

Unfinished Business

by Matthew Bennett

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Flick

James heard the flick of lighter, and waited to see if he smelled smoke. This could be a day of intense joy ... or intense disappointment and sorrow; it all came down to the smell – to one simple cigarette.

For sixteen years he raised Brian and attempted to instill the values that would keep his son from smoking on this day. He brought up his son by the book, within all legal guidelines. He'd never mentioned lung cancer (a year in prison just for talking about it), but he did extol the virtues of breathing completely clean air. He hadn't spoken to his son about addiction to cigarettes (six months of harsh community service), but had told him that he was the master of his own destiny and shouldn't let anything control him. Confined within the legal framework, it had been difficult to come up with a way of instructing Brian that wouldn't land him in jail, or see his son taken from him ... or worse.

Oh God! – how he wished he could just *tell* Brian that smoking was stupid; that it caused lung cancer and emphysema and heart disease; that pouring stimulants into the blood stream harmed sleep and productivity, lowered sperm count and could make men infertile! He wanted so much to be able to tell his son that smoking made you stink; made you unappealing to the opposite sex – or even the same sex, if that was his preference. James didn't care if his son chose a man or woman, but only that they lived in a smoke-free, happy house.

But The New Way had tied his hands completely.

Framed in politically correct speech, the laws of The New Way restricted parents severely by removing the possibility of saying anything negative about tobacco in any form. Things hadn't always been this way: after the Tobacco War of 2021 it seemed like business as usual until the smoking age was lowered – a federal law that the states adopted with very little opposition. After that, the laws of The New Way had fallen into place one by one, each becoming easier to accept.

Before the War, the relationship between Government and Big Tobacco had been a little blurred: publicly they seemed at odds with each other, but in secret many politicians and organizations were sharing in the profits. The FDA was known to be under Big Tobacco control as early as the 1960s; and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (and Explosives) to mostly go after firearms (and explosives) – the name of the organization intended to delude citizens into thinking that the government was doing something to reduce the millions of deaths caused directly by tobacco, when in fact the BATFE was serving Big Tobacco by removing firearms. The conspiracy theories floating around at the turn of the century had never put Big Tobacco and the gun control lobby hand-in-hand, but from the beginning of the real conspiracy, gun control was part of Big Tobacco's plan; a disarmed citizenry under their complete control.

James suspected that the 2015 Prohibition Amendment had actually been supported – and perhaps even suggested! – by the tobacco companies; for if the Government of 2015 hadn't made smoking and tobacco products illegal, there

would never have been a war that resulted in Big Tobacco's owning the United States of America. Back then, when he was a writer, James had wanted to go on shouting from the all the high places, writing books and articles to let the world know what was happening. He had written several books in the first decade of the millennium, detailing the dangers of the two-party political system and problems inherent in the United States' wars in the Middle East; but that was more or less it. James was no longer a writer: Big Tobacco had taken it from him.

He did write one more book, in the aftermath of the 2021 War – while citizens were assured that free speech was alive and well in the United States. He wrote his thoughts on the conspiracy, his thoughts on Tobacco taking over the Presidency; he used his rights as a citizen to try to tell people what he saw happening.

But first they came for his blog.

One night at 3:22 a.m. (he had never forgotten looking at the clock and wondering who the hell it was) they knocked, but didn't wait for a response before smashing in the door. Six men in SWAT gear came in. They dragged him over to his computer and made him delete all the anti-tobacco "propaganda" on his website. He remembered wondering, even under such stress, why they didn't just hack into his website and delete the material themselves ... Then: they don't have to, he'd realised – why bother to hack when you can have a show of power and frighten protesters into submission? They didn't need subtlety or finesse, not

any more; they had the power of the US Government, without the restrictions. He'd removed the material at gunpoint.

That's what scared James the most – that they didn't *care*. They didn't care what the people, the citizens, thought about their actions.

He had stopped writing books and sunk into depression. He'd blogged about irrelevant government actions for a couple of months, but casually, and without heart; for how could one write about an ill-kept front yard when all the while the house was being consumed in a raging fire?

James's wife Julie had seen his struggles and had encouraged him to go on with his writing. "More people should be fighting this," she'd told him; "you can't give up. Don't let them scare you into stopping. This is still a free country."

Oh, Julie, James thought to himself: you were so wrong, and you paid for it. We paid for it.

Three months after the government had forced him to shut down his blog, he had finished his book: *The New Way*, he called it. After encouragement and editing by Julie, he'd sent it to some friends in the publishing industry. It won't be popular with Big Tobacco, his covering letter had said; but it is a necessary work with necessary thought – if this country is to remain free.

