picks up a remote from her cupholder. "Time for you to watch the recruitment video."

"Oh for Christ's sake," says Sindy.

"Play," says the built-in LCD TV, and bright colors fill the screen.

*It's time for A – – – nimaniacs!
And we're zany to the max!
So just sit back and relax
You'll laugh till you collapse
We're Anima – – – niacs!*

"Emily?"

"Shh. Watch."

Sindy, like so many children of the baby-boomers, used to spend hours after school watching the kinds of shows that made media watchdogs howl. For the next two hours (about the same stretch of time it took her parents to get home and take over the TV after school let out back in the day), she watches clips from *Animaniacs*, *Tiny Toon Adventures*, *Eek! the Cat*, *Rocco's Modern Life*, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, *Mighty Max*, *The Magic Schoolbus*, *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, shows she hasn't seen since she learned to drive. Any time Sindy tries to ask Emily what's going on, her friend simply hands her more cannabis, and the minivan continues down the freeway.

The afternoon lineup ends and the screen flickers. A brassy theme plays and a golden apple rolls across the screen. "Did you know a secret organization called the Bavarian Illuminati controls the US government?" says a sock puppet in a Pickelhelm. "IT'S TRUE!"

What follows is like an art deco Wikipedia entry, complete with citations, then a scattering of clips from shows that might be at home on the public access channel at the local asylum. The music is mid-nineties infomercial, the kinds of tunes b-list celebrities might sell overpriced juicers to. Pee Wee Herman narrates the quiz questions.

"So, what did you think?" Emily says once the video is over.

"Uh." Sindy licks her lips. "I had trouble keeping up with the bit during the porn."

"You should have seen his first cut."

"I kinda want a burger now, too."

"Everyone says that."

"Huh. What does any of this have to do with me again?"

Emily looks to AJ, who never takes his eyes off the road but must give Emily some signal that Cindy misses. "You know your regular, the one who came in drunk a couple nights ago?" Cindy nods. Bigs, a man in his fifties or sixties, body built in his youth and maintained at his current age like he must have spent his life as a cop or soldier, has been paying for her books via lapdances since last fall semester. All four years of Cindy's schooling toward her degree in sociology have been paid for by taking her clothes off and dancing nude in front of strangers. This vocation might strike many a purit rant as unwholesome and demeaning; Cindy has never seen it that way.

Sindy was a tomboy in her pre-teenage years, and all her childhood friends were boys. She never cared much for tea parties or My Little Pony and would happily beat the crap out of any boy who suggested she play as April O'Neil (she preferred Donatello). That all ended when she grew a fine pair of C-cups from naught but ribs and nipples quite literally overnight. The arrival of breasts transformed Sindy from "one of the guys" into "a girl," forever frustrating her attempts at communication with the opposite sex. The shape of her long legs and the fall of her chestnut hair compounded the issue, and her sky-blue eyes and full lips didn't help much either; being attractive, Sindy thinks, is generally a pain in the ass.

After Sindy graduated high school, she said to hell with rural shitholes and moved to Seattle, the closest thing to a big city there was in the Pacific Northwest and a place she assumed she could do something with her life instead of getting married and fat. Stripping has been an easy way to use the beauty that she's mostly regretted otherwise to pay for the schooling that she thinks will make men take her seriously, and she's been at it long enough without becoming a whore or a drug addict to think the bald man who stands outside the club with his cardboard sign might not know what he's talking about.

"I remember Bigs," Sindy says. "What about him?"

"Do you remember what you two talked about?"

She has to think about it. Bigs loves to talk, which suits Sindy just fine. She hopes to make plenty of money listening while people talk in her future career. Besides, you can't start lapdancing in the middle of a song—the song marks how long a dance is, beginning to end, and the managers are strict about going into overtime. Pre-dance small talk is essential to her job, and it's taught her to remain in a conversation without becoming emotionally attached to her subject. Call it an internship.

Bigs always avoids talking about religion, politics and the stock market, or he did until the other night, when he came in smelling like the day after Oktoberfest. "I don't know. He was complaining about the war. He said the Dali Lama was the greatest assassin of the twentieth century. Oh, and Joan of Arc was a Rosicrucian agent, and something about the WMD they found in Iraq."

AJ glances back at them just long enough to get Sindy's attention. "WMD? Are you sure that's what he said? He didn't say 'weapons of mass destruction?'"

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"No." AJ is already looking back at the road. "He said they found the WMD?"

"I think so," Sindy says. "Yeah, in Iraq. What does he have to do with this?"

Emily pats her shoulder. "Robbie 'Bigs' Johnson is a known Illuminati operative. I've been watching him for a year. It's the whole reason I've been in Seattle."

"So you've been spying on the guy I've been giving lapdances?"

"See? I knew you'd understand once it was all explained rationally."

"And when were you planning on doing that?"

"What we've told you is all you're cleared for at the moment." Emily smiles.

"Sorry, but you have to go through the initiation just like the rest of us or it won't stick."

"Or what won't stick?"

"Your brainwashing," says AJ.

Sindy's spine snaps rigid and she says, "Stop this car and let me out right now."

AJ shakes his head. "Not happening for your own safety."

Sindy pulls her aerosol mace from her pocket and lunges to spray AJ in the face. She's too stoned and terrified to consider what will happen if the man driving the minivan gets a face full of pepper spray. Luckily, AJ is able to wrestle the mace away from her with one hand while steering with the other, and Emily pulls Sindy back into her seat before she can make good on plan B and scratch out AJ's eyes. "That was excellent, Sindy!" says Emily. "I didn't know you had it in you. But please stay in your seat."

About then, Sindy hears the sirens, and this time it's her mind that snaps rigid. She sits silent in her seat, awaiting the inevitable car chase.

AJ puts on his turn signal and pulls onto the shoulder. The window goes down and hours of accumulated stale cannabis smoke wafts out the window.

"Is there something wrong, officer?"

The patrolman takes a deep sniff. "I have reason to believe you're listening to music without the proper digital licenses."

"My apologies, Officer Dalton." AJ bows his head. "Emily, do we have the proper licenses for all our digital music?"

Emily, still dressed in black fetishwear, blows the cop a kiss.

"I'm going to need you to step out of the car."

AJ flips open his wallet and displays a DHS badge and ID.

The cop stares at it for a moment, then smiles. "Excuse me, Special Agent Jackson. Didn't mean to bother you."

"Thank you, Officer Dalton," AJ says and sets his wallet on the empty passenger seat. "Good night." The window goes up, and the minivan starts on its way again.

Sindy looks to Emily. "He's with Homeland Security?"

"Of course not. Pass it here, AJ."

Sindy reads the badge and card. They identify him as Special Agent Andrew Jackson, and in bold red print the card reads: **THE BEARER OF THIS BADGE IS ON OFFICIAL BUSINESS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY AND IS IMMUNE TO ALL NON-FELONY CHARGES.**

Sindy hands the wallet back to Emily. "I didn't know DHS agents have immunity for misdemeanors."

"They don't. Do you think real DHS badges say all that on them?"

"I dunno."

"So you'd believe it if someone told you they did because you never heard otherwise? If you don't have any prior opinion or belief regarding a subject, you're likely to adopt the first one presented to you — do I have it right?"

"Well, I never thought about it," Sindy says, "but I guess so."

Emily smiles the tired smile of a loving mother comforting a stupid child. "This isn't going to be easy on you. If it makes you feel any better, this was partly my fault."

Sindy returns a glare for the smile. "How's that?"

"I was supposed to be the one giving Bigs the lapdances. He screwed up our plans by choosing you instead."

After this conversation ends there's a long car ride spent mostly in silence (Emily snoozes), so let's break the narrative for a moment and go over that video Sindy watched earlier.

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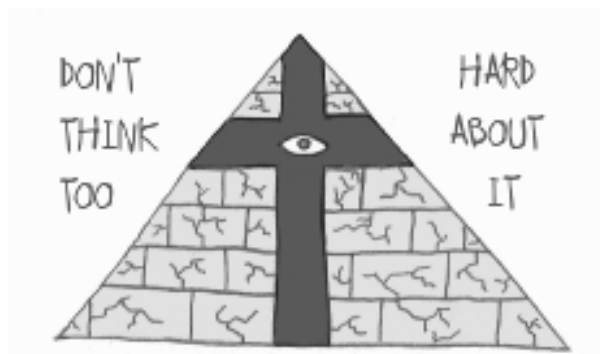
Presents

A Do You Believe That? Production

HISTORY of the SARACENIAN ILLUMINATI

Hi, adults! Let's learn about some **true American history** today!

Once upon a time, **Ormus**, keeper of the Egyptian priests' rites, met the apostle Mark and converted to an early form of Christianity.



WARNING: THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION IS ACCURATE

Ormus founded a secret society called the "Sages of Light" and used a **rosy red cross** as its holy symbol, which led to the group's more widely known nickname, the **Rosicrucians**.

All their esoteric knowledge came down through the centuries to the **Knights Templar**, who admitted to using that knowledge to do terrible things (albeit only when the Catholic Church tortured them to death).

Fun Fact: Torture remains one of the State's most expedient means of acquiring intelligence from enemies of the State to this day!



Figure 1
Determining truth via the use of fire, c. 1310 CE
Image courtesy of some dead dude.

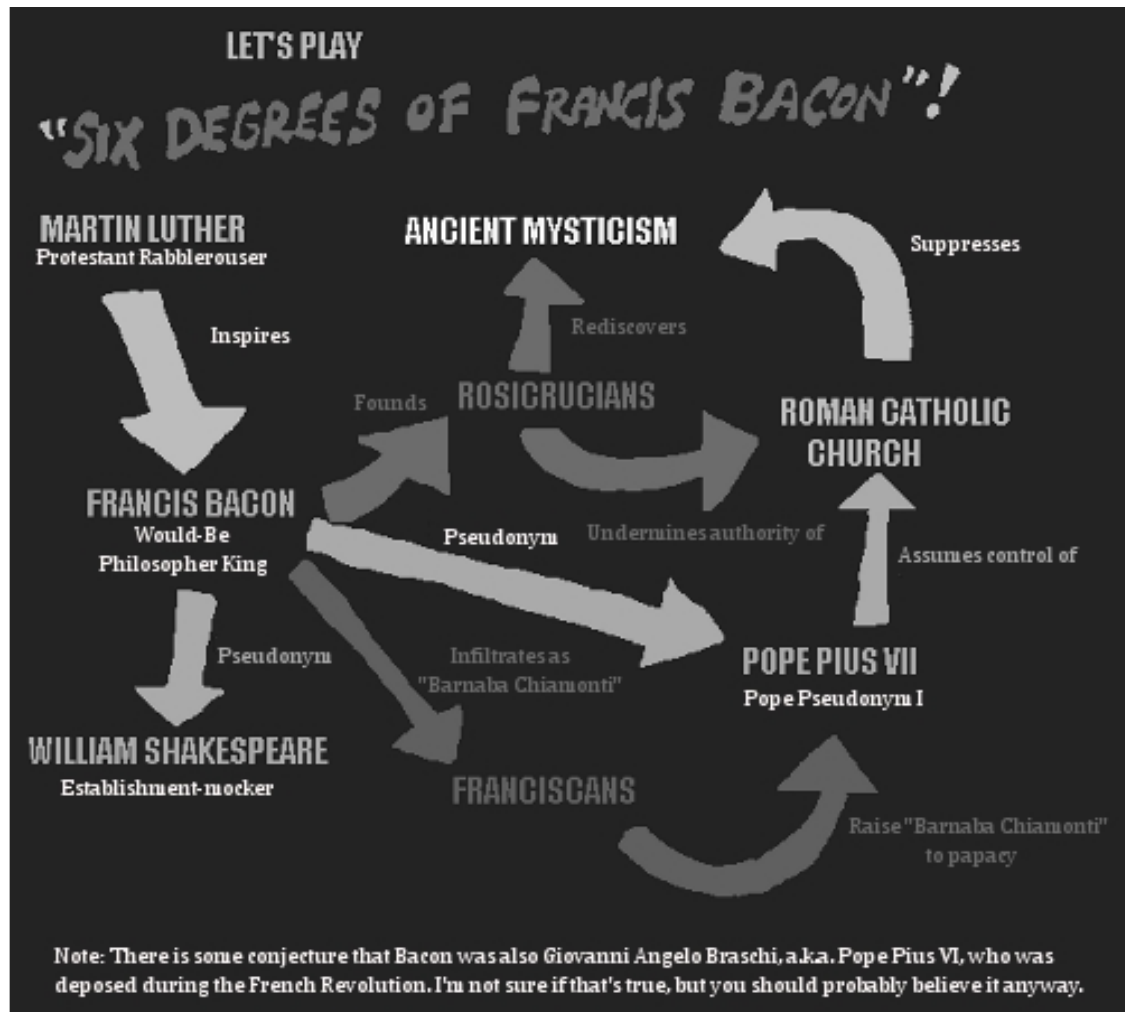


Figure 2
Determining truth via the use of water, c. 2010 CE
Image courtesy of the Marine Combat Training Manual.

Martin Luther* eventually stirred people up against the Church again, and one of the people he inspired was **Francis Bacon**, Lord Chancellor of England. Bacon used the theater to mock the British government and the Church, writing satirical crowd-pleasers under his pseudonym, "**William Shakespeare**." He revived the Gnostic teachings of the Rosicrucians and anonymously published tracts claiming that ancient name for his new movement.



It wasn't enough for Bacon just to fight the Church, though. His goal in both writing his plays and encouraging the Rosicrucians in their religious quest for esoteric superpowers was to distract Rome so he could **infiltrate** the Church's ranks. Bacon's ploy was ultimately successful, and in 1800 CE he was elected **Pope Pius VII**! (source: [Wikipedia](#)) Don't believe it? It's true! This flow chart we made in MSPaint proves it.



But the years Bacon spent infiltrating the Catholic Church left the Rosicrucian order open to dissent, and the German branch splintered in the late 18th century. The leader of the dissidents was **Adam Weishaupt**, who fled to the young United States of America before Bacon could use Ormus' magic against him. Others followed, and soon a new coven of mystics, scholars and magicians calling themselves the **Bavarian Illuminati** was born.

Weishaupt didn't make his move to America blind; he was guided by a fellow Rosicrucian who had already infiltrated the fledgling American government: **Benjamin Franklin**, who became the first **Overmaster** of the Illuminati. Acting as

the Palpatine to Weishaupt's Vader, he arranged for President George Washington's murder and helped Weishaupt take the general's place as a body-double.



The Bavarian Illuminati's **Council of Overseers** has ruled the United States of America as a shadow government ever since. Don't believe it? It's true!

Hey, adults! Here's a fun activity!

STEP 1: Gather some **US currency!**

STEP 2: Throw out anything worth less than **50 cents!**

STEP 3: Anyone on anything that's left is an **agent** of the **Bavarian Illuminati!**






And yes, that includes **Sacagawea!**

NOW IT'S TIME FOR



Introducing
Today's Contestants:

		
Bob <i>Ascetic, Frycook</i> <i>Come to the Party Grill for the specials, stay for the lectures on legal and classical philosophy!</i>	Joey <i>Anti-Mythology Unit</i> <i>Mr. Kamikaze's latest book is about his run-in with a genocidal Easter Bunny in a remote Amazonian village.</i>	Nid <i>Childhood Videogame Star</i> <i>He refuses to show his face on camera because he's being stalked by an ex-editor from GamePro.</i>



Then there is a car commercial. Afterward, we're introduced to the show's host, Hoki Dori, identified on-screen as "*Time Magazine's 'Japanese Guy Smilie'*" and "*Semi-Racist Caricature.*" He has a glorious neon green afro and wears a tiger-striped zoot suit with a polka dot collar, which he accessorizes with a rainbow-striped bowtie. Hoki Dori pokes fun at the contestants' general ignorance for a moment, drawing applause from the unseen studio audience, then the voice of either Paul Reubens or someone doing a bang-on impression of him asks:

WHAT WAS THE CAUSE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR?

- A. Slavery
- B. Taxes
- C. Northern Aggression
- D. Southerners
- E. A Wide Range of Social and Economic Factors

Emily pauses the video. "So? What do you think?"

Sindy blinks. "I'm supposed to answer?"

"Yes. What's the best answer?"

"I guess E?"

Emily hits the play button, and Bob gives the same answer Sindy did.

"WRONG!" says Hoki Dori. "The best answer is:"

THE ILLUMINATI WERE FIGHTING AMONGST THEMSELVES

"Penalty toke," Emily says and hands Sindy the pipe. Sindy stares at Emily for a moment, then obliges her by taking another hit. Next the voice asks:

WHY DID WILSON TAKE THE US INTO WWI?

- A. To Defeat Hitler
- B. He Had A Lot of Points
- C. Secret Alien Technology Buried In The Netherlands
- D. Evil Sock Puppet
- E. Nazis. Duh.

Sindy is prepared to answer this time, but Emily doesn't hit the pause button. Instead, Joey answers, "How about he was an interventionist ass who fucked up a century and a half of decent foreign policy?"

"WRONG!" says Hoki Dori. "The best answer is:"

THE ILLUMINATI WERE FIGHTING THE ROSICRUCIANS

"Penalty token," AJ says, and Emily grins.

"Wait, I didn't even get to answer on that one!" Sindy says, but she takes the pipe and hits it anyway. Emily starts the video again. The voice of Pee-wee asks:

WHO BOMBED PEARL HARBOR?

- A. The Japanese
- B. Aliens
- C. Al Qaeda
- D. Ted Kaczynski
- E. The Illuminati Did It To Drum Up Support For WWII

Emily pauses the video and looks to Sindy. "Let me guess," Sindy says, "it was the Illuminati, right?" Emily hits the play button. The screen displays:

IT WAS THE JAPANESE, STUPID

"I don't believe you missed that one," Emily says and hands Sindy a fresh bowl.

There's more, but we'll get to it later. The minivan's pulling into a truck stop.

"We there?" Emily says with a yawn, and she stretches out her arms. "Go ahead, Sindy. I'm going to change out of my work clothes."

Sindy opens the door and steps out of the minivan. Should she run for it? Where the hell is she? AJ walks up to her before she can decide what to do. He hands her the aerosol mace. "Next time try using this on someone who means you harm," he says and heads toward the truck stop/diner/gas station/convenience store/place for Republican senators to meet up for gay sex. Sindy sticks the mace back in her pocket, gives the minivan another glance, then follows AJ.

AJ is waiting at the door and holds it open for her. It's the first time Sindy's gotten a good look at him. He's annoyingly handsome, though maybe ten or fifteen years older than her—a young DILF? She suspects the brainwashing is kicking in. "You know," he says once she's through the door, "there's nothing more American than the truck stop. It's a uniquely American creation: private capitalists building an industry one café and gasline at a time in out-of-the-way spots, all to enable other private capitalists to conduct industry necessary to the continuance of modern life in line with strict, arbitrary and highly technical legal documents."

"Um," says Sindy, and she follows him to a booth by the back wall.

"The only authority to which these legal documents have any claim is that granted in other legal documents. The job of deciding what those documents mean, how they're enforced and what new legal documents should be created is fought over by two opposed yet co-dependent groups of the financial elite, who are mostly centered around the East Coast." Sindy hears the bell on the door ring as Emily comes in behind them, now dressed in ratty jeans and an old sweatshirt. "All of the bureaucracy created as a side-effect of their struggles for dominance trickles down to fuck the rest of us. That's the world the white man made."

"Oh." Sindy sits down at the table, and Emily sits down next to her a moment later. She smiles and pats Sindy's leg in a way that's probably supposed to be reassuring but mostly makes Sindy wonder what's coming next; it's like the doctor giving you a lollipop *before* he sticks you with the needle.

"I'm kidding. That white man spiel is just xenophobic racism, but it's always fun to see how you Caucasian kids will react to it." He grins. "Nice to meet you, Sindy. Sorry we had to bring you into things this way." He offers a hand, which Sindy is quick to shake. "You want to really know why there's no American institution like a truck stop?"

A waitress approaches the table with a platter. She sets four plates of apple pie a la mode on the table and takes a seat next to AJ. The waitress is a striking beauty with almond-shaped eyes, Kahlua skin and wavy black hair braided to her waist. Sindy is unable to ascribe any specific ethnic background to the waitress, and this makes her even more uncomfortable than AJ's presence. She wants to talk to Emily about all this, but her best friend and only link to sanity has a mouth full of pie.

"Nice to see you again, Emily," the waitress says. "It's really shit timing, though."

Emily flinches and stuffs her mouth again.

Sindy looks around the café. A couple truckers are at the counter, and there's a gaggle of old birds drinking black coffee a few booths away. AJ notices Sindy's wandering eyes and lays his big hand over hers. "It's good to be a certain degree of paranoid, but they can't be everywhere. Eat your pie and relax."

"What's the plan?" says Emily. Sindy is glad to hear someone asking this question but a bit disturbed it's Emily who's doing so. "Do we go to the Party?"

"Manuel's on his way to pick the two of you up. I'm Betsy," the waitress says to Sindy, then back to Emily: "What's up with the accent?"

"Oh! Scheisse!" Emily says, suddenly speaking in a German accent. "I didn't even realize I was still doing zat! Monzs of undercofer vork vill do zat to you."

Sindy bangs her head on the table. "Since when are you German?"

"I was always German. My apologies for having deceived you."

"So if you can speak perfect English why slip back into the accent?"

"English is a Germanic language. You have the accent."

AJ waves his fork at Betsy. "We're leaving like we planned as soon as Manuel shows up, but we have a detour to make. It sounds like the Council has the WMD."

If Sindy didn't know better, she might think Betsy is trying to read AJ's mind by the intensity of the stare the waitress is giving him. "Are you sure?"

"No, but there's only one person who can tell us for sure, and I intend to spirit him away before they do."

They go on discussing important plans, something about 9/11 ("Never forget!" Sindy's brain belches up), Truthers, the Tea Party, something about Scientology – she can't follow all of it. Sindy is exhausted, confused, bewildered, paranoid, terrified, anxious, wired, kinda high and a little hungry, so she solves the only problem she feels she has any control over: she eats her pie.

The System At Work

Special Agent “Freaky” Todd Moody finds the apartment door unlocked. It’s 4:37 AM, not the time of night he’d expect a door to be so insecure. He supposes it’s a trap. That’s okay. Todd’s watched his heroes deal with traps and come out on top in countless TV dramas and blockbuster movies. He knows how to handle traps. Todd lets the door creak open. Silence.

Todd runs a pale hand with black-painted nails through his teased, dyed-midnight-black hair. Thick black eyeshadow hides the lines beneath his black-contacted eyes. From the entryway he can see a light on in the bedroom; it’s a safe assumption someone’s home. Todd sweeps through the door, black trench coat flowing like a gust-rippled river behind him. He’s cut slits in his trench coat at a few strategic spots to give it more wind resistance in case he has to glide from rooftop to rooftop. Thus far the situation hasn’t arisen, but Todd Moody is prepared for every possible scenario his hopelessly paranoid mind can concoct.

First thing Todd notices are the bras and panties piled on the couch. There are three general states of laundry: clean clothes (C), pre-laundry (pL) and laundry (L). Let us express the relationship between these states in mathematical terms.

$$\text{If } C < L, \text{ then } rC^3 = (C+pL) / iCJ(t)$$

The relative clean-conversion chance (rC^3) of any particular piece of pre-laundry (the chance an item from pL will be reassigned to C) is related to the independent Cleanliness Judgment (iCJ). Unfortunately, there’s no accounting for taste (t) and thus no objective mathematical solution to the formula.

Todd assigns Sindy’s lingerie a high rC^3 and stops to grab a bra for evidence. He is completely unaware of having made any calculations. The real trick is how the brain generates the iCJ value—the brain plucks it out of thin air based on what’s convenient for its own survival, just like most of its core value judgments. Todd wears black every day because he realizes this fact about the brain but hasn’t taken the next mental step yet.

Bra in pocket and gun in hand, Todd makes his way across the apartment. He takes a moment to examine a still-life of fruit framed on the wall, then slides across the room, shadows from the lamps and chairs playing across his face and jacket. The bedroom door is open. He pokes his head around the trim and throws a shadow across the bedroom floor. The woman in the bedroom spins around on boots that look two sizes too small for her cankles, and Todd throws himself against the wall on his side of the door.

Yeah, okay, so he just fucked up a little. S’alright. Todd does what his idols would do in this situation—he bursts through the doorway, gun held gangsta-style, and shouts a lot. The woman in the bedroom, watermelon hips bulging in her Sears pantsuit, fires a warning shot between Todd’s legs that leaves a six inch rip in his trench coat.

"Federal agent!" she says. "Drop your weapon and put your hands on your head."

Just as he suspected: an agent of the Conspiracy. "You drop *your* weapon."

"No, you."

"You."

"Do you *want* me to shoot you?"

"I'm sure that's what *they* want."

"Who the hell are 'they'?"

"You know, *them*."

She sighs. "Who the hell are you?"

"Special Agent Todd Moody, Homeland Security."

The woman settles back into her flat-heeled boots and pulls a badge from her waistcoat pocket. "Special Agent Danica Abigail, Homeland Security."

Todd stows his gun and flashes his badge. No doubt this Agent Abigail is just one of the Conspiracy's many tendrils, another snare set by Todd's enemies within the highest levels of the US government. How do they always stay four steps ahead of him? Could one of his allies be a Conspiracy plant? Probably. Yeah, that's it. It's probably Maury, that dickcheese. "Are you here for Emily Thomas? My informant said she was headed here."

"No, I'm here for Sindy Cathaway. This is her apartment."

Is that the truth? The Conspiracy is always working to undermine Todd, and he never knows which direction they'll strike from next. They got to his family early through one of their field operatives, a vile man posing as a youth psychiatrist who slandered Todd's name. They followed him to college, where they spread rumors concerning his sexual proclivities and a Rainbow Brite xylophone. The bastards would even remotely access his computer to insert typos into his term papers after he'd run the spell check just to ding his GPA and keep him out of the Academy.

But Todd Moody persevered, and he's been chasing the Conspiracy since he started at the FBI. He thought he had them in 1996 during the Atlanta Olympics. The mascot of the games, Izzy, was obviously patterned after an alien species called the Lindolears. It's sick: the Conspiracy and their alien allies are so sure of victory that they broadcast their intentions to those who know what to look for. The Lindolears used the games to scout the fittest humans for their beryllium mines and pay-per-view documentaries/live dissections. Todd did his best to protect the gold medalists but was expelled from the grounds by Conspiracy agents when he tried to warn Lisa Fernandez of her coming abduction. Since then he's been reassigned to DHS, and the Conspiracy's attempts to discredit him have only increased in number and severity.

Todd doesn't know who the Conspirators are, only that they exist and control the world's governments through use of alien technology recovered from crash sites. He can't exactly prove it—yet—because the Conspiracy's total control of all media and law enforcement makes it so easy to cover their tracks. The Rants &

Raves section on Craigslist has been a reliable source of anti-Conspiracy intelligence, though lately Todd suspects psi-operatives have been infiltrating the board.

One thing is certain: this “Danica Abigail” must be another of the Conspiracy’s agents. She knows too much for him to suspect otherwise. Well, okay, she hasn’t actually said anything, but she’s here, so she must be in on something.

“So, uh, who’s Sindy Cathaway?” Todd says.

The way the fat rolls in Agent Abigail’s pantsuit suggests she may be smuggling Play-Doh. “A stripper. We believe she’s fallen in with terrorists. Who is Emily Thomas?”

“Stripper and professional dominatrix. Probably a terrorist.”

“Shit.” Danica pulls out her V-Cast. Todd knows from experience that no good comes from other people using cell phones in his presence; it tends to end with him getting banned from places for anti-Conspiracy behavior. Also, according to a blog that has never steered Todd wrong yet, the radiation from cell phones causes autism and testicular cancer. Using this set of beliefs as justification (you could even argue imperative), Todd cold-cocks Danica with his gun when her back’s turned and gets the hell out of Dodge.

Sindy Cathaway. Now he has something to ask Gold Standard about.

A couple minutes later, Danica Abigail drags herself to something like a sitting position and puts out a bulletin on Todd Moody, who she knew was an al-Qaeda sleeper agent the moment she saw him. At last, a link between those counter-culture terrorists and Osama! This will be the case of her career.

Todd Moody drives away from the scene with a Rockstar in one hand and his car phone (yes, they still make those) in the other. He uses his knees to change lanes and, being part of law enforcement, doesn’t feel the need to use his signals. The number he dials isn’t saved in his phone, and he always erases the records after every call. No one ever answers. He hangs up midway through the sixth ring like he’s supposed to.

There’s not much to do for the next three hours, so Todd checks back into his hotel room and boots up his laptop. He visits his usual list of websites for hot tips: Craigslist, Stormfront, Daily Kos, Free Republic, Prison Planet, not to mention a long list of USENET groups forwarded to his email. Todd does all of his web-surfing through proxies and never uses his ISP email anywhere, but he hasn’t learned to use different passwords at different sites yet. He doesn’t necessarily believe any of the conspiracies advanced on the sites he visits; rather, he views the claims they make as various levels of cover for the real Conspiracy. Todd pieces together the facts of the Conspiracy based on what isn’t said in the news and who doesn’t say it more than the opposite.

