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Any Coincidence Is
(or, The Day Julia & Cecil the Cat Faced a Fate Worse Than Death)
v9.2 (January 2004)

Daniel Callahan

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This novel can be found online at <http://www.eclectic-cheval.net> in html, pdf, and zipped text formats.

"I used to do a turn in the army. I was really mad back then... [a] loony! I'd never have any music to introduce me, which was a big deal. Unheard of. I'd hop out on to the stage. It used to take ages. Hop, hop, hop. As I got nearer to the microphone, they'd hear this dodderly voice going 'Do do do... do do do.' When I'd eventually make it to the microphone I'd stop and say, 'I must be a great disappointment to you all.' That's it. There's no joke. It's totally irrational. A lot of people don't get it. Still don't."
-- Spike Milligan

"What will be is. Is is."
-- James Joyce, "Finnegans Wake"

1. The Dim Bulb

"If you guys don't listen to me, we're going to end up in that box again!"
-- Davy to the other Monkees, "Head"

The young man (boy, really) played with his fingers in the garish light cast from the lone bulb hanging in the concrete basement. He scratched at an imaginary itch on his right hand (just below his thumb) in order to take his mind off the man in the lab coat who sat across from him at the beaten, scarred, wood table. It didn't work. And whoever this man in the lab coat was, he was insistent about paperwork. He had three inches clipped onto a weathered clipboard which he flipped through with precision.

"Can I offer you a glass of water?" asked the boy's captor in a calm, sensitive tenor.

The boy, Kurt, continued to scratch the imaginary itch, which had leaped magically from his right hand to the left. Eventually the falseness of the itch would be deduced, and the lab coated man would disappear out of the cell and return with... God knows what. Kurt had seen torture hundreds -- if not thousands -- of times on TV, and he was glumly aware that there would be no commercial breaks for him.

"Can I offer you a glass of water?" The question was repeated without urgency, as if the speaker was an absent-minded waiter. The itch now leaped with the dexterity of a trained flea onto the boy's leg, and the dutiful fingers followed.

He watched as the man in the lab coat, without name tag or company insignia, studied his stack of papers attached to the clipboard. Several yellow forms near the top half inch were labeled 27B. The man frowned and wrote a note on the top page:
Note: Find out who isn't duplicating 27B in Pink.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I wasn't listening. Was that a yes or no to the

water?"

Kurt remained in his chair, almost motionless, except for the itching-and-scratching routine. It had leaped again, this time onto his scalp, and the twitching fingers followed. He wondered how long he could keep this up without drawing blood.

"I'll just write down 'no answer' in your file," the Lab Coat Man muttered, shuffling his way through the stack of paper, skipping the yellows and pinks to find a blue. Locating the relevant box on a 43F, he made a small 'X,' flipped to the front of the pile, and looked back at the boy. He had stopped scratching his scalp and pushing his strawberry-blond hair even more out of place, leaving his hands motionless and his eyes fixed on the table top. Good, he thought; at least he won't make himself bleed with all that scratching. The man adjusted his glasses, which didn't help, as his vision impairment was due to the dim lighting. The singular bulb, being pathetic twice over (as it was:

A) the only one in the room, and

B) thirty watts too dim),

hung from a cord -- a more melodramatic touch than he would have employed himself, but from a practical point of view there wasn't much to see even in a well lit concrete basement. A painting or two would clear up the problem nicely, although it would take away from the point of the room: interrogation. Interrogation rooms were not meant to be pleasant. So, perhaps, they would only fill the room with Dali's? The man chuckled and coughed to cover his lack of composure. Dali, indeed. Or Miro. More camouflaged coughing. But the boy, still maintaining what seemed to be an impression of a sedated vegetable, didn't seem to notice. So, the lab man adjusted his collar and steeled himself for the next grim encounter with the unkempt.

"My name is..." he offered. The boy's silent motif continued. He discouraged a sigh that was building inside him. The boy was obviously frightened and knew nothing. How could he, the man thought. I'm junior vice-president, and I have to keep asking Forrester what to do next. Although no one ever called him by that title, or even his name anymore. Just because he had unpacked the first shipment of lab coats and arranged them on hangers according to size, he had been dubbed the Lab Coat Man. And now, weeks later, the joke dead and buried, the name had stuck. Was this the brave new world they were heading to?

The Lab Coat Man sighed. What could he do but persevere? The questionnaire had to be completed. And if the boy was ever going to be recruited, he'd have to be a lot more forthcoming.

"My name is..." he prompted.

The boy resumed scratching, this time under this first knuckle of his left hand.

"Well, what's in a name, eh? Ha ha ha!" The subtle wit of a well executed quote amused the man, but generated no response from the boy. Discouraged, he dutifully noted this on a blue 42C, adding another 'X.'

This could go on forever...

2. What there's no accounting for

"If that's the best you can do, then your best sucks!"

-- Jodi Foster, "The Accused"

"Because all of you of Earth are idiots!" shouted Tom, wearily wiping the glass counter and removing coconut oil from the reflections of overpriced candy bars. Inside the theater the movie echoed him: "Because all of you of Earth are idiots!"

Tom sighed, not for the first time that evening. The Manager, who paid in cash every Sunday, had decided to take advantage of the bizarre tastes of his Gen X clients and offer an Ed Wood film festival. "Bride of the Monster", "Plan 9 From Outer Space", and "Night of the Ghouls" ran on the second, smaller screen on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, two bucks a head. Carloads of costumed goons from Madison assaulted the theater in droves, throwing popcorn at the screen whenever they saw a particularly bad moment of cinema history. Which meant that Kurt spent a lot of extra time cleaning the theater. He had mentioned this problem to his boss, but his only response had been a toothy grin. The Manager was making a killing.

Tom, who needed the job in order to move out of his parents' trailer home, found little about the Ed Wood canon amusing. Even so, he had been forced to hear the dialog of each film every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday... The soundproofing between theater two and the lobby was nonexistent. Thankfully, he only had to watch them once, when he filled in for the Manager's weasel-featured nephew/projectionist Neoldner, who had called in sick to buy grass in Beloit. In return, Neoldner was going to clean out theater two this evening, and Tom couldn't wait for his shift to end.

One good thing about the Ed Wood freaks - they bought all the popcorn Tom could make. He always had the nagging worry that the Manager would increase his profit margin by manning the concession stand himself. The last two employees in Tom's position had been let go for no given reason... it seemed only a matter of time before the same thing happened to him. But the Manager strolled out of the second theater with a broad grin, revealing his cutting overbite.

"I don't know why," the Manager exclaimed, "but they love it!"

"Most of them are from the 'Ed 9 Film Society,'" Tom replied. "By the way, I need to restock."

"I brought three boxes up already -- they're by the stairs. And once

you're done with that whatever else needs to be done out here, you can go home early!"

"A whole five minutes?" Tom muttered, almost inaudibly. "Whatever shall I do with my time?"

The Manager swung his hands apart and then together in loud clap, as he always did to change the subject. "By the way, your mother called. She said to call her back immediately."

"When did she call?"

The Manager leveled a mischievous stare at Tom and quoted the following: "'He tampered in God's domain!'"

"But that was seventy minutes ago!" The closing line, in fact, of "Bride of the Monster". Woodian dialog had become part of Tom's internal clock. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I had to give Neoldner a hand threading 'Plan 9', and I forgot all about it. Sorry!"

Tom heard Criswell begin his parting words, figured to hell with it, and abandoned his post in order to use the phone in the employee's lounge. It had been a storage room until just recently, when the Manager had redecorated it with a host of kitschy sale items from Osco. Good intentions, perhaps, but the room was only big enough for two people to begin with, and a hypothetical third could only find space through acts of physical intimacy which would have been rendered impossible by the decor. He dialed home and his mother answered immediately, showering him with motherly affection and gratitude that he was safe and babbling on about some catastrophe that had just occurred.

"What, mom? Mom, what?! Mom! What?!" Tom repeated his request in several permutations until he finally received the coherent message that had so shaken his mother: his cousin Kurt had gone missing.

Tom pondered this for a moment.

"And...?"

3. Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

"Voyaging through the strange seas of Thought, alone."

-- Wordsworth

Justin Nelson, Jr., pounded the last of the stakes of his new cattle pen into the dry dirt. Like sentinels, they sprouted in a line from the barn, swerved north of the stream, veered at a right angle for the stump, and followed Justin to where he stood. The cross-beams remained, after which he'd finally be done.

He took a white handkerchief from his shirt pocket and wiped his forehead. The task had been lengthened considerably, although Justin refused to admit it, by incessant thinking, an activity which often stopped him with his hammer in mid-swing. But now, he would soon be able to think all he wanted from the comfort of his porch as the cattle wandered from shade to shade. After he bought some cattle, he reminded himself. Or sheep. He could never decide which.

Under an entirely blue vault of sky, Justin felt something pass between himself and the morning sun. His leathered face turned up to see nothing but ubiquitous light, curving toward him in all directions. He arched his aging back, feeling the popping and hating it more than usual, before wiping his neck and replacing the handkerchief. He had that feeling that he'd better drink something and sit down or he'd end up in that damn hospital again. Twice last year, whether he needed it or not, he went in for a check-up, and twice a year, some intern treated him like the village idiot. Truth be told, everyone who knew about him had treated him that way for nearly eleven years, except his niece. With a sigh escaping from the bellows of his withering chest, Justin shuffled back to the porch he had added onto his small two-room home. In the distance, a plume of dust was billowing off the road. Mail truck. Must be time for breakfast. About time I ate something.

Tired legs maneuvered Justin's frame to the rocking chair, where both of his strong, chapped hands gripped the chair arms as he strategically placed his rear over the seat, then allowed gravity to do its work. As his ass plummeted, he was reminded that gravity yet to be reckoned with electromagnetism, strong nuclear force, and weak nuclear force, the other fundamental forces of the universe. Strange that he would remember a detail like that just now. Something he would have taught to his senior physics class and explained as best he could -- the one-eyed, cataract patient leading the blind. Gravity, he would explain, was the odd man out, and would be until somebody found a way to take the known model of the universe apart and put it back together. And when they did, he thought, wiping his face and neck again, they'd make some interesting discoveries. So much so that our explanation of space and time, the one that was "real" and "true" and had superseded every other theory since the beginning of history, would itself be superseded by something new that was more "real" and "true" than its predecessors. Be hell on all those science-fiction programs, having to reinvent how those cock-eyed transporters worked.

The dust whirled in the air, passing before the green truck as it drove up the road. A shadow, a large one, passed beside it. Dust doesn't make that big of a shadow, Justin thought. There's something up there. He looked up again, and whatever it was had passed away from the sun. And then, there was a glint of light, hovering somewhere above the mail truck. I bet it knows the secret, thought Justin, as he began to rock. How else can they hover that way? Whether anyone else believed in them wasn't the point. What was real and true didn't depend on prevailing fashions - it just was, whether or not it had been discovered yet.

Still, Justin wondered, how advanced could they be if they needed to hang out here and what for the mail truck, too?

4. In loco parentis

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman."

-- President William Jefferson Clinton

Alona Schwatz's persistent knocking at the door of room 412 went unanswered for three minutes as she nervously shuffled her feet. Her book bag was super-saturated with textbooks, notebooks, schedules, rough drafts, and various other forms of academic paraphernalia. And it kept getting heavier. She continued to knock, even though there had as yet been no answer, because the note card tacked to the right of the door indicated that these indeed were Prof. Turgy K. Sigger's office hours. She could see the light under the door and thought she had heard a groan. Just before she decided to give up, slow feet approached from the opposite side, then silence; with a dramatic turn of the knob, the door swung open.

"Was this trip really necessary?" asked Prof. Sigger, blinking and brushing his oily, graying hair back into place.

"These are your office hours," Alona replied. She nervously smiled, feeling the corners of her mouth twitch. Somewhere in the darkened hall, a janitor coughed.

"All right," conceded Prof. Sigger. "Come in."

The carpet was smothered by leaning towers of textbooks. Papers lined the left side of the desk, above which was a small note card which read "To Be Graded." On the right side, the oak finish gleamed in the mid-morning light that pierced the Venetian blinds.

"You've come about your final project," Prof. Sigger stated.

"It's only mid-term," Alona reminded him.

"Oh yes, yes," continued Prof. Sigger, without conscious embarrassment.

"Mid-term grade. I think I have it here. Somewhere." His hands disappeared into the left side of his desk.

"You told the class that we would all get a C if we maintained that Coca-Cola wasn't a crypto-fascist conspiracy."

"Oh yes," said Prof. Sigger. "We were discussing social issues, as I remember. I was quoting Marx and some little idiot brought up Rush Limbaugh."

"That was me," Alona muttered.

"Oh yes, yes," Prof. Sigger continued. "What can I do for you?"

Alona stared blankly back. "You said you wanted to see me in your office anytime before next Wednesday."

Prof. Sigger finally sighed, sinking a little in his chair.

"Did I say what for? I'm feeling a little low today," he said, hoping to elicit a small display of feminine attention.

"Oh," came the succinct and neutral reply. Prof. Sigger sighed again.

"It was about my book report," continued Alona. "On..."

"Rush Limbaugh," interrupted Prof. Sigger.

"No."

"Coca-Cola?"

"No."

"I need to find my horoscope. I can't seem to keep track of anything anymore." He leaned back in his chair and felt his eyes close. That's it! he realized. That's why I asked her to my office! I have to find out if she would...

Somewhere in the pit of Sigger's abdomen, a latent piece of conscience manifested itself as a stomach cramp. He coughed and patted his belly.

Then something lower than his abdomen began to draw his attention. He closed his eyes for a moment to clear his mind and focus on the art he had studied for years. With his intentions firmly aligned within (and without), Sigger opened his eyes but found himself no longer in his office but in a basement alcove. Across the room sat a pimply faced teenager who was scratching his scalp under long strawberry-blond hair.

5. Julia & Cecil the Cat, as mentioned in the title (above)

"I've just one step further from falling behind."

-- Brandy Daniels, "You"

"Did you ever have one of those days," inquired Julia of her cat, Cecil, who lay in the crook of her arm and was pushing his head into the moving fingers of Julia's right hand, "when you think you've noticed something everyone else has missed?"

Cecil didn't respond directly, but instead rubbed the side of his cheeks against the spine of "Gravity's Rainbow" which Julia held lopsidedly in her left.