As it had turned out, the country hadn't remained free – even from as early as 2021, once the War was over. There had been rumors of other non-fiction writers and publishers being censored, threatened and worse, but they could only be whispered. Most had simply remained docile, and sold out to Big Tobacco at

the earliest opportunity. During the sellout there had been media images of owners and CEOs of publishing houses shaking hands with Government representatives and smiling. James had known even then, however, that deals had been being made in secret. No more anti-tobacco publishing.

In fact, the United States had ceased to be a free country from the moment its citizens had begun to fight back. After Prohibition, there'd been a couple of years when people complained about the power the Government was taking into its own hands in banning cigarettes; while non-smokers and people who had been all for the banning of tobacco products were ecstatic, and told them not to complain. They had claimed the move would be great for the future of the country.

But history repeats itself, as is often told, and the second Prohibition had been worse than the first – the black market making billions of dollars a year out of tobacco. The tobacco industry was not forced to shut down entirely, because it wasn't illegal to export cigarettes: they could still make their money and people had kept their jobs (and were, of course, still highly taxed – much of tax money going into the DEA's coffers to keep cigarettes off the streets).

The Big Tobacco takeover hadn't happened as swiftly as in Orwell's Animal Farm, but nor was it slow. The gang wars, martial law, the banning of guns, the revolt, the door-to-door confiscation of firearms, a Government involved in a civil war that was not North vs. South but everyone vs. everyone. A smokers' group killing a gang of non-smoking activists, and then turning on a pro-gun militia to

get their hands on swiftly-disappearing firearms. Riots and military-type skirmishes involving citizens, the Army, and federal agencies such as the FBI, DEA and BATFE leading to tens of thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of injuries. And then, just like that, it was over.

The Government was broke, and in 2021 people could not live on principle. No more police, no more welfare, no more highway repair – it was all over. This had made Big Tobacco the Savior of our Country, sent by God to pay the debt for our sins.

In 2022, the tobacco companies had merged, shifting an unseen balance of power, and bought out the Government. James knew they would kill him for describing it that way: it was called ‘a bail out’. It was in fact the first open and publicly accepted Government bribe in the country’s history: revoke the ban on tobacco, revoke all federal restrictions, and we will use our almost limitless resources to restore peace to this country. They had kept their promise.

Several changes had occurred over the next two years. The smoking age was lowered to 16, marijuana was legalized (with only the tobacco companies allowed to grow and sell it, hardly surprisingly), cigarette advertisements were once again on the media. All of this had occurred largely unnoticed by a citizenry recovering from the trauma of a civil war; some triumphed at the changes – especially those who were already buying pot – while others were just glad to get back to normal life ... to business as usual.

James had seen the problem; he had seen how easily the takeover had happened, how quickly the citizens had been subdued, and he knew that The New Way had to be written about, to be exposed. He didn't care how, he just knew it had to be done; and he would make that happen – not only for Julie, but for his daughter Sarah and his son Brian as well. He wanted to change the world before everything went bad. But every publishing company rejected the book, and some sent back messages of warning” “For your own good, you need to let this rest,” one returned submission read.

As public perception had turned Big Tobacco into more of a hero – almost along the lines of the Founding Fathers – James had found himself becoming less and less popular with his submissions. He'd persisted, and had told himself he would persevere to the end. No matter what.

One night he'd found there was a “what” that did matter, and terribly. They'd come into his house again and dragged him and Julie into the kitchen, sitting them down at the table. A man in a suit said, “James, we need to teach you a lesson. So here it is.” He took out a gun, pointed it at Julie's chest from two feet away, and fired six times. The man then nodded to one of the SWAT gunmen, who went upstairs and grabbed his six-year-old daughter from bed. “You will never see her again. And you will never speak out against tobacco. Ever again.” They left the house with his daughter; and so far they had kept their promise, as he had obeyed their directive.

They'd been smart, James knew, to leave his son with him. Without Brian, James would have done something. He didn't know ... Bomb the White House, organize an army – *anything*, anything at all to pay them back for what they had done. For Julie's life, and for his daughter. He would have become a powerful adversary, but for the need to protect life of his son. So he had obeyed, and he had watched. As he'd watched, he'd planned. The murder of his wife had instantly shaped his resolve into an intense point of hate – resolve that he couldn't act upon because he'd had to raise Brian.

But James had watched, and learned. He'd learned that he hadn't been the only person to go through this kind of tragedy; and that most houses had had listening devices planted contrary to the will of the owners. He'd had soon realized how widespread the murderous treatment had become in a very short time. Big Tobacco had the manpower to control every situation; part of their plan was to eliminate anyone opposed to them, and they had done it often. They were in control of all the armed forces and every Government branch, along with every form of media. Anything that couldn't be controlled had been eliminated.