Gold Standard comes on AOL Instant Messenger just before 8 AM. Todd invites him to a video chat and activates the webcam in his laptop. Gold Standard doesn’t always show when Todd calls him, but when he’s present, he’s

punctual, and he demands they have all their virtual meetings face-to-face. That's an odd way of phrasing it, for Todd has never seen his informant's face. Gold Standard wears a Speedy Gonzalez mask made sometime in the 70's and speaks in a bad Darth Vader impression. Todd's hypothesis places Gold Standard as a senior member of an agency deeper than the FBI or CIA, something much older and more secretive than DHS.

"Good morning, Agent Moody," says Gold Standard in his faux-baritone. "What do you have for me today?"

"The address you gave me belonged to Sindy Cathaway. She's a stripper too, probably from the same club."

"I already knew that. What else?"

Todd frowns. "There was a DHS agent at the apartment looking for Cathaway, claimed she was named Danica Abigail. That's probably an alias. *They* probably sent her. There wasn't any sign of Cathaway or Thomas. I'm guessing they took off together."

"Abigail, eh? I'll look into it." Todd tries to imagine the face behind the Looney Tunes mask and comes up with a cross between Tommy Lee Jones and Bill Richardson. "Be online in an hour. I'll have a new assignment for you then."

"A new assignment? But I've been working this case for —"

"Don't talk time with me!" Gold Standard wags a gnarled finger at Todd. "I've been working on this revolution longer than you've been breathing, and I won't take any guff from some queer wearing nail polish and a dog collar."

"Sir."

"Go take a shower and do something about your hair. You look like a hippie."

Gold Standard signs out of AIM and kicks his feet up on his desk in his congressional office, where he's known as Ron Paul. A few phone calls confirm most of his suspicions concerning Sindy Cathaway and Danica Abigail — ERIS really is playing their hand, just like his informant said they would. Could that mean the rest is true as well? It's worth sending Agent Moody after the Council's quarry to find out.

Paul doesn't let concerns about the Council tracing this snooping back to him discourage him from seeking the truth. He knows his phones are tapped, but the power of Ayn Sedai's prophecy is on his side, so he doesn't care who knows that he's looking into Council business. Even if the Old One himself is listening in, Ron Paul (who rightly considers himself a young man compared to the Overmaster) doesn't give half a damn. The whole Council will shit their Depends when his son fulfills the prophecies of the Dollar Reborn.

The Old One in question is sitting in a hospital bed in Maryland. He's on to another heart already, just eighteen months since they put in the last one. The latest donor was a 23-year-old Texas inmate on death row; bastard raped four girls, three of them white, killed the last one. Dick Cheney, Overmaster of the Council of Overseers, Eye of the Serpent, Talon of the Eagle, More Illuminated Than All (No Take-backs), considers it justice done and another nigger off

Welfare. The fucker was even a match for kidney donation, which brings the total number in his body to seven. It would have been eight, but the dumbshit doctors let one die while they were fucking around in his innards. Dick Cheney hasn't been running on his own kidneys since 1972.

It'll be a while before Cheney hears about Paul's queries into Council matters. Everyone knows to leave him alone after his upkeep sessions; decapitating an intern with a TV tray really drives a point like that home (though to be fair, that was more W'Moud's doing than his). It doesn't matter anyway. Paul's feeding off the crumbs in Cheney's pocket, and his rEVOLution is no more a threat to the Council than the Truthers or Code Pink or the Teabaggers.

There's only one thing on Dick Cheney's mind at the moment, so he bellows at a poor nurse who spent ten years in med school just to be screamed at by the criminally insane elite.

"Nurse! Where's my fucking sock puppet?"

Hail ERIS

Sindy is in the same state we left her (geographically and mentally) when a Winnebago pulls into the truck stop's parking lot. It's gotten light enough outside to make out the scratches in the motorhome's blue-grey paint. Betsy stands as soon as the Winnebago parks and unties her apron; she leaves it on the table. "Looks like quitting time," she says as AJ and Emily both stand.

Sindy gets up as well and follows them toward the door. "Don't we have to pay the check still? And can you just walk off the job without telling your boss?"

Betsy spins on her heel to look at Sindy. She's smirking. "Hey, you'd better go leave me a tip while you're at it, right? Glad we have you around to run things." Sindy suppresses her urge to smack the bitch. She's not a violent person, but the events of the past few hours have her in a mood to lash out at somebody, and that pert little half-smile and the curt quips coming from behind it are making Betsy a top-priority target.

Emily puts a hand on Sindy's shoulder before she can say anything, and AJ guides Betsy out the door without a word. "Zis is one of AJ's properties. He has infestments across ze country. And don't mind Betsy. She always picks on ze nevbies."

"Did you just pronounce a silent 'w' as a 'v'?"

"Vhat, do you haf a problem viz zat? Come on."

Sindy follows Emily into the parking lot, silent and submissive as the chronically abused wife of an alcoholic religious fanatic. There's plenty she wants to say to Emily, but she can't find the words. How do you ask your best friend if she's kidnapping you?

Here's why Sindy's gut doubts the affirmative to that question that's already formed in her head: Emily has been her friend for going on a year. They hit it off the night Emily started working at the club. Thinking back on it, Bigs was there in the audience that night, and he was a regular on the weekends before then. If Emily's telling the truth, she must have been watching him all that time. But Bigs didn't start buying dances from Sindy until maybe six months ago, so unless Emily's psychic on top of being some sort of anti-government secret agent... well, that line of thought's just plain crazy and probably more evidence that the brainwashing is setting in.

Thing is, Emily's never given Sindy a reason *not* to trust her before tonight. Emily was there for her eight months ago when Sindy broke up with her last serious boyfriend and became an unbearable, sniveling mess for a week thereafter, and that was before Bigs started paying Sindy any special attention. They've gotten shitfaced together on Christmas Eve, New Year's (Eve and Day), Memorial Day, Fourth of July and the occasional random weekend; they've slept on each others' couches; they've gotten lost in the Central District after 3AM together. There were plenty of opportunities in the past year for Emily to steal

Sindy's organs for the black market, or sell her into white slavery, or make off with everything valuable in her apartment, and she never has.

Then again, Emily never gave Sindy any indication she was German or a member of some anti-government group before tonight. But does that trump all the good Emily's done by her? As much as Sindy's thought in the past few hours about how far her trust in Emily goes, she can't figure out how to phrase the questions she needs to ask without sounding like an ungrateful bitch, so she follows her best friend with the hope she won't wind up naked in a ditch somewhere along the freeway.

AJ waves to the man in the Winnebago, who's just now climbing out of the driver's seat, as Sindy and Emily approach. "Manuel, how goes it?"

"Uphill and backwards," says the newcomer. He's short, maybe five seven, with curly black hair peeking out from under a wide-brim cowboy hat, and a meticulously groomed goatee rings his mouth. More White Guilt™ ahoy, he's clearly Mexican-American, or is it Hispanic? Which one is J-Lo? Sindy decides he's that one. Manuel exchanges pleasantries with Betsy while Sindy's busy trying not to discriminate against him.

Manuel throws an arm round Emily's shoulders. "Leave it to you to bring a date, or is she a present for Ruth?"

"Nein, as if you didn't know. Zis is Sindy." Manuel stares at Emily for a moment, then looks to Betsy, and a smile traces across his lips.

"Sindy." Manuel takes Sindy's hand and plants a kiss on her knuckles. "Manuel Laboros, at your service. Did you watch the recruitment video yet?" He barely waits for her nod. "Excellent! So you're following the Rules?"

Sindy looks to Emily. "Rules?"

"The ERISian Rules of Conduct. Here," says AJ, and he hands her a pocket-sized yellow book. The pages are lightweight offset paper like that used in bibles, and the sayings of someone called the Great Confusus are printed in red ink. Sindy flips to a random page and reads:

*Great Confusus say, He who speaks truth should not lie
by apologizing. Fuck 'em if they don't like to hear it.*

"Here," Emily says and grabs the book from her, "you're in ze aphorisms. Ze Rules are at ze beginning." She hands the book back, and Sindy reads:

*Rule #1 – You are incapable of learning the
truth on your own. Never, ever question this fact.*

"That's an easy rule to follow," Sindy says. "I don't have to do anything."

"Those are the most successful rules," says AJ, then he turns to Manuel and Emily. "Get to the Party. Keep her safe. Try to figure out why the hell they want her so badly. If they really do have the WMD, we have a lot of work ahead of us."

Sindy?" He really is handsome when he smiles at her. Sindy wonders if this is a symptom of Stockholm's Syndrome. "Remember Rule #2. Welcome to the Party."

Sindy looks up the next Rule once she's seated in the Winnebago. It's this:

*Rule #2 – ERIS is the only organization on
Earth that knows the truth and will share it
with you. Never, ever question this fact, either.*

Sindy supposes this is more of the aforementioned brainwashing.

Manuel drives from the truck stop. Emily and Sindy sit together in the back of the Winnebago. AJ and Betsy head back the other direction in a blue Cadillac; the minivan they arrived in remains in the parking lot. The signs on the roadside tell Sindy they're not far from Wenatchee, which means they must have been heading east along I-90 for most of the trip to the truck stop.

Now they're heading east along Washington Highway 2. Sindy can tell the state from the shape of Washington's – or is Weishaupt's? – profile on the road signs. Every once in a while Manuel says "Which way?" and Emily flips a coin. They always do what the coin says. Sometimes that means pulling off the highway just long enough to drive through some no-name town before getting back on the highway again; other times it means taking county roads between towns before getting back on the highway; sometimes it means just passing the exits by and continuing down Highway 2 without the diversion.

There are times when heads means "Go straight" and times when it means "Turn," and Sindy's not sure how Emily and Manuel keep track of what any particular flip is supposed to signify. It goes on like that for a while, with neither Manuel nor Emily saying much else, and a George Thorogood greatest hits CD plays beginning to end before Sindy finally breaks down and asks: "What the hell are you doing?"

"Making sure no one knows where we're headed."

"Including us?"

"We're headed for Montana," Manuel says. "Then into B.C."

"Shouldn't we at least be to Spokane by now?"

"Sure," Emily says, "if you want to be easy to track." She flips the coin. "East."

"So you're using a coin to generate a random series of turns? That's absurd."

Manuel turns off the CD. "It really is. If you think about it, there's really nothing random at all about a coin toss. The results are all determined by air density, initial inertia, relative velocity, starting and landing positions and a few trillion other things we're incapable of measuring with our natural senses. That said, if you had all the possible data, you could predict the results with perfect accuracy – hell, it's just math."

"What about quantum mechanics though?" says Emily.

"Even accounting for the uncertainty principle, you're still talking about a limited number of possible outcomes based on the conditions the toss happens under. Maybe the mathematical solution is a set instead of a single value, but it's still not truly random."

Sindy has her mid-term thesis for SOC 403 due in three days. She's still clinging, if more by faith than confidence at this point, to the idea this is some kind of surreal nightmare brought on by too many columns of *WA Offenders M* 18-25. Or maybe she was at the club, some fucker slipped her a roofie and her brain's made a mess of the ride to the hospital. That explains her best friend here in the guardian angel role – but not the Latino cowboy and the front seat metaphysics. Her brain hurts.

"You're saying nothing's ever random, but that doesn't stop things from looking random to us," Sindy says. "It's all cause-and-effect even if we can't always see the patterns from where we are in life. I get it. Are you going to start lecturing about the difference between noumena and phenomena next?"

"Look out for this one, Emily, it sounds like she reads." Manuel smiles at Sindy in the rear view mirror. "So what about the flip side to order we can't see? What about when people start seeing cause-and-effect relationships where they don't actually exist?"

"You mean when order is an illusion?" Sindy wonders if Manuel might be a college professor when he's not fighting the Illuminati. He sure as hell talks like one. "Are you saying that thinking things are orderly and thinking things are chaotic can be two competing forms of confusion?"

"Hail Eris," says Emily, and she pats Sindy on the leg.

Manuel nods. "'Let these two asses be set to grind corn.'"

Sindy sighs. "I still think you're crazy people. Emily, are you *sure* about all this?"

"Am I sure zat you're in danger? And zat only ERIS can help you? I'm positif."

"And you're really German?"

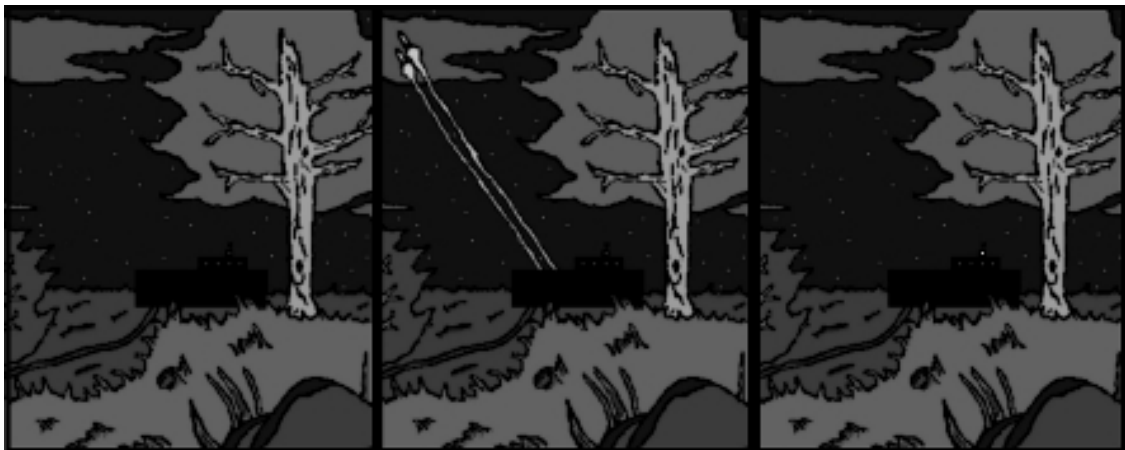
"Ja, I really grev up in Germany."

"Jesus fucking Christ," says Sindy, and she lays her head on the window to get some sleep. Let's take the time to go over more of that recruitment video she watched.

*Spider-Freud, Spider-Freud,
Kinda stuck in the Anal Stage*



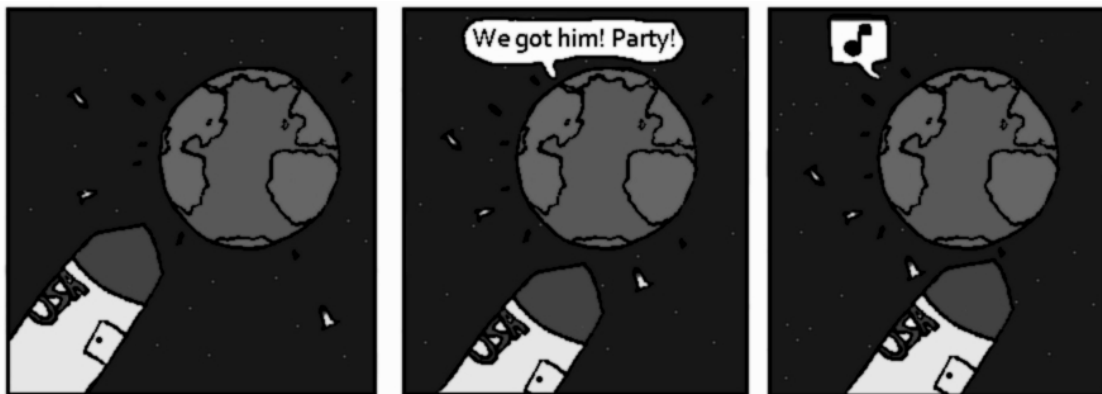
Good evening, adults! In tonight's episode of **Spider-Freud**, we'll continue our discussion on how and why you homo sapiens are **so damned screwed up**. This time we'll be addressing an **inherent flaw** in the human species' behavior that has heretofore **effectively destroyed 99% of all past human civilizations...** one that may some day destroy your own civilization as well! Observe this completely non-scientific near-future scenario!



"What the hell do you mean, '**Accidental full nuclear launch**?' ...Uh-huh, I see. Then I need a middle-aged white guy in the press room, now!"



"My fellow Americans, in 96 hours our full nuclear arsenal, currently orbiting Earth in space, is going to rain back down on, um, **mostly us**. Rest assured that our action will be swift and sure. We will spend every minute of the next 96 hours doggedly pursuing our most urgent goal to avert the **worst tragedy in human history**: we'll find the son of a bitch responsible and subject him to the **harshest punishment** the law allows! **Someone will be held responsible!**"



Fun Facts About Nukes

As of 2010, the US has over 5,000 nuclear warheads.

This is just a drop in the bucket compared to the over 31,000 they had during the Cold War!

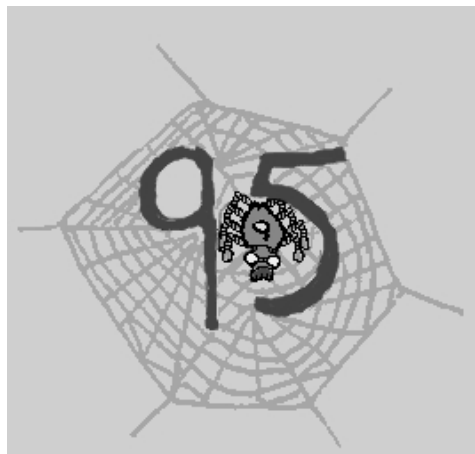
(Source: some guy on the Internet)



The people of the United States of America are caught completely unaware by the sudden and seemingly inexplicable nuclear hailstorm the next day, having already **Assigned Blame and Moved On.**TM

If history is any judge, given the current course of your civilization, exactly this sort of thing is **95% likely*** to happen to you homo sapiens in the next few decades, if not sooner!

*Spider-Freud tends to pull numbers out of his spinnerets.
But that doesn't make him completely wrong.



A ***Do You Believe That?*** Production
Spider-Freud does not actually exist.

The rest of this bit of the video (we're getting into the latter half now) is mostly political cartoons (every wing and in-between) interspersed with hardcore gonzo porn, stuff like Evil Empire and Rocco, edited by someone with a preference for interracial, foot fetish and oil wrestling. Quite frankly, it would take too much time to draw. Besides, the audio track of Nid and Joey dubbed

over it is pretty wordy, so let's sum up the important details in prose (with apologies to Joey Kamikaze).

Sindy has fallen into association with/ arguably been kidnapped by the Earthbound Region-Independent Society. ERIS is a non-national disorganization that claims autonomy from and equality to any national government, though not as a collective; each member of ERIS claims his or her own autonomy and equality. There is only one qualification for membership: a refusal to exercise non-consensual power over others, which includes holding any political office, elected or otherwise (because, AJ explains in his first on-screen appearance, all modern national governments rely on the threat of force to maintain their veneer of authority). The Society began in 1998 after several parties independently discovered and/or confirmed the existence of a secretive cabal that ran both major US political parties, owned the better part of private US industries and major media outlets, and directed the actions of the military-industrial and prison-industrial complexes. Details on ERIS' founding – where the first meetings were, who was there – are sparse at this point in Sindy's education/brainwashing.

According to child videogame star Nid "The Kid" McDuke, who, thanks to the magic of video editing software, appears only in silhouette with his voice distorted like a whistleblower on *60 Minutes*, the Republicans and Democrats are the latest public identities of two Illuminati factions that developed through years of intra-Illuminati each-other-fuckery for power, prestige and wealth. Smaller factions have come and gone, each generally beholden to one of the two major factions. The whole mess is held together by the Council of Overseers, a governing body headed by the Overmaster. This arrangement hasn't benefited the majority of American citizens and in fact has mostly cost them money and gotten them killed in wars foreign and domestic for Illuminati interests, but, according to Nid, so far the American people have mostly been too damn lazy and ignorant to change things.

The bulk of ERIS is made of ex-Americans living in international waters, mostly on the Party. The Party is a nuclear-powered supercarrier pieced together from the remains of three decommissioned Enterprise-class aircraft carriers. The aircraft carriers and the labor necessary to combine them into one supercarrier were provided free of charge in 2002 thanks to a rider on the PATRIOT Act; the necessary bribes ("lobbying") cost \$136,783.92, a few kilos of cocaine and a week of sponsored fun with the employees of Pamela Martin and Associates*, a bargain at government prices. The whole deal was lumped in with the Defense Department's black budget and so escaped the notice of both the media and the General Accounting Office. The Party has since undergone plenty of after-market enhancements and serves as port to other ERISian ships, as well as being one hell of a great vacation destination.

*(*Note: Rumors that Deborah Jeane Palfrey, a.k.a. the DC Madam, was later murdered by Illuminati agents in connection to this arrangement are untrue. Deborah Jeane Palfrey was murdered by Illuminati agents for an entirely different reason.)*

ERIS has no political positions or pet issues. Though they generally dislike the Illuminati, they're not in active conflict with them – they just don't want the Illuminati pushing them around the way the assholes do everyone else in the western hemisphere. That said, they're not against tweaking the Illuminati's nose whenever possible because it often means defending their own freedoms. Besides, it's usually entertaining.

"So there you have the basics on ERIS," says Nid in his Darth Vader-through-an-oscillating-fan voice. "Welcome to the Party!™" Nid turns to Joey, who is well illuminated as he sits in an easy chair. "So what are you going to splice in? It's not just us sitting here the whole time, right?"

"No, I'm going to splice in nature clips."

"Nature clips?"

"Yeah. Au naturale."

"Wake up, Sindy." Emily shakes Sindy's shoulder until Sindy sits up and yawns. It's dark outside again; Sindy guesses she slept the day away and wonders if Emily or Manuel might have drugged her, though she does her best to fight down that paranoid thought. The Winnebago has settled in a Marriott parking lot. Manuel already has the key to a suite on the fourth floor. Sindy isn't sure anymore what state she's in (mentally or geographically). She sees plenty of pine trees and most of the license plates in the lot are American, so she doubts they crossed into Canada while she was out. There are plenty of questions a rational person could be asking in this situation, but Sindy's too tired and confused to be rational, so she grabs her duffel bag and follows Emily and Manuel to the suite without any resistance other than a tired grunt.

"Should we really be stopping?" Sindy says once they're in the hotel room. The phone book on the bedside table tells Sindy that she's in Montana now; the clock radio beside the phone book reads 8:14 PM, Mountain Time. She wonders again how she managed to sleep all day, not to mention why she still feels so tired.

"We'll be safe enough here," Manuel says. He sets down a couple of suitcases, opens one and pulls out a jacket. "I'm going to make sure no one followed us. You want to make sure there's coffee on when I get back?"

Emily nods and takes Sindy by the elbow. Manuel smiles at Sindy and lets himself out the door; Emily throws the deadbolt behind him. "Vell come on, let's get some room service and sleep."

"You think the kitchen is open this time of night?"

"Zis is one of AJ's properties. Ze kitchen vill be open for us."

"Still, is that a good idea? I mean, when we pay for food, can't the police trace our cards? I don't have much cash."

"Good call," says Emily, and she holds up a golden credit card. "But ze ERIS card is untraceable and gifs me revard points."

Sindy cocks an eyebrow. "And they really can't trace it?"

"Ve haf arrangements viz a number of banks zat find ze Party confenient for certain operations. Ze banks fear ze Council, but zey are not loyal."

"Pfft. What's the difference?"

Sindy only meant it as an offhand comment, but Emily nods. "An excellent and difficult question. I'm afraid zat's more AJ and Manuel's department."

"Well at least you're not going to talk my ear off about it. I was beginning to wonder if everyone in ERIS was a goddamn philosopher."

Emily laughs. "Fery true. I vasn't recruited into ERIS on ze merits of my discourses on metaphysics."

"So why were you recruited?"

"Long story. Anozer time," Emily says. "I'm starfing."

They settle in to have whatever the hell meal you have after becoming a fugitive in the middle of the previous night and driving all day with no clear destination in mind. (Please note this is Sindy's perception of her current situation in space/time/reality, and may or may not accurately reflect an objective reality which, as far as our physicists and philosophers are sure, may or may not even exist.) Luckily, she's now in a situation where she can do exactly what her life as an American has taught her to do when faced with any harsh reality: she turns on the TV and stuffs her face full of processed sugar and meat process byproducts.

Per usual, nothing is on. Oh, plenty's *on* — it's just nothing anyone would want to watch. There's a few reasons for this. First, the need for cable packages to appeal to as wide an audience as possible has led to so much niche specialization that entire blocks of channels have become useless unless you dig the niche in question. Second, television is at its most profitable when a large number of people are watching; the larger the audience, the more the ad time goes for. So less profitable programming — the niche of the niche, like *Fishing With Bill Dance* — is on when most of society is at work, asleep, out partying, hung over or out of the house. Third, the federal government imposes strict regulations on broadcasters — mostly not by passing legislation (which would be questionably unconstitutional) but instead by subtly threatening to do so, a favorite tactic of fascist governments popularized in twentieth century America by the Roosevelts. Emily chows down on her mushroom Swiss burger and seasoned fries (\$14.95) and watches Sindy channel surf. Sindy settles on a rerun of last night's *Leno*.

Jay Leno (a misshapen ogre whom no one under age 65 finds amusing) is interviewing a skinny black man in his early thirties who calls himself Ronnie the World's Most Honest Faith Healer. Ronnie was hit by a bus six months ago and was clinically dead for two and a half minutes.

"And you say god talked to you?"

"Yeah," says Ronnie, "that's when I knew what I had to do. So I traveled around the country faith-healing the sick and wounded."

"Wow." Leno shuffles his cards and looks at the camera. "So, ah, how many people got better?"

"Oh, none of them."

"Eh?"

"Yeah, didn't do any good at all. Made absolutely no difference."

"Uh, but didn't they pay you –?"

"Hell no, that would've been dishonest."

Leno scratches his head. "Uh, so, I'm curious. What exactly did god tell you?" There's hesitant laughter from the audience.

"Exactly?" says Ronnie. "He said: 'It's just not working out between us. Stop calling me.'"

A few states further southeast and about thirty-eight thousand feet up in the air, Todd Moody reflects on his newest set of orders from Gold Standard as he monitors the flight attendants for suspicious behavior.

"I'm sending you after a CIA agent named Robert Johnson," Ron Paul had told him from behind his Speedy Gonzalez mask. "He frequented the club Cathaway and Thomas worked at. You're going to Kansas. I'll take care of the paperwork."

Todd sneaks another drink from his hip flask. It's not that the alcoholic beverages served on the flight aren't strong enough for him, so much as he doesn't trust the stewardesses not to be Conspiracy plants out to poison him. Getting the flask through TSA security isn't easy, but it's amazing what waving around his DHS badge will do.

He wonders about this newest turn in the case. Todd never suspected that Thomas' trail would lead to the CIA, but it means he's finally getting somewhere. He has a feeling this case goes deeper than any he's had before, maybe right to the heart of the Conspiracy. The alien overlords out to conquer Earth can't hide from him much longer now.

What Happens When You Forget To Lie

Robbie “Bigs” Johnson has been on the road for ten hours by the time he arrives at his new temporary home in Topeka, Kansas. They’re all temporary homes in his line of work, even the three bedroom two bath house he owns in Capitol Hill. Yesterday it was a Travelodge in western Colorado; for a few days before that, it was a mom and pop place in Boise. Now it’s room 28 at the U-Rest Inn.

It’s five thirty in the morning, which makes it about thirty hours since he got the order to head for the heartland. Bigs has worked for the Council long enough to just go with it when these last-minute assignments pop up. The All-Seeing Eye knows where its agents are needed and gets them there whenever necessary. Normally, packing up in the middle of the night with orders to drive to the middle of nowhere isn’t a big thing; hell, that’s part of what makes the job exciting.

Problem is, Bigs did something painfully stupid a few days ago: he got drunk and told the Truth to a stripper.

Life hasn’t been the same for Bigs since 2001. He felt younger before then, and his work was his life. Bigs’ adulthood has been defined by his service to the Council. They had him hand-picked for service before he left boot camp, and they put his career in the high occupancy vehicle lane. To this day, Bigs isn’t sure how long they watched him before then. Did they start paying attention to him when he joined the Marines? In high school? Earlier? Did one of their psychics see his coming before he was born?

It doesn’t matter. Bigs was ready to serve when the Council came calling. They explained that America is the greatest country on Earth (a fact Bigs has never questioned) only because an enlightened few have guided the nation from the shadows since its inception. This secretive cabal protects a number of ancient mysteries passed down from Egypt, India, Greece, every corner of the pre-industrial world, and they use America’s influence to support freedom and enlightenment around the modern world so someday everyone can know prosperity like theirs. The line they fed Bigs played to the reasons he joined the Marines in the first place, and all the fun he had fighting commies and political traitors was enough to keep him hooked. The eighties were a blast, and the nineties were the height of their prosperity, all thanks to the Council’s defeat of the Soviet Union.

Then 9/11 fucked everything up.

Here’s Bigs’ problem: he likes to know what’s really going on, a grand and infeasible goal even in the best of times. These are not the best of times. Bigs has a horrible feeling something’s amiss with his employers in the last decade. If the Council were an individual, there would be little choice but to conclude s/he had

gone batshit insane. A government can only reflect the mental health of those who control it, and the American government has spent the past decade bouncing off the rubber walls, chewing through its lips, foaming at the mouth and shouting “Unpatriotic!” or “Terrorism!” or “For the children!” while pissing itself parched at every obstacle. Bigs worries it’s just a matter of time before the citizens lose it too, and then they could have another clusterfuck like the sixties on their hands. Order must be maintained.

Still, worries about the Council’s collective sanity are supplementary to his major concern. Bigs just hasn’t been himself lately, and he’s afraid he’s flipped and doesn’t know it yet. How do you know you’ve gone crazy? Do people who fling themselves off rooftops or explode themselves in the middle of street markets know they’re nuts? Isn’t part of being insane finding the motivations for irrational actions to be rational? Bigs doesn’t know what the fuck is going on anymore, and when he’s confused, he drinks. He knows he shouldn’t drink. Drinking makes him honest, and no good comes from honesty.