"Pynchon keeps bleating about the preterit, right?" Cecil, who began licking his paw and washing his face, did not respond. "-- and the

elect who are out to destroy them, but he's the only one I see who's treating his characters badly. I mean, how can you go off on God for malpractice when you treat your characters like you treat cockroaches?" Cecil looked at her for a moment, and resumed washing.

"OK, listen to this: 'Nobody ever said a day has to be juggled into any kind of sense at day's end.' OK, I can see that. But I don't throw you against the wall and call the universe evil, do I?" Cecil snorted a tiny snort through his nostrils.

"But as far as making trying to make sense of everything... I can see that. That's why I wonder sometimes. Like about Uncle Justin," she continued, as Cecil stood, arched his back, and attempted to find a comfortable position on her stomach, "who was a science teacher for twenty-two years, who gave up everything, because... you know..."

Julia shook her head and returned the book to its level reading elevation.

As a matter of interest, Cecil did not know, but was content enough to curl up again, feeling Julia's hand press against his fur, causing his throat to vibrate with greater volume. That is, until the book slipped from her hand and roundly thumped Cecil on the head.

"I'm sorry!" apologized Julia, but too late, and Cecil was off her lap, shaking his the pain out of his head, galloping into the bedroom to find his favorite orthopedic pillow. "Maybe I should read a shorter book," said Julia to herself. She waited for some cosmic act of synchronicity to follow, to confirm her judgment on some level above human interpretation. Yet the moment of truth that had evaded her ever since childhood continued to remain conspicuous by its absence. In lieu of enlightenment, a muffled argument began to emanate from the college students next door. The plaster made it all too easy to hear, in terms of volume, but reduced everything to disconcerting roars, in terms of clarity. As far as Julia could tell, the argument, which was building to the "throwing objects to accentuate one's point" phase, and concerned the doctrine of predestination versus free will as well as whose turn it was to run the dishwasher.

"Well," she said, tossing the hulking tome next to the library's copies of "Cat's Cradle" and "Waiting for Godot", "I didn't understand much of it anyway."

6. Unidentified floating objects

"Sucks to be you."

-- Traditional

Old Zeke handed Justin his day's worth of mail and looked longingly at the cool shade under the porch, half hoping, half anticipating an invitation to enjoy a cool drink and a few minutes out of the sun. His state-of-the-art mail delivery vehicle, an old green Ford with busted

air-conditioning, sometimes elicited sympathy from those along his route, but the ones with beer were the best. However, Justin just looked through his mail and then began watching the sky.

"You ever think about gravity?" Justin asked suddenly.

"No," admitted Old Zeke, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. Justin sighed a little.

"You ever fall off a ladder?"

"Well," considered Zeke. Damned if this wasn't a round-about way to offer a fella a drink, but maybe after all this Justin would offer him a beer instead of that watery lemonade he made. "Yeah."

"How long did it take you to fall?"

Well hell, muttered Old Zeke under his breath. Maybe all those stakes he was driving in had given Justin a touch of the sun. The thought made him consider hauling Justin back to town, although the truck might finish the job the sun had started.

"A second or two," Zeke replied. But before he could load Justin into the truck, he figured he would have to collect a few things from the house, and maybe from the fridge he'd collect a few drinks...

"That thing up there hasn't fallen a foot in ten minutes or so."

Maybe Justin had a small bottle of something tucked away under the...

"What thing?"

Justin pointed.

Zeke shielding his eyes with his hands and looked up. "Oh, that weather balloon?"

Justin's expectant face seemed to droop. "That what it is?"

"Yep. Looks like it's almost out of helium, the way it's floating so low. Launched 'em myself thirty years ago in the Army."

"Oh," muttered Justin. "Be seeing ya, Zeke." He turned back to the porch.

Damn, thought Zeke, plodding back to the truck, if I told him it was a flying saucer I might have got a beer after all. Coincidentally, a gust of wind took the balloon higher into the sky.

7. Fallout

"This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet."

-- Shakespeare

Alona ran out of the elevator, trying to hide her face in one hand and hold her overstuffed bag in the other. She kept wiping away the tears just to get through the already crowded lobby, where young gossip-mongers waiting vigilantly for fresh news.

The tears had started when Prof. Sigger had somehow sneaked passed her as she was searching in her bag for her paper. How anyone that old and lazy could have slipped out without a sound was a mystery to be considered after the wave of rejection and failure had passed -- and after she made it to her car. Wiping her face with her sleeve and pretending to look as bored as everyone else, Alona hoped that even if her roommate were around, she would be fooled long enough to prevent her from starting any more rumors. Unfortunately, Alona decided this just after her roommate spotted her across the vestibule, noted the tears and false-face anxiety, and immediately deduced out loud to several of her closest acquaintances that Prof. Sigger had made a move on the all-too-innocent waif. The rumor spread across the hall and up the elevators by the time Alona was weaving through the cars that stalked the parking lot for open stalls. It seemed nearly everyone in the building had heard a whisper by the time Alona reached her father's rusting Gremlin.

She made her way to it without getting hit by the over-anxious drivers, unlocked the driver's side door, threw her bag into the back seat and herself into the driver's. Then she let go and sobbed and sobbed, hoping that if she got a "C" in Freshman Comp that it wouldn't turn out to be the excuse her parents needed to stop paying her tuition. They wanted Alona to work in the town's newly renovated theater, an investment in which they owned a small percentage.

Alona's sobs lasted for some time, and she knew, just knew, that her water-proof mascara had run, so she opened the glove compartment to find a Kleenex. Out fell a letter.

Her sobbing stopped as she picked it up from the dusty car floor. "Alona" was written, almost scribbled, on the cover. In Kurt's handwriting. She hadn't seen him in weeks, not since he began playing regularly in the band. She couldn't help picturing him the last time he was in her car, brushing back his long hair and scratching his hand in that nervous way of his.

"You're breaking up with me?" he asked, staring vaguely at the floor-mat.

She had nodded. What else could she do? Even she had finally admitted that he was just a good-looking loser. Sure, he could play the guitar and write songs, but she wouldn't be able to face her parents once they found out his most popular ballad was titled "Love Turds".

"This sucks," he muttered. Somehow, that had helped her keep her resolve, although in the weeks that had passed, her memory of that

lonely quality of his, the one that had attracted her to him in the first place, had grown to almost god-like proportions.

Alona sighed and opened the letter.

Alona, (it read, unnecessarily)

O.K. I've had time to think about us. You shouldn't have broken up with me, but you're still cool, O.K.? I mean, even if you don't let me go all the way with you, you're cool. So, like what I'm asking is should we get back together?

I know you don't think your parents will like me. But I'll grow on them. I'll write them a song that they'll like. Like 'Love Turds' but with different lyrics.

Any way, that's not what I wrote about. I mean, you're cool and all and I want to get back together with you but there's something else going on.

I'm probably going to lose my dayjob at Osco. Doesn't matter. Screw it all. But I think I know what's been in those weird boxes Osco orders that end up in Denny's car! Something big is going to happen and I think that all of those freaks who picked up the white lab coats are in on it. You remember them? Anyway--

Denny let it slip that some of that stuff was going to Seltzer or Sesame, or whatever. This all adds up! I'll let you know as soon as I can find out what's in them! Then I'll see if Tom can get off his butt long enough to come with me to search for Seltzame -- Call me tonight after eight.

(I mean if you want to call me after eight. You don't have to but I sure would like to talk to you again about us and all of this and stuff, you know?)

Love, Kurt.

PS. If you aren't getting back with me, can you give me back my Ugly Kid Joe CD?

8. The most effective form of rhetorical persuasion ever devised
"If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again. Then give up.
There's no use being a damned fool about it."
-- W.C. Fields

"Hello!" cried Prof. Sigger, his voice drained of masculine resonance with panic. No one seemed to be around, except the long haired kid sharing his cell. The boy was hunched in the corner, arms folded around his stomach.

"Hello!" bellowed Prof. Sigger. "I'd like to visit the American

Embassy! Unless of course this is the American Embassy, in which case I'd like to visit to the Russian Embassy! Ya neeminoga gavaru parusskie!"

From beyond a shadowed corner, a small man emerged wearing a white lab coat.

"About time! About fifteen minutes ago I was--" began Sigger.

"Contemplating making romantic overtures to a female student less than half your age," said the Lab Coat Man, reading from a yellow page stacked (neatly) in a clipboard.

"Well, yes," muttered Prof. Sigger. "Is that the reason I'm here?"

"We'd like to schedule your interview. Are you free in an hour?" he replied.

"You don't seem to be comprehending me! A minute ago I was in my office with a student! The next I'm here! You have a lot--"

"Entertainment is at seven, attendance mandatory, unless you have failed to complete part one of the interview."

"I'm not completing any damn interview until--"

"What the hell's for dinner?" the boy demanded.

"Let me see, let me see," said the Lab Coat Man, flipping through the pages on his clipboard.

"Excuse me. Point of order here..." began Prof. Sigger.

"That pizza today sucked."

"I certainly can't disagree with you there."

"I am negotiating for my release, so if we could stick to the topic --"

"Couldn't you have at least baked it instead of microwaving it?"

"Out of my control, I'm afraid."

"Am I invisible? Am I not part of this conversation?"

"Patience, Mr. Sigger," replied the Lab Coat Man, flipping back to his top sheet.

"Professor Sigger!"

"Frigging crybaby," muttered the boy.

"I'll have you know--!" bellowed Sigger, his voice cracking in a most

un-John Wayne like fashion.

"Now, now," began the Lab Coat Man.

"So what's it going to be? More bad pizza?"

"La dee da, la dee da! Never mind that I'm here! I think I'll just find a corner and sit here while you two carry on this most important of conversations."

"Oh, no, Prof. Sigger, we have our interview. Not a thing we can skip."

"There's nothing you can say to make me!" Sigger cried, sulking in the corner farthest from Kurt.

"In answer to your question, Taco Bell," he replied, looking up from a red 2B.

"I think I'm going to puke," Kurt moaned, looking even rattier than before and visibly greener as the pronouncement set in.

"I'm ready for that interview now," muttered Prof. Sigger, trotting to the steel bars and waiting like an obedient schoolboy. The Lab Coat Man nodded and marked an 'X' on a white page.

9. A weird day's night

"There is no such thing as an omen. Destiny does not send us heralds. She is too wise or too cruel for that."

-- Oscar Wilde

Julia dashed into the Osco employees' entrance and punched in one second before four o'clock. Accomplishing her day's goal of being on somebody's payroll, she decided to catch her breath by sneaking a smoke in the restroom. She caught Rhonda's eye at the check-out counter, who gave her a smile and a nod that meant: "Join you in a second."

Kurt, aka. Butthead, hadn't replaced the dead bulbs yet, so Julia sat on a toilet lid inside a claustrophobic's nightmare of a stall with only pale, yellow light keeping her from absolute darkness. And the brief flame of the lighter, which she snapped closed as she took a strong, slow drag. Another night-shift to deal with old grannies looking for denture cream, kids trying to lift cigarettes, drunks picking up plastic violets for the wife. If only she didn't need to eat, Julia concluded, maybe she wouldn't have to work in a world that seemed more than a little unreal.

But then, that was the family legacy, wasn't it? Seeing something that wasn't there, or worse: trying to see something that wasn't there and almost succeeding. Find a farm out in Arizona and retire once you've had enough of being called crazy. But then, Julia knew that there were two kinds of people: those who couldn't live without air conditioning

and her uncle. Another run-down, fix-it-up farm in this family was out of the question. She took another deep drag and wondered why she kept smoking these things. They were like beer, Uncle Justin had told her: after the War, they never went back to making them right. If only someone would just make some real changes in the world -- how long could it be before it was a better place to live? A better place than this? Wasn't that what everyone wanted? If so, why did everyone settle for what they had?

That's what her mother had done. Settled for Dad dying. Settled for the life of a reclusive widow, until she died too. Not much Julia could do but not make a conscious mess of her own life. Not that everything had gone perfectly. She had a job, she was going to school -- although Uncle Justin kept reminding her it was "only" for accounting. No science, no liberal arts. But she read a lot on her own. Mysteries, new fiction, the classics that were recommended by that stud of a librarian. Not that she understood all of it, but there was usually something to enjoy, to learn from. Especially questions about the Big Picture -- that always sparked her interest.

But Uncle Justin would just shake his head. It was a tech school, not a college or a university. Lord knows there are plenty of cheap schools in Wisconsin that offer some liberal arts courses, he would say. To say nothing of real science. He accused her of falling for the same trap his sister, Julia's mother, had fallen for: living in a Wisconsin-centric universe. Once he brought this up, the conversation usually degenerated into combative silence. They never settled that argument -- it just kept going on its own, to the detriment of everyone's sanity.

Whether she was getting a real education or not, Julia found herself constantly searching for meaning. About what governed reality (whatever that was), about what was human will (assuming it existed), about the elusive qualities of soul (love, happiness, etc.), and about the urge to bury one's face in Godiva chocolate every twenty-eight days. The last question was more easily answered than the others. She took a long drag, determined to make this one last. One a day was bad enough, but she'd probably need another one after work if Denny was in one of his moods.

She leaned back on the toilet and stared at the pale, sodium light spread out across the ceiling. Deja vu. Something from a dream about lying back and watching the sky. How the sky and the ceiling in an Osco restroom were connected was beyond her, but what the hell -- there would be an entire evening for worrying about mundane problems. Like most of her dreams, she remembered it as another memory, one as real as a memory of a waking moment. And as usual, the memory of the dream seemed more vivid than her memory of what she had done this morning.

It came back to her -- the light in the sky had been yellow, almost gold, with a brown tint. That was what made it look so unusual, this dream-light. It wasn't the sunlight of the world when everyone is awake and concentrating on whatever was going on beneath them. A light

reserved for people who didn't deserve it, or know what it was, or what it meant. At least, that's what it seemed like in the dream. Or maybe she had made all that up after she woke up. But she did remember it had altered into a haze, growing more uniform, covering the world in a grey aura. The white of the clouds gave way, under pressure of a great and unstoppable force, to something else, which she couldn't describe. This, whatever it was, blanketed the sky, offering neither snow nor rain, instead smothering the world below from whatever was above. Except now, the clouds began to descend.