He had learned about restrictions on tobacco being lifted, and the regulation of tobacco being entirely in the hands of tobacco companies. Drugs were added. Cigarettes were changed. All had been made extremely addictive, and one brand made people so addicted that they would do anything to get them. Another delivered steroids to the system. A devious chemical device being used in all cigarettes was a chemical that built a poison in the body that was released by

the smoking of a very special pack of cigarettes. If anyone had needed to be eliminated, someone would make sure that they ended up with that very special pack, and a “death by natural causes” notice had appeared in the media next morning.

The anti-opposition laws had kicked in shortly after Julie’s death. In total repression of free speech, it had become a felony to speak out against tobacco. New research showed that cigarettes were not only harmless, but were able to extend life and increase intelligence. Based on this research, those opposed to smoking were seen as conservative, stuck in the old ways, old fashioned, puritan, fundamentalists. People had been monitored, arrested and jailed – or eliminated. School teachers even hinting that tobacco might be harmful had been removed.

Most disturbing of all were the Government benefits. One of the worst was a free case of cigarettes sent to each child on his or her sixteenth birthday, a “coming of age” present from Big Tobacco. The case was a sampling of many different brands, and included a high-tech lighter. The choice was “left to the children” whether or not they would “act as a responsible adult and smoke”; but if they didn’t they were free to “give them away to their cool friends”.

James had dreaded this day, the day of Brian’s sixteenth birthday, for years. But he also looked forward to it, mostly because it might very well be the day that he reunited with Julie, and perhaps even Sarah.

He had been busy in the last few years. He made an official apology for his book and his actions; and was permitted to find a job with a plumbing company. There he learned how to make bombs out of grocery store supplies (and anything else he could find). Moving about and carefully positioning his creations, he turned Washington D.C. into a ticking time bomb in preparation for this day. He hadn't stopped there: he'd traveled interstate and had placed his paybacks for Julie under Government buildings in New York, San Francisco and several other major cities. He had also collected a stockpile of guns and ammunition on the black market, being careful, and adding to the collection several times yearly. As the bombs went off and the USA went up, he planned on making a spectacle of himself, taking as many tobacco officials with him as possible.

The planning had helped him pass the time. It had helped him deal with the pain. It had also helped him cope with Julie's face, as the life bled out of her from six close-up bullet wounds. But he couldn't be sure if he would go through with it. Would he set it all off? – would he call the number on his prepaid cellular that would ring phones all over the United States, setting the bombs off and killing more people in one day than the Tobacco War did over several months? He still didn't know, and it had been driving him crazy. His plan was no longer about freedom, or Government suppression: it was about Julie, and revenge.

So he'd made a decision. If he ever caught Brian smoking a cigarette, he would go through with his plan: he would have nothing more to lose.

So far, there hadn't been a hint of it.

But today Brian had a choice. And James didn't want to influence his choice with a plea or a threat. No: this was for Julie, and it would be pure. If Brian was his and entirely his, life would go on as normal. But if Big Tobacco took his son away from him too, there would be hell to pay and he'd collect it.

He stood at the door listening. And sniffing. He heard the flick of the lighter as Brian played with it, and wondered what was going through his son's head. Was he just flicking, or was he lighting up a nice, refreshing, Government-provided cigarette?

He would know soon enough.

Old Orchard Street

Sometimes, lying in bed trying to find the strength to get up and get moving in the morning, I'm not thinking clearly. Residue from dreams, some almost remembered and some almost lost, remains sticky and foggy in my mind. I often find some odd little amusement - then later, as I finally drag myself out of the dreamy muck, I wonder what was so funny - even if I can remember the thought, I am confused about why I saw any humor. I would like to believe that everyone's mind works like this in the morning: I would like to think that everyone stares into the bathroom mirror with mind repeating some left-over mantra from a nighttime venture into Faery. I don't ask these questions, so I'll never know.

But I hope other dreamers never face anything like the dregs of my nightmares - the things that clutch onto me after I've left the less happy regions of that night-time Faery where I'm often to be found. Because this is residue from my nightmares, and it poisons my days. Not only does it stick, but it becomes a living entity - escaping the mind's confines and entering waking life. The mantras from these dreams often find themselves in the headlines of the local paper.

Faery can be a wonderful land. It can also be cold, dark and unforgiving.

"That's why—" No ...

"That's what—" Yes.

"That's what took me—" ...