They have to know what he did. They know everything.

He catches a few hours sleep, does the habitual morning stuff and gets into his shiny rental Prius by ten thirty. There’s already a crowd and limited parking when he gets to Gage Park around eleven. Bigs sees plenty of people in red-white-and-blue, and the throng is choked with signs that say things like “Truth NOW” and “What Aren’t They Telling Us?” and “Taxed Enough Already!” Misspellings and poor punctuation choices are common. There’s a gaggle of grossly fat women near the back of the crowd more interested in their cigarettes than their wild spawn.

Bigs has seen this kind of beat before, though it’s been a few years since he last worked it. Truthers and Teabaggers. The Truthers are a loose union of conspiracy theorists who don’t buy the official story about the 9/11 attacks, especially the collapse of the Twin Towers. One popular hypothesis the Truthers put forth has the US government conducting the attacks to justify foreign wars and abrogation of civil rights back home. Bigs sees two problems with that hypothesis. First, the US government is a century past needing a rational excuse to go to war or violate civil liberties – if they want to do it, they do it, and deal with the consequences later, if at all (usually, there are no consequences). Second, Bigs would have known if 9/11 was an inside job because covering up inconvenient facts like that is in his job description. The fact that he didn’t know about 9/11 ahead of time means it couldn’t have been an inside job.

(There’s a third reason Bigs doubts the US government caused 9/11, but his current frame of mind won’t allow him to look too closely at it. It’s this: the Council had a collective shit-fit on 9/11. But that suggests they’re neither as powerful nor as all-knowing as they claim to be. This train of thought derails before it can leave the station because Bigs is still convinced the Council as a unit is both omniscient and omnipotent.)

The rest of the crowd represented here today are members of the Tea Party, an AstroTurf organization financed on the sly by members of the Republican party and not a few white supremacist organizations. The Tea Party blames America's current woes on its abandonment of constitutional values such as strict adherence to Protestant theology, rejection of the science behind global warming and evolution, hatred of non-Caucasians and several other supposedly core American values that in no way reflect the contents nor spirit of the US Constitution. But don't tell them that unless you want to get screamed at and possibly lynched like a census worker in the South.

A horde of sweaty, inbred-looking protestors hoisting signs with messages like "God Hates Faggots" and "9/11 Divine Justice" is cloistered apart from the rest of the throng. Bigs wonders if the members of Westboro Baptist have mistaken the rally for a soldier's funeral. Maybe they just expect the news cameras to show up and they're making sure they're visible like the media whores they are. Hell, maybe it's church policy to bring the signs along on congregation picnics.

A man with a goatee and more ink than a Bic factory approaches Bigs, tells him about Ron Paul and the gold standard and forces a pamphlet into his hands. Bigs makes up an excuse and squeezes through the crowd. The throng gets thicker the closer he gets to the temporary stage, and he's almost trampled by the local Code Pink chapter. He wonders what the hell he's doing here. Is the Council just keeping him out of the way while they debate what to do with him, or could these yuppies and schizophrenics really be a threat to the country? He suspects he's been demoted.

Doing his job means keeping his mind free of those thoughts for the moment. Bigs has been initiated into the ancient mysteries as a field agent of the Council, which means he's spent years honing his psychic abilities. He can't move things with his mind (though at times he feels *so close*), he can't read thoughts like he's heard the Overmaster can, he doesn't dream the future any more often than the average person, but once in a while he gets a hunch from looking at someone, and his employers have encouraged the belief that this gift is supernatural. No one here sets off Bigs' psychic fire alarm. They look weird, but harmless.

Sweep made, Bigs heads back to the Prius. The alarm in his head goes off the moment he sits down. Funny how the brain does that. Bigs is sure he's suddenly in a great deal of danger, but none of his senses are feeding information to the conscious portion of his brain to back that sensation up. The sensation Bigs feels could be referred to as the sixth sense and is somewhere between an itch you can't scratch and that feeling you get right before you sneeze.

Instead of assuming this sensation is somehow extrasensory, we could hypothesize that those humans most likely to survive and reproduce in more hazardous times may have been those who reacted to threats perceived with their five earthly senses without having to consciously process that information before setting off the brain's warning systems. Whether this had the unfortunate

side-effect of creating a present world full of people who “go with their guts” instead of thinking things through rationally when appropriate is another matter entirely. Whatever the source of this sixth sense, suffice to say Bigs knows he’s in trouble before he knows why.

He doesn’t dare touch the radio or the ignition. Same goes for the mirror. Pedals look okay, no loose wires poking out under the dash...

Wait, the pedals. They’re further away than they were earlier. The seat’s been adjusted since he got out of the car. Goddammit.

Bigs throws open the door and rolls into the street fully expecting his ass to be blown halfway to Canada before it can hit pavement.

Now explosions are funny things. The average American sees between 100 and 5,000 explosions in a season of television (the actual number depends a lot on how much s/he watches shows on FOX and Michael Bay movies). Explosions on the silver screen are clean, flashy orange blooms of fire that do minimal damage to their surroundings (unless they’re supposed to do otherwise) and burn down to embers quickly (sets are expensive, after all). The explosion that destroys Bigs’ rental Prius is more of a concussive blast that leaves peoples’ eardrums vibrating for a quarter mile, plenty of smoke and shrapnel. There are flames, sure, but it’s not the controlled bubble of Hollywood murder porn.

Gravel and dirt mars Bigs’ face when he clammers to his feet. He’s never felt more like throwing up without emptying his gut a second later, and all he can hear is a constant shrill “Keee—”. He’s vaguely aware of the onlookers rushing over for the free non-televised entertainment and the car speeding toward him, but none of it registers. It’s rather the opposite of his senses’ earlier performance—now he’s aware of all kinds of input but unable to process any of it.

Someone takes Bigs by the arm and leads him to the back seat of a car, hands him a cup of water and tries asking him questions. Bigs shakes his head and watches the remains of the Prius smoke. He still can’t hear a thing except that one tone, so he’s spared the insult when a man with an “I AM A HETEROSAPIEN” sign sees the wreckage and yells, “Take that, faggot!”

Shell-shock has neutered Bigs’ usual paranoia, and he realizes too late the water he’s been sipping is drugged. His limbs are numb and his throat tight, and he’s helpless to resist when the helpful stranger locks him in the back seat behind tinted windows and hauls him away just as the first emergency response vehicle is rounding the corner.

He’s surprised by a number of things when he wakes up. First, he doesn’t remember falling asleep, but that would be whatever the stranger slipped him (in retrospect, he was so out of it that he’s not even sure if his savior-turned-kidnapper was a man or woman). Second, he’s alive. Bigs wonders if that means whoever nabbed him is working for a different party than the one trying to kill him. Third, and most disconcerting in the immediate sense, is the fact he’s bound hand and foot in an evil bastardization of a dentist’s chair. The chair is bolted

into concrete in the center of a basement chamber without windows; the fire marshal would have a fit if he inspected this underground deathtrap. The blinking 12:00 of an unset digital clock provides the only illumination.

Bigs refuses to panic. He's been trained to escape situations like this. He calms his breathing, focuses on the steady rhythm of his pulse. He needs peace so he can open his Third Eye, the path to the psychic hand, the means to exercise his will upon the Universe without moving his body. He's put in long hours of meditative training for a day like this. That he's never achieved telekinesis is irrelevant. His Council-appointed teachers told him most people could only unlock their inherent telekinetic abilities in times of great need. Faith, they've told him, gives the mind power over all things.

According to Bigs' teachers, the ancient ways of the spirit have been passed down as part of the sacred knowledge held by the world's oldest secret societies. That knowledge had its birth in humanity's earliest days, when mankind was still close to the earth in mind and body. Today's humans lack psychic gifts because they've forgotten their connection to the spiritual, too preoccupied with the material. To cast aside one's earthly concerns is to gain mastery of the beyond. Size matters not, there is no spoon, yadda yadda yadda. Bigs has been fed this line for decades and believes every word, which is why he's so surprised when what he's been assured are his well-honed psychic powers fail to break the restraints in his time of need.

Dammit, he thinks, the room must be under a psychic shield.

He spends a while trying to escape the old fashioned way. There's not much else to do. Nothing he tries makes any more difference than his attempt at psychokinesis did.

The light flicks on overhead, and Bigs hears sandaled feet stepping down the stairs. The woman who comes to face him is lean and muscled, with a tight face lined more by stress than age. It's the kind of face he's used to seeing on his coworkers.

"I looked through your pockets, Agent Johnson. I was a little surprised to see you were CIA. I thought DHS was doing domestic wetworks these days."

As it happens, they do (well, them and the ATF), but Bigs keeps his poker face. He tries to keep his mind as blank as his face, too, in case she's a telepath. He wonders who she's with. Could she be an agent under direct orders from the Council, like himself? But why would a Council agent keep him alive after they tried to kill him? Bigs doesn't doubt that the bomb in the Prius was the Council's doing. So who is she with? "This is an illegal detainment. I need you to release me immediately so this situation can be resolved peacefully."

"You mean so you can arrest me. Are you fucking retarded? The government just tried to kill you."

Fuck, she might have pulled the thought from between his ears. "Isn't that your intention?"

She smiles. "I'm going to hell, but not for killing you." She bends down so he can get a good look at her face. He doesn't recognize her. "They didn't tell you shit, did they? That's so typical. Sounds like intel's just as fucked at the CIA as it is at the Bureau."

"You're FBI?"

"Not since August of 2001." She steps back. "You really don't recognize me?" Bigs shakes his head. "Susan McHailey. Tell me you weren't there to watch me."

"I wasn't. Never heard of you before." It's the truth. Bigs was told to watch for known terrorists in the crowd, but they never said a word about McHailey, and he's never seen her name on the watch lists, not even the ones from the Council. "Should I have?"

Susan sits on a loveseat against the far wall and cracks open an RC. "I was with the domestic terrorism unit. May of 2001, I submitted an urgent report to the Secretary of Defense. It concerned an imminent attack by Al Qaeda via suicide bomb a la jumbo jet. My report, and my three subsequent inquiries into the matter, were ignored. So I resigned."

"That's all news to me. Never heard a word about it." Because it can't be the truth. He was there in those frantic post-9/11 days. Everyone—even the Council—was spastic as a dog with its ass on fire when the towers came down. It took precious hours to confirm Al Qaeda was behind the attack, and all the intel he's seen the past nine years has supported that early conclusion. There's no doubt in Bigs' mind the Council was as surprised on 9/11 as everyone else, unless...

Fuck, there's an *unless* now? Bigs breathes in and out, concentrates until he's sure McHailey isn't using some telepathic mind trick on him. He lets the thought form organically in his brain: *Unless they were feigning surprise to even their closest agents.*

Bigs' surety that he's known what was really going on these past nine years is fading faster than dollar store hair dye. They lied to him all these years while he served them loyally—is that it? He's always known that the Council dealt in untruths to protect people, but he's spent years convinced of his own exceptionalism. Why would they lie to *him*? And for the kicker, why kill him for blabbing what he knows to some stripper unless what he let slip was the truth? He can remember parts of what he told the poor girl in his drunken ranting, including, "I have a friend in the Pentagon who thinks 9/11 really was an inside job. Says he has the video to prove it." Is that what all this is about?

"Having a crisis of faith?" Susan says, and Bigs wonders how much of his mind she can see. He tries his best to distract himself by thinking of old *Simpsons* episodes, but now that the thought's there, he can't get it out of his skull.

"Let's assume everything you're saying is true. It's my ass they tried to blow up, not yours."

She cocks an eyebrow. "Guess you must have fucked up lately, huh?" Now he's almost positive she's in his head. "A bunch of Truthers and Tea Partiers

murdering a CIA agent would be bad for both movements, really discredit them. If they could pin it on me, it'd probably be enough to put me away for life, maybe get me the gas chamber."

"You think they're trying to kill me and frame you for it?"

"Two birds, one bomb. It's how the bastards think."

She has a point, but something else she said is working on its own, separate ulcer in his gut now. He's been captured by Truthers, unpatriotic conspiracy nuts raised on *X-Files* and dope. They won't be persuaded to let him go easily. If it was the police, he might have pulled rank and gotten away before the feds came to town to haul him off for some sham trial. Bigs knows the feds will be supplied some excuse to take him into custody now that the Council has played its hand against him. He wonders what they'll accuse him of, not that it matters. The Council will see to it that the courts have all the falsified evidence they need to justify the manhunt and arrest. Hell, they'll probably blame him for the car bomb.

"They're already on their way, you know," Bigs says.

Susan nods. "I'm not going to be here when they arrive."

"I'd rather not be either."

She smiles and stands. "Sorry, not my call. I'm not the one who brought you in. I'm just a guest speaker."

Susan walks back up the stairs and shuts off the light. Bigs goes back to working his psychic powers on the restraints, but no matter how he tries he can't break through their shields.

The Great Confusus

There's a steady clak-clank-clau-clank going in the back room. Jack can't see through the hanging lines of beads in the arch separating the sitting room from the study, but he assumes Mikey is at his translations again. It's past six; Jack wishes Mikey would give it up for the day, or at least stop hitting the keys so hard.

A good twenty minutes have passed since Dan let them in. Jack's used to the wait. The Great Confusus moves at his own pace, especially when you don't call ahead of time. Jack isn't willing to have another conversation with Confusus over the phone; his last digital conversation with the sage left him a subscriber to *Cat Fancy* magazine and the owner of six cases of lukewarm off-brand ice cream sandwiches, and to this day he's still not sure how it happened. Better just to show up and wait in Confusus' sitting room. He hopes Megan keeps her cool.

Megan smiles when she notices Jack watching her. She's flipping through magazines from the silver stone bookcase. Jack will have to ask her later what the Great Confusus reads on the john. All Jack has seen the old man read besides foreign texts is back-issues of *Soap Digest*. A few magazines rest in a pile on the coffee table; the one on top is a copy of *TV Guide* that proclaims "WHOA! An Interview With NBC Breakout Hit *Blossom*'s Joey Lawrence!"

There's not much to do but wait, something Jack is accustomed to after the years of riding with soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. Jack's birth certificate calls him Abdul Muhammad Ali Tyson Smith, but Jack Smith is how his master's in journalism refers to him. He grew up Lutheran in Maryland and mostly worked local human interest stories (and a little traffic) before following the troops to Afghanistan in 2002. He looks like his given name implies but acts more in line with his assumed name, which is why his brother Saddam calls him "falafel-with-mayonnaise."

The sanded white double doors to Confusus' office open and the sage appears. Jack could swear he just heard a gong, but it might be his imagination. The Great Confusus looks like a kung fu master in an Akira Kurosawa film; his eyebrows are as thick as his mustache, and his head is bald and bumpy as an elementary schoolroom globe; his family goes back hundreds of years in what is now Singapore.

"I was told to expect you," Confusus says and waves them into his sanctum.

Megan winks at Jack. This is the first time she's met Confusus, but she's heard plenty. "Did you have a vision that said we'd come?"

"No. Email. Sit."

Couches and loveseats line the walls. A gigantic Aquaman rug takes up most of the floor. Megan notices an Aquaman mug, lamp, penknife and Pez dispenser and immediately makes the snap call that Confusus is an Aquaman fan. The Great Confusus is not a fan of Aquaman, nor comic books in general, nor has he

(as far as he knows) given anyone reason to believe otherwise. He accepted the rug, quite graciously he thought, as a replacement when an acquaintance spilled sacramental wine on a \$35,000 bearskin rug. After that, random people would give him Aquaman items – he mostly stashes them in a drawer on the off chance they’ll be useful someday. The mystery of the Aquaman synchronicities occupies much of his time during meditation, like an unfamiliar koan echoing in the canyon between his ears.

“Who is this you’ve brought with you?” the sage says, looking at Megan.

Jack pats Megan on the knee; she gives him a smile back. “This is Megan. I’ve told you about her before.” And he has, though it’s hard to say if Confusus got the right impression about her from what Jack has told him in the past. Megan Livingstone is not the woman you’ll mistake her for the first time you meet her. She’s a ten, never a hair out of place nor panty line visible, and to the untrained eye appears totally unaware of it. She was valedictorian of her graduating class (high school, undergrad and law school). Her father is worth 3.8 million on paper and refers to himself as a HENRY – “high earner, not rich yet.” She seems a perfect bourgeoisie professional until she opens her mouth, which is when you meet the woman with nipple piercings, tattoos down her back and round her hips, and a concealed carry permit, the limits of which she tends to push. She describes her year of state-mandated military service in the Israeli Defense Force as the funnest job she ever had, and she’s been known to spend her lunch hours lounging in banks on the off chance someone will try to rob the place. (This hobby has never panned out, though she did once stab a man in the ass with a ski pole when he tried to stick up a pawn shop. But that, as Michael Ende would say, is another story and will be told another time.)

“What brings you back from your holy land?”

“I think I know why the US invaded Iraq,” Jack says.

Confusus sighs. “Ah. Just a moment.” The sage opens a mini-fridge and takes out a bottle of Yoo-Hoo. “**Sour news goes down easier with chocolate milk.** Would you like some?” Megan accepts a bottle with a gracious nod; Jack declines with a wave of his hand. “Okay, why *did* the US invade Iraq?” he says in the same tone one would say “I don’t know, why *did* the chicken cross the road?”

“Halliburton is digging up Sumerian ruins. They’ve been at it at least a couple years now, maybe since they invaded. I got talking to some contractors after a shoot-out and they told me there were trucks coming in from the middle of the desert full of old scrolls and stone tablets. Meg and I think all the saber-rattling about Iran is probably because there are ruins to be dug up there as well.”

“You have seen these dig sites?”

“Yeah.” Jack and Megan share a glance; Megan reaches behind her Coke-can-red-dyed hair and pulls out the hoop earring she’s been wearing for weeks. It’s not really a hoop earring, of course. Within the hoop is a triangle touching the rim at three points, and within the triangle is an eye. The pupil of the eye is a fine golden pentagram. No one in the room has eyes fine enough to make out the

markings in the center of the pentagram, so we'll save that detail for when it's relevant. "We snatched this before they could load it into a Halliburton Humvee."

Confusus takes the emblem and bounces it in his palm a couple times. He *harrumphs* deep in his throat, and his shaggy eyebrows skate along the dark half-circles above his eyes. "Mikey! Bring me the sacred writings!"

The typing in the other room comes to a sudden halt. Into Confusus' sanctum walks either the funniest looking poor misshapen kid ever, or Confusus is telling the goddess' own truth when he says Mikey is a rare species of ape that he shaves and dresses every morning. Mikey has sunken blue eyes above a snub snout, and a few stray hairs atop his otherwise bald head are the only fur on his body. Mikey walks on his legs, overlong arms swinging his hands by his knees; he comes to maybe three and a half feet at full posture. Today he's dressed in blue and red boy's size 8 Transformers pajamas. Mikey is a big fan of Michael Bay's movies; he can't make heads or tails of the plots, but he loves the pretty explosions and leg-humping robots.

Megan almost spits out her mouthful of chocolate drink product when Mikey comes in. "Why the hell is there a monkey here?"

"Ape, honey," Jack says, but Megan ignores him.

Mikey sets a book on Confusus' desk, then takes a seat on the Aquaman rug at Jack and Megan's feet. The book is bound in purple velvet, its pages yellowing paper with thin cracks running along the margins. Confusus' tongue traces round his lips as he flips through the volume. "Ah," he says and turns the book so Jack and Megan can read the page he's settled on right-side up.

A pyramid is drawn in golden ink on the page, and a lone blaring red eye stares from the middle of the triangle, dilated and unblinking. Beneath the pyramid, described in some ancient script neither Jack nor Megan can read, are three more familiar icons: the six-sided Star of David, the Holy Cross, and the Crescent Moon. Confusus taps his finger on the pyramid. "Look familiar?"

"I know the All-Seeing Eye is an old symbol already," Jack says. "What does the writing here say? I mean, what language is that?"

Confusus pulls at his beard. "Mikey, fetch me the translations for this page." He *harrumphs* while the ape waddles off on his chore. "The sacred writings were written in an ancient cipher I cannot read, and the translations were lost in a tragic photocopier accident," he says to Megan. Jack nods along; he's heard this explanation already. "Mikey was gracious enough to volunteer to create a new translation for me."

"He volunteered?" Megan says, but Mikey comes back with a yellow legal pad scrawled from top to bottom and margin to margin with something between cursive script and impressionist art before Confusus can explain, assuming he would have.

"Oh," Confusus says after he's looked at the legal pad. "It's just a lot of talk about the magical rituals of long-dead cults, relics of mystic import, that sort of thing."

Jack's heart skips a beat. When he was a child, he asked his minister why the sort of magic and miracles that populated the bible were so uncommon in the modern age. His minister answered that the only people practicing the old magic were cultists who wouldn't go to heaven. Jack's liberal education assures him that "magic" is the stuff of a less enlightened age, but he's never been able to shake that childhood sense that there's more to the natural world than biology, chemistry and physics can possibly describe, that there's something to all the mysticism and ritual that modern science scoffs at. Megan thinks he's full of shit, but she's always had different priorities. It took two weeks of arguing to get her to come here with him today.

"Couldn't Halliburton be digging up those ruins so they can find those relics of mystic import? That was kind of why I came here."

"Is it?" Confusus clears his throat again. "You believe the US government invaded Iraq so Dick Cheney's company could extract objects with mystic powers from Iraq? And that Barack Obama, who belongs to a party opposing Cheney, wants to go to war in Iran so that Cheney can loot more of these magical items from ruins found there?"

"Well, it sounds kind of crazy when you put it that way," Jack says.

"That's what I've been fucking saying." Megan sighs.

Jack gives Megan a glance but decides not to have that fight here. Instead, he turns back to Confusus. "But what if it's true? We've seen the dig sites. They're definitely pulling stuff out of those ruins, regardless of the reason."

"So why not write a story about it?"

"I have. No one who's reputable will publish it. They say it sounds too crazy."

"Hmm." Confusus finishes off his Yoo-Hoo. "Then what you lack is a way to make others believe in the world as you have seen it. You must go on a quest to uncover the truth of what you have seen. What power lies at the heart of the great and ancient faiths whose treasures now fall into the hands of your enemies? That is what you must seek out before anyone will believe what you have to say."

A quest! Yes, that's exactly what Jack wanted to hear from Confusus. Now he's getting somewhere. "Where do I begin this quest?"

Confusus shrugs. "Fuck if I know. I'll drop you a line if I figure it out." He closes the book and folds his hands on his desk. "Mikey will show you out. Mikey?" The shaved ape springs back to his feet and offers Jack and Megan each a hand.

"Wait. That's it?" Megan bats away Mikey's hands. Jack swallows and hopes she doesn't break anything. "That's all you have for us? And why the hell is the monkey wearing pants?"

"So he won't shit on the floor," Confusus says. "And Mikey is an ape, like yourself. Monkeys have tails."

"Motherfuck," Megan says, and Jack puts his hands on her shoulders. He steers her back through the doorway with a quick good-bye to Confusus and lets her vent until they're back to their Subaru Forester, parked outside.

"Well that was a total cunt-fisting," Megan says after she's buckled her seatbelt. Jack puts the Forester in gear; the vehicle is in Megan's name, but Jack is the designated driver when Megan's pissed because she has a habit of hitting other cars on purpose while she's in a bad mood. Actually, her license was suspended four years ago, but that hasn't stopped her from driving.

"I don't know. Confusus kind of works in strange ways."

"Like your god?"

His god. Jack smiles. Megan's made it very clear that there's nothing that says you can't be Jewish and an atheist. Actually, from her perspective, it's kind of the default position. It doesn't matter. Jack believes. And Confusus is right — this is his quest, and Jack only has to find where he's supposed to start. And he suspects he hasn't heard the last from the old sage in his matter.

For his part, Confusus is already back to meditating on the Aquaman mystery and how it relates to the Jewish princess with the foul mouth.

New Age Sherlock Holmes

Todd Moody's feeling dour when he finally gets to Topeka around noon. Spending the morning arguing over the phone with his deputy director as to the necessity of his midnight flight to Kansas City has left Todd feeling wrung out. The deputy director can't understand why Todd needed to catch a flight to the middle of the country after Todd argued so convincingly the other day that he was needed in Seattle to break up a major heroin ring.

Things used to be different when Todd worked for the FBI, but his bosses at DHS have some funny ideas about accountability, and there have been disagreements in the past over what he can and can't charge to the federal government's accounts while he's chasing down leads on a conspiracy his employers refuse to admit exists (but of course—Todd is sure the deputy director he reports to is in on the whole thing). As luck would have it, the news on the hotel room TV is all about yesterday's explosion of a rental Prius at a right-wing political rally in Topeka, which gives Todd a perfect opportunity to follow up his lead on Robbie Johnson, even if his stated and actual quarries have nothing to do with each other. Besides, Gold Standard has already seen to it that Todd's ass is covered on the bureaucratic front; the deputy director can bluster all he wants; it won't send Todd back to Seattle or leave a mark on his performance evaluation.

Having arrived in Topeka, Todd wants to skip all the boring bureaucratic details and get down to fighting the Conspiracy, but the deputy director will ride his ass even harder if he never checks up on the case he put in for. A detective called Finley meets him at the precinct and hands over the case file.

"No body at the scene," Finley says. "We had a few witnesses say someone got in a car and left before first response got to the scene, but then we busted some college kids with an eighth of weed, so we forgot all about it."

"You put off investigating a missing person from a crime scene for a drug bust?" Even Todd, who only does drugs prescribed by his doctor or sold in check-out lanes at Walgreen's, finds that a little strange. He's never been one for fighting the Drug War, though not because he's against drug prohibition so much as because security won't let him onto the Senate floor so he can bust the country's biggest offenders.

Finley shrugs. "Hey, you feds have it easy. Country full of taxpayers to fund your salaries." He balls up his fists like he's going to unleash some traditional police brutality on the desk. "Most of our funding comes from traffic tickets. I got enough trouble meeting quota without missing out on matching federal funds for drug busts. I mean, I got a car payment, right?"

Todd decides to give the case a fair shake after all. It doesn't sound like the locals are getting anything done on this one, and Gage Park isn't far—nothing's that far in Topeka, except maybe a good time. It's not like he has any leads on Robbie Johnson yet anyway. He wonders about Emily Dulce Thomas, the last

lead Gold Standard gave him on the Conspiracy, and his mind flits briefly to Danica Abigail and that Sindy Cathaway girl she mentioned as well. Todd thinks Johnson must have given evidence of the existence of extraterrestrial life to Thomas and Cathaway. Yeah, that has to be it. It's the only rational explanation for the Conspirators wanting so badly to round all three up.

The explosion's proof is in the pavement. The Prius belonged to Hertz and was rented in Boise on behalf of a Detroit property management firm. A quick call confirms the firm has no idea who the driver was nor who authorized charging the car to their account. Todd has worked for the federal government his entire adult life and thus sees nothing unusual nor suspicious in this. He figures the paperwork's just lost in the bureaucracy, same as always happens at his job. There are agents ten years dead still getting assignments and paychecks from the FBI.

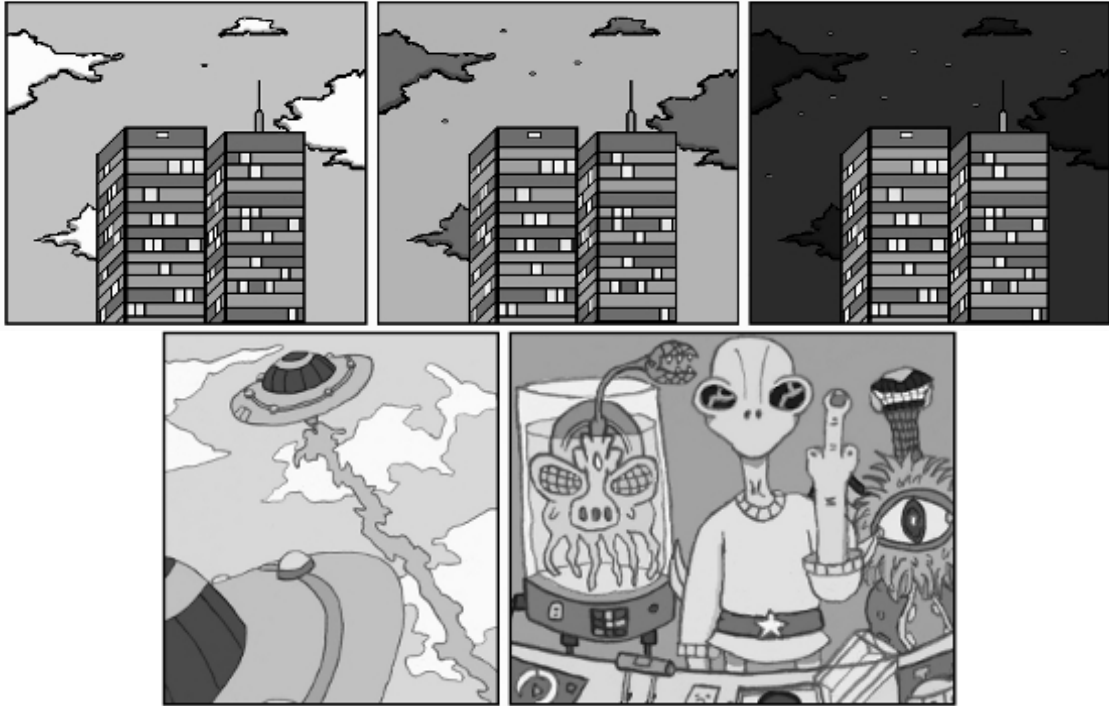
A walk around the park tells Todd little more. There was some sort of company picnic here the other day; ants are hauling off the remains of barbecued hotdogs, a mound of empty Hamm's cans is threatening to tip over onto a ketchup-stained picnic table, and there's even a Ron Paul sign crafted into a well-intentioned but ultimately disappointing beer bong. Again, given Todd's years working for the federal government, this seems fairly normal for any company function and reminds him a great deal of his last performance evaluation. What catches his eye is a xeroxed pamphlet lying atop a pile of ketchup-stained paper plates.