In parallel streams, this gray sky, this aura seemed to move toward her. Julia felt herself begin to giggle, that nervous giggle when she knew something was wrong but didn't know what. And then she realized that she wasn't just remembering the dream -- the haze was overhead was coming through the ceiling, causing the restroom lights to bend and shimmer. Julia stopped giggling and stared upward, her eyes fixed on whatever it was that she knew she had to be imagining. But just as suddenly the gray haze retreated until it had returned to whatever unknown sky it had descended from.

Julia felt her body constrict itself to form another giggle, but none came. She stood up, tossed the butt into the toilet, and quickly lit another cigarette. Nicotine euphoria swept through her body, but it would not take her to wherever it was she desperately needed to go. She dropped the cigarette to the floor and crushed it under her foot.

"Now that was disappointing," she muttered. She felt her throat knot up with sadness until she heard someone move outside the door. She looked at her watch -- she had wasted fifteen minutes, and now the restroom smelled terribly guilty.

The bathroom door creaked open. The fan located above Julia's well chosen stall expelled the smoke and Julia began flapping her hand as quietly as she could to speed the smoke on its way.

"Julia?" asked a voice.

"Rhonda?" Julia whispered conspicuously. The restroom door quickly closed and Rhonda scuttled into the stall next to Julia.

"Quick! Give me a drag!"

Julia, heretofore holding her breath, exhaled in relief and passed another cigarette and the lighter into Rhonda's hand hovering under the partition.

"I thought you were Butthead looking into the restroom again," Julia said.

Julia heard Rhonda inhale and exhale in rhythmic, sage-like fashion. "No," Rhonda finally answered, "somebody said he called in sick."

Rhonda's hand appeared under the stall again holding the lighter.

Julia took it from her as they both heard a man's voice from outside the door.

"Rhonda? Julia?"

"That ain't Butthead!" whispered Rhonda. Both toilets flushed, as if their actions in unison would provide an air-tight alibi which, notwithstanding the stern tone in the voice outside, caused them both to giggle. They emerged sheepishly from the restroom as Supervising Manager Denny frowned and shook his head disapprovingly.

"Rhonda, where's Kurt?"

"Sick, I think. Someone said he called in with a stomach ache."

"Then he's fired too."

"Too?!" exclaimed Julia.

"Well, let's see, Julia. You missed your shift yesterday without calling in..."

"I did?"

"You did. And that's the third time this month."

"I can't believe I did it again!"

"You did. And you don't have to tell me which novel you were reading. I don't need to know." He turned to Rhonda. "And I figure if you leave now, we won't need to talk about the beauty supplies that go missing just before your days off."

Rhonda's eyes widened uncontrollably as she gave a guilty grin to the floor tiles.

"So, adios!" With that, he returned to the Osco floor.

Julia's jaw slackened but Rhonda pealed into outright laughter.

"It's not funny!" shouted Julia.

"Oh, forget this Popsicle-stand! You punched in, right?"

A smile formed reluctantly on Julia's face. "Well," continued Rhonda, "let's take off and punch ourselves out in eight hours!"

The smiles and laughter became contagious as they grabbed their jackets and ran out the back door. They spent the rest of the afternoon taking in all of the shops that lined both sides of the street. Eventually, they found themselves at Popeye's pub, where they had a sandwich and a few beers, and decided to kill the rest of the evening with a movie. After a short walk, they saw the marquee, which read: "BRIDE, GHOULS, &

PLAN 9!" Rhonda seemed to have noticed it first, taking Julia's hand and leading her toward the theater.

10. The Second Phase

"There was a point to this story, but it has temporarily escaped the chronicler's mind."

-- Douglas Adams, "So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish"

"Well done!" the Lab Coat Man exclaimed, rubbing his eyes and replacing the pen in his coat pocket, "Very well done! Not many subjects have been able to answer our comprehensive questionnaire in under three hours."

Prof. Sigger forced a smile to his drawn face. "I take it most people are reluctant to answer your questions without knowing how and why they arrived in a place like this." The room, like the holding area, was also concrete, although this section looked more like an office than a jail.

"That long haired fellow," the Lab Coat Man confided, "we pulled him out of a urinal. Dirty trick, really. Maybe he thinks we're all drug-induced hallucinations. As far as he's concerned, he was leaning against the bathroom wall in order not to stain his shoes and the next moment he's peeing in our corner."

Sigger tried to nod sympathetically.

"Hasn't completed the interview yet," he continued. "Oh that doesn't mean I haven't been able to take a few notes, but I guarantee he'll be missing out on the entertainment for some time to come!"

"Now that I've answered your questions, let me ask you --" Prof. Sigger began.

"No time. I have a number of errands to run. You'll find we're quite organized, once you've been here a while."

"A while?"

"Yes, this may take some time. All good projects do, as I'm sure you understand." Sigger nodded dumbly.

"Now I'm going to turn you over to my assistant, Neoldner."

The door opened, and twenty year-old resembling a ferret and wearing an identical lab coat entered, a clipboard in his hand.

"He's going to help with the second phase," the Lab Coat Man said.

"Hey," Neoldner said.

"Um... yes," Sigger replied.

Neoldner took the seat across from Sigger as the Lab Coat Man moved to the doorway. Forrester, with his strange brown mustache, popped his head into the room.

"I'm going home to finish to schedule for tomorrow this evening. Do you have everything?" Forrester asked.

"How could I? You haven't told me what I need yet," the Lab Coat Man replied.

"I haven't?"

"No, I've been with Prof. Sigger since..." He looked at his watch.

"It has been a while, hasn't it?"

Prof. Sigger shrugged, although no one noticed that he had answered.

"I thought Frank would have told you," Forrester said.

"Who's Frank?" asked the Lab Coat Man.

"Oh, I forgot! Frank resigned. That's when we brought you in."

"Right. Just after what's-his-name resigned."

"Frank."

"Exactly."

"That's what I said."

"I know, I just repeated it."

Silence.

"So do you need a list?" Forrester asked.

"If you wouldn't mind. And whatever forms you'll think I'll need."

"Ah, forms. Yes. Definitely. Meet me at my office before you go."

And out popped Forrester's head from the room. The Lab Coat Man sighed and turned to Prof. Sigger.

"Once we're ready, we should be able to conclude everything quickly. Neoldner will help you out with the details. I think you'll enjoy the perks. The travel. The entertainment, if you like that sort of thing."

"What about the entertainment?" Sigger asked.

"Soon!" replied the Lab Coat Man, misunderstanding, his eyes twinkling

with an annoying but enigmatic flare.

"So," Neoldner began after the Lab Coat Man had left, "what size jacket do you wear?"

11. An Unintended Mishap

"It is a curious thought, but it is only when you see people looking ridiculous that you realize just how much you love them."

-- Agatha Christie

Tom walked into his parents' trailer home to find Alona crying on the couch. He barely knew her, saw her only twice before, and with Kurt, so he figured she had to be a loser.

"Why are you here?" he grumbled.

"Kurt's missing!" she shouted, and let loose with a protracted wail.

Tom's mother came in and hugged Tom tightly, then slapped him across the cheek. "Your cousin's gone missing, and you don't care!"

Tom rubbed his cheek and said, "He's probably just sleeping off a date with Rhonda in her backseat!"

Alona wailed again. Tom couldn't help thinking that if that wail had been sung, it would have raised the hackles of even the greatest opera devotee, a majestic solo of anguish and a thousand angry paper-cuts.

"Sorry," muttered Tom.

"The police won't do anything until he's been gone twenty-four hours!" Betty exclaimed. "Twenty-four hours! And he disappeared while he was playing in that band of his!" She went on to explain how Alona had called after she received a letter from Kurt -- how he hadn't been at home or with the band -- how, according to the other members of the band and a half-dozen other witnesses, he had disappeared the night before from a bathroom with no windows. Tom listened to most of this and nodded. He kept nodding even after he stopped listening. Once his mother was done talking, he stopped nodding. She didn't seem to notice the difference.

The TV across the room was on a little too loud, so he decided to shut it off, grab a sandwich, and sneak out of the house again. Maybe he should go into work, even though he had the night off. Maybe get a second job. He had to earn enough to move out of here. Enough to move out yesterday.

"And this just in at WXOR," said the newscaster. "An English professor -- "

"Turn up the TV, Tommy, will you?!" Betty shouted. Tom sighed, annoyed at being called Tommy in front of a female, and reached for the switch.

" -- and disappeared earlier today without explanation. He was discovered missing after an unknown female student was seen running from his office. Police are still searching for both Prof. Turgy K. Sigger and the student. If you have any information, please call the WXOR Viewer Hot Line(R) at 387-4278 -- "

A scream interrupted the newscaster, which acoustically channeled the shattered death of a priceless chandelier. To Tom's surprise, Alona had leaped from the couch and had grabbed his arms, forcing him to look directly into her eyes. "That's him! He just disappeared when I looked the other way!" She began to sway, and Tom instinctively reached for her. "He's missing too!" she cried.

Then she swooned and fell forward perfectly into Tom's waiting arms. He helped her to the couch as his mother dashed to the kitchen to fill a glass of water.

Tom looked around, as if to see if anyone had been watching him. If anyone had seen what he had seen. If there was any way out. But there wasn't.

Tom was utterly, and helplessly, in love.

12. Cecil Gets Away

"Only the fool, fixed in his folly, may think he can turn the wheel on which he turns."

--T.S. Eliot

Cecil stretched and sniffed the air. Movement, but just the curtains.

He remembered that Julia had left. Probably back by dark. Or not. She had been sitting on the couch, and he had come from the bedroom and hopped onto her lap again. After stroking his fur for a while, she held up the shiny thing with the snake on the end. Cecil had batted it a few times, then ambled off to eat. Smelled like fish.

Later, Julia had thrown the fuzzy ball around the apartment, so he ran after it until he was ready for another nap. Then the phone rang. Julia left the house without petting him, although he stood near her legs and arched his back. He slowly padded his way to his pillow, which smelled like Julia, especially in the morning.

Cecil turned three times before settling down, but a sound stopped him. A footstep in the hallway. Then, nothing. Cecil waited for a moment, watching the doorway, his tail whipping softly on the bed. After another moment, he yawned.

But then another sound, a squeak. Cecil hopped down from the bed and peered from around the frame.

A man stood in the hallway. He moved something in his hand, like a twig, but Cecil didn't want to play with it. The man smelled strange.

New. Odd. If he could have recognized human clothing, he would have recognized a lab coat, a clipboard, a pen. The balding man, glasses, a slightly weary look, who, after scanning the room, made a note on a yellow 12A.

The man turned and spied Cecil in the doorway, and Cecil darted into the closet.

The Lab Coat Man cursed quietly after he realized that the cat had darted into what appeared to be the world's most cluttered closet. And the cat was the last (damn) item on Forrester's list! He wondered if the Director knew of Forrester's cat phobia, how it was adding to an already full schedule. He'd have to wait for the next general meeting to bring up the matter, assuming the Director would even attend. And even by then, Forrester could have required them to round up as many house-cats in Tranquil as he could list on a 12F!

He began pawing through twenty-six years' worth of mementos, which were crammed into a space that could barely hold enough office supplies from one small conspiracy. But enough holes for an orange tabby to hide. He waited for any kind of movement, and something eventually flickered in the corner of his eye. He turned to see Cecil pull his head back into the bathroom.

The man's sublingual cursing increased audibly as he tromped into the bathroom and found find no trace of the cat in the bathtub, behind the toilet, in the sink, or under the sink. Nowhere. He cursed audibly and stormed out to see Cecil scamper off the couch and into the kitchen. He flew toward him, but he'd already gone again. The man let loose an expletive at the top of his lungs that woke the downstairs neighbor who was napping in front of a hockey game. And with manic grin born of angst and momentary abandon, he struck out the last line and its corresponding box on the 12F. His pen capped with a momentary sense of triumph, the man disappeared.

Cecil poked his head out of the bedroom closet and into the empty apartment. The man was gone. He snorted with satisfaction and hopped onto the bed to continue his nap. Before laying down, he turned three times.

Coincidentally, the phone began to ring.

13. Perfection

"Despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim."

-- Graham Greene

After waiting for nearly a minute, Justin slammed the phone onto the receiver, muttering something about nine hundred damn miles and not

having the decency to be home when someone was calling. He had to call. Something was wrong. He didn't go in for that malarkey about being in touch with the universe or having sympathetic vibrations reach him from a different plane, but, damn it, if there was something wrong, you did something about it. And he knew something was wrong. But would have been sent to the loony bin by one of those interns before he could explain it all to another human being properly.

He didn't give a damn (as those who ventured near him would often discover) about what everyone else perceived as reality. He saw what he saw. If no one else saw it, that was up to them. Sure, he couldn't verify it, but did that mean he was crazy? Not if he was right (which Justin had already concluded), which meant that he was seeing relationships and consequences that everyone else had just learned to ignore or couldn't see in the first place or would never see. Sometimes he saw it, sometime he just felt it. It was there, like an invisible web, telling Justin enough to either stay away or to get involved. And when he got involved, sometimes the people in the thick of it just couldn't understand what Justin was getting at! Of course, after the dam had broke, after the cows got loose, after the snake bit the dog, then everyone forgot all about old Justin and concentrated on what was practically too late to fix, unless he had been lucky enough to have a solution ready beforehand. All too often, he wasn't that lucky. But now, he felt that too. Luck. Invisible, intangible, and someone somewhere was going to feel the heat of it if he ever found out who was planning to harm his only (semi-sane) relative. But Julia wasn't home, so he couldn't warn her that he had had (as she would describe it) a vague impression of imminent danger that only sad, smelly, old Uncle Justin could perceive.

Put that way, perhaps it was best that no one had answered. Justin scratched his scalp and decided to have a beer. He harrumphed quietly, then turned around.

To his shock (but only mild surprise), there was a balding man with a clipboard standing in his corner taking notes. J.J felt paralyzed for a moment, until his anger regained the upper hand, and he reached down, opened the third drawer under the phone, and pulled out a loaded revolver.

The Lab Coat Man, weary, almost to the last of his forms (a pink 2D with carbons) wished he had could have arranged to appear in a sauna somewhere in darkest Finland, but resolutely kept noting all he was able until he realized somewhere between checkmarks that Justin Nelson was pointing a gun right between his eyes. At first, he wanted to flip to a red 1A. Somewhere on a 1A there was a box relevant to imminent personal danger. But then, he understood in the microseconds he had left that Justin's finger was pulling the trigger, which was pulling back the hammer, which would imminently fire the bullet in a more or less straight line directly into his tired, balding skull.