"That's what took me so long—" ...That's it. That is the phrase I repeated over and over as I woke.

The Mantra. I *remember* ...

I dreamed of a woman – very black, long straight hair. And the darkest eyes -beautiful. And a good looking guy - athletic. And I dreamed that—

Zhenya was jogging faster than usual – a few blocks ahead of Nicholas, usually the faster runner. Despite the cold and the snow she felt as if she could run all day; but they had work to do. The current phase of their project was not quite complete, which meant there wasn't enough time for recreation but enough to at least get outside briefly and enjoy the day.

She halted on Village Street, next to the stop sign at Old Orchard, taking her gloves off and setting them on a small black SUV that had seen better days. Shaking the circulation back into her fingers, she waited for Nicholas to catch up.

They had been working together for only a few months, and they started dating shortly after she hired him. He was handsome, and they got along well. So far she just had him doing useless paperwork – busywork – so that he would be around when she needed him. She wasn't sure what her motive was, but she wanted to be with someone kind – someone who would make her feel human again.

Looking back to see where he was, she started to prepare a first-time taunt: Nicholas usually had some smart-ass comment to make when she was lagging behind. Before she could come up with something, she saw him pointing frantically and shouting: “WATCH OUT!”, he was yelling. Before Zhenya knew what was happening, there was a large creature tearing into the shoulder of her coat: powerful jaws had control of a large amount of material and powerful neck muscles were jerking her back and forth. The coat began to tear.

Frozen in fear, all she could think of was that if the material ripped any more the dog would have easy access to her arm. Too scared to move, too fearful of getting her free hand involved, she turned her head away to protect her face

and screamed. Nicholas arrived then and grabbed at the animal, trying to pull it away from his partner, but was met with fierce snapping and a twisting muscular torso that almost knocked him off his feet. The dog's instantly turning its attention back to Zhenya happened with such force that she was slammed down into the slush-covered road in front of the Jeep. Nicholas picked up the first weapon he could find, a fallen branch.

He raised it, but before he could swing he heard a distant voice: "Petra, STOP! Petra, that's ENOUGH!" and, turning, he saw the voice's owner running down Old Orchard towards them. The animal was instantly obedient, and ran to greet his master. "I'm sorry, folks – I'm so sorry! I don't know why he did that. He's not like that, ever!" The danger not quite out of the way, Nicholas felt, holding tightly to his makeshift bludgeon with one hand as he assisted Zhenya to her feet with the other. What do you do in a situation like this?: do you yell? – do you threaten to sue?

Zhenya knew exactly what to do.

"Petra?" she said. The canine's response at hearing his name squarely challenged his earlier demeanor: with tail wagging, four paws gently walked over and stopped at her feet. She looked down and studied the golden retriever. Petra looked up and studied her.

"What was that all about?" she asked the dog. Wearing the 'smile' humans think they see in the species, Petra sat down at her feet and carefully sniffed at her knees, glancing upwards at her eyes every now and then as if making sure that it was still OK: "we're friends now, right?"

The owner answered the question put to the dog. "I'm ... he got outside, I'm not sure how. He can ... I mean, he's ... I'm sorry. I'd know his bark anywhere. I looked outside, saw you fall ... I'm so sorry. Please believe me: he's never done anything like that before." There was a noticeable Italian accent, although probably less so than thirty or forty years ago.

“As if that matters.” Nicholas said. “He did it now.”

Zhenya looked at the man, and saw genuine confusion in his face. She placed him at around 80: a short, solid-looking man, in very good physical condition for his age. She deduced this quite easily from the muscle in his legs, as he wore a button-down red flannel shirt and an old pair of boxer shorts that had the misfortune to be stitched together showing Pac-man chasing three ghosts, the fourth one presumably already eaten (or, worse – hiding on his derriere).

She allowed compassion for him when she saw that he was standing ankle deep in chunky ice water, wearing only socks on his feet. She shot a sidewise glance at Nicholas, and held her hands up slightly as if to tell her partner, ‘Easy, easy now. Don’t get mad.’

She gave the man a little half circle wave in front of her chest. “Hi, I’m Zhenya.”

“Luigi,” he said.

Trying her damndest not to giggle at his situation, she said, “Luigi, can we go somewhere warm and talk about this? I’m freezing.”

“Most assuredly ...” he said, almost questioningly, somewhat taken aback. “I live only three houses down.” Petra ran showing before them, showing the way as if he had understood.

As the trio of two-legged creatures headed down the road, Nicholas demanded, “What are you doing? We have to—”

“Shush,” she said. “This is what we need to do.”