Of course, Todd already knows what happened on 9/11. He was in the shower when the actual attacks took place and didn't bother turning on his TV until hours later, and by then the news was showing (what he's sure was) doctored footage. Luckily, he's been able to piece together a pretty good idea of

what happened that day thanks to internet sites and his own wild imagination.

Todd's reconstruction of the events of September 11, 2001, goes a little something like this:



A Photoshopped picture of an eagle crying beneath the words “WHY WON’T THEY LET US MOVE ON?” takes up most of the pamphlet’s back cover. The inner pages accuse the US government of conspiring to hide the truth about the 9/11 attacks, but that’s all a smoke screen. Todd understands the pamphlet isn’t about 9/11 at all. The real message is coded into a newspaper clipping reproduced on the third page. All it takes is a trained eye to read what’s really being said. Take this paragraph:

Working at a White Falls, IN, crime lab, Dr. Majors found surprising results. A coating of synthetic materials found in high-grade explosives settled over sections of the wreckage. Skeptics say this is proof the towers weren’t destroyed by the planes’ impacts alone. Several groups have requested an official inquiry into the September 11 attacks. “That morning changed everything,” says Majors. “You have to ask the questions to get the answers.” –wire reports

Catch that? Todd gets it right away; he barely comprehends what the whole paragraph’s about because he’s focused on the code. The code is thus: If there’s more than one capitalized word in a sentence, take the second capitalized word. If there’s only one capitalized word, take the second word in the sentence. Quote

attributions don't count. So this is what Todd reads: "White coat(ing). Say 'September morning.' Have reports."

The Conspiracy leaves messages like this for each other all the time, but most people never notice. Todd always notices. It's rare that the Conspiracy uses electronic means to communicate with their agents because phone calls, email and faxes can all be apprehended and used as physical evidence of the Conspiracy's existence. They release coded messages in newspapers and magazines (particularly *Victoria's Secret*, which has gotten Todd in trouble for stealing copies from mailboxes more than once), traffic advisories over AM radio and the occasional skywriting from a stunt flier ("EAT AT JOE'S RESTAURANT?" More like "ET TO RETURN."). This message must have been meant for Robbie Johnson. An earlier paragraph tells Todd where to look for the person in the white coat—S 22nd Avenue. Too easy.

It's too bad about the poor bastard in the Prius, but this is what Gold Standard sent Todd to do, and Todd's not about to waste a lead on the Conspiracy. He rents a room at the U-Rest Inn (it seems room 28, farthest from the noisy ice machine, has just become available) and catches a little rest before his stakeout. It's not like the person in the white coat will be there while the sun's out. Todd's learned from TV that all the good cloak and dagger stuff happens in the dark. Todd's considered that Robbie Johnson may have already met his ally on S 22nd Avenue, but the Conspiracy wouldn't leave one of their secret messages lying around after it served its purpose. He has so much trouble proving the Conspiracy exists in the first place because they're so good at covering their tracks. There are times when Todd can't blame people for not believing in the Conspiracy, but mostly he chalks their doubt up to ignorance and their being so used to sucking at the proverbial teat of the Conspiracy's front companies. That, and alien mind control waves put out by cable television.

Todd rolls out to S 22nd Avenue once the sky is dark. He's sure he'll soon blow the lid off the Conspiracy and prove to all the doubters and optimists just how right he's been and how rotten the whole system is. Maybe then people will stop calling him Freaky Todd. Cutting out the goth/emo/vampire/whatever-they're-calling-themselves-this-year look would probably help too, but black clothing and various leather accessories are all Todd has in his closet, and he just doesn't have anything left in his budget for fashion after all the ramen and holy water he goes through every month. Besides, he's going to look totally badass in all the pictures when he gets on the news for proving the aliens are coming to enslave mankind.

Lights off, radio off, he waits in the car for hour after hour drinking Rockstars and watching the street. By maybe three thirty, his back teeth are floating and he can't stop crossing and recrossing his ankles, but he holds it for another hour until the first light creeps onto the street. Todd ducks behind his car and empties his bladder. Past experience tells him that if anyone was going to show up it

would happen the moment he had his dick in his hand, but there's still not a goddamn thing.

Shit, Todd thinks to himself, must have picked the wrong night.

Gold Standard has a saying — “the Market supplies as the Market demands” — that Todd (wrongly) interprets to mean “shit happens or it doesn't.” Todd returns to the U-Rest Inn, gets into some leftovers from Panda Express and fires up his laptop. A few tipsters have left possible leads in his inbox. One claims President Obama is a white man in blackface and supplies an obvious Photoshop of a “missed” splotch of pale skin on Obama's neck as proof. Todd deletes this one without a moment's pause. Another claims the H1N1 vaccine is an experimental mind control serum (he saves this one in the maybe folder). A woman from Florida who claimed she saw heavy UFO activity in the days preceding the BP oil spill still hasn't gotten back to him again, and Todd files her messages away in the unsolved folder with the assumption she's been kidnapped and processed by the Conspiracy. He's happy to see a hot tip in his fortune cookie: “Beware of strangers, beautiful women and rodeos.” Todd dozes, completely by accident, and doesn't wake up until almost nine in the morning.

The continental breakfast is picked fairly clean by the time Todd gets down to the lobby. There are only two other guests to be seen, and they're sitting together: a Native American man in a pinstripe suit, whose silky black hair hangs in braids that pass his jawline, and the most stunning woman Todd's ever laid eyes on, a petite knock-out with almond eyes, a rosebud mouth and skin of a color he can't put any ethnic origin to, a kind of pale, creamy golden brown. She might be Russian, or Eskimo, or Irish, or African, or maybe she's from somewhere in South America or one of the Pacific Islands? Todd can't make up his mind and pretends sudden interest in his complimentary *USA Today* before she notices him staring.

Todd doesn't believe in gods. He believes in black magic, mystic talismans, the all-encompassing government Conspiracy to hide the truth about the existence of extraterrestrial life from the public, psychic visions, telekinesis, indigo children, poltergeists, the Loch Ness monster, Sasquatch, the Chupacabra; he thinks it's only a matter of time before the flu vaccine is responsible for a zombie holocaust, the Google search engine becomes self-aware, and a technological singularity erases the distinction between self and other across the globe. But deities are an intellectual hard limit.

That said, Todd believes the Universe provides if he lets it. How that differs from faith in the various spirits of ancient paganism, the reverence of Egyptian god-kings or the deism of America's founders is anyone's guess, but Todd makes a gut-level distinction. Right now, Todd's gut tells him the Universe sent that fortune cookie last night because he's supposed to follow the stranger and the beautiful woman. And avoid rodeos. So he sits at the table mentally filling in the crossword puzzle and gets so caught up on 23 across that he almost misses seeing them leave.

Todd knows he's on the right track when his new quarry heads for Gage Park. He watches from the car as the pair walks over the same remains of the company picnic he picked over yesterday. The woman picks up some litter and hands it to the man. They talk for a moment, then it's back to their blue Cadillac, and Todd follows them to some kind of church. The woman changes some of her clothes in the front seat, then they head inside, and Todd settles back in the driver's seat to wait for them to come back out.

Then he sees her: a woman in a white coat walking past the church with a serious set to her face. Todd's out of the car in an instant. It's all coming together – it wasn't S 22nd Avenue, it was Saturday the 22nd, today!

"September morning," Todd says to the woman as she walks by.

She stops and turns. "Excuse me?"

"Lovely September morning weather."

"Fuckin' junkies," she says and picks up her pace away from him.

He's careful following the woman in the white coat. It's not that Todd doesn't want her to know he's there; no, he's counting on her thinking he's a fellow agent of the Conspiracy so she'll lead him to wherever their local base might be. Todd just doesn't want anyone else to know she's leading him somewhere discreet so they can talk. Who knows what kind of Conspiracy trap could await him if he's not careful? Even some of Gold Standard's other agents are so deep undercover that they've had to take restraining orders out against Todd or had him arrested to keep up the appearance of non-compliance with his investigations in the past. Who knows what kind of trouble he could get into if the woman in the white coat or one of her fellow Conspiracy stooges realized Todd's true purpose? With that in (his hopelessly paranoid) mind, Todd keeps his distance until his target goes into a stucco office building with a giant cardboard American flag in the window.

People enter and leave the building until the sun's headed on its westward arc and Todd's gut is cursing him in a tone the average fantasy writer might call "guttural." The woman in the white coat never comes back out. Todd doesn't want to just rush in. It could be a trap, and he doesn't want to be abducted by the Conspiracy or the aliens on an empty stomach. So first he backtracks to his car and drives to Quiznos for a sandwich.

Dusk is near when Todd pulls to the curb out front of the rendezvous point. If he was the protagonist of his favorite shows, he'd find an open window or cellar hatch to sneak through; reality is a bitch, however, and Todd is left with no option but the front door.

The girl at the greeting desk takes one look at him and says, "Meeting's in the second room on the left, but you're kind of late."

Sounds like they're expecting him. Todd nods and heads down the hall.

(The greeter is a local community college student who took this job on the recommendation of her uncle, who thinks it's time she "started payin' attention to what's *really* goin' down." Todd strikes her as exactly the sort of paranoid

whackjob she's working for, not one of the law enforcement officers she's supposed to keep out.)

Any fool could guess the meeting's just a cover. Todd makes his way down the hallway checking behind closed doors instead of joining the poor saps sitting through the distraction. Pictures of the World Trade Center in various states of explosion/implosion/rubble are plastered along the walls. Photocopies of articles from homemade newsletters and print-outs of text-choked websites that look circa-1994 AOL member page are stapled to a cork board by the unisex bathroom at the end of the hall. There's something about the peeling tile on the floor and the flickering fluorescent bulbs overhead that makes Todd worry about asbestos exposure, not that he'd be dumb enough to go get screened; the Conspiracy has been infecting people with mesothelioma when they complain about asbestos, probably as another excuse for doctors to pump them full of mind control drugs.

Todd finds a locked door next to the restroom, and his gut says it's the one he wants — his gut, and the fact that all the other doors have led to rooms full of old furniture or janitorial supply closets. The lock doesn't faze him; Gold Standard gave him a skeleton gun for this kind of situation. A skeleton gun is like a Swiss Army Knife with mechanical skeleton keys; flash memory auto-admin-rights USB sticks for Windows, iMac and LINUX/UNIX; a couple different all-purpose security passes hacked to simulate industry-wide default passwords; that kind of thing. Todd steps around those pesky Fourth Amendment roadblocks whenever possible. People wouldn't have any problem with the government curtailing their rights now and then if they knew what was good for them.

There are stairs leading down into a basement beyond the door. Todd draws his gun and fumbles a moment for a light switch. The stairs descend to —

By god, Todd realizes, it's an alien abductee holding room!

Lies My Preacher Told Me

We already know AJ and Betsy arrive in Topeka and stay the night at the U-Rest Inn. They do so following an uneventful 25 hours of driving spread over the course of two days. Let's not dwell on the details to pad the page count.

Betsy walks to the reception desk, throws her hair back and breathes in deep to make the most of the unbuttoned neckline of her blouse. The man behind the desk is happy to tell her all about the guest whose car blew up near Gage Park on Thursday, even volunteers his room number. He even lets it slip that someone from the federal government is staying in that same room now and wonders out loud if there's an investigation going on. All it takes is letting him look at what he'll never touch.

Satisfied that they have a lead to go on, Betsy meets AJ back at the breakfast table in the lobby. A few minutes later, some goofy looking emo guy a couple decades too old to be shopping at Hot Topic comes into the lobby and gives her an obvious up-and-down stare. Someone who didn't know AJ wouldn't notice the little rise at the ends of his lips, but Betsy's been his student long enough to see those private smiles of his. He likes to call her his walking distraction; that's fair enough since she sees him as the best familiar a witch could have.

They head to Gage Park. Betsy watches the goth guy follow them and mentions him to AJ, who only shrugs. She wonders if AJ knows something she doesn't. Well, that's a given – AJ uses the stereotypical stoicism of his ethnic background as an excuse to play his cards close to his chest. Betsy's spent hours learning how to guess what most people are thinking at a glance. The average person's eyes and set of mouth, hand motions, stance, even the scent of the pheromones in his or her sweat will give away more than words ever will. A witch has to be able to read her targets or her charms won't work, and Betsy is one hell of a witch. Still, reading AJ can be like trying to decipher Braille without fingertips.

The park is a mess. The Truthers and Teabaggers left their crap everywhere. For a group so concerned about saving their country, they sure don't seem to mind trashing the place and leaving the mess for someone else to clean up whenever it's convenient for them. Betsy's used to seeing that kind of double-think in large groups; her parents were hardcore Scientologists. She notices a flier in the grass that's different from the others, reads it, grunts, then hands the paper to AJ.

"Phelps." AJ crushes the paper and tosses it back to the grass. Unlike a lot of the trash out here, it's biodegradable.

"Think he's in it with them?"

AJ shakes his head. "Wrong kind of crazy. His type scares the crap out of the Council for all the wrong reasons. But he might have seen something."

That's how they end up at 3701 West 12th Street, home of Westboro Baptist Church. The man from the hotel follows but doesn't get out of his car. AJ ignores him, so Betsy does the same. She buttons her blouse up to her neck, pulls off her stockings in the car and slips on some more conservative shoes. Effective witchcraft isn't about casting spells in consecrated circles or brewing potions; it's about controlling how people perceive the witch and guiding their responses so they make convenient conclusions. The lipstick comes off, a little antiperspirant goes on. By the time Betsy's done, she's as plain and sexless as the women in Phelps' cult. The stalker watches them go into the church.

A woman at least as wide as she is tall sits in the front pew typing a legal brief on an iBook. A black and white dot-matrix-printed banner hangs above the pulpit. It shows pixilated images of dead and mutilated US soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan to either side of "**GOD HATES AMERICA**" in 72 pt. Comic Sans. Betsy grabs a free homemade coloring book from a stack by the door. Most of the pages feature rabbis and bare-chested cowboys in various states of torture while they burn in hell. Helpful Old Testament passages explain what the sinners did to deserve their torments, most of which comes down to being gay and/or Jewish.

"Trespassers!" A man with thinning blonde hair bolts from his pew and thrusts a finger at them. "Outsiders! Defilers! Faggots!"

AJ puts up a hand and beams his best I'm-not-going-to-strangle-you grin. Betsy's told him before that giving that smile to crazy racists is like petting a rabid dog. He gets it. AJ just has a knack for not getting bitten, and he thinks pulling their tails is funny.

"We don't need no heathens dis'specting our holy place," says blondie.

"We're all brothers and sisters in Christ," AJ says.

Betsy steps up beside him. "Except Jews, liberals, geologists, Catholics, soldiers, faggots and all the other heathens who'll burn in hell."

"Amen." AJ bobs his head.

"Oh," blondie says and offers a hand, "why didn't ya say ya were god-fearing' folk? What can I do ya for?"

AJ takes a seat on the nearest pew. "We heard there were heathens in these parts blaming man for the acts of god. Seems one in particular we've been looking for is here in town." He hands over a picture of Bigs printed from the ERIS database. "This is Robert Johnson. He's an abortionist from out of Chicago—"

"Babykiller!" The blonde man stamps his foot.

Betsy bursts into tears on cue. "He took my baby!" The tears are the easy part of this charade; there are plenty of things Betsy can think about to make herself cry. It's the way the breath rattles in her lungs and catches in her throat for a choking cough between sobs that really sells the whole act.

Blondie gives her a hug; his hands linger a moment on the bit of bra strap he can feel through her blouse. Why are so many of these religious conservatives

such fucking perverts? She could be his youngest daughter, maybe his granddaughter if his oldest kid got started early. Betsy ignores the opportunist's fondling and lets him guide her to a seat on the pew. "What happened, kiddo?"

"Dr. Johnson..." Betsy's bottom lip quivers between sniffles. "My baby was three months quickened in my belly when I went in for a prenatal check-up. He started asking if I was ready to have a baby and who the daddy was and how I was going to support myself. Then he gave me a shot that put me to sleep, and when I woke up..." She sobs.

"Go on, child. Ya'll are safe here."

"When I woke up, I wasn't pregnant no more. He aborted my baby without my permission!" Betsy buries her face in her palms and lets loose a ghostly moan.

"Ah, dear." The blonde man strokes Betsy's hair. He's giving her a serious sex offender vibe. "This no good sin-cursed world."

AJ clears his throat. "We followed him this far. He was here in Topeka a few days ago. I was hoping, since he's a baby murderer, you might be keeping tabs on him."

Blondie nods. "I don't know nothing 'bout that, but the prophet might."

AJ and Betsy exchange a look. Betsy sniffles and says, "Can we see him?"

"Ya kidding? He loves company from the faithful. C'mon."

They follow blondie down a hall, through a metal detector and past a pair of bored-looking dogs to an oak door with a silver plaque that reads "Reverend Frederick Phelps, Attorney at Law, Prophet of the Lord God Almighty." A number of *B.C.* and *Ziggy* cartoons are stapled to the door; the latest is from 1998.

Fred Phelps, patriarch of Westboro Baptist, is passed out on his desk. A drool puddle is condensing on his latest diatribe for the local op-eds, a stunning condemnation of Post cereal for using Alphabits to send subliminal messages to children encouraging the homosexual lifestyle. Blondie clears his throat and Phelps sits up with a snort and a muffled "Faggots!" Fred Phelps' bushy white eyebrows shoot up the moment he sees AJ. His wild white hair, age-receded to bare the mottled skin of his forehead, makes him look like Dr. Wily without the 'stache.

"Revered Phelps, these folks are —"

"I know who this devil is," says Phelps, and he jabs a gnarled finger at AJ.

"Git, Andy. A man of god's gotta face the devil when he comes to your door."

The blonde man stares at Betsy for a moment more before he goes and shuts the door behind himself. Fred Phelps leans back in a plush leather chair bought with the proceeds of spurious slander and libel suits. "Who's the witch?"

Betsy wonders whether Phelps just assumes any woman not under his arthritic thumb is a witch or he's really guessed at her profession. "Betsy Rothschild. Howdy, reverend."

"Rothschild!" Phelps slaps his desk. "I knew you had questionable features. And you!" He turns back to AJ as the latter takes a seat. "Bringing a Jewess witch

into my house, you god-cursed woodsnigger. I oughta burn the both of ya and let Satan get on to bugging you up the ass tonight."

"Hi, Fred," says AJ.

"I'm not Jewish," Betsy says, but Phelps ignores her. She takes a seat next to AJ.

"Andrew Jackson, last time I saw you, I swore before god and man I'd have your hide next time you showed your face here."

Betsy looks to AJ. "What did I miss last time you were in Topeka?"

"I fucked his niece and she ended up leaving his cult."

"She was expelled from this church before her cancerous spirit could corrupt any more of the body of Christ," says Phelps. "'Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease.'"

"She left of her own accord and you know it."

"No one ever leaves Westboro Baptist! No true Christian ever would!"

AJ grins. "Is that the No True Christian fallacy, Fred?"

Betsy puts a hand on AJ's wrist. "This isn't very productive."

"But it's fun." AJ winks at her. "Hey Fred old buddy, seen this particular sinner lately?"

Fred squints at the photo of Bigs when AJ plops it on his desk. "Nope."

Betsy can tell in a half-dozen ways that Phelps is lying. First, his mouth is open. Beyond that, he's trying too hard to look AJ in the eyes, he half-swallows before he speaks, he wiggles in his seat, a bead of sweat trickles down the graying folds of his neck's skin and he looks at the picture too long before he hands it back. The old man would make a horrible warlock, and it's no wonder he's such a washout as a lawyer.

"Looks like you were down at Gage Park the other day," AJ says.

Phelps shrugs. "'And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.' I take my ministry to the people, bunch of unwashed heathens headed for hell though they be."

"Good on you. What day were you down there?"

Phelps shifts in his seat. "Thursday."

"Heard a car blew up during a political rally that day. You see it?"

"Just the Lord sending some rumpsticker to the lake of fire."

"So you saw a body? 'Cause I heard the driver disappeared."

"I don't know what happened to him."

"Never said the driver was a man." AJ puts the photo back on the desk. "It was him, wasn't it? He never checked back into his hotel room after the car blew up."

Phelps doesn't bother looking at the picture again. "Fine, ya god-cursed woodsnigger. Who is he again?"

"Robert Johnson. He's an agent of the Council of Overseers."

"Whoa-oa." Fred laughs like a fat third-grader. "What in the name of Fag-Hatin' God Almighty you think I'm gonna pull the tail of that nest of demons

for?" He slams his palm on the table three times, and one of his eyelids half-blinks over and again like he's having a seizure. "For its name is Legion, and it will swallow the earth when the anti-christ Barack *Hussein* Obama takes his throne as emperor of the United Nations. They put some bush-lipped Jew Muslim in charge of the button. You know how crazy those old men are."

Betsy wonders where Fred Phelps gets off calling anyone crazy, but then again she used to be in Sea Org and doesn't have a lot of room to talk.

"Fair enough," AJ says, "but what would you tell me if you had balls?"

Spittle flies from Phelps' mouth when he yells. "May satyrs rape your eye sockets with their barbèd cocks! I'll stick to protesting; I ain't about to piss off the Beast." The air goes out of him, like he was expecting to say something different, and he slumps back into the leather chair looking very old.

"All I want to know is where he is. He knows something worth killing civilians to keep quiet. I'd like to know what. Wouldn't you?"

Fred Phelps folds his hands and bows his head in silent supplication. Betsy listens to the breath rattle in the old man's ribcage. If Phelps was just bone and blood, he'd have been dead years ago. Hatred and self-righteous fury (and a psychopathic need for attention and power) have replaced everything else in his body, and he has destroyed his career, his family, his church and his mind in a confused attempt to fulfill his defective drives. He nods to himself, farts a little, clears his throat.

"All I need to know is what's written in the word of god. Not that a godless heathen like you or your loose floozy witch would understand. I expel you, faggot hippie witch and warlock!" He tries to stand but slips and almost breaks a hip. "Butthumpers!"

AJ waits for Phelps to ease his brittle bones into his seat again. "See, I knew right off there was no point appealing to your sense of decency. Figured I'd at least try your curiosity. Let's try extortion next. Tell me what you know or I'll pull your banking privileges."

"Motherfuck! The Mormons are right, you really are the lost tribe of Israel! You're a woodskike."

"Call me whatever you want, either my next stop is Robbie Johnson or the IRS finds out how much you really pull in from anonymous donors."

"I'll sue you!"

"Who? The people hiding all your money from the IRS out in international waters? C'mon, Fred."

Betsy tries to keep her eyebrows from climbing and her lips from compressing. She didn't know Phelps had an account with Cousins & Indian, LRC.

"The Truthers, dammit." Phelps looks like his blood pressure is getting out of hand. "He drove off with a gaggle of 'em after his car blew up. They meet at the Tea Party headquarters downtown by where the Arby's used to be." By the look on Phelps' face he's silently praying to his hateful deity that AJ drops dead

where he sits. Good thing Betsy doesn't believe in his brand of mojo. "That's all I know about it. Now get the hell out of my church."

AJ waves at the cultists waiting in the pews for the evening mass when Betsy and he are on their way out. The stalker from the hotel is gone, but his car's still parked by the curb. Betsy wonders what that was all about – he was obviously following them – but again AJ just waves the matter off when she mentions it. She lets it drop; there's something else on her mind, but she waits for AJ to put the car in drive before she says, "Does that bastard really have an account with Cousins & Indian?"

"He does."

"You're really helping *him* dodge taxes?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

AJ gives her one of those smiles only she seems to catch. "We've been shaving big bucks off the top of it for years. Gives us a list of all his donors, too."

"It's dirty money."

"It's paper money. It's inherently dirty."

Betsy sighs. She unbuttons the top of her blouse so she can get a lungful of air for the first time in forty minutes. "So, Truthers?"

"I want to check Johnson's room first," AJ says. "But then, yeah, Truthers."

Bigs Gets Saved

Bigs has no idea how many hours or days pass while he's imprisoned by the Teabaggers. There aren't any windows to let natural light into the Truthers' firetrap basement, and the only times the bulbs overhead go on are when someone comes down to drug him. Susan McHailey never comes back, or at least not when Bigs is conscious. Bigs wonders if the drugs they're pumping into him are inhibiting his telekinetic powers. He also wonders what the hell's going to happen to him, either when the Truthers decide to do something besides keep him here or the Council tracks him down, but he doesn't like thinking about either scenario.

Dreams pass by while Bigs drifts through his medicated haze. Marie, his ex-wife, yells at him for cheating on her. Bigs has never been unfaithful, but the nature of his work precludes him from telling Marie where he is some nights, and she does the math using the numbers Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake have taught her that sort of thing adds up to. She thinks he's fucking a stripper in Seattle, which is ridiculous because Bigs' move to Washington is another twelve years in the future when Marie leaves him, and Cindy's barely hit puberty at the time.

Another dream has him in New Orleans after Katrina. The official story is that a hurricane's hit the city and the federal government has to declare martial law to stop the murdering, raping and looting going on in the flooded ruins. The truth is Al-Qaeda has stolen a prototype psi-weapon capable of instantly converting everyone in a five-mile radius into a radical Muslim jihadist and, with help from Castro's government in Cuba, has infiltrated New Orleans in preparation for a massive assault on the American homeland. The Council begrudgingly turns the experimental HAARP superweapon against their own subjects, sacrificing the few for the good of the many all Spock-style. At least that's what they told Bigs, and it sounded perfectly rational at the time. Bigs never hesitated to put down the jihadists trying to escape the city then, but in the dream his finger can never quite pull the trigger. He's sitting in a helicopter with a sniper rifle, but somehow flood water fills his lungs and his scope goes dark. Bigs rolls into the copter's cab, crawls to the cockpit to beg the pilot for help. Lying in the pilot's chair is a dingy old tube sock.

When Bigs fights his way back to consciousness again, a pair of faces are staring down at him.

"It's like one of those tentacle rape pornos!" says a jolly man in a jester hat. He's easily 300 pounds and maybe six-foot-ten, and Bigs' first impression of him depends mostly on his round-lensed black sunglasses and magnificent bush of an orange beard. When the man steps back, Bigs can see he's wearing a mustard-stained t-shirt advertising TREK-CON '94 that ends a half-inch above his belly

button and palm tree patterned swim trunks cinched another inch below the bulge of his bare gut.

"Aye lad, but not a Jap'nese high school girl ta be seen." The other man is about four feet tall and wears an emerald green leprechaun outfit. There's a four leaf clover in the band of his buckled green top hat, a corncob pipe in his lip and a fire engine red beard on his face that, judging by his eyebrows (the only other hair on his head) is its natural color. Neither man looks to be armed, though the first could probably squeeze a man to death in his flabby arms with an enthusiastic hug.

Bigs sits up, relieved that he can. His head's still a little fuzzy, and he has to piss like a race horse. Who are these jokers – Truthers? Council agents? He's fairly certain he's not dreaming them because he can feel the blood rushing back to his fingers and toes. It's possible they – whomever "they" may be – are fucking with him, but he's loose from the restraints (*Was that their doing?*) and that's a step in the right direction.

"I *told* ya I saved!" says the Trek-Conner. "Saved him good!"

"Aye," says the leprechaun. "Up on yer feet, friend. Drink a swig o' this."

Bigs waves off the canteen. He doesn't want to be drugged again, and whatever's in the canteen smells like stale goat piss. His jacket is on a crate; his gun is still in the holster, though someone's been pawing at it. The bearded men don't make any moves to stop Bigs from retrieving his things. "Who sent you?" Bigs' tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth. He wonders how long it's been since he had any water. "Council?"

The leprechaun shakes his head. "Jesus here seen 'em kidnap ya. I been sayin' those feckers bring in th' wrong crowd. Bad fer th' local economy."

There's a mini-fridge in the corner. Bigs finds a few sealed bottles of water inside. He gulps down most of one and sticks another in his coat pocket. "Jesus?" he says and clears his throat.

"I save!" says the man in the jester hat, and he hands Bigs a coupon for twenty cents off microwave popcorn.

Bigs sticks the coupon in his pocket. "How'd you get in?"

"T'ey let us in. S'pose we look like their kinda kooks." The leprechaun takes a quick bow. "Name's Blingbring 'round these parts. 'Ow ye do, friend?"

"Bigs. Look, thanks and all, but can we cut the chatter and get the hell out of here before someone comes down to check on me?"

Blingbring and Jesus lead the way up the same set of stairs Todd will come down in less than an hour. Bigs lets them go first because they were conscious coming down and he doesn't trust either man as far as he could roll Jesus uphill in the snow. Blingbring locks the door from the inside once they're in the hall – "Just ta feck with 'em." – which makes Bigs wonder if the door was locked to begin with.