He had expected his life to flash before his eyes, but all he could remember (and in fact see, superimposed over the image of Justin's gun)

was a Dali that he could not be sure he had ever seen or had even been painted. Perhaps, in those last days of his own early life, studying art history and believing he too was capable of producing something famous, immortal, perfect, he had envisioned such a painting, an abstract only now completed, detailing a life of frustration and mediocrity that wound its way, eventually, down to this last moment of nothing.

It was so beautiful, so tragic, that he held the clipboard over his face as Justin fired once, piercing the thin wood with a single, perfect hole.

14. Criswell Speaks

"One is always considered mad when one discovers something that others cannot grasp."

-- Bela Lugosi, "Bride of the Monster"

Julia and Rhonda ran inside the theater at exactly 7:10 pm. Still giggling, they bought two tickets from a weary looking man wearing a jacket and a "Manager" tag. When they hit the concession stand to relieve their munchies, they found a sign that said: "Closed".

"Aww!" Rhonda whined. "I was getting really hungry too!"

"It's too bad I can't hop back there and get us some popcorn. I worked at a theater for two summers when I was in high school."

"I beg your pardon?" the Manager inquired, somehow looking five years younger. "Do you mean that?"

"Oh yes!" exclaimed Julia. "I was Assistant Manager for a month as well!"

"Would you like a job? Part-time?" he asked, regaining another three.

Both woman screamed and hugged each other. Wiping a tear from her eye, Julia said: "Sure!"

A smile suddenly broadened upon the Manager's now young and chipper face. Tom had been showing signs of being less than happy with this job. Perhaps he was ready to move on. Maybe he needed a push. Anyway, he had called in sick for the evening, and despite the run of good luck with the second-run bad movies, the Manager did want something left over for a vacation this year.

Julia was about to ask a few questions from her new employer, but a voice like a drunken oracle began to blare from inside the theater. Julia found herself entranced by the grammatically awkward oratory:

"Greetings my friends. We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives. And

remember my friends, future events such as these, will effect you in the future."

Julia winced, (and the Manager silently cursed Neoldner for threading "Plan 9" instead of the intended Bride of the Monster.)

"You are interested in the unknown, the mysterious, the unexplainable; that is why you are here."

"You got the job!" Rhonda suddenly whooped in her friend's ear. But it seemed more like a distraction than an exclamation of happiness. Julia looked at Rhonda and the Manager. Her imagination? or was there something in the space between them, around the building, wrapping tight around the theater doors, something that was just plain... wrong? For the first time in years, she desperately felt the need to talk to her Uncle Justin.

Julia took a step back from Rhonda. Her friend's face suddenly fell, and she reached out to her as if to let her know everything was all right. She had the job. The Manager's eyebrow arched, perhaps a second thought as to his quick hire. She had to sit down.

"I need to sit down," her voice echoed her thought.

"We've got the tickets, don't we?" Rhonda replied, taking Julia by the arm and leading her into the theater.

15. Chance Happens

"Good luck needs no explanation."

-- Shirley Temple Black

"So I says to this guy I says -- "

The TV in the bar was on, and the man at Tom's side was letting his mouth run loose as he sucked back on his third beer in Popeye's none-too-copyrighted Pub. Jeez, he thought, I finally meet the one, the one, and she's going out with Kurt. With Kurt! How does he do it? I couldn't get a date to save my life (except with Rhonda), and Kurt can't seem to shake them off! Alona's, what, his third this year?

The rest of the bar was watching a rerun of "The Simpsons" and trying to imitate Barney the drunk. One fell off his chair in a drunken stupor, which gained the applause of his comrades. After he lay on the floor for a minute, they realized it hadn't been an imitation, and they picked him up. They ordered him a coffee and Kaluhua in the most obnoxious trio of 'Moe the Bartender' voices ever heard east of the Mississippi. Some of the bar laughed at this but most just groaned. Tom still wasn't listening.

If only... Tom thought. If only she had come in to see "Bride of the Monster" and gotten bored, and come out to the concession stand to get

a drink, and began to talk about something -- it wouldn't have mattered what -- and stayed all the way through that entire string of rotten films!

The guy at Tom's side suddenly realized no one was listening to him and stumbled off to the bathroom. He nearly bumped into a man with a strange brown mustache who took the seat to Tom's right. He plopped his clipboard onto the bar and ordered a beer. The bartender gave him a frosted mug of flat Treaty Beer and went back to the television. Tom, again, didn't notice.

That is, until the sight of the man's reflection in the mirror behind the bar caught his attention. He seemed familiar, but he couldn't be sure. He was sure he would have remembered that mustache. The man was looking around for someone, peering into the far corners of the ill-lit room. As he did so, Tom noticed the clipboard. The cover sheet, a form labeled 3G, read: Complaints, Problems, Irregularities:

- 1) Find out who's been using Green paper. No green paper allowed. If it's Neoldner, give him restroom duty. If it's You Know Who, make him fill out all the forms in the proper color.
- 2) Leave message that Kurt is in Chicago for the weekend; also find and destroy his letter to Alona.

Tom read the note three times before believing it. Without realizing what he was doing, he raised his mug, causing what was left to dribble on his head. Then he brought it down, and the mug broke from the handle and bounced on the floor after smashing into the exact center of the man's bald spot, who crumpled soundlessly to the floor. As the bar hooted and laughed at the cartoon antics on the tube, Tom grabbed the clipboard, tucked it inside the man's trousers, and dragged him by his feet out of the bar.

16. The Decision

"It is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring."

-- Carl Sagan

Justin watched the clipboard plummet to the floor, followed by a multi-colored stream of papers, detached from the clip, fluttering like autumn leaves. The wall was marked by a bullet hole, the floor littered with paper, but the man had disappeared. Justin stood over what would have been the corpse. He looked at the floor from one angle, then another, and finally shrugged and scratched his scalp again. This was strange...

A lot of strange things had happened to him, even since he could remember. That dog he had. It was odd moments like this that he remembered how much he missed him.

Had him for thirty years. Never seemed to grow old. He never told

anyone about it -- made the excuse that he just preferred the same type of black lab when the old one got taken to live at his parents' farm. It was something of a relief when Roosevelt (the dog, named after Theodore rather than Franklin Delano) got killed. It was getting hard to keep up the pretense, especially after the local vets started to compare notes. But just when it seemed like half the town was talking about the Dog That Wouldn't Die, Justin woke up and found Roosevelt laying by his feet, even though he had left him out in the back yard and shut the bedroom door. Roosevelt was lying as content as he'd ever been, but dead. A coincidence, to say the least.

But if that had been the end, Justin wouldn't have thought of him so much. It was years after his dog's death that he saw him again, standing in the front yard, ready to chase a ball if it ever got thrown again. Justin had gone to the window, certain that his eyes were playing tricks on him, then more certain that they weren't. Roosevelt just stood there, waiting.

After Justin had summoned the courage to go outside, Roosevelt had led him the half-mile west to the new elementary school, up to the east-facing double-doors that opened into the kindergarten. Inside, the darkness seemed not merely a lack of light but more of something alive, spreading outward from the room and into the playground, toward Justin. He felt fixed to the spot, unable to do anything but shake, as Roosevelt let out a long, slow howl beside him.

He could not remember how he got home. He was sitting in his easy-chair, looking outside at the darkness. No Roosevelt. No vision, nothing. But his shoes were on, the soles stuck with wet grass. Justin had trouble getting a few hours' sleep that night.

The next morning, he was sure the whole thing had been a dream. Sleepwalking, probably. He comforted himself with this conclusion as he drove by the elementary school on his way to work. He slowed as a kickball bounced lazily into the road. An older child with an orange crossing-guard sash carefully crossed the street to get it. Justin turned toward the school. A number of children were playing outside. Then he saw Roosevelt again. Standing in the middle of some children. The smallest children. The kindergarten class, Justin supposed. Then Roosevelt was gone. The ball had been retrieved, and a car behind him honked, but Justin couldn't drive on. Instead, he parked his truck by the curb and walked to kindergarten the doors. Inside, Mrs. Nolla was straightening a few chairs when he entered.

When she turned and saw him, she gasped and put her hand to her chest.

"I..." she stammered, "I wasn't expecting... to see... you... there."

Justin apologized and muttered something about stopping by. They had met a few times during the last round of school board meetings when the latest draconian cuts had been proposed. She was a few years from retiring and had a remarkable teaching record -- Justin still came across her old students in his class who remembered her fondly.

He asked her if anything was wrong, which surprised her again, but she said no. He offered to help with some last minute cleaning, but she declined, visibly becoming more nervous. Instead of explaining anything, which he thought (knew) would make things worse, he decided to invite Mrs. Nolla and her husband to a non-existent faculty dinner on Saturday. She thanked him, and he left, wondering how quickly he could throw together a faculty dinner on Saturday if they decided to RSVP.

The dinner never happened, because while Justin sat in his third period Physics course, Mr. Nolla entered his wife's class and shot her dead in front of her twenty-six students. When he shot himself a few moments later, he had the decency to do it outside.

Justin tried to live with the guilt, but it kept growing inside him like a child, or like cancer. He sought out a psychologist, who kept harranging that it wasn't his fault, a fact Justin knew in his head. But his heart didn't agree, and soon the pain inside him was so bad he had trouble keeping his food down. He kept noticing how his colleagues would look at him and whisper... or how their conversations would stop when he entered the room. Finally, he resigned, sold everything, and moved to Arizona. Sometimes he would call his sister; usually, he talked to his niece, Julia.

The friends he left behind had heard that he had visited Mrs. Nolla the morning of the shooting. A few even hinted that Justin had believed that something would happen, but not what or when. Mr. Nolla hadn't left a note - perhaps there had been an affair? But despite varying theories, the general consensus was that Justin had left due to his guilt -- unable to save Mrs. Nolla's life.

They were wrong. Somehow, the life of Mrs. Nolla had seemed, and still seemed, out of his hands. Not his responsibility that morning. Instead, he had failed those twenty-six small, shattered lives. That was what had haunted him and turned his insides out. And as he shut himself away, he told himself that he was dealing with the problem head on.

For years, he had been left alone. The few who had tried to invade his privacy found out quickly that entrance into his life was by invitation only. Trespassers were sometimes shot at, but never actually shot -- until today. If you can call a body that disappears "shot".

Justin lightly turned over the clipboard with his foot. He picked it up and raised it to eye level to be sure his eyes weren't fooling him -- they weren't. Not a drop of blood anywhere.

He turned on a light and tried to make out what he could (given that the pages were no longer in order and had a bullet hole running through them). He found a white page, marked 3G, that read:
Complaints, Problems, Irregularities:

1) I don't know who's been photocopying form 3G lately, but they have been doing so on white paper. Keep in mind that the color code system is there for your benefit, and all forms marked 'G' are meant for goldenrod. You'll find it tucked away under the photocopier (under the coral).

2) After taking notes on Justin and his recent activities, call Julia and leave a message. Tell her that Justin is ill and hospitalized but that all is well. Maybe a kidney infection (?).

Justin reread the note, stunned. Some kind of conspiracy. A big one, maybe. He had been right about the danger (but then, he had known that, although it didn't hurt his faith in his own sanity to get confirmation). His hand came to rest on some gray sheets that contained a series of mathematical formulas. He gave them the once over and almost put them down before he realized what they were. As quickly as he could, he gathered all six gray papers together, put them in order, and read slowly them through. When he was finished, he was so surprised that when he stopped to scratch his scalp he -- literally -- disappeared.

17. In Charge

"Everyone rises to the level of their incompetence."

-- Traditional

"And he shot me!" the Lab Coat Man shouted (again), flinging himself into a swivel office chair. He put his hands to his forehead and massaged the red spot right between and just above his eyes that would eventually scar, forever to mark the spot where the bullet struck an instant before he had vanished and reappeared back in the basement.

"Right between the eyes!" he bleated.

"No, right between and just above," Neoldner corrected. "You've gone over this fifty times now..."

"Shut up!" the Lab Coat Man bellowed. "He shot me! If he had fired just a millisecond sooner..."

"You'd be dead," Neoldner noted. "So what are you going to do about Forrester?"

Prof. Sigger, huddled quietly in the corner, added: "Well, I for one am very glad that you escaped with only --"

"Shut up, both of you! I have to think!"

There was yet another crisis. Not only had he been shot (almost), two unauthorized persons had possession of clipboards. Of the two, Nelson was the most likely to make sense of them, but there was no reason to be relaxed about the other. The problem was, no one had a spare. How

was he supposed to look up the relevant procedure if he had lost his (damn) clipboard?!

Well, he was in charge now, at least until the Director showed up. Not Forrester, not the clipboard. And he needed some help. There was only one choice he could make. He walked out of the office and to the cell.

Kurt was scratching his arm in the garish light cast from the lone bulb.

"I'm afraid we're running out of time. You know what will happen if we cannot conclude matters by a satisfactory hour."

Kurt continued to scratch.

"Does your arm bother you?"

"No."

It wasn't the answer that shocked the Lab Coat Man, but the fact that he had replied at all. "Good! I mean... too bad! Good that you answered one my questions, but too bad that -- wait, what made you finally answer one of my questions?"

Kurt pondered this for a moment. "I don't know. I just got bored."

The Lab Coat Man reached for his pen in order to mark an 'X' on his clipboard, stopped, and sighed.

18. One Too Many

"A story to me means a plot where there is some surprise.... Because that is how life is -- full of surprises."

-- Isaac Bashevis Singer

Julia never lost that feeling of uneasiness, so she and Rhonda had left before the screening of "Bride". As Rhonda drove them past the usual road signs and over predictable bumps, Julia became aware of the magnitude of what had happened. She had lost her job and gotten a new one all in one night; she had felt something that she had always assumed was a figment of her uncle's imagination -- possibly the first symptom of a mental illness; she had sat through one of the worst films she had ever witnessed without finding an excuse to leave. Everything that she had ever assumed about this dreary town, small in both size and its collective capacity to imagine, about her life, and just about everything else now seemed strange and unfamiliar. On top of this, Rhonda, after shifting into third gear, was running a hand up her thigh.