“I’ve had Petra for a long time. A long time,” Luigi said thoughtfully as he gave each of them a cup of tea. “He outlived my wife and my oldest son.”

“How old is he?” asked Nicholas. “I mean, if he’s acting like this, perhaps it time you had him put down? He could’ve hurt us.”

“I am glad he didn’t hurt you, and I will happily compensate you for the coat. But I don’t think that I could ever do that. Put him down, I mean. I think he’ll outlive me, too.”

“Don’t think that,” said Zhenya, setting down her teacup. “You’ve got years left.”

Luigi chuckled softly. “I’m old enough to know better than that. I know some things that you young folks don’t know. And old enough to feel some things that you don’t feel yet. As for Petra ...” He paused. “This dog is at least 26 years old.”

“Oh, come on now! That’s absurd! And what do you mean ‘at least?’” Nicholas challenged.

“That is hard to swallow, Luigi.” Zhenya added.

“Well, you may think that I’m possibly getting a little bit senile. And at my age, there are some things that begin to slip. Phone numbers, which medications to take, the little things. But with the big things, I’m still alright. I was a structural engineer back when we were still trying to work out what Newton meant. I can repeat formulas about statistical determinacy for hours. I can do this, because those were the big things. Those were the things that kept people alive when we were building bridges and museums. And the biggest big thing is love. And I love that dog. So when I say he’s at least 26, I mean he’s at least 26.”

“At *least*?” Zhenya prompted.

Ignoring the question, Luigi said, “The dog seems to have taken a liking to you, signorina.” Petra was lying on the couch with his head in Zhenya’s lap, acting as if they had been friends forever: she was unable to resist his charms, and stroked his head and ears as they spoke. “That is as uncommon as his rough and

tumble act with you outside. Usually when I have visitors, he sits over by the TV as shy as a deer ...”

“So why do you think he did it?” Nicholas interrupted.

“I can’t say for sure. Maybe it was the excitement of breaking out of the house. Maybe it was his way of playing. Sometimes he seems more ... ahh ... intentional than other animals. He’s never hurt anyone; but I think if he wanted to he could. He went for your lady’s coat, so although he gave you a fright, I honestly believe he thought he was playing. I mean, look at them ...” The two men regarded at the scene on the couch.

Smiling, Nicholas said “She does seem to be falling in love.”

“She does,” Luigi responded. The old man seemed to have relaxed quite a bit after Nicholas had calmed down from the attack.

The three stayed talking for a couple of hours, over several cups of tea. They laughed, disagreed about politics, talked about the neighborhood and tried to find people they knew in common. This pleasant conversation continued until it started to get dark outside; and for the entire time Petra would not leave Zhenya’s side, even when she needed to use the old man’s bathroom.

While they were out of the room, Luigi said to Nicholas, “I honestly have never seen him act like that. Not even to me, or my wife. and he really is a special dog. Extra special. While we’ve been talking, I’ve been doing some thinking, and I have to ask you something.”

“Ummm ... OK,” Nicholas said.

“This may seem strange, but I’m too old to be very embarrassed about it. The last few weeks, I have had this feeling – hard to describe, but it has been there. I feel like I am not going to be around much longer. I can’t explain why. I got my regular checkup, and my doctor said everything seems to be running good for my age. My son’s doing good, too. But I haven’t been able to shake the thought.

I keep wondering what will happen to Petra. I feel so bad for him, you know? He's so loving, and gentle, and I keep picturing him lost and alone after I'm gone."

"Where are you going?" Zhenya asked, walking back into the room with her new pal close behind.

"Luigi thinks his time is ... ahhh ... almost up," said Nicholas, wondering if that wording was rude. Should he have found a gentler way to say it? Dying? Headed for the Big Sleep? *Was* there a gentler way to say it? "And I think that he's just about to ask us—"

"If you would at least consider caring for Petra when the time comes," Luigi finished.

"This is a rather strange day," Nicholas said to no-one in particular. Then, to Luigi he said, "A strange day, and a strange request. This is very unexpected. Please forgive me, but we've only known you a couple of hours and you are asking us to take care of your dog when you die. There are just too many questions. Why do you think you're going to die? Why would you pick us instead of someone you know?"

"Look at them. They've barely stopped touching each other since we came into the house. As I've said, Petra doesn't act like that around anyone. This dog is special, and I can't take the chance that he'll be taken to a shelter and eventually put to sleep. My son is a rather cold man: I wouldn't even ask him because I don't want to hear him say no. My friends are all around my age and it wouldn't be long before they were looking for someone to take over the responsibility. Besides, I'm not sure who I trust."