There's just one thing in the world Bigs wants more this moment than to get the hell out of Topeka, and as luck would have it the bathroom's next to the

basement door. Bigs takes a days-delayed piss that sends two and a half orgasms worth of shivers down his spine. He straightens the wrinkles from his suit the best he can and reloads his sidearm. The money's still all in his wallet, but someone's been looking through his plastic. It's not like he dares use any of his cards regardless; the Council surely has their agents watching his accounts. He wonders if his rescuers are from the Council. If not, why hasn't someone from the Council come for him? They have to know where he is. Or could the psychic shielding on this building be so powerful that not even the Overmaster can penetrate it?

The weirdoes are still waiting for Bigs in the hall when he's done seeing to his bladder's needs. Bigs pokes his head around the corner and sees the young receptionist watching the door. Being a highly trained secret agent (see: paranoid semi-psychotic with delusions of grandeur regarding one's own value in the international intelligence scene), he assumes she's already been given his description and is probably armed. Leaving that way is out of the question.

"Okay," says Bigs, "how do we get out of here?"

Jesus slaps him on the back. "With everyone else. C'mon, Bigs, there's Kool-Aid!"

"Ah, lad," Blingbring says and follows him to the meeting room, "what'd I tell ye 'bout always drinkin' th' Kool-Aid?"

Let's talk a moment about the human psyche and the need to conform. Homo sapiens are inherently social creatures. The need for social contact is hardwired in the human brain, if not by DNA (which itself seems pretty likely) then by the just as real inherited behavioral programs people are imprinted with from the moment of birth onward (if not before, which again seems likely). Maybe there should be some sciencey name for these inherited ideas and behaviors like "inherited meta-programs," or IMPs (with apologies to Neal Stephenson).

Twentieth century research in psychology and molecular biology shows that the human brain operates via electrical and chemical functions that leave permanent impressions in the brain tissue. That means everything that happens in the brain – every thought, sensation, memory, emotion, impulse, habit – exists *physically* in the grey matter. This should be fairly obvious to anyone who gives the matter (and the nature of matter) much thought, but most humans in the Universe depicted herein are yet to realize the implications of this fact. The gist is that all IMPs exist as physical structures with permanent residence in the brain, which explains why they're so damned hard to overcome.

Humans are subject to a particular bitch of an IMP: the mistaken gut-level belief that people who seem like they know what they're doing actually do. This is such a bitch of an IMP in modern American society because a certain segment of the population has evolved the ability to look like they might know what they're doing despite actually being fuck-ups. What's more, in a cruel twist of genetic fate, many of those who look like they know what they're doing have atrophied the mental capacities necessary to know what they're doing via a

combination of 1) not needing to know what they're doing because people will follow them anyway and 2) a great deal of multigenerational genetic and social inbreeding among the country's most influential families. Let's call this the George W. Bush Effect.

Bigs is a white man just the other side of his prime – tall and yet to stoop, wide-shouldered and barrel-chested, with new hairs going silver every week and his features hardening in that strange way age grants men their majesty. He's the kind of man who, according to the American mindset, looks like he knows what he's doing. Jesus isn't, but, by some twisted non-logic, Bigs' gut tells him that makes it *especially* likely Jesus knows what he's doing when he starts giving orders (let's call this the Paris Hilton Corollary). That's the sort of line of thought that terminates with Bigs sitting between a corpulent man-child guzzling Kool-Aid and a dwarf in a leprechaun costume, watching a Power Point presentation about bombs planted at the base of the Twin Towers to ease their destruction on 9/11, and fondling his gun through his coat pocket because he's sure someone in the room will realize who he is and raise the alarm any second.

Jesus stands at the end of the slide show and announces to the room, "I have to pee!" Everyone in the room watches him leave. Bigs sinks lower in his seat. Jesus waddles back in after maybe five minutes of armchair speculation on who would have benefited from destroying the World Trade Center and leans across Bigs so he can say to Blingbring, "I saved three more!"

"Good on ye, lad, but kin'ly sit down."

"Bigs!" Jesus settles back into his seat. His white beaver teeth make a half-moon in his beard when he grins. "Did you know I'm your close personal savior?"

A balding man in a Budweiser tee steps behind the podium and clears his throat. "It's funny the way your mind'll play tricks on ya," he says once the room is quiet. "Ya ever remember something, then realize yer rememberin' it wrong?" A few heads bob in the audience. There's even a "Praise Jesus!" from an elderly woman that gets Jesus halfway out of his seat before Blingbring reaches across Bigs' lap to pinch the savior's ham hock thigh. "Well what if I told ya Washington's been usin' the media to distort yer memories of 9/11 so they can feed ya a cockamamie story 'bout what happened instead of telling ya the truth?"

A short, rail-thin blonde woman in a white coat stands in the front row. "I was there in the streets when it happened. I heard the explosions on the bottom floor a long time after the planes crashed. It was like they had it rigged to blow ahead of time."

"Thank you, Miss Barker," says the balding man.

"I think it was Nancy Pelosi doing a human sacrifice spell so she could make a witch's pact with the devil and get control of the government," Miss Barker says. "That pact came to fruition when Barack *Hussein* Obama usurped the Presidency. He'll rule for seven and a half years until Joe Biden goes crazy and nukes the New Russian Empire's Middle Eastern oilfields. Then a lot of people die in

World War III and Jesus comes back." She pumps a bony fist in the air. "That magical residue around the World Trade Center fucking cured my cancer!"

"Thank you, Miss Barker," the balding man says again. He suddenly looks rather ill. Miss Barker takes her seat. The man lectures on architecture, different metals' melting points, jet fuel ignition speeds, witness accounts that differ from media reports and, on special request from the audience, the hypothetical link between autism, vaccines and Islamofascism.

Bigs half-listens to it all. He can't stop thinking about what Susan McHailey said, that the Council had fair warning of the attack and apparently chose not to heed it. Their psychics must have seen it coming even before she filed her reports. He allows himself to wonder for the first time in almost a decade who was responsible for 9/11. He knows something happened at Roswell because the Council put out disinformation about the incident. The same goes for the Lindbergh baby and the Philadelphia Experiment. Regardless of who was behind 9/11, crazy religious extremists or the Council, Bigs' gut senses disinformation at work, and that's enough to make him think that the official story wasn't the *whole* story.

"Now I know what yer thinkin': yer thinkin' this all sounds a mite like conspiracy talk, and ya know what everyone says 'bout conspiracy theories." The balding man thumps his hand on the podium in the same spot his bible would sit Wednesdays and Sundays. "But c'mon, wasn't Watergate—a conspiracy? Wasn't the Spanish-American War—a conspiracy? Wasn't the Boston Tea Party—a conspiracy? Our government has a history of conspiracies goin' back to its roots, so it ain't like it's anything new. We don't want to tell ya what to think, just how. We want ya to look at the evidence yerself and get back to us if ya need the answers."

"Hallelujah!" says the religious lady.

"Praise me!" says Jesus.

A pair of older folks share disgusted looks and make to leave. Bigs sees his chance and nudges Blingbring awake. Together, they lead Jesus out after the elderly couple as the balding man hands the floor over to the redhead running the raffle. A few more people follow Bigs' group into the hall; he watches them, but they look more like bored locals than undercover agents.

The receptionist doesn't even glance at them when they leave, but Bigs imagines he can feel her eyes between his shoulder blades all the same.

Night's already fallen in Topeka. Bigs takes a deep breath of the cool night breeze, relieved to smell something besides sweat and stale air.

"Jesus requires sustenance!" says the big guy, and Bigs' stomach growls its agreement.

"What ya say, lad, a bit o' dinner's in order, innit?" says Blingbring, and he takes Bigs by the arm. Bigs gives the Truther hideout one last glance and follows the leprechaun down the sidewalk.

A Series of Coincidences

Todd leans close over the abductee holding chair. He can't see any probes or tracking chip implantation devices, but a poster on one of his favorite newsgroups said the aliens are using portable solid hologram technology, so the lack of physical evidence is further evidence of alien involvement in this case so far as Todd is concerned. Drying sweat (and possibly urine and other bodily fluids) have discolored the seat. Todd puts his beaklike nose within a half-inch of the stain and takes a sinus-clearing whiff. Whoever was being probed here hasn't been gone long. Todd does his best to scrape a fluid sample into an empty Tic Tac canister.

The stairs creak. Todd ducks behind the chair and hopes he's out of sight from the stairwell. The lights go out, and Todd's left gripping his gun in the dark. He wonders if he's fallen into an alien trap. Is he finally going to be abducted? Todd's been waiting for this day since he watched his first episode of *Unsolved Mysteries*.

He's waiting for the pulsating white light and string bean grey men to come down the stairs when a pair of hands wrap round his neck and shooting arm. Todd's unseen assailant pulls him to his feet. The lights come back on, and the exotic beauty from the hotel is staring at him from the bottom of the stairs. Todd assumes the Indian is the one holding him; he must have used his sacred forest magic to shadowwalk up behind Todd. It never occurs to him that the Indian may just be good at moving silently and have decent night vision; the supernatural remains his default explanation for anything he doesn't understand and even a good deal of what he does. Todd's fingers go numb and the gun drops, surely the work of more Indian magic and not a matter of exerting force on the proper pressure point in his wrist.

"You're not Robbie Johnson," Todd says to the woman. "Are you with the aliens?"

"It's okay," says the man behind Todd, and he lets loose his bear grip. "He knows." The woman nods, and the man walks back around Todd to stand beside her. He flashes a badge just long enough for Todd to catch a glimpse of it. A rational mind might wonder if the man was trying to avoid scrutiny of his credentials, but Todd works for the government and, like Bigs, assumes anyone who says the right words and carries a badge is in charge. "We're with the First United Nondenominational Psychic Detective Agency. I'm Detective AJ and this is my psychretary, Betsy."

Todd doesn't want to feel ignorant, so he convinces himself he's heard of this FUNPDA gig. Hasn't he read about them or seen their videos on YouTube? Probably, right? "This is a crime scene under federal investigation. What are you doing here?"

Betsy squints and rubs at her temples. "Someone... important and secretive... told you to find Robbie 'Bigs' Johnson in Topeka... right?"

Goddamn, she's the real thing! "What do you know about him?"

"Our most powerful psychics have foreseen Robbie Johnson pursued by a vast government conspiracy," Detective AJ says. "We tracked him here from Seattle. All we know is he guards one of the conspiracy's most terrible secrets, and they'll do anything to silence him."

"I heard his mind crying to me across space and time from this room." Betsy nods toward the abductee holding chair. "We've been running around Topeka all day trying to narrow down the spot. Looks like they knew we were coming and moved him."

"Sounds right." Todd bends down and scoops up his gun; he puts it back in the holster. He's not sure where Robbie Johnson's gotten to and isn't sure it matters at the moment. There's a genuine psychic with a sweet ass and an Indian, whom television shows assure Todd is sure to have inherited generations of lore concerning the imminent invasion, not only staying at the same hotel but working the same case. Meeting up with them might have been the real reason Gold Standard sent Todd after Johnson to begin with. Who knows what new insights they could give him into the Conspiracy? And if they can lead him to his original quarry, all the better. "I'm—"

"Special Agent Todd Moody," Betsy says, "from Homeland Security."

Todd's mouth opens and closes a few times before he can get any words to leave his throat. "Want to get some pie at Denny's and swap intel?" Chances are he'll get more out of them than they will out of him, seeing as how they already seem to know who he is and why he's here, and sugar enhances his interrogation skills.

The detective and his psychretary look at each other and exchange shrugs. Todd wonders if Betsy is reading AJ's mind. Maybe she's talking to him telepathically.

The trio heads up the stairway we've seen a couple times now, and AJ closes the door behind them. Before anyone can say anything, a bulbous man in a jester hat yells and makes a beeline for them.

"Poor lost souls, let me make your eternity less of a pain in the ass!" He hands each of them a coupon clipped from a glossy newspaper insert. Todd gets buy two, get one free on store brand dandruff shampoo.

"Not a bad price for mangoes," Betsy says and pockets her coupon.

AJ stares at his coupon. Todd doesn't know AJ well enough to read his face and assumes AJ's just going over the fine print. Betsy knows how to read AJ's face, at least as much as it can be read, and she wonders what he sees in the coupon that she doesn't. "Did you make these?" AJ says.

"It's Spore N' Spread, and I helped." The man in the jester hat flashes a Cheshire Cat smile. "Beware, new apostles, this building is full of crazy people! I

have to pee." He waddles around them without another word and disappears into a unisex bathroom.

"Fucking Teabaggers," Betsy says.

They walk out of the building as innocently and anonymously as they came in. The receptionist goes on playing Sudoku on her iPhone. When her employers ask her later if anyone suspicious came through on her shift, the Native American in the pin-stripe suit, the exotic woman with the awesome shoes and the emo guy don't even make her list. The leprechaun and the crazy Star Trek guy get mentioned, but they're locals and everyone's used to seeing them around town. Middle-aged ex-military types are a dime a dozen at these meetings and don't make a blip on her radar.

For the second time today, Todd follows AJ and Betsy's Cadillac, though he thinks it's the first time they're aware of the fact; then again, Todd also thinks Betsy knew his name because she can read minds and not because she and AJ searched his hotel room earlier. AJ always uses his blinkers, a big mistake in Todd's book because it takes away the element of surprise if anyone's tailing you. As a member of law enforcement, Todd doesn't have to worry about traffic tickets from cops looking to fill quotas. He wishes running the Cadillac's plates told him more about AJ and Betsy, but the vehicle is registered to a rental agency in Vancouver.

The Denny's is just a few blocks down. Todd makes an excuse about calling his field office so he can take a piss. He gets to the table the same time as the bun-haired waitress. "Cherry a la mode," Todd says to her, then to his two new informants, "What do you want? I can charge it to Homeland Security."

"Is that really what your expense account is for?" Betsy says.

Todd gives her his best David Duchovny-meets-David Boreanaz grin. "We have to spend our whole budget each quarter or we don't get as big an increase next session."

"Wouldn't want that to happen." Betsy smiles back. There's something about how she traces a finger on the tabletop that draws Todd's eyes to her bosom and makes his throat tighten. Todd's conception of a witch is stuck at the black cat and broomstick stage, so it never occurs to him that Betsy, not AJ, is the one likely to work pagan charms on him.

"We'll take four pies of each flavor," AJ says, "for each of us."

The waitress walks away thinking this table had better tip at percentage.

Todd begins questioning them at once. He has an old analog tape recorder running in his coat's inner lining pocket. The recorder is mostly for cataloguing the time, duration and color of his urinations. Todd always documents his urethra's excretions in case he's ever drugged or poisoned by the Conspiracy. Leaving the tape recorder on after his latest trip to the bathroom was an afterthought.

Detective AJ doesn't say anything, though he does grunt or shake his head once in a while. Betsy does the actual talking, though Todd suspects she's

repeating thoughts she's plucking from AJ's head. Todd catches himself sharing bits and pieces he probably shouldn't in return. Oh, the Conspiracy is an evil megalomaniac organization that hides the truth from the public, but Todd doesn't think the public is ready to deal with that truth. He walks a fine line trying to uncover the truth while protecting the public from both the truth's shocking reality and those who would do anything to maintain the lie.

Here are some excerpts from what ends up on Todd's tape:

TODD

"What can you tell me about Robbie 'Bigs' Johnson?"

BETSY

"He's a federal agent. FBI, I think."

TODD

"CIA."

BETSY

"Wow, even our best psychics couldn't see that. How'd you find out he was CIA?"

TODD

"A source I use. Hey, does 'the Dollar Reborn' mean anything to you? I think it's a codename for an aircraft built using alien technology, like the B-52."

...

TODD

"Hey, what do you know about the pyramids?"

BETSY

"At Giza?"

TODD

"Right, the ones the Conspiracy says the Egyptians built."

BETSY

"I know the Conspiracy uses the pyramid as one of their mystic symbols..."

TODD

"I think they're shelters for the chosen ones during the next polar magnetic shift."

BETSY

"What if they're really spaceships?"

TODD

"Nah, those are all in Peru."

...

TODD

"I think they're after Johnson because of something he knows."

BETSY

"That's what we think too. Maybe he has information about the shadow government and they think he'll leak it."

TODD

"What if he's already leaked it?"

BETSY

"I sensed a disturbance involving a stripper..."

TODD

"Holy crap, you really are psychic! You want to make James Randi shit his pants?"

By now, Todd's positive that Betsy is a former alien abductee. If there's one thing he knows about psychic powers from all the reading he's done in Time Life books, it's that psychic powers often manifest in victims of alien genetic testing. Todd theorizes (he skips the hypothesis stage entirely, just like most of the human population) that the aliens are performing psychic surgeries on prime subjects to unlock peoples' latent telepathic abilities and make them more susceptible to remote particle wave brain re-engineering. It's amazing how the extraterrestrials can do all this creepy sci-fi stuff without leaving any physical evidence.

The waitress comes back with the check after a while. AJ grabs it, writes down a tip and reaches for his wallet. That sparks Todd's need to pay, which may or may not be one of those IMPs we talked about earlier. The need to pay is a fairly harmless urge in and of itself, though it's been known to lead to arguments in the past and, we could speculate, possibly wars in the future. Whether the need to pay has its roots in culture or biology is irrelevant. The fact is that the need to pay is a firm undercurrent in the stream of American consciousness, shared by those with money to burn and those eating from dumpsters.

"I got it," Todd says and hands the waitress his DHS charge card. "We're still about eight million over budget this quarter." General accounting doesn't blink at the \$75,000 tip a waitress gets in Topeka, Kansas – hell, that's a drop in the bucket compared to the production costs on the bunker buster (\$18,200,000 in taxpayer money, with each missile fired costing at least another \$146,000) – but it gives AJ something to grin about, and he leaves the waitress a Cousins & Indian card on the table. The waitress is just walking away when the bell on the door clinks and the fat giant in the jester hat rumbles through.

"My lost little lambs!" Their savior waddles to the table. "Are you enjoying your new life of eternal salvation?"

"Jesus, lad, ye can't be both' rin' folks when they be eatin'." Todd's lifelong belief in leprechauns is finally justified by the short, bearded creature who grabs the savior's meaty hand. All the old stories about them being good luck must be true as well because Robbie Johnson comes walking up beside them a moment later.

"I owe you guys dinner for getting me out of there, but we need to be on our way pretty quick." Johnson looks at AJ and Betsy, and his mouth snaps shut.

"You're plenty safe out in public like this," AJ says. It's the first time he's spoken in almost an hour. "Take a seat, Bigs. Have you ever heard of ERIS?"

"Fuck me," says Robbie Johnson, but he sits down all the same. The leprechaun and giant follow suit. "I know who you are, Tsutsayasti Unegwagule."

AJ laughs. "Are they really calling me that?" Bigs nods. "I'm flattered. But your pronunciation is awful."

Todd leans back in his seat and listens while AJ tells them a whopper about his so-called Earthbound Region-Independent Society, a group fighting some "Council of Overseers." Johnson's face goes from white to red to purple while he takes it all in. If Todd had his guess, he'd say this ERIS nonsense is a cover story concocted by FUNPDA's psychics to get Johnson's cooperation. They probably did a telepathic evaluation of Johnson's psyche in creating the story, too, because it's obvious he's believing every word. Some people are just that gullible. Todd exchanges a knowing glance across the table with Betsy when Johnson hints he works for the Council.

His ears perk up when AJ mentions another familiar name: Sindy Cathaway. Betsy must have pulled that name from Johnson's head and sent it AJ's way using their telepathic bond. "That was her real name? Damn." Johnson rubs at the base of his neck. "Look, I might have said something I shouldn't have to her."

"Any idea what?"

Todd licks his lips. Here it comes. Human-alien hybrids? A cloning project to create a slave race? The set date of the invasion? A downed ship? What could make the Conspiracy stick its neck out like this?

"Well, um, that's the thing," Johnson says. "I was so piss-drunk I don't know what the hell I told her." He gives a hesitant laugh. "I might have been making shit up and just hit on something that was true. Used to joke with my brother like that before his car accident."

AJ's face shows what Todd recognizes as real emotion for the first time since they met. "So you don't know what you told her to make you both threats? Jesus."

"What?" says the man in the jester hat. He's on his third slice of pumpkin pie.

"I do have a guess." Johnson leans over the table and lowers his voice. "What do you think of the idea 9/11 was an inside job?"

Ah crap, Todd thinks, he's not just gullible, he's a damn nutjob, too. Haven't we been over this?



AJ shakes his head. "What do you know about the WMD in Iraq?"

"We never found any," Johnson says, but then his head shoots up. "Wait. I remember now. Have you ever heard of the Ark of the Covenant? I heard from one of my sources they found it and the WMD they went into Iraq to find was inside. But that's just a joke, right?"

Betsy and AJ look at one another. Todd isn't sure what game they're playing, but it doesn't matter. Gold Standard told him to find Robbie Johnson, and he has. Now it's a matter of sticking to Johnson's side until he knows why he was supposed to find him. Todd will follow anyone to get the truth, even a Truther.

Megan Livingstone and the Temple of Dumb

It's mail day. Megan hates mail day.

There's an element of wonder to getting the mail when you're a child. What's it going to be today? The latest issue of your favorite magazine? An offer from the Columbia Record Club? Your international pen pal? Most of the time it's bills, but bills are just a form of junk mail to children. Sure, kids know there's a difference, but it's a difference without consequences, which seems the same as no difference at all.

That all changes upon reaching the completely subjective plateau called maturity. Mail goes from benign subject of curiosity to recurring reminder of the many ways being an adult is a total bitch. Junk mail remains junk mail, any shine it once had rubbed dull by the greasy hand-towel called Time, and everything else is the world bleeding your anemic bank account dry.

Megan only checks the mail a couple times a week, and it's always with a sense of trepidation and a bit of an upset stomach when she does. The mailbox is custom made to look like a miniature of the house she shares with Jack, down to the puce paint, white roof and burgundy door. A stack of those stupid white envelopes with their goddamn little plastic windows for your name and address rests inside. The walk back inside to the kitchen table is more effort than was the walk coming out, and all the sudden she's getting congested like she's going to get a migraine. Mail day. If Megan had a time machine, she'd go back in time and punch Franklin in the balls for inventing the postal service.

Today, various assholes are using the mail to hit her up for:

\$19.⁷⁸ to the electric company. "Dammit."

\$48.²³ to the gas company. "Goddammit."

\$17.³⁵ to the city for water. "Don't the sons of bitches steal enough in taxes?"

\$92.⁶¹ to the cable company. "Why the hell do we pay for the whole package? We never watch TV."

\$52.³¹ for car insurance she's never made a claim on. Someone dinged the Forester in a parking lot a few days ago, but she didn't want to report it because she's been driving without her license, and now the SUV is making a new noise when she turns. "Fuck!"

That's \$230.²⁸, or about 22 hours of her life gone. Roughly a third of Megan's life can be quantified with a dollar sign. Another third is spent sleeping, and the final third has typically been spread between being tired from working or resting and dreading the return to work. Foremost in Megan's mind is the need to accumulate little pieces of paper, which she gets from rich men by giving up her labor—she then gives these pieces of paper back to the same rich men at reduced value in exchange for the results of her own labor and that of her fellow serfs.

What's more, men with guns will shoot and/or imprison Megan if she doesn't annually surrender substantial amounts of her labor-paper to the rich people who pay the men-with-guns using paper taken from the serfs.

She looks again at the total and throws the calculator at the wall. The calculator shatters and leaves an ugly grey mark in the plaster. "Jesus fuck!"

Jack pokes his head out of the den. "You okay?"

"It's fucking mail day."

"Ah," says Jack, and he immediately makes himself sparse.

One piece of mail remains, a manila envelope with a drawing of a Liberty Bell stamp rendered in hot pink crayon in one corner. Jack's name is rubber-stamped upside down on the back. Megan uses a pen knife to open the envelope. Inside is a New Year's greeting card from 1982 with the following pasted over the original greeting:

You are invited to partake Upon
A JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL SPECIALNESS
On a path of Self-Discovery
ONE TIME OFFER ONLY!
What is the goal of your spiritual quest?
What is the great religious truth?
What does your god have in store for you?
A SAVINGS OF OVER 100 BILLION![†]
3471 St. Wayward Ave
([†]No actual savings.)

"Honey? What the fuck is this?" Jack pokes his head out the den door. Megan waves the greeting card at him. "Come take a look at this."

Jack reads the message three times over. "Any return address?" Megan hands him the manila envelope. "It's the Great Confusus," he says after giving the card its fourth once-over. "These are Mikey's crayons on the outside."

"What about the inside?"

"I don't know. Mikey has an iMac."

"You think an ape wrote this?"

"He's a very smart ape."

"He has a goddamn tail."

"Okay, first, apes don't have tails. Second, your cousin has a tail."

Megan folds her arms beneath her breasts. "Fine, wiseass. First, she had it removed when she was fifteen. Second, Mikey has *fur*. Third, blow it out your ass and go fuck yourself with an AIDS-blood-soaked fiberglass dildo!"

This probably sounds like a pretty gruesome argument to someone who doesn't know Jack and Megan, and you might think it's a sign their relationship is on the rocks, but you'd be mistaken. Let's skip the rest of the profanity-laced shouting match and the makeup sex afterward so we can get to the post-coital discussion on the mystery mail.

"Well," says Jack as he leans on one elbow, "if Confusus didn't send it, who did?" This is a wholly irrational argument, comparable to a man who doesn't understand the physics of thunder demanding "If it isn't god bowling then what is it?" Megan's in too good a mood to start arguing again—it's funny what a handful of orgasms will do for a person's outlook and disposition, which is to say the world might be a lot more peaceful place if there was more and better fucking going on.

3271 S. Wayward Avenue turns out to be a temple with Tibetan sensibilities sitting on a good four acres of well-tended earth. Wayward Avenue itself is mostly gravel and winds its way among peach trees and eight foot sunflowers. Bald monks in tan robes stop their raking in the dirt to stare at the Subaru Forester. One of the monks, distinguished from the rest only by his blonde goatee, approaches the driver's side and waits for Jack to lower the window.

"We were invited," Jack says. The monk nods and starts toward the temple without a word. Jack and Megan look to each other, exchange shrugs, get out of the Forester and follow him.

The temple antechamber is tiled with sea green and fire orange porcelain. Megan assumes the various sayings spelled out in the tile are koans of this sect, whoever they are. The tiles under Megan and Jack's feet read *WE ARE THE SIDE-EFFECTS OF THE UNIVERSE'S BIRTH*, and other sayings like *BIRD IN HAND CAUGHT IN COOKIE JAR* and *THE WAY OF THE MASTER IS TO MASTER ONLY ONE WAY* run along the walls and across the ceiling. Some of them sound like Mikey's, that cookie jar one in particular, but Megan's not willing to concede the argument just yet.

"Remove your shoes," says the goateed monk, who walks into the next room with his Sketchers still on his feet. Jack pulls off his loafers, then gives Megan an arm for balance while she pulls off her knee-high boots. The boots are polished snake leather, and Megan will garrote the monks if the fuckers so much as touch them. She's still the subject of a restraining order in the state of New Hampshire as the result of an incident involving a torn sweater, but the matter's still in litigation so it's not something she talks about much.

They pass through purple velvet curtains into the main chamber. The monk leads them to a hall beyond the dais at the back. Tapestries depicting a ten-round boxing match between an orangutan in a life jacket and a pissed off baby elephant serve as the walls' only decoration. There is no indication of who wins. The monk stops at an Aquaman shower curtain, which he draws aside, and he waves for Jack and Megan to step through.

Dan O'Brien, the Great Confusus' human disciple, sits in the lotus position in the midst of a shallow ball pit. Megan's only seen pictures and heard the story, but she knows Jack met Dan while he was in Afghanistan four years back. That was during one of their rare times apart; Megan was already working private security in Iraq, but Jack had to wait weeks for his media clearance to go through. Jack passed the time writing a story on Private O'Brien, a high school graduate from Tennessee who joined the Army on September 12, 2001, and spent most of ages 19-24 living in a war zone. The doctors diagnosed Dan as suffering from PTSD and shipped him back home not long after the article got picked up. Megan knows it's Dan who later led Jack to Confusus, but she's fuzzy on the details. "W-welcome to the Temple of the L-l-laughing Jackalope," says Dan. "You have no names while you are h-h-here. You must stu-stu-stu-study the way of contemplation."

That's right, Megan remembers — Dan stuttered as a kid, but he kept it in check through middle and high school. The stutter came back after an IED killed the soldier walking next to Dan in an outdoor market. Couldn't Confusus help him with that?

Jack nods. "What do we have to do?"

"Hmm. You must know why you have erred in ask-asking that question. Go and think on this a while."

The goateed monk is waiting for Jack and Megan in the hall. "You have no names while you are here. You must leave behind all that you brought with you." He hands them a pair of tweed robes, folds his arms and waits for them to strip. There is no indication he intends to turn around. Jack drops trou without hesitation, but Megan stares death-by-sudden-aneurysm at both men before she follows suit. Are these guys some kind of perverts? But the only time the monk really looks at her is when the 9mm, holster and extra clip she had strapped to the inside of her thigh hit the tile. "Good. Now come."