"Uh, I'm, uh... I'm straight," said Julia.

Rhonda muttered something and shifted into fourth, charging through the intersection of Central and Oak just as the light changed to red.

When Julia finally unlocked her apartment door, she found Cecil and two messages on the machine waiting for her. Cecil purred and rubbed her shins with his head. She picked him up and pressed play on her answering machine.

Message number one: "Hello, this is Dr. Bernstein calling for Julia Nelson. Your uncle Justin became dehydrated today and will be at St. Joseph's for a while. We'll call you as further developments arise at..."

Uncle Justin in the hospital! I'll have to call the Manager and let him know she needed tomorrow off, she thought. Would he buy that? Oh great, I'm going to lose two jobs in two days!

Before she could rewind, message number two began: "Hon, this is Justin!" Julia gasped and dropped Cecil, who landed perfectly and returned to rubbing her shins. "Don't believe any messages you get about me unless they're from me! I shot a fella who got into my house... well, sort of shot him. I did and I didn't. He was there one minute and then Poof! Anyway, there's no body here, so there's no need to call the cops, but he left behind a clipboard that said he was going to call you and leave a message about me! I don't know what the hell this is all about, but it's not right! Say hello to that cat for me." The message ended, and Cecil, not contented with the action he was getting at foot level, jumped up to the counter just as Julia began dialing her uncle to find out just what the hell was going on.

19. The Meeting

"He that communicates his secret to another makes himself that other's slave."

-- Baltasar Gracian

Supervising Manager Denny was stocking shelves when the Lab Coat Man approached him.

"Denny?"

"How'd you get in here?"

"Back door."

Denny stopped shelving Snack Ramen (6 for a \$1) for a moment and looked at his fellow conspirator. "The back door? We unlock one of the most important secrets of space and time, and you walk in through my back door?"

"We, uh... lost a clipboard."

Denny stared for a moment before throwing the empty packing box to the floor. "Oh, Lord. Who has it?"

"Remember Tom? He clocked Forrester at Popeye's. Took his clipboard. Which makes a total of two that are missing..."

"Two? What was Forrester doing with two?!"

"Oh, he only had one. I, uh, almost got shot by Mr. Nelson and, uh... well, I dropped mine."

"And you became a Hindu, I see?"

"What?" the Lab Coat Man asked, touching his forehead. "That was the bullet! Do you realize--?"

"Just kidding..."

"Kidding! I'm almost killed in the line of duty, and all anyone can think to do is make fun of me because at the last second I didn't die! Am I so dispensable that --"

"All right, calm down. We need to have a meeting about this."

"Yes, I informed everyone. They'll meet us."

"Good. We also need to discuss another complication."

"What's that?"

"Not what -- who. Don't worry, I've fired her. Just a precaution."

The Lab Coat Man nodded vaguely and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Well if you're just going to stand there," Denny said, "how about giving me a hand with this mouthwash?"

The Lab Coat Man frowned, but began to arrange the bottles of mouthwash (3 for \$2) on the opposite shelf. "If I had known I was going to be shelving, I would have brought the new kid... Kurt. Why don't you just... move them, you know? Since we've unlocked one of the most important secrets of space and time, why not just--?"

"Not until after the final phase, I keep telling you! We don't know who's watching! Like that Nelson. What do we know about him?"

"Zeke knows that. Brings him his mail."

"Zeke?" Denny asked.

"What?" Zeke replied, filling his basket with hemorrhoid cream (2 for \$3) fifteen feet up the aisle.

"You askin' about Justin Nelson, Jr.? Oh, he's just nuts. Thought he saw a UFO once, but it was a weather balloon." The trio converged in the middle of aisle seven. "He asks strange questions, that's about

all."

"He almost shot me!" the Lab Coat Man exclaimed.

"Would you leave that alone for a minute?" Denny asked. "We'll have to get him out of the way."

"And whoever has Forrester," Zeke added.

"Something happened to Forrester?!" exclaimed a black woman at the end of the aisle, who had been comparing prices of toilet paper (2 for \$5).

"Who was careless enough to let two of us be compromised?!" she demanded.

"Keep your voice down, Shenika," Denny replied. "Forrester was in charge of the daily operations, so he's only got himself to blame."

"And who lost the other one?" Shenika demanded. All turned to the Lab Coat Man.

"I'm afraid I was responsible for the other mishap," he admitted, grudgingly.

"Yeah, right before you became a Hindu," Shenika said, noticeably not suppressing a smirk.

"Well, you can't be too hard on the old LCM, here," said Zeke, "'cause Justin has always had a quick temper. And since he's paranoid, he's more likely to notice something going on. In fact, I think he thinks there was something going on before he got hold of the clipboard."

"Like what?" Denny asked.

"I dunno, I was never able to get him to tell me."

"He's a fricking nut," said a police officer, who was passing through the store on his rounds. Aisle seven was filling up. "He reads books on UFO's, Bigfoot, crop circles, you name it! And he listens to Art Bell at lot..."

"But no one knows specifically what he knows?" Denny asked.

"Nobody," said the policeman. "He's never opened up to my people down at that hospital."

"And Julia is just like him," Shenika muttered.

"Rubbed off I guess," said Zeke.

"Inevitable," the Lab Coat Man added.

"Inevitable how?" Shenika demanded.

"Well, I just thought... inevitable," he mumbled, straightening another row of mouthwash.

An old lady turned the corner with a shopping cart. "Are all of you going to block the aisle?" she asked. The Lab Coat Man, Denny, Zeke, Shenika, and the police officer turned. At the sight of her, their backs stiffened and their heels ever so slightly clicked together.

"Don't worry about Julia. There's plenty of other work for you to be doing," she said. "All right! Meeting's over!"

The crowd, except for Denny, quickly dispersed.

"Now, young man," she asked, "I found my Depends, but could you tell me where I might find the Metamucil?"

20. Love in Bloom

"Give me golf clubs, fresh air and a beautiful partner, and you can keep the clubs and the fresh air."

-- Jack Benny

When Alona began to regain consciousness, she thought she saw Tom drag the body of what looked like a mad scientist inside the trailer home.

"I'm not feeling too well," she muttered.

"How's that, dear?" Betty asked, stroking her patient's head.

"I'm hallucinating about Tom dragging the body of a mad scientist -- "

"You're not hallucinating. He just did," she replied. "Well, he might not be mad, but I wouldn't trust anyone with that mustache!"

"Oh."

For some reason, this did not disturb her. During her blackout, she had dreamed of a subtle shift in the circumstances that kept her universe in equilibrium. She was too disorientated to judge whether this was a dream or not, but at least she no longer felt like crying. In the kitchen, Ritchie, Tom's father, had just come home from work and was searching for a cold Pabst to drink in front of the news. He watched his son drag the man's body into the center of the room, drop his legs, and turn toward Alona.

"Who the hell's that?!" he cried.

But Tom wasn't listening. He was looking deeply at Alona, who was looking back. Alona felt her heart flutter; instantly, she knew. The trailer seemed to glow in a light she had never believed existed. Tom kept her gaze as he stepped over the body, stood before her, and took her outstretched hand in his.

"I did this for you," Tom said simply.

"I know," Alona said, and she did.

"Anyone care to tell me what this has to do with Kurt and that professor?" Ritchie asked, cracking open a bottle and taking a long-deserved drink.

Tom and Alona, their gazes locked, now holding both hands, seemed to glow somehow in the lower-middle class splendor of the trailer home. Betty, watching the exchange with incredulous eyes, finally sighed and her own hands slipped together over her heart. Ritchie, noting his wife's reaction, allowed himself an ironic smile.

"Oh, for crying out loud," he muttered. "Tom!"

Tom and Alona jumped and turned toward the voice, their hands dropping by their sides.

"Why did you just drag an unconscious scientist into my home?"

Tom turned toward the body. "Oh, him!" Tucked in the front of the man's trousers was a clipboard. Tom extracted it and handed it to his dad. Both parents read the top sheet, their faces turning pale.

"Does this mean what I think it means? Richie?"

He nodded slowly.

"This settles it. They were kidnapped," Ritchie pronounced authoritatively. Tom and Alona did not hear. Their eyes and hands had found each other's once again. Tom attempted to say something meaningful and clever but only managed a half-swallowed: "I love you."

"I love you," replied Alona, and the room seemed to begin to slowly revolve around a newly formed sun. Betty peeked at them over the clipboard, but Richie raised it again.

"Aww..." she cooed.

"Now, hon'," he admonished gently.

21. How the World Works

"Courage is the capacity to confront what can be imagined."

-- Leo Rosten

Julia felt a scream building. Cecil wouldn't stop rubbing her legs, Uncle Justin wasn't answering the phone. He shot somebody, but there was no one there to have been shot. Rhonda, having flirted with all of the men in Tranquil, had started flirting with her. Seeing things that

weren't there, or if they were there, things she didn't want to know anything about. Losing jobs, getting jobs. Being caught up in a world that she could barely make sense of, running by so quickly by that there was no chance to catch up. Concerns of that general nature were making it tempting to rip the phone from the wall and throw it through the sliding glass door.

She settled for slamming the receiver down. Cecil jumped and skittered away. Julia, for once, was going to make this a three cigarette day. And smoke indoors. She grabbed her purse and scrounged inside for the pack. Her old one was gone, but a new one, wrapped in a red ribbon, was in its place. Had to be from Rhonda.

"Oh great," Julia muttered. Do I take it or not? It's not exactly red roses or from someone I'd want roses from, so if I take them, am I sending a signal I don't want to send, or... The debate could have lasted longer -- on a better day, it would have, but this wasn't one of those days. She ripped open the pack, jammed a cigarette between her lips, and flicked her lighter.

As the flame touched the end of her cigarette, a hand smacked it from her mouth, sending it flying over Cecil's head and onto the couch. The cigarette suddenly burst into a small fireball, sending a cushion up with it. As Cecil sped off for the safety of the bedroom, Julia grabbed her least favorite throw pillow and beat it against the flames.

Whoever had just appeared next to her tossed a flower vase full of water (and one white rose) onto the cushion. With a sizzle, the fire died, leaving a burn mark and a pathetic flower on the center of Julia's couch.

"Well, this is the end of a perfect day!" she yelled, turning to whoever it was who had just appeared.

"I told you smoking wasn't good for you," Uncle Justin said, scratching his armpit with a clipboard. Julia figured that the worst thing she could do right now would be to have a temper tantrum, but decided to throw one anyway.

"What -- is -- going -- on?!" she yelled.

Justin shook his head and motioned with his hand to calm down.

"Look, this is going to take some explaining. Let's sit down and -- no, I guess we can't sit there now, can we?"

"I can hear it standing up! First, you're in the hospital; then, you're not. You shot somebody, but you didn't, and then you break into my apartment just as -- "

"I didn't break in," he interrupted. "I just that second got here."

"Without opening the door?"

"Without opening the door."

Julia took a long look at her Uncle's face. He wasn't drunk, and he wasn't lying.

"OK, maybe I do need to sit down," she said, sitting on the carpet and pulling her knees to her face. Justin grunted as he managed to get his body to sit (and not fall) beside her. They waited in silence for a minute.

"So what's going on?" Julia asked.

"Something to do with this clipboard," Justin said, handing it to her. "Flip to the front."

Julia read through the directions concerning Uncle Justin and the outline of how Julia could be removed if necessary. Someone would slip her some knock-out cigarettes.

"Knock-out cigarettes?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, from what I've seen, this isn't the most intelligent conspiracy in the world."

"You'd at least think they'd check to see if their knock-out medicine was flammable."

"Probably alcohol based."

"Why not just slip me a mickey, then?"

"How much do you drink?"

"Hardly at all. Occasionally when I'm with -- "

"What?"

"Rhonda must be in on this."

"Are you still hanging out with her? She's bad news. Her family owned Tranquil's only brothel about eighty years ago, and --"

"No ancient history lessons, please," Julia said.

"Well it wasn't ancient to my grandfather, who -!"

"All right, pax, pax! Sorry for using that word. So how did you get in here?"

"That's the gray section, towards the end."

Julia flipped through and tried to read them. "This is worse than 'Finnegans Wake'."

"You don't know the half of it. But as I was reading that, I got blipped to Wildwood Park."

"Blipped?"

"Pinged. You know, there one second, gone the next. Zap! All the way from Arizona to Wisconsin!"

"That's what 'blipped' is. OK, so what were you doing in Wildwood Park?"

"Hard to say. I was reading this over, trying to remember all the math I knew ten years ago, thinking about how I used to come up with ideas for class while I walked Roosevelt, about how we used to walk through Wildwood Park on Sundays, how I used to sit on that bench across from the swings, and next thing you know, I'm sitting on that bench looking at the swings!"

"So, you're saying that if I went through these pages and thought of, say, Nova Scotia, you would have blipped there instead?"

"Sort of. It's a set of equations that tells you how to travel anywhere instantly. It took a few more tries to get it to work again, but in the last few minutes I've been over half the globe."

Julia closed her eyes so Uncle Justin wouldn't see her roll them.

He tapped her on the arm, and when she opened her eyes, he handed her a brochure in French.

"From the Louvre," he said.

"I thought they'd be closed by now," she muttered.

"They are," Justin replied.

"You realize the damage this will do the economy," she said, flinging her hands in the air in mock exasperation. "No more gasoline, cars, airlines --"

"I don't need sarcasm right now, Jule," Justin said. "I need some help. Now."

"So," Julia sighed, "my choices are: either accept the possibility that you may have done the impossible, or ostracize you like a kook along with the rest of humanity despite the evidence of my senses. Right?"

"I think," Justin said, "you've finally figured out how the world works."

22. The Plan

"If life doesn't offer a game worth playing, then invent a new one."

-- Anthony J. D'Angelo

Denny walked into the interrogation room to find Neoldner and Kurt giggling inside a cloud of smoke.

"Oh cripes," Denny muttered.

When they heard Denny in the doorway, they stopped moving, slowly turned toward him, and starting giggling again.

Denny clenched his fists and exhaled slowly. "OK, Neoldner, why don't you take five?"

Neoldner nodded in agreement and stepped into the hallway, giggling all the way out. Once he had left, Denny gave Kurt a quick stare, and suddenly, Kurt's giggling stopped.

"Whoa, what did you do?" he asked.