"Why trust us?"

"Two reasons," Luigi said. "First, like I said, look at the two of them – I trust you because Petra does. Second, you are very good people to sit and talk with me for so long right after my dog attacked you. It wouldn't surprise me at all

to find out that Petra knew that I wasn't long for this world, and he broke out to find someone like you."

"I'll ignore that," Nicholas said, "and ask you this: I know you love the dog, but it's not that difficult to care for and love a dog. Why would you have to put so strong a degree of trust in someone to care for him? Please don't take that the wrong way, but you seem to be placing quite a bit of emphasis on *trust*."

"Because Petra is more than just a dog. But I can't just tell you – I'm going to have to show you. If I told you, you'd just think I was senile ... crazy. I am going to show you, so we can all sit here and think we're crazy together."

"What—"

"We're going to need a drink. Whisky?"

After pouring each a generous amount, Luigi sat back in his chair. "I have said that Petra is a special dog—"

"Extra special," Nicholas interrupted.

"Extra special," Luigi agreed. "I found him 26 years ago, and he was fully grown. I know that it seems like an exaggeration, but just wait ... I had him for a year before I knew that there was anything different about him. Sure, he was obedient from the beginning...I guessed that he had been trained well. My wife and I put his picture in *The Times*, *hoping* the owners would come and get him, I was sure they must miss him. Such a beautiful dog! Well, by the time we were sure nobody was coming to get him, we also knew we wanted to keep him. He felt very safe.

"Then one day ... well, Nicholas, Zhenya ... first, let me show you, and then I'll finish the story."

Luigi rose to his feet and wiped sweat off his hands, as if preparing to do a magic trick. Clapping his hands together twice, he said, “Petra! Go fetch me something. Anything.”

The dog raised his head off Zhenya’s lap when Luigi clapped. At the command to fetch, he leapt off the couch and ran out of the room. He came back a few seconds later gripping a DVD between his teeth. It was the movie *Gladiator*, with Russell Crowe. “That was just a warm-up,” Luigi said to the couple. “Now watch, every second.” He turned his attention back to the dog. “Good, Petra. Good boy. Go and fetch me some money.”

The canine turned to leave the room again. But this time, before he made it to the hallway, he disappeared. He didn’t wink out sight, but glimmered, then and faded entirely and disappeared. Zhenya put her hand on Nicholas’ knee and gripped tightly.

“Just wait,” Luigi instructed.

A few seconds later, Petra came glimmering back into the room, appearing on nearly the same spot from which he had vanished. Between his powerful jaws, he was sporting a see-through mesh bag containing what looked like two large stacks of hundred dollar bills: Nicholas guessed the dog was carrying something like twenty thousand dollars. Petra walked over and dropped the bills into Luigi’s lap.

“Wha– what just happened?!” Nicholas stammered. “Is this ... what *is* this? Where did he go? Where did the money come from?”

“After all these years, I’m still not exactly sure. But you must watch. We’re not done yet. Can’t be. This is important.” To his dog, he said, “Petra! Take this money back where it came from. And bring me a Roman sword from the first century after Christ.” Petra reclaimed the stacks of money from his master’s hand, ran toward the hallway, and glimmered out once more. After a few minutes of

tense silence, Petra came back, this time gripping a sword. The young couple knew nothing of Roman swords, but they believed this would be one; and there was blood, or what looked like blood, dripping off the end of the sword and pooling on the floor.

“What is going here?!” Nicholas demanded. “What we’re seeing—”

“One day, about 25 years ago, my wife and I were arguing about money. We just didn’t have enough to go around. We were both trying to make ends meet, but in different ways. She stormed off to bed. I sat down in my easy chair and lit a cigarette. Petra came walking into the room, and just sat and stared at me for a long while. He was starting to irritate me so I said, ‘Don’t just sit there and look at me. Why don’t you fetch me some money, dog?’ Well, as you can guess, he did just that. Just what you saw. That was the beginning.

“For the first few years, every time I needed money, I would just send Petra to get it. I told my wife I got a raise at work, and she never questioned me. But after doing this for a couple of years, well, ... I guess think my father just raised me right, because I felt as if sooner or later, you gotta pay the piper, you know? I slowed down, stopped using Petra’s ‘talent’ so often. I won’t say I didn’t slip up, and that I didn’t take more than I should have.: I just slowed down a lot.”

“That’s quite a temptation,” Zhenya said.