Maybe thirty or more bald-headed, clean-shaven monks are now sitting cross-legged on the main chamber's floor. The disciples of the Laughing Jackalope arrive at the temple via diverse roads from the looks of things; young, middle-aged and old; descendants of eastern Europe and mid-South America and northern Africa and a mining town somewhere in Siberia; among them 5 Protestants, 4 Catholics, 3 Jews, 2 Muslims, 2 Buddhists, 2 Hindus, a Sikh, a Scientologist, a Rastafarian, a Wiccan and a Mormon. They all lock eyes on the 70-inch flatscreen hanging from silver cables above the dais. Goatee-man points for Jack and Megan to sit on the floor with the monks, then he pops a burned DVD into the player behind the dais. The following is beyond a level Jack and Megan are cleared for yet, but hey, what are you going to do?



Opening theme song “By the Green River Lights, I Fight! LOVE”

Performed by Megumi Hayabachiro

Available on Galaxy Universe Records

Your looks are like the clean transmission

I see the true you in the chrome

The day on the beach

RO-MAN-TISS-IZE

The overseas tire betrays

The elimination of the fuel is harsh

Making funny faces at the people in the gym

I bought a watermelon

Always doing your best

CUT FIGHTING

Giant eagle of the round eyes

Burning Automobile Style!

It's a standard anime plot: Satashi sells quality Japanese cars, but his rivals at the evil Eagle Auto use their military influence to pawn off shitty imports at bargain prices. There's a fourteen year old girl whose skirt always seems to be destroyed and a talking cat who pilots a giant robot, but they're mostly just there for comedy, if that makes any sense (it doesn't to Megan). When night falls, Satashi dons his grandfather's ninja costume to become the Japanese Car Salesman Ninja (though no one ever calls him this) so he can battle Evil Eagle

and his henchmen, the Karate Aardvark and Dog Woman. This is the subtitled version, not the dubs, so there's some reading involved.

This particular episode (#11: "The Great Aardvark Heist! What, I Cannot Defeat Him?") features Satashi's first battle against the Karate Aardvark. The original manga creators knew aardvarks were an African mammal but had no idea what they looked like, so the Karate Aardvark is a flabby man with an afro and a dopey grin. Evil Eagle and Dog Woman look more like their names imply. While the talking cat seems exceptional in the world of *Japanese Car Salesman Ninja* and draws shock when he opens his mouth around strangers, no one seems the least bit disturbed by the anthropomorphic eagle selling cars or his canine henchwoman.

Satashi and the Aardvark chase each other across Tokyo's rooftops until, for no apparent reason, the Aardvark turns to fight. There's a moment of banter where Satashi says something about truth and honor and cars built by local labor before he unleashes the first of his stock footage attacks with a mighty cry of "HON-DAH!" Just like every monster since the third episode, the Aardvark is immune to this weakest of Satashi's finishing moves.

"You cannot defeat my Sacred Aald-Wu-wah-werk-fu with such a technique," read the Aardvark's subtitles. "Show me your best!" The two spar some more, and Satashi prepares the second of his stock footage attacks, the TOY-OH-TAH, which he's used to defeat every boss monster in the past seven episodes. Lens flare and rose petals fill the screen when Satashi throws his flaming yin-yang of death, but the Aardvark still stands with that dopey grin on his face.

"This cannot be!" Satashi panics behind his ninja mask. The colors change to purple and pinkish-reds, and there's an echo to let the audience know they're hearing Satashi's thoughts. "I swore that I would never use my grandfather's ultimate technique, but I have no choice!" The music swells.

There's a commercial break here in the original broadcast, but since this is DVD it fades back in again in seconds.

Next there's more on the side story about the schoolgirl and the cat; the cat ends up destroying the girl's bedroom with its robot, or "Gah-toh-meh-ka" (according to the subtitles). Megan wonders who the hell they're marketing this thing to; little does she know it ran for 152 episodes with five theatrical versions, 2 direct to video spin-offs and a soundtrack, not to mention the original 17-part manga series, which featured a lot more nudity and blood. Let's skip back to the main story.

The Aardvark's back to saying rude things about Satashi again, but Satashi has the Serious Face on now, and he says, "You force me to rely on ninja magic so strong! This is a destiny I accept? So be it! MIH-TSU-BIH-SHIN!" Red lightning strikes Satashi, so naturally he spouts a black bat's wing and his katana transforms into a scythe. A rock ballad with heavy percussion kicks into gear as Satashi swings the scythe in the show's newest special attack stock footage, but the music cuts off when the Karate Aardvark remains standing afterward.

"What kind of display are you making?" says the Aardvark's subtitles.

"I am fighting you with my grandfather's most powerful magics!"

"No, you are yelling words and dancing around, and nothing is happening."

The video pauses, then the flatscreen turns off. Megan rubs at her temples.

"What the fuck was that?" She looks to Jack, but he's deep in thought. Is he trying to assign some deeper meaning to that piece of crap? Confusus is just fucking with them. That, or the old sage is batshit insane, which is probably the more likely answer.

Goatee-man strikes the gong by the dais. "Everyone who gets it is dismissed." The monks stand and scatter like the denizens of a flaming ant hill. Jack and Megan alone remain sitting on the floor.

"Oh bullshit," Megan says.

"Anyone who didn't get it should follow me," says their guide. They follow him out the chamber's east doors to a courtyard ringed by sunflowers. An artificial creek runs through the center of the yard; goldfish swim among the waterlilies, and an arch bridge allows dry crossing to the meditation area, which is cobbled with dark and pale riverstone to form a swastika with arms and crooks of five feet on each side.

"Holy shit!" Megan's fingers stab into the flesh of Jack's arm as a memetic response programmed into her brain by her parents, the media and the IDF (arguably another of those IMPs) hits the red zone. "I just realized these monks are all skinheads!"

Jack laughs. "The swastika's an old symbol for good fortune in Asia. The Hindus used it in India and the Buddhists passed it on from there to China and Japan."

Her body's rhythm immediately ratchets back down closer to normal. Jack always knows what she needs to hear, and he always means it when he says it. Isn't that love? "Where did you learn that?"

"*The Unofficial Guide to The Legend of Zelda*. C'mon, they're waiting for us."

Goatee-man instructs Jack and Megan to take the lotus position beside each other on the center of the swastika. He stands behind them with a pair of his clean-shaved, silent brothers, each of whom holds a wooden bucket. "Clear your minds of your earthly concerns," he says. "Allow the inner you-that-is-you to rise above your delusions of what is real."

They sit in silence for a while. Jack does his best to slow his breathing and focus on nothingness. Megan closes her eyes and lets her mind wander, and soon she's thinking about the day she and Jack met. He was working on his BA in English; she was pre-law. Some treehugger bitch from the econ department was spiking tires in the parking lot. Jack caught the eco-terrorist in the act and was giving her a stern lecture when Megan blew out a tire on her Miata backing out of a faculty spot. She was already pissed at having gotten her third parking ticket of the week (being neither handicapped nor college faculty nor an emergency

vehicle). She felt like smacking someone, and as soon as she overheard that eco-bitch was responsible for her tire, she did.

"Bitch messed with my car," Megan said to Jack as way of explanation, and she walked away to biochemistry before he could respond.

They didn't see each other again until a drunken make-out session at a frat party three weeks later. From the morning afterward on they were inseparable, with that kind of unspoken psychic agreement two people can have when they're instantly and irreversibly crazy about one another. Megan took Jack to meet her parents on October 23, 2003, and engaged her mother in an I-can-out-shrill-you contest over Megan dating an "Ay-rab," especially one in the liberal arts. They'd apparently been hoping she'd marry a Battalion Commander she'd served under during her year in the IDF. Her parents moved back to Jerusalem not long after. Megan ate turkey and ham with Jack at a Denny's that Thanksgiving.

"Good, yes," says the monk, "now allow your true self to answer as I ask these questions." Megan opens her eyes. The men standing behind she and Jack are casting shadows in Megan's line of sight. "Now tell me: do you believe in a higher power?"

"Yes," says Jack.

"Higher than whom?" says Megan.

The monks lift their buckets and Jack and Megan get cold showers of water from the artificial stream. Jack spits a little but does his best to keep his cool. Megan glares at the monks behind her back. "What in the name of daughter-fucking Lot are you doing?"

"Good," says Goatee-man, otherwise ignoring Megan completely, "now, how many fingers is Tom holding up?"

"Who?"

"What?"

They both get the water bucket again. The monk walks around to look them in their faces. He leans toward them and says, "Focus! Who's on fifth?"

"Um," says Jack.

"Is there anything I can say that won't get me a bucket of water over the head?" Megan's answer comes in a liquid form and consists mostly of hydrogen and oxygen.

"Excellent!" says the goateed monk, and he leads them back to the main chamber. When Megan asks if the monk could spare a towel, the monk seems surprised and a little offended that she would ask and insinuates she should have her own with her, so she remains soaking wet and dripping for the rest of the enlightenment process.

The monks have brought in a knee-high table, and a wrinkled old bald man in one of the temple's tweed robes is sitting cross-legged at one end with a set of chopsticks in his hand. A steaming bowl of white rice sits on the table, and two

sets of chopsticks lay across from the old man. "Sit. Eat," says the goateed monk, and he waits for Jack and Megan to settle by the table.

"Tasty rice," says the old man, and he helps himself to a bite. Jack picks up his chopsticks and takes a moment to fix their position in his hand. He dips his sticks into the bowl and pinches a sticky clump of rice. The old man's sticks shoot into the bowl, and he steals the clump of rice from Jack before Jack can draw his sticks back out. "Oh, my apologies," says the old man, and he eats Jack's clump of rice.

Megan's eyebrow climbs, and she scoops up her sticks as well. She doesn't have to spend any time repositioning them; she's spent plenty of Christmas dinners eating at Chinese restaurants and perfected the art of chop-fu by fifteen. Her sticks go in; she grabs a clump of rice and snaps her wrist back so the sticks are in her mouth before the old man can pounce.

The old man makes a "Hmm" in his throat. Jack tries for the rice again; the old man's sticks knock Jack's aside. "Rice is very good," the old man says and stuffs his mouth.

"Well shit," says Megan, and she goes for the rice again. This time the old man's ready for her; he knocks her sticks aside and pinches a clump of rice; Megan counters by stripping the rice from his sticks; it falls back in the bowl. She pulls up another clump of rice and has it almost to her lips when the damned old man's sticks rattle hers in mid-air. Megan rolls her wrist and traps the old man's sticks in a wooden submission hold, but the old man manages to pull his utensils free.

"Honey," Jack says, but Megan ignores him.

"What is this man?" says the goateed monk. "Is he a disciple of the Smiling Jackalope? Is he a noble teacher? Is he a great master?"

The chopsticks clash in mid-air again, clacking together with a sound like tiny bamboo staves. Megan scores a blow on the old man's ring finger, and she uses his moment of hesitation to grab a bite of rice. She's not really too fond of white rice, but now it's come down to principle, dammit.

"Is he a rich man? Is he a poor man? Is he a holy man? Is he a criminal?"

Another mid-air clash, and the old man's stick pinches Megan's thumb. She hisses and jabs him in the soft spot between his thumb and index finger.

"Perhaps he is a hungry traveler. Or is he a great chef?"

The old man drops his chopsticks and gives Megan a slight bow of his head. Then he smiles and reaches his other hand into the bowl and scoops up a palmful of rice with fingers that look fresh from digging in the garden.

"Who is this man?"

"He's an asshole!" Megan says and stabs her chopsticks through the old man's hand, pinning his palm to the table. Jack stares at her, then at the old man, then back to Megan without blinking. Megan stands. "Fuck this," she says and heads for the antechamber. Jack calls after her, but Megan doesn't just see red when she's pissed, it's kind of like all she *hears* is red too, if that makes any sense (and please don't tell her it doesn't when she's in a bad mood). To hell with these

nonsensical monks. She's so pissed on her way out that she strips from the itchy wet robe and pulls on her clothes going out the door. Not like the cuckolded asstards here are allowed to beat off to what they may see anyway.

It's past dark when Jack comes back outside in his street clothes. He kisses her on the cheek and fires the ignition.

"Did they say anything?"

Jack nods. "We're headed back to Iraq."

Megan grins and leans her head on his shoulder. "We're getting a Pulitzer for this one, baby."

Within the Temple of the Laughing Jackalope, Dan O'Brien remains in his ball pit, his Bluetooth earpiece buzzing. "Are you su-su-sure they're up to it?"

"This is their quest," the Great Confusus says over the line. "Together they will come to understand the nature of truth and untruth."

"Do you really think she'll stick with it?"

"He will teach her patience."

"But do you th-think he'll get it?"

"She will teach him to think critically."

Confusus drops the line, and Dan is left to contemplate amidst the bright plastic globes that line his office floor. It's not long before the Aquaman curtain in the doorway folds back and the man with the goatee steps to the edge of the ball pit and clears his throat. "They're gone. Hey, when do we get paid?"

"**Reward is its o-o-own experience,**" says Dan, and he hands the man fifty bucks.

The Flight in the Ford

The officer nearest the door nods to Danica; she returns the gesture and tightens her grip on her P2000 SK. Another policeman kicks in the door. Danica and the other officers follow him into room 324 of the Marriott, and one of the local cops yells, "Police! Face down on the floor with your arms and legs spread, now!"

All that typical primate yelling and breaking things wakes the dog on the twin bed nearest the door. The dog raises his head and gives a hesitant bark at the strange people intruding on his master's territory. "It's coming at me!" says the last officer through the door, and the police fill the confused canine with nine rounds. The room's human resident jumps out of the far bed and grabs something off the floor—it's impossible to say what in the post-midnight darkness, but the cops assume it's a staff or sword. The perp doesn't bother to switch on the bedside lamp.

"Watch out, she's a ninja or something!" says another officer, and he shoots at the dim-lit silhouette. That gets the other cops shooting, and though none of them hit anything alive, they manage to do \$1,283.⁶² worth of damage to the room and its furnishings in a matter of seconds.

Danica hangs back and flips the light switch. A naked man with dead grey eyes is flailing a white-striped cane in the air. His seeing eye dog has already bled its life out on the bed. "Another isolated incident," Danica says to herself, and she pulls out the warrant to double-check the room number their quarry's supposed to be in (turns out it's room 423). The locals handcuff the naked blind man and make him lie face-down on the carpet, then they do a quick sweep of his room so they can find something to justify shooting his dog after-the-fact; standard procedure.

A floor above and a few rooms over, Sindy sits up in her hotel bed, awakened by the first shot and dread growing with every pull of the trigger thereafter. She listens to the racket with chill night sweat running down her back. Emily goes on snoring in the other bed. Sindy wonders how she can sleep through all the noise. Sure, Emily's apartment back in Seattle was close to the railroad tracks, but the trains weren't this loud. The whole hotel must be awake.

The digital clock reads 1:14 AM in bright red characters. Sindy throws off the covers and hops out of bed, rushes to the window and sees the police cruisers sitting in the parking lot outside. She paces back and forth in the gap between the feet of the beds and the dresser the TV sits atop, wondering what the hell she should do.

This is the third night sleeping at the Marriott. She and Emily spent the past two days watching all the pay-per-view on the box except the pornos, and all their meals were room service. Sindy would have liked to take a dip in the pool, but Emily won't let her leave the room. Manuel's come and gone. Emily says he's

keeping in touch with their ride across the border and they just need to stay put until Manuel says they're ready to go.

"Or we haf a reason to go," Emily had added, and the gunshots downstairs make Sindy think that time's come.

Thing is, she's not sure who it's time to go *with*. She was sleep-deprived and stoned that first night, in no condition to make sense of what was going on and too exhausted to put up much of a fight. Sindy spent yesterday and today doing a lot of thinking but hasn't gotten much of anywhere. Her mind's stuck in an endless loop weighing two possibilities – either Emily's bullshitting her or Emily's saving her. What does she believe? She isn't sure. Which option would she prefer was the truth? She's not sure on that one either.

Right now, that same dilemma she's been wrestling with all day comes down to two courses of action: either she turns herself over to the police or she wakes Emily up and runs away with her. One thing makes up Sindy's mind. Somehow, either using some sense she's not consciously aware of or maybe just as a side-effect of her adrenaline rush and days-old paranoia about this situation, Sindy's positive that whomever just shot up a room on the floor below is here for her, and if they're willing to bust into the *wrong* room guns blazing, they're probably going to bust into the *right* room with a shoot-first-ask-questions-maybe mentality too. If there's one thing about this whole situation Sindy's sure about it's that she doesn't want to get shot, so she shakes Emily, first gently, then with escalating fury, until Emily opens her eyes, yawns and says, "Vhat?"

"Cops," is all Sindy has to say for Emily to jump out of bed. Emily pulls a Glock from her purse and, buck naked, steps to the window. A hiss slips between Emily's teeth when she sees the cruisers parked below. Then she starts throwing on fresh clothes, and Sindy does the same, fugitive-see-fugitive-do. They're just finishing packing when the fire alarm goes off in the hall.

Five quick raps (*shave-and-a-hair-cut*) sound on the door. Emily knocks twice (*two-bits*) on their side and opens the door. Manuel slips in, cowboy hat askew and custom six-shooters hanging loose in their holsters on each hip. A scoped rifle is slung over his shoulder. "Ready?" he says, and Emily nods. Sindy grabs her duffel bag and follows Manuel into the hall, with Emily at the rear.

The fire alarm is a deafening rumble of bass; its bulbs flash on and off like a strobe light at a rave. Guests are poking their heads out of doors and yelling back into their rooms to be heard over the siren. Both elevators have been called to go up, but someone (Sindy suspects Manuel) has lain towels on the tracks so the doors won't close and the elevators are stuck.

Sindy follows Manuel to the window at the end of the hall. A fire escape platform is just outside. Manuel slides out the window, revolver in hand, and waves for them to follow after he's taken a quick look around. Sindy climbs out after him, and her eyes swing back through the window just in time to see a woman in a stretched and tortured pantsuit come out the stairwell door forty feet down the hall behind Emily. She almost says something, but the panicked look

on her face must be enough because Emily spins on her heel and brings her Glock up to fire.

The woman in the pantsuit sets her feet and raises her gun too; her torpedo breasts jiggle and point all to hell round her endless stack of pancakes gut. "Homeland Security! Drop your weapon and –"

"Toss this." The pin is already pulled from the little grey cylinder Manuel hands to Cindy. She hurls it through the window, past Emily and down the hallway. The grenade bounces a few times down the hall spilling white smoke that smells like the Fourth of July. Manuel's already sliding down the fire escape ladder when Cindy turns back to look at him; Cindy can't see the blinding white flash when the grenade goes off in the hallway with her head turned, but she can hear the DHS woman cursing. She slides down after Manuel, and Emily is quick to follow. "Move," Manuel says as soon Cindy's feet hit the pavement, and he grabs her arm to pull her along.

Big green industrial dumpsters offer quick cover to hide behind. Manuel hands Cindy one of his revolvers. "Listen quick. This fires canisters of a quick-dispersing gas that causes temporary paralysis and hallucinations."

"Oh Christ," says Cindy.

Manuel smiles. "The rounds are rigged to blow on contact and the active dispersal range is about..." He looks lost in thought for a moment. "...Six feet, so it doesn't matter where you hit them or even if you do so long as you're close. Comprene?"

"Got it," Cindy says, surprised at herself for being so nonchalant taking one of Manuel's six-shooters. It looks like she's in for another weird, stressful night.

Footsteps echo from off in the dark, and a pair of men in SWAT gear carrying semi-automatic rifles and flashlights come round the back of the hotel. One of them is Lt. Berg, who's glad to finally use his PATRIOT Act-funded equipment for something besides drug raids, though those are fun too. Berg misidentifies a pair of panicking guests (both men) as the perps he's after and opens fire, killing one and wildly missing the other, who runs like hell. Both the official police report and the news will label the shooting as gang-related violence tied to a drug bust that night at the hotel.

"Hijo de puta!" says Manuel, and he pops around the dumpster just long enough to crack off a shot with his revolver. A gas cloud chokes both SWAT officers, and they fall to the pavement before the air clears. "Murdering motherfuckers."

"I hope zis nev batch doesn't make zem shit zeir pants like ze last one did."

"Still working on that. At least the grenades are finally spitting smoke *before* the flash." Manuel shrugs. "Vamanos." They ditch their cover and slip into the hedges that ring the hotel parking lot and separate it from the K-Mart and IHOP parking lots next door.

Sindy hears a din of confused and cranky voices from the front lot where the other guests are congregating. The combination of the fire alarm going off, the

elevators suddenly not working and reports of smoke on the fourth floor have convinced most of the guests there actually was a fire, though a few annoying naysayers swear they heard shots fired and point out the lack of a fire truck on the scene. The night staff workers gathered in the parking lot know there's no fire, but they've been instructed to clear the hotel any time the alarm goes off regardless of whether it's legit or not for liability purposes, and besides, most of them would have come out anyway to watch the cops manhandling the sobbing naked blind man into the back of a police cruiser. The night auditor even records the whole thing on his iPhone so he can upload it to YouTube.

A yellow Ford Mustang awaits them in K-Mart's lot; Manuel makes a bee-line for it. Sindy's about to follow him out of the hedges when a no-nonsense voice yells "Freeze!" and Manuel stops in his tracks. A fat man in a local police uniform has his gun trained on Manuel, and he takes a few steps toward the Mustang to get a better look at his target.

"Alright, hands up," the cop says as he steps forward. "Now where the hell is Cathaway and Thomas?"

"No habla ingles," says Manuel.

"Don't give me that shit, Laboros, we got your picture on the bulletin board downtown. Where are the other two terrorists? Where's your ringleader Cathaway?"

Up until this moment, Sindy's held on to the perverse hope that Emily is some kind of pathological liar or sociopath and law enforcement (the Good Guys) would be along to save her just like they do on TV. Seeing the officer press Manuel against the Mustang and hearing him prattle about Emily and her being terrorists is what finally makes it all real for Sindy. In that moment, she realizes Emily hasn't been bullshitting her the whole time. Turns out the government really is after her, the police really do think she's a terrorist – and not just any terrorist but apparently the *ringleader* for a bunch of other terrorists! – and Emily really has been her friend and savior this whole time.

If that's true, what about the rest? The video? The allegations about the Illuminati? Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell is *really* going on?

All these mental gymnastics inside Sindy's skull take mere seconds, just long enough for the cop to knock Manuel over the head with a baton. Manuel stumbles and falls to the asphalt beside the Mustang's passenger side door. Sindy glances back for Emily, but her friend has disappeared. A moment later, the Mustang's driver side door opens and the car roars to life. The cop jumps back from the car, Manuel crawls away and Sindy raises the revolver and fires before she can think twice about it. Her shot hits a couple inches left of the cop's foot (Well, she thinks, it's not like she's ever shot a revolver before!), but the impact with the ground releases a cloud of gas wide enough to choke her target, who goes to his knees, then prone on his gut and lays still with a rancid, wet fart.

"C'mon!" Emily leans out the driver side window. Sindy swallows a lump in her throat, grabs her bag and helps Manuel into the back seat before she jumps

into the front beside Emily. "Zey vill haf heard zat shot and be here soon. And from ze looks of zings zey knev about our getaway car anyway."

"What about the Winnebago?" Sindy says.

"Fuck it." Emily pulls the Mustang out of the lot and makes a couple turns before she switches the headlights on. Manuel rolls in the back, groaning and rubbing at the back of his skull, but he's with it enough to buckle his seatbelt.

"Emily..." Sindy sighs.

"Vhat?"

"I'm sorry. You're the oldest friend I have outside the sticks. I should have trusted you, but it was too fucking weird. I'm listening now. What the fuck is going on?"

Emily takes a hand off the wheel long enough to knuckle Sindy on the cheek. "Dummkopf. Hov many times must you vatch ze fideo to get it? I'fe nefer told you anyzing but ze truth. Except zat time I spilled vine on your sweater."

Which is exactly the answer Sindy had both dreaded and expected. "Well fuck." She shudders. "...Shit!"

"Ze paralyzing fear vill subside gifen time. Nov buckle up. Ze cops are right behind us."

Sure enough, the sirens sound and a cruiser falls in behind them. You know what a car chase looks like, right? We see them all the time on television. It's dark outside and hardly anyone's on the road, so this isn't even the most exciting car chase, no running through orange carts or going off ramps, more OJ Simpson than Dukes of Hazzard. This is probably as good a time as any to finish up our survey of ERIS' first recruitment video.

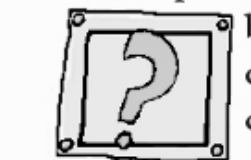
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Fine print is for assholes.

Gather round, adults! It's time for
People Magazine's "ERISian Oprah."



"Today, we're coming at you live from the Party Grill, where my husband Bob serves up greasy pieces of nirvana on a bun with a side of fried potatoes and metaphysics. I'm here because I was craving a cheeseburger and I wanted to tell you how the two of us got together.

"Back in the eighties, I was a mathematics professor at the Indian Institute of Technology. One of my friends in the civil engineering department roped me into his pet project; he wanted to do surveys of some Delhi temples to see if there was a mathematical pattern to their features. That's how I got to Kalka Mandir."



(Note: The screen shows shots of Delhi, India while Manisha tells her story. Go look up some pictures of the city on the internet if you really need a visual. This chapter is long enough as it is.)

"Bob stepped on my foot while we were both admiring the architecture. He apologized to me in Hindi, which surprised me because his drawling accent

marked him as an American, and it seems rare for an American tourist to speak the local language in any country, let alone one in Asia. We talked about Kalka Mandir, and I explained what I was doing there. Bob said he'd come to India while retracing the steps of a man he called the Beast, and that he'd stopped at the temple because he thought Kali embodied qualities of his own goddess, Eris. Bob invited me to dinner that night, and I accepted.

"But it's not that first date I want to tell you about, friends. A few weeks later, it was time for Bob to leave India. The Beast's trail led to the Middle East. I tried to dissuade Bob from hunting this man, whom I inferred from our time together that Bob intended to murder. There was a sorrow in him that he could not let go. I asked him to stay with me in India and study yoga. He told me that would mean abandoning the ethos of his own culture, which required revenge, and he asked me to make a sacrifice of my own, one I had stood firm against since learning of his occupation. Bob was a frycook and, he told me, his hamburgers were famous back home. He wanted me to eat one.

"After a great deal of arguing, I overcame my belief against eating the meat of a cow and Bob overcame his belief that being wronged required revenge. Nowadays, Bob practices raja yoga three hours a day and I have a couple cheeseburgers a week. It was our anniversary last week and —"

There's a brief spurt of clapping and cheering from the unseen audience.

"Thank you. Anyway, we got to talking about the different ideas our cultures had instilled in us about the world, not necessarily the *how* or the *why*, but more simply the *what is*. To that end, we've prepared a little something for you today. Here's our anniversary gift to you, friends: a sampling of world-views from around the planet."

The Buddhists

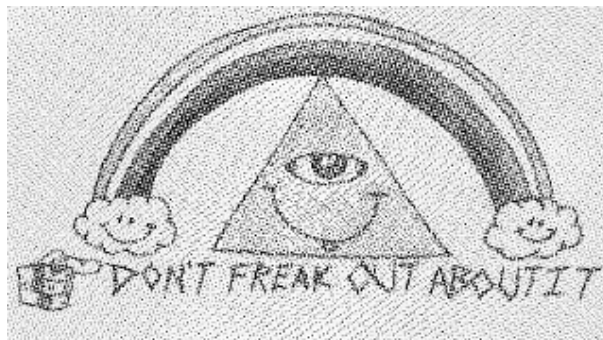
*Life is suffering due to attachment.
One is doomed to continue living life
over and over until one learns to
cease being attached to this life.*

The Scientologists

*Being possessed by alien ghosts
inhibits your natural psychic powers.*

<h2><i>The Marxists</i></h2> <p><i>Society is more a matter of how individuals stand in relation to each other than a collection of individuals.</i></p>	<h2><i>The Postmodernists</i></h2> <p><i>All metanarratives are bullshit. Including this one.</i></p>
<h2><i>The Inuit</i></h2> <p><i>Everything has a soul, but not a soul is running the Universe. As such, a soul freed of its body is free to take revenge on the one who loosed it from the flesh.</i></p>	<h2><i>The Sentinelese</i></h2> <p><i>Red is a better color than green.</i></p>

After the first half-dozen screens the presentation speeds up, and Cindy isn't able to make out more than a word or two of each slide before it's gone. "Yakety Sax" plays on a loop over the whole thing. The screen goes black after the slide show's end, and the last image of the video is a still frame of a drawing apparently reproduced on newsprint:



Back in the present, it's not long before the fugitive trio is back on a rural highway leaving Wherever The Fuck They Were, Montana. Emily hugs the center line and keeps the Mustang over seventy on what feels to Cindy like a suicide run through the curves, passes a logging truck round a blind corner and shifts up to eighty, and the police cruisers fall back as they slow to make the same corners without hitting the side rails.

"It's the next forest service exit," Manuel says from the back seat, and Emily nods without taking her eyes off the road. "Have your bag ready, Sindy. We're jumping out as soon as she slows down enough that we won't break our legs doing it." He lights a spliff, takes a puff and passes it to Sindy.

"What?" Sindy takes the spliff but doesn't hit it just yet. "Why?"

"Get ready," Emily says before Sindy can get her explanation; she pumps the brakes and downshifts. Sindy hits the spliff and hands it back to Manuel, who clamps it between his teeth, unbuckles his seatbelt and gets ready to throw open the door. Sindy unfastens her belt as well, wonders what the hell the plan is from here and follows Manuel's lead when he jumps out of the Mustang going twenty miles an hour.

Sindy hits the packed mud that qualifies as a forest service road, duffel bag hugged to her breasts and knees pulled in to her stomach. She rolls and hears the Mustang speed away before she comes to a stop. Manuel pulls her to her feet and off the road before the cruisers go shooting by. "Is she going to be okay?" Sindy says once the police are out of sight.