"I had to remove whatever it was you didn't inhale from your bloodstream," he said. His legs suddenly felt limp, and he steadied himself against the wall. "It takes something out of you to work that precisely." Slowly, he moved toward the other chair and sat down.

"When am I going to learn to do that?" Kurt asked.

"If we had a clipboard, we'd start ASAP, but we're kind of screwed right now. Forrester's taken, along with his copy; Justin Nelson has another. We were making more, but our copier ran out of toner."

Kurt pondered this for a moment.

"What kind of organization is this?"

"The shoe-string kind."

"Well, if you can't get your hands on some toner, how do you expect to take over the frigging world?!"

Denny gave Kurt a dark look.

"Sorry..." Kurt muttered.

"As it happens, we're not trying to take over the 'frigging' world. We're trying to create our own."

Kurt guffawed and slapped his knee, and stopped when he noticed that same scowl on Denny's face.

"OK, so, you're trying to create your own world..."

Neoldner, stumbling his way past door, and still giggling, shouted:
"Planet Wisconsin! Woo-hoo!"

Kurt covered the smile on his face with his hand. Denny sighed, stood, and shut the door.

"Not a new planet, a new world. There's a lot we can do, now that we've figured out the secret. Moving from point A to point B in zero time is just one aspect. Moving from one alphabet to another takes organization."

"I'm lost."

"OK, follow the metaphor. You're in the restroom, then you're here. Point A to point B."

"Uh-huh."

"You're here, and then you're in a new world. Not another planet, another level of existence. Somewhere you normally can't get to from here. You've gone from point A to point μ . That's where we're trying to get to. Got it?"

Kurt thought about this.

"So why this conspiracy?"

"It'll take a concerted effort if we're going to take the town with us."

Kurt's jaw dropped. "All of it?"

"Every last citizen and every last piece of concrete. A community isn't an easy thing to build, is it? So we'll just bring along what we've got."

"Including Wildcat Graham?"

"Who?"

"She's a senior at Tranquil High."

"Yes, if she's in town."

"What about Wendy Branwell?"

"Yes, her too," Denny said, placing his head in his hands.

"And --"

The door burst opened. Denny and Kurt turned to see Prof. Sigger enter wearing a white lab coat and holding a clipboard -- a smirk borne of a thousand cut-throat departmental meetings perched cruelly on his lips.

"Allow me," said the latest recruit. "Due to recent vacancies I was offered a post... tenure track, of course! Let me interrogate this capitalist."

"I'm a capitalist," Denny said, sternly.

"Oh yes, yes," Prof. Sigger replied. He turned to Kurt. "Now, when did you first notice that you were being indoctrinated by right-wing ideologues?"

"What?" Kurt asked, scratching his arm.

"When did you become a mind-numbed robot? Why have you become resistant to income redistribution?"

Kurt looked at Denny, who was rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"It's going to be a perfect world with him along?" Kurt asked.

Denny looked up and stared at his colleague for a moment, who then disappeared. The clipboard fell to the floor. Kurt stared at the space before him that used to occupy Prof. Sigger.

"Cool..." he whispered.

23. Real Love

"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

-- Song of Solomon 8:7

Ritchie flipped through the clipboard one more time before placing it on the table between his recliner and his wife's rocking chair.

"Did you find anything useful?" Betty asked, without looking up from her knitting. Tom and Alona sat across from them on the coach, holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes.

"Did we ever look that stupid?" Ritchie whispered.

"Oh yes," Betty replied confidently.

"Thank God I'm getting old," Ritchie grunted.

"Now, hon'," Betty admonished gently.

"I only found one name in there that might help us at all. Any idea where Seltsam Street or Avenue or whatever it is might be?"

"No idea. Are you sure it's a street and not a name of somebody?"

"A couple pages referred to it as a meeting place. I guess we'll have

to see if the Lovebirds birds know anything. Standby with a bucket of cold water in case I can't get through," he said.

Betty chuckled and kept knitting.

Ritchie cleared his throat. Getting no response, he tried again with gusto. He considered tossing the TV Guide at them, but figured that would be too humiliating. So he settled on using his 'voice of authority': "Hey, Lovebirds!"

The Lovebirds jumped slightly and turned toward the voice, as if unaware that anyone else had been in the room.

"Any idea where Seltsam Street or Avenue or whatever it is might be?"

"Seltsam? Sounds German," Alona said.

"Seltsam Way?" Tom asked.

"Could be," Ritchie said.

"That's that cul de sac that ends up behind the theater."

"Oh!" Betty said. "Remember when they rezoned Doege? They put in Vine Avenue and the library and cut off Seltsam, remember? There were those town meetings about it -- oh my, that would have to be thirty years ago!"

"That has been a while! I forgot all about that street. Tom, does any other business have access to Seltsam?"

But Tom and Alona had already lost themselves again in each other's eyes.

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Ritchie muttered.

"They make such a wonderful couple," Betty sighed.

"A couple of what is what I'd like to know... Now listen here, Lovebirds!" The Lovebirds turned. "Whatever's going on, the people who are working with this guy," Ritchie said, pointing to the still unconscious Forrester, lying in the corner with a pillow under his head and Betty's second-best afghan over him, "meet at Seltsam. If the only place you can get to from there is that theater, then maybe that's where they are."

Tom slapped his hand to head. "The theater! The basement! It's huge, and the Manager never lets me go down there!"

Alona smiled and said: "I knew you'd figure it out!"

Ritchie felt like reclining his chair all the way back and calling it a night, but his wife reached over and patted his hand, which was all the

support he needed, all that he would ever need, to get up in spite of himself and do what had to be done.

24. Challenging assumptions

"I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge."

-- Igor Stravinsky

"And there's something else about this movement business," Justin began, still sitting on the floor and leaning back against a dry portion of the couch.

"Where did Cecil go?" Julia asked, looking around the corner into the bedroom.

"I don't know. The thing about this instantaneous movement is -- "

"Cecil!" she called. "Kitty, kitty, kitty!"

"He's probably in the bathroom," Justin grunted. "Hiding. He'll come out in his own time."

"I know, I'm just feeling paranoid right now."

"I understand. But the thing about this movement -"

"Look, I can barely follow physics when I can think straight -- which is not now -- so skip over that and just tell me where we go from here."

Justin sighed. What good was discovering something important if no one wanted to hear about it?

"There's only one thing we can do. We find Seltsam, whatever that is. That's probably where they're operating from. I don't know what they're planning, but from what's written in here, it's big!"

"Uncle Justin, you've stumbled on the secret of instant travel, you've gone half-way around the world in the last hour or so, and you don't have the first clue where Seltsam is. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Justin grimaced. "Yeah. And with their freedom of movement, I'd say it could be anywhere on Earth."

"I think I can find out," she said, standing up and walking to the phone. She began to dialing, but suddenly stopped and turned to Justin. "Uncle Justin, would you mind... just going somewhere else for a moment? Like outside? No, go outside the normal way, through the door. Thank-you. And shut it behind you!" Justin allowed himself to be forced outside, where he waited at the top of the steps, wondering

whether or not he could blip himself a coat if the wind got any colder.

"Oh, but baby!" Rhonda squealed on the other end of the line. "I'm not supposed to say! I didn't want to give you those cigarettes! Denny told me to!"

"Denny's in on this, too?!"

"Oops," Rhonda muttered.

"Well, forget Denny for a minute. I just need to know how to get to Seltsam. Is it an avenue? A street?"

"How to get to Seltsam-ee Street!" Rhonda sang, her voice growing farther away.

Just how wasted is she this time? Julia wondered. "Hello! Earth to Rhonda! Put the phone back to your ear, darling. Tell me where Seltsam is and I'll let you get back to... whatever it was you were doing."

"Oh, I've been up to my eyeballs in what I've been doing -- !"

Julia nearly hung up the phone, but decided she had to try one more trick before giving up. She leaned against the counter and tried to make her voice sound threatening. "Tell me where Seltsam is or I'll send you off God knows where!"

There was a sobering silence at the other end. "What?"

"You know what I mean. Zap! You're somewhere else. Only it'll be worse than Tranquil. Worse than Wisconsin!"

"Arkansas?!" Rhonda shouted with disgust.

"What's so bad about -- I mean, yes, Arkansas! Right in the middle of... of Hindsville! In Madison county. A dry county!"

"Oh God, no!" Rhonda wailed.

"Uncle Justin has the clipboard all ready... On the count of three? One, two..."

"Stop! You win! It's Seltsam Way, the street behind the theater!"

"Where I just got hired? Was that all part of this too?!"

"Well, what do you think?" Rhonda said. "That it was all just coincidence?"

Julia stood listening to the silence for a moment, and then hung up the phone. Justin stepped out of the bathroom.

"I thought you were waiting outside!"

"It got cold. I didn't have my jacket!"

"I suppose you heard all of that," she said.

"Most of it. Where's Seltsam?"

"Seltsam Way, behind the theater."

"Oh yeah. I forgot about that road. Well, we better get going."

Julia picked up her keys. "Wait. You didn't see Cecil in there, did you?"

"Not unless he got inside the cabinets."

Julia went into the bedroom and looked around. She lifted the skirt of the bed and peered underneath. No cat. She looked in the closet. No cat (as far as she could tell, with all of her junk in the way).

"We have to get going," Justin commented.

"Cecil!" Julia called.

"He's just hiding! We have to go, now!"

Julia shrugged and sighed.

"So how's it done?"

"You won't need your keys, but take them if you want," he said. "Hold my hands."

For a moment, Julia began to feel the room spin. And then, she wondered how it was that she had reached the exact center of the universe.

25. When it hits the fan

"Truth is the only safe ground to stand on."

-- Elizabeth Cady Stanton

When Prof. Sigger found himself standing three miles outside of town on County Highway A, he was, to say the least, chagrined. He tried thumbing a ride from a couple in a pickup, but no luck. They were too busy necking. One of them, however, did throw an empty beer can to him.

After studying his situation carefully, he decided that he either must walk the three miles or try that new method of movement that was supposed to be listed in the gray section of the clipboard. And

considering that he hadn't exercised regularly in years, the clipboard seemed to be the better option.

With only the starlight behind him, he began to read his way through the higher math. It wasn't easy, but at the end of four minutes, he decided that the section in question had to be interpreted subjectively. This had been a theme of his academic career, so the conclusion hadn't come as a surprise. It was amazing how elastic a text could be given the right kind of reader. In fact, he had often convinced himself (when lecturing to a room full of stupefied students) that only he and his method could arrive at any kind of coherent, but highly tentative, meaning. When he had debated the subject years before, the experience of reading had come down to an indeterminacy that left out the possibility of conclusive understanding. This disappointed many of his undergraduates, but then, reality was more often than not a disappointment. His writings on the matter had taken him a long way at the beginning of his career, but after years of more ardent methods of spiritual exploration, late at night, with several friends keeping a bloodshot eye out for the police, his writing had lost something of the cohesiveness it once had. He had always assumed that he would get it back one day, but lately, the face he encountered in the mirror looked more like his father's than his own, and although he had taken some positive strides to get back into the lit. theory game, he hadn't enjoyed much success. This new venture, however, seemed to be the turnaround. Having this kind of power would turn not a few heads -- networking being the prime ingredient in any good, tenured position.

Skimming through the pages one last time, he decided that he had arrived at a justifiable understanding of the matter. Perhaps he would make an entrance at the exact spot where he had left. Or just outside the theater. Or perhaps on the roof. Too dramatic? He settled for just outside the theater's back door, in Seltsam Way.

He closed his eyes in order to concentrate on the math, felt that peculiar sensation of vertigo, and felt a cool wind blow on his face. He opened his eyes to find himself hovering a thousand feet above Tranquil. His heart stopped beating as he began to fall, but began again, much to his relief as well as anguish.

He nearly let go of the clipboard, but managed to clutch it to his chest as the pages, his clothes, and the Earth, began to flutter violently around him. The fell past some kind of balloon, reached out to catch hold of it, but it was too late. Now, the only thing that could save him were those few pages whose contents he had just forgotten, thanks to a somewhat reduced short-term memory. The only numbers he could recall (as he struggled to find and not lose his place) was his rate of descent: thirty-two feet per second per second.

Something inside him wondered how long it would take to reach the end of his fall, and something else answered that this could not be known without ascertaining one's starting altitude. Strange, he thought, what you think of when you find yourself airborne without a parachute.

But he forced himself to focus on what little he could read as he tumbled toward to the ground. And though he had spent the bulk of his academic career teaching his students that truth, with its duplicitous and mutable definitions, could never be found in a text, he began to search, quickly and sincerely, for meaning.

26. It Falls Together

"Everybody has got to die, but I always believed an exception would be made in my case."

-- William Saroyan

The station-wagon swerved around the corner (as it had all the previous), jolting and jarring its passengers from one side to another. Tom and Alona, in the back seat, were thrown next to each other at near regular intervals, wondering how long their luck would last. With a final, sharp turn of the wheel, Ritchie half-drove, half-skidded off Central and into the back alley known as Seltsam Way.

"There it is!" he shouted.

"This isn't a cavalry charge, dear," Betty muttered, having braced herself in the passenger seat as best she could throughout the horrible ride.

"Now we'll see what's going on around here!" he replied.

It was when a man dressed in a lab coat plunged from the sky and slammed into their hood, pitching the car forward and then back onto its wheels as the body rolled off the windshield and into the alleyway behind them that Ritchie finally applied the brakes. The wagon skidded to a stop, turning as it slid until the vehicle became lodged in the narrow alley. After the occupants caught their breath, Betty spoke.

"I think you hit him," she said.

"I didn't hit him, he hit me!" Ritchie replied.

"Look at the hood! The car's totaled!" Tom cried.

"He fell on us! How could I know he was going jump and land on my car?!"

"Who are they?" Alona asked, looking past Tom as they sat pressed against the door.

"Who?" Ritchie asked.

"That old guy and... isn't that what's-her-name from Osco?"

"Do the doors still work?" Betty asked in a shaky voice.

They did, and the four of them crawled out the driver's side and slowly made their way on unsteady feet toward the body.

"You got one!" shouted the old man.

"Justin..." the girl admonished.

"You know him?" Ritchie asked, pointing to the man the coat.

"Never seen him before, but I'm guessing he's one of them."

"How do you know?" Betty asked.