“Yes,” Luigi agreed. “After the question of paying the piper came into my head, I did my best to learn where the dog was from and where he was going. I did a lot of my own research, and I asked colleagues at schools around the country to help. Of course, I had an excuse...I told them I was writing a book about animals with special powers, and wanted it to seem more real by joining it with real-life news stories. I ended up with a lot of information. No-one guessed this was my reality; and even if they thought something weird was going on, or if they suspected I was lying, it didn’t matter, nobody would ever figure out what was going on.” He walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out a black binder.

“Most of what I found is in here. Research has gotten easier since I’ve been online, but most of what I have found there was already here, in the binder. You should keep that,” he said, handing it to Nicholas. “It makes very interesting reading, and should temper what you know about Petra’s abilities. It will help you use common sense.”

“Common sense ...” Nicholas repeated.

“In 1859, there was a traveling carnival called the Carpmen Brothers. Back then, carnivals proposed ghastly creatures that people would pay to see, and their clients would be sadly disappointed when it turned out they were paying to see a hoax. They’d pay a nickel to see a genuine alligator man – ‘see what happens when a man has a baby with an alligator!’ and after paying twenty cents to get himself and his three boys inside, they would see a man in a cage sitting on a pile of straw, growling at you, too obviously painted green, and the father would be upset at being misled, at being the butt of a joke ... you see what I mean. So carnivals didn’t have the greatest reputation because they boasted great things and didn’t follow through. Many were run out of town as charlatans.

“But the Carpmen Brothers had a following. They promised to deliver, and they did. They always knew that they could come back into a town safely and make money from repeat customers. They understood that they didn’t need to boast as much, as long as they could always come up with the goods. When a man paid the Carpmen good money to see a woman take her clothes off, she always did. People paid to see malformed and mutilated people, human anomalies, and that is what they got to see. There was no trickery.

“I found a story about the Carpmen Brothers in an 1859 copy of the the Charleston, South Carolina *Daily Courier* – a story about one of the carnival’s feature acts ... A story about a disappearing dog. It was just a small note in a big article about many of the carnival’s wonders. But it’s there.

“And what happened to the Carpmans – well, I believe it happened because of that one small note in the article. Close to two months after the *Courier* published the story, two of the Carpmans were found murdered, horribly mutilated inside one of their animal cages. The *Courier* ran that story as well. Apparently the mutilations took place while they were alive, though I don’t know how they knew that at the time. Both of the brothers had their legs sliced open from the back, and the bones were broken off at the hip and removed. The bones were placed in a circle around a pile of the rest of the bloody remains. Nobody knows what happened to the third brother, but the police saw him as a person of interest in the crime. It was never solved.

“In 1911, there was a similar murder of a small family – husband, wife, and young daughter – in Chicago. Rich family, plenty of valuables and antiques lying around in the house, quite the collection, the paper said. The only thing missing was the family dog, a golden retriever. I found this story because of the similarity of the mutilation – the bodies placed inside a circle of their own bones. In 1923, another carnival – same circumstance, but only one owner this time so one murder. My list goes on, it’s all in there the binder. 1930s, 1952, and 1962. All murders with no reason and no compassion. And they all were owners of a golden retriever. ‘62 was the last one I found. It has to be Petra. It has to be the same dog.

“So that’s why I don’t use Petra’s abilities, that’s why I stay under the radar. I was never, well ... after finding all this out, I was never going to use his talent again. These people, the victims ... all made me suspect that they were using Petra for personal gain. They were all rich, or had certain advantages in life. And they were killed. So I decided to keep quiet. For the last 26 years ...”

“I know,” said Zhenya as she slowly rose to her feet and carefully removed her eyeballs, revealing a glowing gray light shining from the sockets. “That’s what took me so long to find you.”

The Mantra.

“That’s what took me so long to find you ...”

I live just a few blocks from Old Orchard, I thought. *I could go talk to Luigi*. As a kid, growing up in the neighborhood, I used to play with Petra as I’d ride my bike by the house. Pet the dog and wave to the old man.

I could go talk to him, let him know what I dreamt, but he would just think I was crazy. He wouldn’t see there was a storm coming.

I have thoughts like this, but they are useless. Once again, I recalled my place in life. I remembered why I dreamed this evil thing.

I headed to my front door to check the morning newspaper.

I knew what I would find.

Knock Knock Knock

Knock knock knock

“Who’s there?” he said. His heart leapt in his chest.

Knock knock knock

He needed to answer the door before the sound woke his wife, who was sleeping upstairs. It was well past three in the morning. Nobody should be knocking at the

—

Knock knock knock

back door. People never went to the back door. There was no sidewalk, just yard. Not visible from the road. He was scared, but this wasn't something that he could ignore. He had all the lights on inside the house, there was no fooling the visitor into thinking that nobody was home. He guessed that was why his mysterious visitor was so -

Knock knock knock

persistent.