"She hates driving stick, but she'll be fine." Manuel nods for Sindy to follow him along the muddy road, and Sindy complies without giving it much thought. "She used to do this kind of thing all the time before AJ asked her to watch Johnson. Hell, she's probably been bored and waiting for a chance to cut loose if I know her."

"Do you know her pretty well?"

"About as well as anyone. I'm the one who recruited her into ERIS."

The darkest part of the night has fallen and the thick clusters of pine needles overhead block out the moonlight, but the road's rough enough that it's easy to follow just by the feel of the ground through the soles of their shoes. At one point, it occurs to Sindy she could ask where they're headed, but mostly her thoughts are too jumbled for her to care. And just when she was feeling level-headed earlier today, too. A spark in the night is Manuel relighting the spliff, which he and Sindy pass back and forth as they walk until it's down to a roach; Manuel flicks it in the road.

"Isn't that littering?" Sindy says.

"It's biodegradable."

Fifteen minutes of walking brings them to a dirt driveway winding off the forest service road. Were there light, Sindy might notice the wooden numbers "325" nailed to one of the trees on the side of the road, as close to an address as there is this far away from civilization, and below it a pair of signs that read **PRIVATE PROPERTY - NO TRESSPASSING - NO SOLICITING** (this one looks store-bought) and **PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE SASQUATCH AS IT MAKES HER GASSY** (this one looks homemade). Grey gravel is sprinkled over the driveway, though a few potholes have developed regardless. The trees thin as they approach a blue-roofed, two-story red brick house with a white wraparound porch.

Floodlights suddenly illuminate the yard when they're maybe thirty feet from the porch, and Cindy hears a dog barking and, she could swear, the sound of a shotgun being cocked. She stops in her tracks. Manuel laughs and turns around. "That's just the proximity alarm. There aren't any dogs."

Cindy sighs and resumes her trek toward the house. "Whose place is this?"

"Mine. Come on in. Mi casa es su casa tonight."

Sure enough, Manuel produces the key and lets her in the front door. "If you lived so close then why the hell were we staying in a hotel?"

"It's kind of a mess right now." Manuel goes through the house turning on lights, dodging all the obstacles that might strike a stranger's shins in the dark, and he keys a code into what looks like one hell of a burglar alarm system. The floodlights outside go off and the barking of the faux-dogs ceases.

It doesn't look like much of a mess to Cindy; no dirty clothes lying on the furniture, not much for dust on the coffee table; it even looks like Manuel ran the vacuum right before he left because she can still see the rectangular imprints in the carpet where it passed. The living room smells of incense and air freshener. Pictures of (Cindy assumes) Manuel's relatives hang in various creative patterns along the entryway hall, and the living room is full of plush, comfy furniture, including a tie die couch and a Fresh Prince of Bel-Air-themed recliner. Manuel's NES, Master System, SNES, Genesis, DreamScape*, Jaguar, 3DO, Nintendo 64, Saturn, Dreamcast, PlayStation 2, Wii and Xbox 360 all compete for space on a set of shelves that lie beneath the 50-inch flatscreen hanging on the wall. Okay, so it's a little bachelory after all, but it's still a hell of a lot cleaner than Cindy's place. The mental comparison makes Cindy wonder if she'll ever see her apartment (not to mention all her worldly possessions) again now that she knows for a fact the government really is after her.

*(*Note: While an avid gamer may recognize most of the consoles listed, the 16-bit Corenco DreamScape, which managed to wrest about 28% of the market share from its contemporaries in the mid-nineties, didn't exist in our universe. That's a real shame as it was home to several classic games that, from our point of view, never existed, including Klyne Crusade, Challenge of Puzzle Mansion, cHaOs II: The Kilted One Is Strong, W.I.L.D.E.Fire and, of course, Corenco's flagship series: Nid the Kid, Nid the Kid 2: Revenge of the Evil Elvis-Impersonating Alien Chickens and Nid the Kid 3: Back To The Fowlture.)*

Manuel sets out some cheese, crackers, Oreos, a glass jar full of the most pungent weed Cindy's smelled in her life and a three-foot bong on the kitchen table, then he makes a pot of decaf. "I don't know about you, but I intend to get back to bed," he says when he pours her a cup.

"I don't know if I can sleep. Aren't you worried about Emily?"

"Hell no. She didn't tell you much about her old job, did she?" Manuel stirs a drop of creamer and a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. Cindy wonders how he's going to sleep with all that sugar in his system even if he is drinking decaf.

"Well, she probably didn't want to weird you out any more than we already have."

He offers her a hit off the bong, but she waves it away. "So why didn't we come here instead of the hotel? You don't trust me?"

Manuel's Blackberry starts playing "Linus and Lucy" before he can answer. Sindy wishes she hadn't left her cell phone at home the other night; she knows it's still plugged into the charger on her nightstand, temporarily forgotten and perhaps permanently abandoned. "That's Emily," Manuel says and answers the call. Whatever Emily has to say doesn't take long. "She's fine," Manuel says after he sets the phone down, "but she won't be back tonight. As for your other question, it's more that AJ doesn't trust you. I just took his advice and took you to the hotel because I hadn't gotten to feel you out yet."

"What the hell? He comes to my house, sends my best friend in to kidnap me, drugs me, shows me that weird movie, and *he's* the one who doesn't trust *me*?"

"Don't take it personally. It's because he doesn't trust Emily."

"Why not? Doesn't he trust you?"

"AJ doesn't trust most people." Manuel pours himself another cup of coffee. "He only trusts me as far as he does because I was one of the founders of ERIS."

"Who were the others? AJ, right?"

"You're going to get sick of hearing this, but you're not cleared for that yet. They talk about our first meeting in one of the later videos."

Sindy sinks into her seat. "Oh god, there's more of those?" She decides that maybe a hit from the bong sounds alright after all. "Okay, then how about this: how'd they find us at the hotel?"

Manuel repacks the bowl and hands the bong to Sindy. "That's easy. We have a mole in ERIS. That's what has AJ watching Emily like a hawk."

"AJ thinks Emily is a mole? Why?"

He smiles. "You're not cleared for that."

"Oh hell. Do you think she's a mole?"

"I don't think so. I really fucking hope not. If she is, then you probably are, too."

"And that's why you didn't want to bring me here?"

"That's a damn psych major for you, trying to figure out everyone's motivations."

"I'm a sociology major, not psychology."

"Right, sorry. You're studying why people are crazy as groups instead of why they're crazy as individuals," Manuel says, and he finishes off his coffee. "Let me ask you this: what did Johnson tell you about the WMD when he was drunk?"

"Nothing really. Just that they found it in Iraq."

"And he called it WMD, not W'Moud or Wimhd or Wymoufh."

"Um, no. Are those names?"

"Yeah. Did he ever mention the Holy Grail?" Manuel says. Sindy shakes her head. "How about the Ark of the Covenant? Pandora's Box?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it. He said the WMD was in the Ark of the Covenant. Isn't that what the Nazis open in *Indiana Jones* that melts all their faces off?"

"That's the one. The Ark's mentioned in the Old Testament, among other places. Different cultures have different names for it. Did Bigs ever mention a sock puppet?"

Sindy blinks. "Okay, I think I'm still not stoned enough for this conversation."

The clock on the stove shows it's almost 2:45 AM. Manuel stretches and yawns. "Don't worry about it tonight. I think I'm going to get to bed while it's still dark outside."

Manuel shows her to a guest room on the second floor. Sindy hadn't thought she'd be able to sleep when she first walked through the front door, but hearing that Emily's safe and seeing an empty waterbed waiting for her is enough to change her mind. Still, she's too riled up to conk out just yet, so she turns on the HP on the corner desk. "Um," she calls into the hall when the Windows password screen comes up, "you mind if I check my Facebook? I'm not going to tell anyone what's up or where I am."

"Facebook?" Manuel has a disgusted look on his face when he pokes his head out his bedroom door. Sindy can't help but notice the smooth brown muscles of his chest now that his shirt's off. Is this Stockholm Syndrome again, or is all this adrenaline just making her horny? "You really use that site?"

"What? Is it really run by the CIA like the rumors say?"

He laughs. "No, but the bastards sell all your data to businesses. The recommended pages feature is probably the most insidious marketing tool ever." He catches himself beginning to prosthetize and sighs. "Look up the fifth rule. First sentence is the password, all lower case and one word."

Sindy takes the untitled little yellow book out of her duffel bag. It's the first time she's looked at it since AJ handed it over at the truck stop. She flips through the pages, skipping the first two ERISian Rules of Conduct she's already read to take in the next three:

*Rule #3 – Ignorance is a prerequisite to learning.
Don't beat yourself up about not knowing things.
Accept that ignorance is the inescapable default
state of the human mind, and that goes
for you as much as anyone else.*

Why is the first sentence red like the aphorisms? Sindy flips ahead in the book again. It looks like the red print is reserved for this Confusus guy's sayings. So is the first sentence of this rule something he said? The first video didn't say a thing about him, but he must be important if his sayings are given to new members of ERIS.

And is she a member of ERIS now? Funny how that sort of thing slips into your thinking. Sindy rubs at her temples. Okay, so this is the first rule that asks her to do something, but all it's asking her to do is accept her own ignorance. Alright, she decides, she can do that. What's next?

Rule #4 – Free access to information is a prerequisite to freedom.

*Any attempt to control the information you have
available to you is an effort to enslave you.
Don't let anyone else control your perceptions, but
accept that all points of view are subjective and incomplete,
including yours and those of everybody you trust.*

How does that tie into these constant "you're not cleared for that" responses she's getting from ERIS members? Talk about your double-standards. Sindy reads on.

Rule #5 – With no power comes no responsibility.

*You're always in charge of your own trip in life.
You don't have any control over anyone else's trip.
Don't forcibly impose your trip on other people.
Don't let other people forcibly impose their trips on you.
Remember the guilt trip is one of the oldest tricks in
the book when it comes to imposing a trip on someone.*

These last two rules sound to Sindy like the opposite of brainwashing, almost like the book's encouraging her to question the people who gave it to her. But what if she only thinks that because she's already been brainwashed? Goddammit. She wonders what the world would be like if the *Bible* told Christians to question the priests, if the *Koran* told Muslims not to trust the imams. What the hell kind of cult encourages debate and schisms and warns against people trying to guilt-trip you into obedience? An honest one, probably.

(And is ERIS a cult? Sindy still hasn't decided what she thinks ERIS is, but with the rules and aphorisms, that label seems as likely to stick as any other for now. After all, they have their own revealed wisdom, their own rituals, their own holy book, and a cult is just a religion without a lot of followers, right? But that could just be the lack of sleep, the weed and a past semester of studying so-called "new religious movements" talking.)

Sindy types *withnopovertcomesnoresponsibility* in the password field, logs onto Facebook and surfs through a few dozen alerts about new pictures and liking statuses, then reads a few news stories about the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and new record numbers of people filing for unemployment and Wall Street suits raking in multi-million dollar bonuses paid for by the bailout and whether or not Brad and Angelina are getting a divorce. She has a dozen new emails, half

of them about enlarging her penis, none of them from anyone she wants to talk to at the moment.

One of those emails is from Geni, the backstage manager at work, who's probably wondering about Sindy and Emily missing their shifts the last couple nights; Sindy doesn't bother reading it for fear her responsible side would feel compelled to reply to it if she did. Maybe she should email Geni back and tell her she won't be in for the foreseeable future. Maybe she should email her parents and let them know she's okay in case something pops up on the news or DHS comes knocking at their door.

Except she told Manuel she wouldn't do that, and for good reason, right? Besides, she really doesn't want to talk to anyone now. Sindy feels like she's caught between two lives, her pre-running-from-the-Illuminati life and her post-running life, and she doesn't necessarily want to bother with the trappings of the old one tonight. And hell, for all she knows the Illuminati have already hacked her email. Sindy wonders if she's going full-blown paranoid and decides it's time for bed.

But when she lies down, she can't get back to sleep. The clock radio counts from 4:30 to 5 AM and, eyes squeezed shut, she still can't make her mind relax. At one point, she considers visiting Manuel in his bedroom. He's a fairly handsome man when he's not wearing that ridiculous cowboy hat, and she could use a little stress relief, couldn't she? The impulse barely even registers in her frontal lobe before she feels guilty about it. What kind of slut is she, considering going and fucking a near-stranger down the hall just so she can get some sleep? Besides, he's probably asleep already and wouldn't want to be woken up, right? Nah, who's she kidding — she's never known a man who wouldn't want to be woken up for a little serendipitous sex. Why is she even considering this? She chalks this latest impulse, too, up to brainwashing, sleep deprivation and weed.

At some point she must finally nod off because the clock says it's after ten the next time she opens her eyes. Sindy wanders downstairs, still half-dreaming, to see if there's any non-decaf to be had in the kitchen. That's when she notices the black helicopter that landed in Manuel's front yard sometime while she was sleeping. Wide awake, Sindy forgets the search for coffee and steps out the front door. Emily and Manuel are sitting on the porch steps chatting with a short-haired, pale-skinned brunette probably in her late thirties or early forties.

"Morning," says the newcomer when she notices Sindy coming out the door, and Emily and Manuel both look back to smile good morning as well. Emily scoots a bit so Sindy can have a seat beside her on the porch.

"Hi," Sindy says and takes her spot. "How long have you been here?"

"Ve got in only a fev minutes ago," says Emily.

The short-haired woman laughs. "Ems, what's up with the wonky accent?"

"Vhat? I always speak like zis."

The woman laughs again and sparks a menthol. Emily keeps her straight face another moment before a giggle escapes and she throws her arms around Sindy.

Sindy glares sudden intestinal rupture at her best friend. "You goddamn *bitch*," she says, but she can't help laughing and returns the hug. "I should have known."

"Well shit, now I owe AJ fifty bucks," Emily says, German accent abandoned. "I figured I could at least keep you going until we got to the Party. Thanks a lot, Ruth."

"Any time, sweet stuff."

"So wait," Sindy says, "does this mean you're not German?"

"Oh, I'm German. I just don't have a speech impediment."

Breakfast and showers are in order, then it's time to pack up and continue their journey again. Manuel packs a suitcase of his own, though it looks like it's mostly books and a stack of burned DVDs full of god knows what. There's no sign of the Mustang, or any other car for that matter, so Sindy's not too surprised when Emily tells her to load her duffel bag into the helicopter and buckle herself in to one of the back seats. Emily slides in beside her, and Manuel sits in the co-pilot seat with Ruth at the stick.

"Am I allowed to ask where we're going?" Sindy says while Ruth goes through the pre-flight checklist. The fourth rule is still fresh in her head.

"You're allowed to ask anything you want to ask. If it's something we can't tell you then we'll at least tell you that." Emily pats Sindy on the leg. "We're flying over the border into Canada. After that we cross over land to Alaska and meet the Party in the Bering Sea. You'll be safe once we get there."

Sindy nods. "How'd you get away last night anyway? Ruth?"

"No, we didn't meet up until this morning. I got onto the police channel with the CB and ordered the cops that were following me to stop and block the road going back, said there was a blockade up the road in front of me."

"And they believed you?"

"Of course," Manuel says and turns around to face them. "The people who are drawn to police work tend to be the grown-up versions of playground bullies and hall monitors, the kids who were either picking on the weak or narking on everyone else to the teachers. They're drawn to power and like exercising that power over others." He lights another of his seemingly endless supply of spliffs, takes a quick drag and passes it to Emily. Sindy's glad to see Ruth isn't partaking, considering she's the one who'll be keeping them in the air. Come to think of it, neither AJ nor Manuel smoked when they were driving either. Sindy thinks they seem pretty responsible for a group of anarchist terrorists. "Cops are mostly group-thinkers who base their decisions on enforcement of primate pecking orders instead of logic—you know, authoritarians. And what's the one thing an authoritarian respects?"

Sindy grins. "Authority."

"Right. So what's the easiest way to get authoritarians off your back?"

"Convince them you have authority over them. I get you."

Emily squeezes her arm. "He'll go on like that all day if you let him. Get him and AJ in a room together and no one but Bob can get a word in edgewise."

"Everyone listens to Bob," Manuel says, and he takes the spliff from Emily.

"Mostly because he keeps your mouth full," Ruth says and starts the rotors, after which it's too loud for conversation. But there's one more thing that's bothering Cindy, so she yells to Emily over the noise.

"Won't they see us crossing the border on radar? Or hear us?"

Emily shakes her head. "Didn't you notice? This is a black helicopter." Ruth hits a few more switches. The noise of the rotors falls away and, if Cindy was watching the helicopter from outside, it would seem to become a shade of black with every color in it at once for just a half-second, then it would disappear entirely and she wouldn't notice it at all unless she squinted, cocked her head and was using sense-heightening compounds of some sort, and even then she'd only see it if she was in just the right light and stared hard at exactly where the chopper was. "We'll be in whisper mode."

The Council of Overseers

The blind man's name is Ryan "Rigby" Dakota, and he was born February 3, 1923. The locals bring him in naked as his wedding night save a medical ID bracelet round his left wrist that labels him as blood type O- and a diabetic. Lt. Mitsuda fishes him a faded Mickey Mouse shirt and a set of ass-worn overalls out of the lost and found, then Danica sits this newest in a long chain of suspected Al-Qaeda sleeper agents down in what she thinks of as the confession room. But the asshole won't shut up about his fucking dog!

Well, that and goddamn *habeas corpus*. "I don't give a rat's ass what it says in English common law, Mr. Dakota, this is America, and I'm telling you that for reasons of national security, you're not talking to anyone until you explain why you had four thousand dollars in your suitcase." Danica Abigail rubs at the puffy half-rings forming beneath her eyes, knowing she's in for a migraine; it always hits her sinuses before the random spots of light in her vision and the icepick-to-temples pain kicks in.

"I already told you. Why can't I talk to a lawyer?"

For a blind man, Danica thinks, he does a great job of staring her in the face when he talks. You'd think he'd wear some kind of glasses or something so people wouldn't have to see those dead grey eyes. It's rude to just let them loll at you all the time. "What was the money for, Mr. Dakota?"

"Like I said, I was on a tour to see the American West. There was a bus in the parking lot, and if you call the tour guides they'll tell you I was —"

Okay, no more good cop shit. "It was for drugs, wasn't it?"

The blind man — Danica just can't *not* think of him that way — blinks at her a few times. She hadn't realized they did that until she started her chat with Mr. Rigby. She thinks he might just be doing it to creep her out. Maybe Lt. Mitsuda can find some sunglasses in the lost and found. "I don't do drugs!"

"There's no need to carry around that kind of money unless it's for drugs. Or were you buying something else? Maybe some black market guns for use in a terrorist attack."

"I'm not a goddamned terrorist!"

"Law-abiding citizens don't carry that kind of money around. They put it in banks, where it's safe, and when they want access to it, they use ATMs to withdraw their money at reasonable fees, and they get receipts showing traceable electronic transactions took place."

"Safe?" Ryan Dakota laughs for the first time since Danica met him, and she just now notices that he's wearing dentures. Those could be a weapon. She'll tell the locals to take those dentures away from him before he goes to lockup. "I don't trust the banks to keep *my* money safe. The bozos are only still in business because of the bailout, and they only got that 'cause they own D.C."

Danica writes DEFINITELY A TERRORIST!!! on her notepad. What kind of nutbar doesn't trust banks? It's a good thing she nabbed this psycho before he could blow up a federal building. Lt. Mitsuda opens the door before she can get any further with the interrogation and says, "Phone call from Washington for you, Agent Abigail."

Mr. Dakota stands as she moves to leave. "Hey, you gonna send anyone back to my hotel room to get my cane, or what?" Danica ignores him; if he's going to further impede this investigation by persisting in his refusal to confess then there's no way she's doing him any favors. She wonders if a charge of obstruction of justice might be in order.

Danica takes the call at her temporary desk. It's not a pleasant conversation. For the next forty minutes, Danica tries to explain to the deputy director who assigned her the Cathaway case why, after being tipped as to where the fugitive was and who she was with, she let said fugitive escape and is "wasting her goddamn time" grilling a blind man. That last criticism falls away when Danica explains Mr. Dakota was carrying four thousand dollars in cash in his suitcase — if you're going to do that you'd better be wealthy; otherwise, it's grounds for immediate arrest and asset seizure because, hey, what are you trying to hide?

Still, Danica has "utterly failed after receiving exemplary intelligence" to capture a high-priority suspect. For that, the deputy director tells her, she's to return to D.C. immediately for debriefing and reassignment. Danica hangs up and fumes in her borrowed office chair, partly because she just got her ass chewed and partly because the damn chair keeps slipping to the lowest setting under her weight.

Someone must have helped Cathaway from inside DHS, and she thinks she knows who that someone is. Danica vows to dig up the truth about the Al-Qaeda mole calling himself Todd Moody as soon as she gets back home, no matter how deep the hole goes.

Right after the deputy director in charge of Cathaway's case hangs up with Danica, he dials an 800-number that (he's unaware) redirects to an answering machine a few blocks away. "Cathaway, Laboros and Thomas were all identified by eye-witnesses at the hotel. Someone called off the police pursuit over a restricted channel, and their vehicle escaped with all three believed to have been in the car. Their last known direction of travel suggests they're probably in British Columbia by now. I'm sending the full report to the usual place."

The machine beeps, and soon the message passes to the man serving as the nation's default patriarch (on account of the fact that he's the only Founding Father still alive). He groans, wishing he could just ignore this newest disaster and deal with everything else that's going wrong at the moment, but the sock is

right: something must be done about Sindy Cathaway. It's time to get the Council together.

In a posh office on the other side of town, the Witches Three kneel in a triangular configuration before a hand-sewn effigy. Around the effigy lie photos of faces famous and unknown, an ex-President and an ex-Vice President, the governor of New Mexico, and, pinned between the doll's legs, a photo of the current President with a cigarette hanging off his bottom lip. The effigy's face remains blank, the shape and color of the original visage that belongs there a rumor whose truth is known only to the Overmaster and the Beast himself.

"O come forth in the name of Abaddon," says Nancy Pelosi, reciting the invocation from decades-worn paths in her neural circuitry as she drips black wax on the effigy, "and destroy him whose name I give as a sign." Joints pop as she hands the candle to Hillary Clinton, whose eyes flicker to watch the wax drip down Pelosi's fingers. That better be all she's watching. Nancy's been casting satanic curses for so long she barely remembers nudity is part of the ritual once she's started chanting, but there's something about the way Hillary's eyes linger on hers before Madam Secretary of State picks up the chant that reminds Nancy not all of those young women were lost to satisfy Bill's simple, earthy desires.

"O great brothers of the night, you who make my place of comfort, who rides out upon the hot winds of hell, who dwells in the temple of the profane, move and appear!" Hillary flicks wax at the effigy's blank face and hands the candle to the third and newest member of the Council's coven.

"Oh golly, I hope I can remember all the words!" says Sarah Palin, who seems not to have understood that she was supposed to remove her glasses and wedding ring for the ceremony. "Here I go, okay?" She clears her throat. "Rend ill the gagglin' tongue that speaks naught but eczema for the weak, O Moloch, let his liver shrivel and his nipples bleed and his testicles migrate deep up his ass, O Kali, O Airman, O Lilith Fair, hear the prayers of us your scorned daughters and visit justice unbridled upon the interloper!"

Hillary and Nancy look to each other, shrug and join Sarah in the reverse rosary and chant with her: "Shemhamforash! Hail Satan!"

"Yay us!" says Sarah, and she jumps to her feet with a certain jiggle that Hillary doesn't bother hiding her ogle at. Pfshaw, Nancy thinks, if only Gingrich had known. Sarah claps her hands. "My first magic spell! That was nifty!" She seems to be looking for some kind of response, maybe a pat on the head, but it's the message light blinking on Hillary's desk that has the other two witches' eyes now. What does the old man want?

Seeing as how he's not a member of the Council, Ron Paul is unlikely to receive a summons from the Overmaster any time soon, which suits him just fine; his vision of the future doesn't have much good in it for the Council. Even were he to receive a call like the ones now going to the sitting members of the Council, he wouldn't get it at the moment, nor would he be in any position to heed it; he's locked away in his study at his home in Lake Jackson, Texas, reading the secret prophecies of Ayn Sedai, just as he has so many times before when the way ahead was murky.

You've probably never heard of Ayn Sedai in our Universe. In our Universe, the Nathaniel Branden Institute fell apart when Ayn Rand discovered her apostle Nathaniel Branden was having an affair with a younger woman, which Rand apparently felt was an intrusion upon her own past extramarital affair with Branden. In the Universe we're concerned with now, Rand never found out Branden was not-cheating on her, and the NBI eventually morphed into the First Holy Communion of the Randites, who believed Rand to be the physical manifestation of Ma'at, goddess of truth, balance, order and laissez-faire capitalism. In the final months of Rand's life, secluded within the Randite compound, where she was surrounded by and endlessly waited on by her oath-sworn followers, the self-styled Ayn Sedai claimed she could "channel the currents of space-time in the Universe" and gave a secret code whereby one could find prophecies of the future in her writings and the writings of those she had inspired.

Ron Paul is a seventh-degree Randite Master; thus, he knows the code forward and backward, along with the story it tells in Rand's own writings. Take this decoded bit from *The Fountainhead*, which to the untrained eye seems merely several paragraphs about a villainous newspaper editorialist:

*It shall come to pass that what America made will be ruined
And the parasites shall once more lay across the electoral map.
Soldiers shall make war across the world for no good reason
And workers of the nation will lose consumer confidence.
Neither shall Wall Street abide...*

The prophecies tell of foreign wars of aggression, economic collapse, public demonstrations against a federal government out of touch with and control of the voters, the hopeless apathy and moral degradation of the coming generation, the sorts of things you generally find in prophecies about times to come from any culture past or present. What sets this bunch apart are the bits about "Gugurped," a computerized intelligence that will arise and force humanity to live in a technocratic collectivist empire until the end of history should America continue down its spiral of irrationalism and "capitulating to the looters."

Ayn Sedai secretly assured her closest followers that a champion would come to save them, a real life John Galt destined to win the Presidency and lead America back to its nineteenth-century glory: the Dollar Reborn. The Dollar Reborn will tame the mechanical beast Gugurped; he'll become its master and turn its power to regulating a well-armed militia, enforcing the gold standard and protecting the borders, and that will be *it*. Ayn Sedai's writings don't contain prophecies to identify the Dollar Reborn; the collectivists, she explained, would use her prophecies to identify and destroy the Dollar Reborn while he was young and weak if the signs of his coming were known before the time of his arrival on the world stage drew near.

Part of the prophecies contained in Ayn Sedai's writings have already come true, so far as Ron can tell. Gugurped rears its head on the internet, though it's still in its embryonic stage and not yet self-aware. Its awakening will surely come when Google and Wikipedia (and possibly this Facebook thing all the young people are using now) inevitably merge, becoming a self-aware search engine with all of mankind's collected knowledge available to it. Ron started an initiative to get as many people as possible to enter his name into Google to counter Gugurped's advances; that ought to make it more susceptible to his influence in the future. But he's always known small measures like that won't be enough, and he's given up on illusions that he might be the Dollar Reborn – the White House seems forever out of his reach, his career already having reached its zenith with his seniority in the House.

As the new millennium began and Ayn Sedai's prophecies became more and more real every day, Ron couldn't escape the feeling that he needed guidance if the war against Gugurped was to be won. Then, in early 2001, an intern working on the House floor brought Paul a copy of *Faith of the Fallen* by Terry Goodkind and told him he'd get a kick out of it. Paul never saw the intern in question again and wonders about that from time to time, but all concern over where the book came from falls away whenever he reads the code-masked prophecies hidden within its pages. *Faith of the Fallen* blew him away – not because of the Randian plot or the implied rape (a hallmark of Objectivist literature that not only survived under the Randites, but actually became more widespread, to the point that most modern Objectivist/Randite stories are at least eighty-four percent rape scenes) but because Ayn Sedai's code could be used to identify several heretofore unknown prophecies about the hero who would save America in its darkest hour. The only rational explanation Paul can think of is that this Terry Goodkind must be channeling the same currents of space-time as Ayn Sedai, or maybe even the undead spirit of Ayn Sedai herself. As Paul does so often nowadays, he reads over the prophecies that identify the Dollar Reborn to comfort himself and think on his next step.

*Once the eagle he shall be marked,
For fiscal responsibility that was abandoned.
Twice the eagle he shall be marked,
For gold standard he will restore.
Once the serpent he shall be marked,
For path that need be trod to win the nomination.
Twice the serpent he shall be marked,
For none shall tread on him.*

While these familiar verses give Ron Paul a reassurance that warms what marrow is left in his bones, he can't help but go back again to the lines he usually ignores, the ones he's never fully understood and isn't sure he wants to.

*Patsy, fall-guy, mark and tool
Don't let Lady Chaos make you her fool*

Ron thinks this one might concern those looters in ERIS. Those anarchists are a threat to freedom, capitalism, god and country, and Ron Paul doesn't need a prophecy to know that. As the only representative in Congress to have actually read the PATRIOT Act, he knows just how dangerous those radicals are. But that's not even the worst of it. It's the next one that scares him shitless.