And, coincidentally, the contents of a clipboard came fluttering down upon them like leaves.

"Justin Nelson," Justin said, extending his hand to Ritchie. Introductions were made all around.

"Didn't you work at Osco?" Alona asked.

"Until they fired me!" Julia replied. "And then they hired me here."

"Here?" Tom asked. "Doing what?"

"Concessions."

"My job?!"

"Be glad you were out of it," Alona said.

"Yeah, but I wasn't even told I was fired!"

"So who is this guy?" Ritchie repeated.

"I don't know. No name tag," Justin replied.

"He's moving!" Betty shouted.

All turned toward the man who lay in the alley. Somehow, he was still alive, gasping for breath. When his gaze caught Alona's, she recognized him.

"Professor Sigger!" she shouted.

"Alona..." gasped the professor.

"You're involved in this?" Ritchie demanded.

"Tricked me... Fascist swine..."

Justin bent down to the dying man's ears. "Quick, man! Why are they doing this?!"

"Trying to take the town with them," he gasped. "Conspiracy... half the town... ran out of toner..."

"Shouldn't we call an ambulance?" Betty asked, wringing her hands.

Prof. Sigger looked back at Alona and with his dying breath said:

"Damn...."

The group stood around the corpse, unsure of what to do.

"Half the town? Probably the police are in on this too, then. Can't call them," Justin said.

"Shouldn't we cover him up?" Betty asked.

"I think we need to get into that theater first," Ritchie said. "He said something about taking half the town."

"If they can, we're in real trouble," Justin said.

"But what does it mean?" Alona asked.

"The way they move. Instantly. That's how they kidnap people. They move them or themselves instantly from one point to another. That's probably what this guy meant. Their goal must be to take the town with them," Justin said.

"That's stupid," Tom muttered.

"No!" Alona said. "That's what happened to Prof. Sigger! He was there one second and gone the next! And that's how they got Kurt!"

"Just what is going on here?" Betty asked.

"We won't know that until we get inside," Justin replied.

"Right," Ritchie began. "Let's sneak in the back, and -- well, we'd have to crawl over the car to get in."

"Forget that. They'll be expecting us now. Might as well use the front door," Justin concluded.

They agreed and began the short walk around the building to the main entrance. Julia, unusually quiet, was the only one who didn't follow immediately. Her attention was fixed on a piece of paper that had fallen on Prof. Sigger's face, covering him just as Betty had wanted.

Julia bent down and saw that it was a form labeled 3G, "Complaints, Problems, Irregularities:" The rest was blank.

"Did you ever have one of those days," Julia found herself repeating, "when you think you've noticed something everyone else has missed?"

27. Their Last Stand?

"The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, but wiser people so full of doubts."

-- Bertrand Russell

"You killed Prof. Sigger," said the Lab Coat Man, pacing back and forth in the basement hallway. "How could you?"

"I didn't kill him," Denny repeated, rubbing his face with his hands. He sat inside the small office, leaning back as far as he could in the one decent office chair the conspiracy had acquired. "I sent him outside of town, and the idiot tried to get back without using the proper steps."

"And shot himself a thousand feet in the air? On his first try?"

"You know what I know..." Denny leaned forward until he was sitting straight, took a cigarette from his pack, and lit up. The Lab Coat Man continued to pace.

"How could he interpret that from our notes?!"

"I don't know!"

"There's no smoking down here," the Lab Coat Man complained, as Denny blew a long, slow cloud into the room.

"There is now," he replied. "All I did was send Sigger out of town for a little while. The rest is on him."

"Out of town? You mean -- you were trying to make sure we didn't take him with us, weren't you?"

"Don't tell me you weren't tempted."

The Lab Coat Man considered this. "OK, I won't, because I was, if you understand me."

Denny waved his hand as if to say: "Whatever."

"You'll still have to tell the Director," the Lab Coat Man. "I'm not going to!"

"Tell me what?" asked a voice. The men turned as the Manager walked in.

"We have bad news," the Lab Coat Man said.

"Or good news, depending on your point of view," Denny muttered. He avoided the stern look that the Lab Coat Man gave him momentarily.

"We've lost Sigger," the Lab Coat Man said.

"So? Get him back," the Manager/Director replied. "It's not like you need a travel voucher."

"No, we lost him," Denny said. "He's lying in Seltsam Way after falling from... a great height."

The Director paused. "How did he get to a great height in the first place?"

"He must have ignored the information on the second page," Denny said. "I sent him out of town to... to cool off. He decided to come back the easy way, and then --" Denny slapped his hand on the table.

"Oh dear," the Director replied.

"Indeed," the Lab Coat Man added.

"Indeed what?" the Director asked.

"Nothing," the Lab Coat Man muttered, turning away.

"I see you don't know, then," the Director said.

"Know what?" Denny asked.

The Manager swung his hands apart and then together in loud clap. "They're right outside."

"Who?" asked the Lab Coat Man.

"All of them. Justin, Julia, Tom, Alona, Ritchie, Betty..."

"Outside?"

"Nearing the front doors as we speak."

Denny muttered a curse, stood up, tossed his cigarette to the floor, and crushed it under his foot.

"Get Kurt," he said to the Lab Coat Man, "Neoldner, anybody. Extra-Short Notice Emergency Meeting, or whatever the hell Forrester would call it. Whoever's available. No, I take that back. Whoever's available and sober."

"That leaves out Rhonda, then," the Lab Coat Man sighed.

"But what could they do?" asked the Director. "We've got almost the entire town on our side."

"Why do you think we take new recruits by surprise? It comes down to willpower. A willing or unsuspecting subject is a lot easier to move

than someone who's fighting you. You'd have known that if you'd bother to read what we sent you!"

"I financed what I could, gave us a place to work, but I left it up to Forrester to --"

"Never mind," Denny said. "Let's get up there before anything else happens." He brushed past the Director and the Lab Coat Man, past open cardboard boxes that contained their extra supplies, including clipboards, paper, and lab coats still wrapped in plastic.

28. Breaking the Law

"As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality."

-- Albert Einstein

"Where's Julia?" Uncle Justin asked. Tom's hand had just reached the door of the theater, and everyone looked around.

"I thought she was behind me," Betty said.

"Did you see her?" Tom asked Alona, thankful for the excuse to gaze into her eyes.

"No," she replied, gazing back.

They heard footsteps, and Julia came jogging up to them from around the theater.

"Where have you been?" asked Uncle Justin, the concern evident in his voice.

"Thinking," she replied, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

"Couldn't you do that without waiting behind?"

"Like you should talk," Julia mumbled to herself.

The rest of the group began looking around at the other shops on the street. For some reason, they were all closed. Traffic had dwindled down to nothing. The street-lights had come on early, revealing a deserted town.

"We'd better hurry," Ritchie said. "Is the door open?"

"I think so," Tom replied, reaching for the door again.

"Wait," Julia said. "That's what I wanted to say. Something is wrong."

"What?" they asked.

"I don't know."

They stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out if she was being serious. "Did you see something?" Uncle Justin asked, wondering if there was some danger that he had missed.

"No, that's just it. There's something wrong here. And it's more than this conspiracy."

"That may be," Ritchie began, "but right now we have to see what they're up to and where Kurt is. Try the door, Tom."

"But --" Julia began.

Tom pulled at the door, which swung silently open. The lights were on, but the lobby was deserted. A large sign rested on an easel announced the films of the evening. Tom walked up to it and gave it a kick, toppling the stand and sending the sign into the corner.

"That's theater property," said the Director, somehow stepping out from behind the concession counter.

"It's the Manager!" Tom said.

"No, not the Manager. I'm the Director. I have been for some time."

"Why doesn't he have a name?" muttered Julia to no one but herself.

"You've been directing this outfit?" Ritchie asked.

"About as well as Ed Wood," Tom scoffed.

The Director reddened.

"Hold on, let's remember why we're here," Justin began.

"Where's Kurt?!" Ritchie shouted.

"I'm right here," Kurt said, stepping out of the doors that led to the bigger screen.

"Kurt!" Alona said.

"Alona!" Kurt said, almost simultaneously.

"Butthead!" Julia said.

"Don't call me that!" Kurt said, and gave Julia a stare that meant only one thing.

"Move!" Uncle Justin yelled, pushing Julia out of the way. She stumbled and fell against the ticket counter. The artificial plant that had been just behind her disappeared.

"Hold it!" the Director shouted. "Let's not get violent."

"Why not?" asked Denny, stepping out of the emergency exit. "Did you think we'd get what we want by being nice?"

"We want a better world, Denny! I'm sure these people can be made to understand what we're trying to do."

"And what exactly is that?" Ritchie asked.

"We're going to move the town to a better place," the Director replied.

"Northern Wisconsin?" Alona asked.

"Minnesota?" Betty asked.

"Somewhere where they run bad movies 24/7?" Tom asked with a smirk.

"Somewhere that's not here!" replied Shenika, as she stepped out magically from behind the ticket counter. "Do you want to be stuck in this backwater state forever?!"

Julia stood up and tried to work out the kink in her back. "You hate Wisconsin, is that it? What kind of an excuse is that to start a conspiracy?"

"Most people know that everyone in Wisconsin hates Wis-" Kurt began.

"I like this state!" Ritchie said, Betty nodding in the affirmative by his side.

"It's not about this state!" Denny yelled. "Why stay in a world where..." He couldn't finish, but the nightmare he'd had since he was six flashed before his eyes anyway. A bang. Everyone jumps and covers their ears. She's sprawled on the floor. Blood running from her body. A man with a gun by the door. Another shot outside, and he falls.

"Where what?" Julia asked when Denny didn't continue. "Where on Earth were you planning to go?" Julia asked.

"That's just it!" the Director exclaimed. "Not on Earth! Somewhere else!"

There was a pause, and then Tom said: "You've been watching too many of your own movies. You're full of crap."

"We can do it whenever we want to, numb-nuts!" Kurt shot back.

"Then why haven't you?" Betty asked.

"Because we can't do it whenever we want to," Denny admitted, giving Kurt a dark look. "It takes planning, preparation... recruitment,

teamwork. And it's going to be a lot more difficult if you stand in our way. So..."

"You want us to agree with you?" Ritchie asked. "To send this whole town to Fairy-Land just because you don't like it here? Why not just move?!"

"It's not the state that's the problem," said the Lab Coat Man, stepping out from the doors leading to the smaller theater. "That point has been exaggerated by one or two of my colleagues. It's this world that's the problem. Who would ever choose to live in a world like this? No one, in truth, and we've found a way out and want to take the town with us. You ought to be thanking us for our generosity, really."

"No wonder you recruited Sigger," Alona said. "You are such an ass... although I respect your right to religious difference."

"I'll have you know -- !" began the Lab Coat Man, his hand moving to cover his forehead.

"Never mind all that," Justin interrupted, "it won't work."

All turned to him. The Director and Denny took a step forward.

"Like hell it won't," Denny said. "You should know that."

"Whoever wrote these formulas had a lot of insight... Had to. They solved the big mystery in physics: how gravity relates to the other fundamental cosmic forces."

The Director grinned. "Well, I'm not at liberty to say where they came from, but thank-you!"

"Like you had anything to do with it," Denny grumbled.

Kurt giggled until the Director gave him a scowl.

"Oh, I'm not saying it doesn't work. It does. But there's a flaw here."

"If this turns into a science class," said Zeke, who had appeared just inside the main doors, "I'm leaving."

"Don't be rude, Ezekiel," said the old lady, who appeared in a corner along with her rocking chair. "Go on, Mr. Nelson."

Justin scratched his head and went on. "You seem to be violating the Law of Conservation of Energy."

"I told you he was a nutcase!" said the police officer, who had appeared at the Director's side.

"Seem to be violating...?" Denny said. "Either we are or we aren't."

"Which law is that again?" Tom asked.

"The Law of Conservation of Energy," Alona repeated.

"You're so smart," Tom replied, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"How does it work?" the Lab Coat Man asked. "And don't pretend I'm the only one who doesn't know how it works!" he added, rubbing the spot on his forehead in agitation.

"It's a law in the strictest sense. There's no way around it," Justin said.

"This is a science class!" moaned Zeke.

"Oh, have a seat and be quiet!" the Director snapped. "If there is a flaw in the formula, we have to know about it!"

"Assuming he's not lying," the cop said.

"Physics can't lie!" Justin bellowed. "Now listen! Think of it in terms of simple math. You all can do simple math, right?"

There were a few faces that fell and began examining the carpet.

"Well, listen anyway!" Justin began, back in his classroom for the first time in years. "You got a set of Legos. Twenty, fifty, a hundred, it doesn't matter. You make a car out of them for your grandchild, then take it apart. You have the same number as you've started. Those Legos represent energy. They can't be created or destroyed."

"What if the Legos get lost?" Kurt asked.

"Then the energy went somewhere else, but the block is still around somewhere. They can be moved around all you want, but the Legos themselves are indestructible."

"OK, that's fairly simple," said the Director.

"Now here's the problem. We have a kind of energy called potential energy, and specifically I mean gravitational potential energy. All potential energy is based on position, right?"

"I know where you're going with this," Shenika said. "Gravity pulls on us all the time, so the higher we are, the more potential energy we have, right?"

"Basically. So, with this instant movement of yours, it all seems to work except for one thing..."

"Boy, you really get into your explanations, don't you?" Denny muttered.

"Just hurry up," Zeke moaned.

"It would take too long to explain in detail, but with these equations, you shouldn't be able to move up or down."

"What?" Shenika said.

"Huh?" Zeke said.

"Pardon?" the Director said.

"You're magically creating and destroying energy when you blip from one place to another and change energy states!" Justin said.

"I'm lost," Kurt said.

"No surprise," Tom muttered.

"It's in the math! You're using the same energy going laterally as you are going up or down! It's like an elevator that doesn't need power to move! It can't work!"

"But it does!" Denny said.

"That's why I said it appears you're violating Conservation of Energy. Maybe you are, but it's more likely that you're drawing energy from somewhere else."

"From where?" the Director asked, suddenly looking pale and slightly older.

"Oh Lord," Tom said, "it's Ed Wood time, again, isn't it? They're getting it from another dimension, and there's going to be this disastrous consequence, and the whole Earth will be get swallowed up, and yadda yadda yadda..."

Now it was Uncle Justin's turn to study the carpet.

"Well?" Ritchie asked.