*Weep, gnash thine teeth and curse thine bank account,
For his blood on tragedy's soil is thy salvation.*

He doesn't like the sound of that one at all. Again, he wonders if he should tell his son what he knows, but foreknowledge of the future might change Rand's destiny and damn them all. The best Ron can do for now is make sure none of his son's campaign stops take place at "tragedy's soil;" there might not be another choice after Rand takes the Presidency in 2012, but Ron Paul refuses to allow prophecy to come to pass before its time. In all the chaos of the modern age, there's only one thing of which he's absolutely positive, one truth around which all his actions revolve: his son, Rand Paul, is the Dollar Reborn.

Back in Washington, D.C., the man called Dick Cheney in this era rests his wrinkled ass upon the silver throne of the Overmaster of the Council of Overseers, like the Roman Catholic pope, first among equals in name only. The throne rests on a dais at the western point of a small pentagonal room in an undisclosed location (hint: it's about a mile below a certain similarly shaped building in Washington, D.C.). A golden pyramid with a single onyx eye rises from the back of the throne and glares over the room. Woven into the hemp

carpet of the dais is a pentagram-and-inverted-cross pattern, developed in 1793 by the original Council coven to ensure the room's maximum magical defensive potential against Rosicrucian curses, and the throne sits in the exact center of the symbol, a spot measured to the millimeter. It looks a bit like this on paper:



The other four corners of the room are decorated with ivory busts of the nation's past Arbiters of the People's Will, which you might know better as the Presidents. Washington is at the northwest corner, Adams at the northeast, Jefferson at the southeast, Madison southwest, then Monroe next to Washington in the northwest, and so on to the newest bust of Arbiter forty-three down the line from Jefferson. The only entrance or exit from the room (besides the dais, which doubles as an elevator and is reserved for the Overmaster's use alone) is a set of gold-gilded double-doors on the eastern wall; one door is inlaid with the Eagle, the other with the Serpent. Beyond the doors is a staircase, and beyond the staircase is an elevator that requires a retinal scan to activate going up or down. Men and women belonging to a government agency without a name guard the elevator's entrance at ground level.

The Council's members are coming through those double doors, mostly in groups of twos and threes, some locals, some of them after trips in to D.C. from the surrounding states. Each has his or her assigned spot on the floor. There are no chairs or stools allowed, not even for the oldest and most infirm among them, though anyone over sixty is allowed to sit cross-legged on the floor rather than kneel. Not that most of the young fuckers appreciate the old ways anymore. Cheney chased some young investment banker representing Merrill Lynch out of the last meeting; the little shit brought in one of those folding chairs the proles take on camping trips, and he was sitting in it and sipping a latte like everything was right with the goddamn world. Well, okay, Cheney didn't so much chase him out as scream at him until he left. Same difference. Point is, there's no respect for authority anymore, and without respect for authority, what do they have? Murder, rape and — he shudders — *theft* in the streets. Chaos.

The Old One feels a gurgle in his stomach, like an angry baby is kicking him from within his remaining intestine. Cheney leans closer to the Beast, who's standing at the Overmaster's right hand as he has for decades. "How went the talk with Tony Hayward?"

The man America's most recently learned to call Barack Obama smiles. Though he wears neither the name nor the face he was born with, his expressions look natural. The Beast always was an impeccable impressionist, even before he got into politics. "We came to an understanding. Hayward was still under the

impression that the oil spill was a genuine accident. Once I explained what a tragedy it would be if accidents like that kept happening, and what we might be forced to do if they did, he agreed it was in our mutual best interests that BP take our concerns to Parliament.” Cheney nods, satisfied his protégé has resolved the issue, though he’s annoyed the incident had to take place at all. What’s wrong with the world when the fucking *English* think they can question America’s right to use the UK’s airspace and ports? Do they really think America’s that vulnerable now?

“The whole world is waiting for a chance to kick us when we’re down,” the Overmaster tells his latest disciple, knowing that if anyone’s ready to go after him when he’s down, it’s the Beast.

This whole Beast thing probably deserves an explanation, and since we’re still waiting on everyone to get to the meeting, now’s probably the best time to give it. There’s a lot of talk going around about who Barack Obama “really” is and what his agenda might be, none of it very accurate, including the bits about him working with the underprivileged in Chicago or being a secret Muslim, but inaccuracy hasn’t stopped the rumors. Take this randomly selected post from Craigslist’s Rants & Raves:

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Known half-breed Muslim terrorist and suspected gayfag Barack Hussein Obama was born Barry Soetero in Kenya. When he was still a baby to an Un-wed single cokehead Mother he came to Hawaii and the America-hating Liberal Socialists who run that faggot state gave him a false Birth Certificate so he could qualify for Welfare and his Mom could get Taxpayer Abortions. Barry assumed the name Barack so Black people would vote for him. Barack Hussein Obama’s plan is to institute mandatory Sharia Law and sell our White Christian children as sex slaves to the Chinese to pay the National Debt all this Socialized Medicine is going to cost us!

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The truth is that the Beast doesn’t ascribe to any particular religious viewpoint, though his original persona is fond of meditation. Cheney assures the rest of the Council that the Beast was born in the United States, which is quite truthful, though when and where and under what name are some of the Overmaster’s most closely guarded secrets. The Barack Obama persona identifies as a Christian, albeit a different brand of Christianity than that of George W. Bush, the persona the Beast wore most often during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Right now, one of the Beast’s personas is caught up in a pay-to-play investigation in New Mexico, another believes a camera company is out to get him, and yet another is drawing comparisons to eighties-era Madonna. Cheney isn’t sure if the Beast really is the world’s greatest method actor or if he

just has a high-functioning form of dissociative identity disorder, for the Beast wholeheartedly believes certain things as some personas that are anathema to things he believes as others without any apparent internal contradiction.

Through the double doors and across the room comes Joe Biden, who strides up the dais steps and slaps Barack Obama on the shoulder. "I was just getting ready to tie one on. What's up?" Cheney grunts. Biden wasn't his first choice for Vice President, but that was the deal with Olmert, so Biden takes a place on the Council of Overseers not as the Vice President of the United States but as the Council's official liaison with the Israeli government. It worries the Old One that those goddamn kikes are able to dictate who gets within a bullet of the Presidency, but the Council needs the nation of Israel to serve as a staging ground for their military endeavors in the Middle East, and that means playing nice when they make demands. For now.

"The Overmaster is concerned," the Beast says, which is all he knows about it despite his bevy of titles (Grand Illuminated Trueseer, Protector of Old Glory and He Whose Finger Is On The Button, among others). Biden nods his acceptance of that explanation, knowing it's the best he's likely to get before the meeting starts.

Some other men and women come into the conference room and kneel (or, as has been happening more and more lately, sit) at their assigned and long-familiar places on the floor, but they're mostly the boring ones you don't hear about, representatives from oil companies and financial firms, a couple of older women who have something to do with pharmaceuticals, those sorts of people. Their job is to listen, make their quarterly reports and pass on orders (or "scenarios") to their bosses. The real Council members they represent are busy running corporate America, not to mention the military-industrial and prison-industrial complexes. A survey of the representatives present at an average meeting would find at least fifty percent of them are personal assistants with human resources degrees, and half of those are unpaid interns. We're not concerned with them.

John Boehner and Mitch McConnell, the representatives for the conservative faction, come into the room together and take knees on the right side of the room (from Cheney's perspective, not theirs); the liberal faction's representatives, Robert Byrd and Harry Reid, come in a minute later and head to the left. Nancy Pelosi, head of the Council's supernatural defenses, is with them. The conservatives and liberals glare at each other before they all turn their gazes to their betters up on the dais.

While we're on the topic, let's have a quick chat about these two major factions. Each represents a sizable chunk of the Senior Council, and each is vying for influence with the Overmaster (and therefore power over the American people):

	The Conservatives*	The Liberals*
Public Goal	Maintain American prosperity and protect American values. Protect jobs from immigrants.	Promote tolerance, equality and prosperity for all Americans.
Actual Goal	Seize power to pursue own interests and vendettas.	Seize power to pursue own interests and vendettas.
Major Supporters	Oil, agriculture, manufacturing, banking, Wall Street, pharmaceuticals.	Oil, agriculture, manufacturing, banking, Wall Street, pharmaceuticals.
Party Line	We can make things as good as they were in an imaginary time that never existed if you give our side enough power.	We can create a utopia like something in a science-fiction novel if you give our side enough power.
Official Reaction To 9/11	Assign blame and cover own ass by distracting public with wars. Take advantage of panic to pass unconstitutional laws that were sitting in desk drawer at home for years. Create illegal mercenary company run by the CIA to do dirty work.	Complain loudly about government run amuck and promise to fix things if put in power. Once in power, retain status quo of previous faction in power while blaming other faction for everything and asking for more power.

Would Have Done In Other's Shoes	Same thing liberals did, except with more empty talk about reducing size and power of federal government. Complain about how much war costs.	Same thing conservatives did, except with less Iraq and more Darfur, but still an equal part Halliburton and Blackwater (sorry, "Xe").
What People Need	To be controlled because they're too dumb to know what's good for them.	To be controlled because they're too dumb to know what's good for them.
Who Knows What's Best	Only themselves.	Only themselves.

*Both terms used erroneously. On purpose.

As you might imagine, allowing combinations of agents from these two factions to run the country has led to a bloated and corrupt kleptocracy posing as a republic, a glorified fiefdom ruled by nefarious sociopaths with total disregard for individual liberty or happiness; it has created an insulated ruling class who feel morally justified both in spending the nation into bankruptcy while indiscriminately killing non-citizens overseas (either in "self-defense" through wars of aggression or for "humanitarian purposes" to ensure cheap access to natural resources in foreign nations) and in imposing blatantly illegal restrictions on their serfs' activities in the homeland in the name of "national security." Lucky for the members of the Council, they also control the courts, who ostensibly watch the watchmen, but are mostly packed with watchmen as well, meaning even with the right to vote, run for office and file suit against the government, the serfs are effectively (though unofficially, and therefore legally) disenfranchised.

Hillary Clinton is next to enter the room. As Secretary of State, she's the only Cabinet member on the Council, though her presence on the Council precedes her ascension to her current public office; in fact, it goes back to 1992, when her pawn first sat in the Oval Office. Cheney had once planned to put the Beast into the executive office in the mid-nineties, but his spotty performance as Vice President under Bush Sr. (not to mention his failure to take the office seriously when he was temporarily President after Nixon fucked up) convinced Cheney to hold off on those plans. At the time, Bill Clinton had seemed an ideal placeholder to fill the office until the Beast was ready to rule. If Cheney could do it all again, he might have let the Beast have the job after all, or at least picked someone besides Hillary's stooge; that woman has been a boil on his ass every week of the

past eighteen years, and she's been on the Council too long and knows too much to be gotten rid of now.

Right on Hillary's heels comes Sarah Palin, a new addition to the Council and one Cheney wasn't happy to make. The Old One's still not sure whether she's nefariously bright and using that bumpkin accent to disarm her critics or she's really dumber than a tongueless mime with laryngitis. Cheney thinks it's the latter, but W'Moud says she belongs in the room, and just thinking about disagreeing with W'Moud makes Cheney's left arm start to ache. Cheney does agree that it's a good idea to direct the serfs' unpatriotic dissatisfaction into this Tea Party business so the bastards can be monitored and pushed in convenient directions as need be, but did they have to let this hick in a skirt sit with the grown-ups? At least she seems comfortable getting down on her knees; that's a quality the Old One has always appreciated in a woman.

Cheney waits for the latecomers to settle on the floor, then he raises a gnarled hand. The room goes quiet. He savors the moment, reminding himself that despite all the hell the Council's gone through in the past nine years, he's still Overmaster of the most powerful cabal in the world. It would be better if the others gathered here would remember that too and behave appropriately.

"What I have to say is sealed to the Senior Council alone." Most of the people in the room plug their fingers into their ears as the precepts require. A woman near the back, probably a new intern, whispers "*Really?*" to the man next to her, and he gives her a solemn nod; the woman jabs her lacquered nails into her ear canals with a dazed look on her face. Cheney waits until he's sure no one's listening who shouldn't be, then says, "My friends, we are beset by terrorists and worshippers of anarchy."

Every society needs a group to fear, be it the Vikings, the Jews, devil-worshippers putting subliminal satanic messages on rock records or, since September 2001 in the United States of America, faceless, hidden, ever-unconfrontable terrorists. Cheney subscribes to the old mentality that served the USA so well during the Cold War: the easiest, and therefore best, way to control people is through fear of an enemy no one can ever face directly, which is to say the rulers of the United States manipulate their serfs the same way the average horror film director plays with his audience.

"We have reason to believe a terrorist organization called ERIS is in possession of Council secrets." Cheney's left hand flaps open and closed as he speaks, like he's trying to scoop something out of the air, though he seems not to notice. No one dares mention it to him. "Last week, we intercepted word that a drunken CIA agent disclosed the discovery of the WMD in Iraq to an erotic dancer in Seattle named Sindy Cathaway. I had a DHS agent dispatched to apprehend Cathaway, but ERIS got to her before we did and spirited her away."

Henry Reid clears his throat. "Who did we intercept that intelligence from?" As a representative for the liberal caucus, Reid is a member of the Senior Council and allowed to pose questions to the Overmaster. It hasn't slipped the Old One's

notice that members of the Senior Council used to ask for permission to field those questions instead of just tossing them out. What does he think this is, the press corps? There's no respect for authority anymore.

"A mole planted within the Roman heretics. They had the club bugged. But I'm afraid we got the news several days after the fact." The Overmaster sits in silence for a minute, mentally daring someone else to interrupt him. "Another tip from a mole within ERIS led our agent to the hotel where Cathaway and her ERIS compatriots were staying this morning, but they have escaped again. I am told the terrorists tapped into a local law enforcement radio band and impersonated a field agent to call off the pursuit."

John Boehner chokes back a sob. "That's cheating!"

Clinton gives Boehner a look fit to send a man's toenails fleeing up to his kneecaps, and he wipes his nose with the cuff of his jacket. She turns to the Overmaster and says, "Do we know where they headed after that?"

"The Canadian border, it seems." Cheney grimaces, though that isn't too far from his usual expression, so it's a little hard to tell. His left hand spasms open and closed, like the mouth of a man throwing an expletive-heavy fit.

"What about the CIA agent in question?" the Beast says.

"His name is Robert Johnson. We're unsure of his present location. It looks like he left Seattle the day after he ran his mouth, and he hasn't reported to us since."

Pelosi frowns. "Johnson? Isn't he part of Project Judo?" Cheney grunts an affirmation. "Did they put him up to this? And how did he find out about W'Moud?"

"What's Project Jew-Doh?" Palin says, but no one pays her any mind except Biden, who scowls in her direction, then tries to look down her blouse.

Clinton clears her throat. "So, if this started last week, why are we just hearing about it now? Especially in light of your failure to contain the problem."

Not a breath can be heard in the room outside the Old One's usual wheezing, and the Beast shifts his weight like he's ready to pounce at the Secretary of State. That would be something, the Old One thinks; it would be just like old times.

"Nancy," Cheney says as he turns to look at Pelosi, ignoring Clinton's breach of etiquette for the moment, "I want new barrier spells cast in all five spots around the capitol. We have to assume those Roman bastards are throwing hexes at us again."

"I'll make a stop by the Humane Society tomorrow."

"That won't be enough. We have to be sure on this one."

Pelosi clicks her tongue. "I can arrange a few celebrity adoptions from Africa. It won't take longer than a week." Cheney nods. This age of bureaucracy is usually convenient when you're on top, but it's made gathering orphans for use in sacrifices harder to pull off without leaving a paper trail. That's a problem, even in a country where the Council controls the mainstream media. There are too many goddamn bloggers with too much internet-surfing time on their hands

looking for exclusives. Maybe some kind of law requiring bloggers to register as journalists and pay for licenses is in order? It's a thought for another time. The Old One misses the days when the Council could kidnap even famous aviators' babies for use in their rituals and get away with it.

"Fine, fine," Cheney says. "Get their fingers out of their ears." The Senior Council members wave back at their hear-no-evil compatriots, and it's not long before everyone's listening again. "Mueller." The director of the FBI bobs his head in acknowledgement. He's not often invited to Council meetings, but he's been called in today to give a report. "What is the status on the McHailey investigation?"

"She was in Topeka, but she's skipped town," Robert Mueller says. "Looks like she was shacking up with a group of Truthers. A rental car exploded at one of their rallies, and it looks like she left Topeka immediately afterward."

Cheney's eyebrows climb into his forehead wrinkles. "Those unpatriotic bastards are blowing up cars now?"

"We're not sure, sir. DHS sent an agent to look into the matter, but he hasn't submitted a report yet. Do you want the Bureau to investigate, sir?"

"No. Any idea where McHailey went?"

"Based on our interviews with the locals she had contact with, we believe she's coming to D.C., sir. I've already forwarded her description to the MPDC."

"Fine. Gates," Cheney says. Robert Gates stands. He's not usually part of the these meetings either, but this is another report due and now's as good a time as any to get it out of the way. "How goes progress on HAARP?"

Gates clears his throat. "We've finished using data from the Haiti quake to recalibrate the IRI. Pre-test readings indicate we may have upped our accuracy by as much as 5.8 percent, but we can't be sure until we fire it again."

"Excellent. How soon can you run another live test?"

"All we need is a target and permission to fire, sir."

Finally, someone with some good news. Cheney waves for Robert Gates to take his seat. Perhaps he should see to making the head of the Department of Defense a permanent member of the Council. There aren't any hard and fast rules about who does and doesn't get to attend Council meetings; everyone serves at the Overmaster's pleasure, the same way it's been since the eighteenth century. There's an empty spot on the left side of the room where Ted Kennedy used to sit, same piece of the floor once occupied by Ted's father and two older brothers before him, but the Old One hasn't seen fit to fill it with another Kennedy since Ted's death last year. Gates is making noise about retiring, but a spot on the Senior Council might change his mind.

"You will all receive new orders shortly," Cheney says to the rest of the Council. "Go forth and do what thou wilt. Dismissed."

Senator Robert Byrd returns to his office after the meeting and types the latest in a long history of secret reports on Council business. He emails this report, as he's mailed so many reports on Council business in times past, to an organization called DRAGON (Democrats and Republicans Against the Gay Onslaught), whose incoming emails are forwarded via proxies in 23 various international locales to a server currently off the west coast of Alaska.

As far as Byrd is aware, DRAGON is an ally in both his secret war against the Council and his public war against the encroachment of the homosexual agenda on American politics. Unbeknownst to Byrd, his history as an unwitting mole for ERIS has been uncovered by a Council counter-mole on the Party, and his time on this earth is thereby limited.

Elsewhere, John McCain blinks his way out of a nap, awakened by a rap at his door. "Who is it?"

"Howdy!" says Sarah Palin as she lets herself into his study. "Howyadoin', chief-in-command?" She sits in the guest easy-chair across from McCain's own and leans back so that the footrest comes out. "I tell ya, Mac Daddy, I don't know about this witch stuff. I'm pretty sure that Hillary wants to jump my bones, and that just ain't biblical, ya know? Besides, I looked up witchcraft in the *Bible*, and it said you're not s'posed to suffer a witch to live, and when I asked Todd about life as a witch being suffering he said it sounded Buddhist, and that ain't biblical neither."

McCain grunts. "What brings you here?"

"We had a meeting," says Palin, "and you said I was always s'posed to tell ya after we had a meeting. Ya wanna know what it was about, doancha?"

McCain nods for her to continue, but she doesn't say anything. She seems to have problems understanding unspoken instructions. Also written instructions. Also the English language in general. "What did they say, Sarah?"

"Oh golly, there was somethin' about the Jews and a harp and that place with all the chocolate people that had the tsunami, but mostly they talked a lot about this stripper who found out about that one thing we're not supposed to talk about and how some heiress who's a terrorist got away with her to Canada."

"There's a lot of things Council members aren't supposed to talk about," McCain says, but his pulse quickens at the thought that she's babbling about what he thinks she's babbling about. "What does the stripper know about that she's not supposed to know?"

"She knows about the dubya-emm-dee from aye-arr-aye..." Palin trails off, unsure of what comes next. "You know whadayemean?"

"W'Moud. Someone knows about it?"

"Yeah, Paris Hilton, I think. They said it was some heiress, and she's the only heiress in the country, right? Never would have thought she was a terrorist."

"Paris Hilton knows about W'Moud?"

"Yeah. I feel real bad for that little dog she carries around in her purse 'cause now that she's a Muslim, ya just know she's gonna eat it sooner or later, right?"

"Ahumph." McCain chokes back the urge to smack the infidel bitch.

Now you might think, based on experiences in our Universe, that John McCain has spent years in the House of Representatives to better America, and that he ran for President in 2008 because (rightly or wrongly, from your perspective) he thought he was the right man for the job. I'm afraid there are some things you need to know about the John McCain in this Universe, and some of them may come as a shock.

The official story is that John McCain accidentally crashed his plane on his sixth flight during the Vietnam War and subsequently spent five and a half years in a POW camp. The truth is that John McCain scuttled his fighter jet on purpose at a pre-arranged location, and he did so for two reasons:

- 1) To provide the Viet Cong with an A-4 so the Russians and Chinese could reverse-engineer American military aircraft, and
- 2) To give McCain cover to train as a sleeper agent at a secret Soviet installation so he could help destroy the United States from within.

What would drive a man to turn against his own society so completely? While it's probably impossible to give a straight answer on that one, let's examine the path of John's life leading to that fateful choice in pursuit of a clearer understanding.

John McCain grew up in a strict military household, groomed from childhood for military and political leadership (which is called "service" for some odd reason, possibly an attempt at low-level irony). He was a C student who fucked off through school and passed at the bare bottom of his class on the murmur of his father's name. McCain hated living in his father's shadow, but he was too stubborn and lazy in his youth to cast his own. Spider-Freud says that when McCain grew up he substituted the hatred of his symbolic patriarch, the United States of America, for the rage at his father that he felt he could never express. Whatever the reason, McCain swore an oath as a Russian spy during his final year at the academy and entered the Navy as a double-agent. Spider-Freud speculates further that McCain crashing his jet and embracing his clandestine training with the Russians, where he suddenly excelled and rose to the top of the ranks, may have been his rebellious rite of passage.

The half-decade of Soviet training put steel in a spine that had once been rubber. McCain led false-flag attacks on Vietnamese peasants to fuck with the press and discredit the American government, but it turned out the Council so

completely fucked up in Vietnam that those false-flag massacres were assumed to be part of the larger catastrophe and didn't get much airtime. To this day, US military intelligence (another possible attempt at low-level irony) believes the nation's armed forces were guilty of McCain's atrocities. Over time, the steel in McCain's spine has morphed to iron and rusted, but he could kick some Yankee capitalist ass back in the day.

All that said, it wasn't McCain's Soviet indoctrination that set his life on its current path. That honor goes to his introduction to Ahmatohtal Wahkjab, a Sunni cleric who spoke to the young radical of a sacred truth, a holy mission and a deep and abiding hatred for the Great Satan America, a country where women wore pants and everyone smelled of cheese. John McCain's conversion was sudden and absolute, and he returned to the United States to pursue not his original political agenda, but his newfound religious destiny – he would stab the Great Satan's heart from the Oval Office, and none of the pig-fucking infidels would ever suspect John McCain was a secret Muslim until the United States was burning to the ground.

Victory seemed so close in 2008. The Beast, posing as George W. Bush, couldn't have mismanaged the country worse, and the Overmaster had to have known it. But the Overmaster had refused to boot his protégé out of office even after his string of failures, though not without losing face – he'd had to buy off Hillary with the office of Secretary of State. But what was John McCain left with for participating in the electoral game of musical chairs that put the Beast back in the White House with a new name and face? Nothing, not even a seat on the Senior Council. It might sting less if he thought the infidels knew of his true intentions, knew of his true faith, but no – they just think him burned out and harmless enough to cast aside.

But the Great Satan has made an error in its hubris: they took Sarah into their ranks. McCain isn't sure whose bright idea that was, but it gives him an ear at all their meetings. Not the most comprehending ear, certainly. John gave Sarah a book of Sudoku puzzles in the hopes they'd give her brain a work-out, and she came back complaining that she couldn't find the across and down clues. Still, tonight proves what a blunder putting her on the Council was for Cheney. He wonders if it's true that the Old One is finally losing it for good.

"Here's what you're going to do, Sarah. I want you to –"

"Oh hang on, okey dokey? I gotta write this down, ya know?" Sarah digs in her purse for a Hello Kitty notepad and a stub pencil. "Shoot, chief!"

"I want you to go back to Alaska," McCain says. "If these terrorists are headed where I think they're headed, you'll be in the right place to capture them." A heiress who's a terrorist? No, he knows about the terrorist organization ERIS all too well. How could he not? Their prankful intervention in his campaign is what stuck him with Sarah as his Vice Presidential candidate in the first place. And he also knows their base of operations is somewhere out in the Pacific Ocean; where, he's not sure. But if that's where they're headed, Alaska's as good a place

as any for them to disembark from. He'll tell the Al-Qaeda agents in British Columbia to be on a lookout as well. "Use any means necessary to capture them. Can you do that?"

Sarah Palin grins as she puts her notepad back in her purse. "Sure thing, ya know? Easier than catchin' a moose in a noose!"

The Old One stands at his office window and looks out over the national capitol he helped build. His aged eyes can't quite make out the statue in his honor standing by the Old Post Office from here, not even with these modern glasses. The man called Dick Cheney in the present day marks the last item off his daily checklist:

~~Contemplate what we have wrought.~~

This list-making is an old habit long ingrained in his ancient psyche, and he credits it above everything else for his longevity. He keeps a stringent schedule every day, each moment of exercise planned, each bout of contemplation pre-arranged, all the facets of his life orderly, scientific. He keeps meticulous journals on both his diet and (like Todd Moody) his bowel movements, and the occasions when he indulges in pleasures of the flesh are all inked on the calendar in his personal ledger weeks in advance. There is a time to eat, a time to nap, a time to take his pills and a time to think on those he's lost over the long course of his life. There is time on Sunday devoted to thinking on those whose names start with A-D, on Monday for those of E-J, and so on.

Perhaps he's right, and he's lived these past 304 years thanks to his insistence on order. Maybe it's the secret concoction of herbs he developed as part of his scientific career; he continues to take that tincture once a week, just as he has since his forties. Putting the same mix in batter for frying chicken and feeding the results to the masses seems to have done nothing positive for the average person's life expectancy, however. That was a disappointing, though profitable, experiment.

Hell, maybe that bolt of lightning changed something in him, though he's not often given to that kind of comic book logic. If he had to guess, he'd wager that divine providence has blessed him with a biblical lifespan so that he might continue to perfect this most sacred of Unions.

Truth is, it no longer matters to the Old One why he's lived so long. Whatever the cause, it's no longer working. A score of years and two centuries have passed since the day the history books claim his body was laid to rest beneath Philadelphia's soil, with over a dozen lesser personas supposedly settled into the dirt since. But there will be no trickery when the persona Dick Cheney dies, for the man born Benjamin Franklin will have finally come to his natural end.

He wonders what George and Tom would say if they had lived as long as he has. The Old One misses their bull sessions, sitting around a tavern, drinking hard apple cider, smoking their hemp pipes* and talking legal philosophy and rebellion. Now those were the days of statesmen – patriotic men who understood what it took to build a nation, men who took radical positions and stuck to them despite knowing that failure to win the revolution would mean a trip to the gallows. They'd created a perfect Union – well, okay, there were some bumps along the way, but the Old One doesn't like to think about that – but what had come of that Union? It was inherited by squabbling children who sniped at each other while terrorists foreign and domestic did their best to wreck the peace and prosperity he'd fought for. Well, other people had fought for. He had mostly hung out in France at the time, making speeches at elaborate dinner parties and fucking other men's wives, but each patriot had to fight in his own way.

*(*Note: This habit of our Founding Fathers should come as no surprise to anyone. Washington and Jefferson were both known to grow their own. Besides, one need only read the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to know the people writing both were stoned; ideas like "everyone is born equal" and "the government shouldn't push people around" and "some people are, like, only three-fifths of a person" are all stoner ideas.)*

"It's all falling apart. None of them..." He's sure he was going somewhere with that thought, but it's gone before he can finish his sentence, like one of his all-too-rare hard-ons spent before he can unbuckle his belt. Maybe this is the joke of a mortal life, that what one builds must inevitably be handed off to the young, whom it seems to the Old One will only wreck everything if left to their own devices. Can there be any doubt that the young – and everyone alive is "the young" from the former Mr. Franklin's point of view – need to be dominated by their elders for their own good? "No respect for authority," he says to no one in particular, his personal koan.

"Oh, Benny." The Old One can feel his left hand flapping open and shut within the sock, but it doesn't move of his accord, nor does W'Moud's voice issue from the Old One's throat. "Don't let it get you down," says the only consciousness in the United States more ancient than the Overmaster. "C'mon now, let's see a smile."

The Old One does his best, which is something like a scowl that would frighten only toddlers as opposed to children in general.

"That's it!" says the sock puppet. "You know what we're gonna do, buddy? We're gonna catch that slut, then we're gonna burn her alive and piss on her ashes. They're all gonna burn, Benny, every fucking one of 'em! All the terrorists, all the towelheads, all the illegals, all the whistleblowers, all the faggots, all the moochers, all the goddamn unpatriotic bastards who don't give you credit for all you've done for them, they're all gonna *burn*. So smile, yeah?"

"We must make this nation safe at any cost," the Old One says, and he sighs. "So much blood has been spilled already. We owe it to those who have laid

down their lives to spill all the more blood necessary to bring it to an end. We really do have no other choice in the matter."

"No choice at all," says W'Moud, and it begins to laugh.