"Well it's coming from somewhere...! I don't know where, but the more energy you use, the greater the problems you'll have when it's time to pay the bill!"

The conspirators turned to the Director.

"So that means if we try to move the town..." he began.

"There's no way to say," Justin said. "But it probably won't be pretty."

Just then, a dark wind blew against the building. The glass doors popped open momentarily and then locked back into place. The widows high above the lobby rattled ominously. The lights, for a moment, flickered.

"Woah," Kurt muttered, "how's that for coincidence?"

"Do that again," Tom prompted.

"Do what?" Justin asked.

"That wind thing."

"I didn't do it!"

"Well, just say something like 'the world is doomed' and see what happens..."

Justin opened his mouth, then thought better of it and closed it again.

"Say what you want," Shenika said, "but that's enough to convince me that this has been nothing but a big waste of my time." And with that, she disappeared.

"Where'd she go?!" Zeke asked. "Who did that?"

"She did," Justin said. "I think she's left your conspiracy."

"Now wait a minute --" the Director began.

"Where's the cop?" Tom asked. He had disappeared too. So had the old lady. And, when they turned around, so had Zeke.

"They're running out on you," Ritchie said, taking a step forward.

"Didn't need them anyway," Denny said, stepping toward Ritchie.

"I thought you said --"

"We need a lot of help to move the town, but not as much to move a building. Say, a theater..."

"Denny, I don't think this is- --" the Director began.

"Why not?" Kurt said, moving toward him. "Let's just get the hell out of this town while we can!"

"You're not taking anything!" Ritchie said. "This ends right here, right now."

"Why?" Julia asked.

All turned to her, equally shocked and stunned.

"What do you mean why?!" Ritchie demanded.

29. Behind the Curtain

"Life is but a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream."

-- Mark Twain

"Does that mean you're on our side?" the Director asked with uncertainty.

Uncle Justin, with a stunned expression, asked: "What are you saying, Julia?"

"Is that what all this has been leading up to?" she asked. "The coincidences? The odd connections? Six people running across each other in order to quash some silly, escapist conspiracy?"

"It's not silly!" the Director objected.

"It is escapist," the Lab Coat Man admitted.

"What brought us here?" Julia asked. "To this lobby, at this time, facing off over something that seems like a weird dream?"

"Oh cripes," Denny said. "Don't get metaphysical on us."

"Mathematical innovations always seemed unreal at first --" Uncle Justin began.

"The math doesn't matter. It never did," Julia said flatly. "It was all part of the same thing."

Justin's jaw opened and closed silently several times as he grasped a bench to keep himself vertical.

"What the heck is she getting at?" Ritchie asked Betty.

"I think you're over-thinking it, dear," Betty said to Julia.

Tom and Alona exchanged confused looks. Kurt scratched an itch that had appeared on his hand.

"Why this conspiracy?" Julia demanded of the Director, (who had seemed to suddenly age five years).

"To take this town to a better place," he said, attempting to remain calm.

"Why not just go there, then?"

"We, uh, as I said, we wanted to take the town with us."

"What for?! What would you need to take with you if it's already a

'better world'? Wouldn't you make that better world worse just by taking the town with you?"

The remains of the conspiracy looked at each other.

"I don't know, I just joined up," Kurt said.

"I wasn't privy to those early meetings, remember?" the Lab Coat Man said. "I joined after Frank left."

"I thought it was your idea," Denny said to the Director.

"I thought it was... group consensus," he replied vaguely.

"So instead of just taking off for your new world, you do the one thing that would eventually expose your plans to the rest of us?"

The Director looked to his co-conspirators for answers, but they were looking back at him. He finally turned to Julia and shrugged.

"So where does that leave us?" Julia asked, turning on her companions.

"Do we defeat this conspiracy, save the town, and live happily ever after? Is that what we're supposed to do?"

"Don't be silly!" Ritchie said. "They have to be stopped!"

"Why?! Because they kidnapped Kurt? Well, he's happy to be with them, so that can't be the issue. They've harmed you? If they leave for their New World with this theater, what do we lose? We can rent videos, you know! Why exactly are you doing this?"

"They're evil!" Tom exclaimed.

"Oh, please! Where did you get that word from? From the films you run here that you hate so much?"

"Look!" Ritchie bellowed. "You just get out of the way unless you want to be considered one of them!"

"How did we all come together at just the right moment?" Julia demanded. "All finding out the right information on the right day, appearing in the same alleyway at the same time, divided conveniently into two sides just to fight out... what? Some badly written melodrama, where we're the cavalry and they're the Three Stooges?"

Denny had had enough. He leaped for Julia. Luckily, she had turned just enough to see him in her peripheral vision, and she threw herself to the floor. Denny flew straight over her and into Ritchie. Betty screamed and began hitting Denny (and every so often her husband), while Tom tried to try to pull them off each other. Kurt tossed his clipboard aside and jumped on Tom. A magnificent brawl had begun in the theater lobby.

"Stop! Stop!" Julia yelled, as she pulled herself up. "This isn't worth it!" But every time one of them tried to stop fighting, someone from the other side would clout them over the head, assault their shin with a shoe, or engage in some other act of miscellaneous violence.

Denny finally managed to crawl away from the mob and stood up. He held his side and smiled grimly: "Let's face it... Any coincidence between this conspiracy and a real conspiracy is entirely accidental." At least, that was what he meant to say, and would have, had not Tom tackled him just after the word "is". The phrase stuck in Julia's mind, reduced to essentials and repeating: "Any coincidence is... Any coincidence is..."

"Is what?" Julia asked, as she crawled to the corner to get away from the escalating melee. "Knowing that would solve everything."

She stood, watching Uncle Justin, one of the kindest men she had ever known in her life, shove Kurt into a plastic, potted plant. In a moment, Tom was on top of his cousin, swinging wildly. Denny took a swing at Justin and missed, but he didn't see Alona, who came up behind him and kicked the back of his knee. Denny went down, where Betty was trying to revive Ritchie. She rubbed his face and his hands as he sat dazed against the opposite wall. The Director stood against the concession counter, trying to concentrate in order to send everyone home, but unable to stay calm long enough to do any good.

Julia looked around for the other one, the nerdy looking guy in the lab coat, but was distracted by something coming up behind her. Julia turned to see the Lab Coat Man holding a two-by-four in both hands.

"I don't want to hurt you. Just don't move! You can't stop us now!"

"What do you mean?!"

"Who'd want to live in this world a moment longer than we have to?! I can't take it here any more! We need to go! Please, let us go!"

"I'm not stopping you!" she yelled, moving slowly along the wall toward the ticket counter. The Lab Coat Man followed her.

"You'll stop us! I know you will!" Julia could see that he was being overcome with fear and anxiety. She watched as he began to raise the beam higher. She involuntarily closed her eyes only to hear the man scream. When she looked, she saw him stagger back and drop the board, his face red with claw marks. She looked down in time to see Cecil jump into her arms.

"Cecil?" she asked.

Cecil licked her nose.

"How did you get here?"

Denny's phrase echoed again in her head. It reminded her of something... What was it that she had read? "Nobody ever said a day has to be juggled into any kind of sense at day's end." What kind of crap was that! Would a fight like this be taking place if life was meaningless? Was it just by pretending that there was no structure to the world that got you through, detached and senseless to the lower orders of people beneath you? If that were true (she noted as Denny brought a framed poster over the top of Ritchie's head), this lobby would be a lot easier to clean up in the morning.

But what if it was all just coincidence? The last twenty-four hours being nothing but a protracted example of how some fool can carve the world into some semblance of order because one thing happens chronologically after another? No reason for Kurt to have his butt kicked by Alona, for Denny to land on Tom after tripping over the Lab Coat Man, for Ritchie to sock the Manager in the jaw, or for a thick gray mist to begin sweeping across the lobby floor?

Julia blinked and rubbed her eyes. It was still there. The mist was rolling across the floor at ankle level. She tried to move out of its way, but it wrapped around her feet, and she could no longer move. Whatever was really going on, if there really was a pattern hidden behind the curtain, behind the screen, from somewhere beneath the lowest pit in the theater, it was slowly creeping across the room. None of the others noticed it as they kept up their insane combat, pounding each other as if the future of the world depended on this last battle. Outside, the city lights were fading in the fog, shimmering and melting in what seemed less like air and more like the bottom of a gray sea.

What kind of author would treat their characters this way? Julia wondered, as she felt her shins being enveloped by whatever it was. She struggled, but her legs would not move. She tried walking, running, kicking. All equally useless. That is, until Cecil rubbed his head against her chin and began to purr.

Her left foot suddenly came loose, and she was able to take a step. Then her right. This couldn't be happening, she thought. Totally irrational. This doesn't make sense! But she found herself muttering these thoughts as her legs carried her slowly toward the doors. Outside the gray light had grown dark, as if the theater had been cut off from the rest of the world. Perhaps the conspiracy had done it: perhaps they had moved the theater to that 'somewhere else'. Or maybe it was just payback time. Julia didn't know, but she did know that, for this moment, the answer did not matter.

As the fog swirled and filled the lobby, and as the muffled sounds of fighting echoed dully in her ears, she found herself at the doors. She reached out and pushed them, and they swung open without resistance. Behind her, she heard Uncle Justin call her name from somewhere in the lobby. She looked back, but the room was completely filled by the nothing that had blown in. Nothing was behind her, not even the lobby. Her hand held the door open, as if the rest of them were about to

follow her outside.

Cecil hopped out of her arm and landed at her feet. He walked ahead into the darkness and looked back. She could hear the others making their way toward her, but something was wrong. It didn't sound like them anymore. The footsteps were slow and heavy, and she could no longer hear any voices. The room had suddenly become so cold that Julia could see her breath. She began to shiver, and the sounds of the footsteps were nearing.

So Julia did the only thing she could do: she stepped outside and allowed the door to close on its own, and she followed Cecil away from wherever it was she had been.

30. What happens next?

"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

-- Socrates

Oh great, Julia thought, a light at the end of the tunnel. And it was a tunnel, completely dark, with only the theater doors behind her. Cecil was ahead of her but getting farther away. Julia tried to keep up but couldn't keep her footing on what seemed to be a slope toward the white light in the distance.

Venus?, she thought. God? Swamp gas? The end of a dream? If this were the end of one of those novels she had been reading, she figured that there wouldn't be an ending. All a trick by some smart-ass author who wanted the audience to put all the pieces together, figure it out, write papers, hold seminars about 'what he really meant', provoke arguments, inspire entire schools of thought... all of that crap. It would have to be this.... stuck in-between the two possible answers to the question... whether this had all happened for a purpose or had all just happened.

Nuts, she thought. I bet it's one of those. I wouldn't be lucky enough to have this turn out to be just a regular, old-fashioned, story. The kind that people actually read. Then it would at least have an ending. Nothing to figure out. All in-your-face, like television. A movie would be better, though... at least there'd be a budget. Hopefully a good soundtrack, too. Who would play her and Uncle Justin? Would the director cast real actors or some muscle-bound and double-D bearing gimps who would have a few lines of dialog between shoot-outs? Would it even matter? Because, Julia noted, the light was getting larger... and brighter. Cecil was lost from sight.

Great, I'm about to meet God. Or just wake up. Or just keep going like this forever. Great choices. I suppose if it's all been a comedy, I just wake up right there next to Auntie Em. If it's a tragedy, I'm dead, right? That's how they all have to end -- it's in the union rules. Unless there's a twist right after that ending, where the good ending turns sour or vice versa... if it's a comedy, who

writes God's lines? Or a dark comedy. Then I'd just keep walking forever and ever... and bitching about it every step of the way. Waiting for God, you know... Good grief, I hope whoever is behind this has a better sense of humor than that.

Good, the light's still getting bigger. I suppose it's close to the end now. Hopefully not 'The End' but just the 'end' of whatever kind of weird day this has been. Too much for me, I can tell you. Like this tunnel... Oh great, what if it just looks like I'm getting closer but in fact the tunnel just stretches on forever? It wouldn't be so bad if this were just a dream... I'd have to wake up eventually. Thank God for bladders.

Well, I guess I have my three choices... I go on forever, I wake up, or I die. Unless the author is so far-gone that he won't even stop at three choices! My God, what would be the fourth? How weird could this get?! Maybe this is like one of those art projects where the artist gets stoned and paints with bear snot? Oh, who cares?! Can't this come to a conclusion one way or another? That would be the worst. Never knowing one way or the other. That would be a fate worse than death. Oh... good phrase. I bet it's in the title of whatever this is. I wonder what it means... I bet anything the author doesn't know.

Oh, my feet! I should have worn sneakers today. It's so bright up there! Is this it coming up? Is this my answer to everything? That moment of truth? If it's not, where I am supposed to be looking if not here? Maybe I'm supposed to just stop worrying about and just take whatever it is as it is...? You know, just let go of the preconceptions and see what's in front of me for the first time?

Oh God, I sound like such an idiot I should be on a talk show! There might as well be a white rabbit up there, for all the good I'm doing. Or Oz! Oh great, I'll escape from Wisconsin and end up in Kansas. Think positive: maybe I'll end up wherever those romance novels take place. Maybe I could do some passionate heaving for a while instead of all this walking.

Is this tunnel ever going to end? The light is just ahead! Is it supposed to get harder to reach the closer you are? Is all this supposed to be metaphysical or just plain impossible? And how did that cat get through all of this while I'm still here? Is that God's message to me? The cat gets nirvana while I trudge up this incline forever? It's so bright -- what if he's waiting for me in there and I step on him? The cat, I mean, not God. Oh, this is ludicrous! Isn't this ever going to end?!

31. Sunlight

Julia awoke on her couch with the morning light that streamed in through the blinds. Cecil, sleeping in the crook of her arm, twitched and tried to roll over. Julia felt the warmth of the light on her legs

and arm and wondered what time it was. She stretched and dislodged Cecil, who jumped to the carpet and padded off to use the cat box.

Am I back from Wonderland?, she asked herself, unable to control the smile that spread across her face. Julia stood and stretched in the morning light that made her body feel whole and warm and good.

She stretched until she stood at the tip of her toes, as tall and straight as she would ever be. She relaxed and let her body go limp, her head tilting forward just enough to see a weather balloon drift into view in the otherwise blue sky, where it hung lazily in the air for a last few moments before it descended gently to the ground.

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