He considered going to get his gun, but he was nervous, fearing he might shoot someone. He have never held a gun while his adrenaline was pumping, and he didn't want to be a trigger happy lunatic. He decided for safety's sake to grab the 12 gauge, rack it, and lean it against the wall behind the door so that when it opened, the visitor wouldn't see it. If he needed it, he could pick it up quickly. The more actions he could place between -

Knock knock knock

a decision to kill, and actually killing someone, the better. He snuck upstairs to

get the gun and his thoughts focused on the knocking. It was so consistent. It didn't sound -

Knock knock knock

frustrated or impatient. It had almost a mechanical rhythm to it. It was the exactly the kind of knock one expected to hear from a family member or close friend right before they walked into your house. He loaded on shell into the empty gun, and placed several rounds in his pocket. Back downstairs -

Knock knock knock

he leaned the shotgun according to plan, then quietly slipped out the front door, and peeked around the side of his house. There was no one at the back door. He walked up to the door, checked the lock to make sure it was still secure. He walked all the way around his house, all the while checking out his yard and the surrounding woods, searching for the visitor. *He must have gone*, he thought to himself as he walked back inside, feeling the warmth of the kitchen, and safety in the glow of the lights.

Knock knock knock

He thought about ignoring it and wondered how much of that impulse was fear. The irritation welling up is what finally gave him the nerve and strength to yank the door open.

Knock knock —

“What —“ he began to say, but realized that things weren’t quite right. His eyes showed him a hooded figure, but that is not what was standing there in totality. His mind superimposed the hooded image with an all-encompassing vision. He saw his own evil, negativity, irritability, everything that he was, everything that he had done that was not good. He saw himself yelling at his wife for saying something harmless that he had twisted in order to be offended. He saw his sister dead at the bottom of the stairs that he threw her down when they were kids. When it happened, she got up and told their mother, but in this vision she didn’t get up. He saw himself taking a twenty out of the drawer at the donut shop he worked when he was a kid, stealing it to buy cigarettes. He didn’t see these things inside his head; he saw them in this figure at his back door.

The visions locked him in. He saw himself driving the borrowed family car around his high school parking lot, the needle approaching 80mph, he saw a young boy stepping out in front of him, killing the boy. *That never happened*, he thought, *I drove the car fast, but I hit a street sign, not a person. I’ve never killed anyone.*

Breaking into a house with his friends, stealing 8mm reels of pornography, hoping that his father's old projector still worked. Putting a brick on the railroad tracks with his friend. He remembered the huge sound it made and how much it had scared them, but in this vision the train derailed, killing everyone on board, and his friend laying dead next to him with a piece of bleeding brick embedded where his nose and left eye should have been. Killing a baby rabbit in the backyard with his slingshot, feeling horrible as he watched the creature in the throes of death and not having the balls to finish it off. Just watching.

"I'm not that bad, not evil, not all of that really happened," he shouted at the figure. *I'm a good person*, he tried to convince himself as he quietly closed the door.

Knock knock knock

"What do you want," he said as he opened the door again. "Who are you? This is my house. Go away."

He shut the door.

Knock knock knock

Praying that he wasn't going insane, praying that this wasn't some trick of the mind, he picked up the shotgun. He opened the door and fired the gun, directly at the head of this creature, from less than one foot away. Its head disappeared in the blast, and the rest faded away. He waited for his wife to wake up and ask what was going on. He watched the figure disappear, and closed the door. *I suppose I could tell here that there was a bear. That's it. I'll tell her that there was a bear or something from the woods and it was getting too close to the house and I had to fire the gun to scare it off.* He prepared his story, but she didn't –

Knock knock knock.

wake up.

He checked his shotgun. There was a shell in it already. He traced his steps. *Went upstairs, checked on my wife and put a couple more shells in my pocket. Back at the door, and at my gun, I pulled out a shell to load it.* There was already a fresh round in the shotgun. *Huh. I must have put two in,* he thought.

He opened the door, and the figure was back. Visions. Smoking in the woods at thirteen years old, kicking his mother when he was five. Stealing books from the library. Destroying a bike he found outside his high school. He pulled the trigger.

Watched the head explode, closed the door.

Knock knock knock

He opened the door grabbed the gun, meaning to put a shell in, and saw that there was already one in the chamber again. *I know I didn't put three shells in this*, he thought. *Odd*. Pulled the trigger. This time he didn't close the door, he just waited. He stood there with the door open for probably an hour, maybe an hour and a half. He looked at his watch. 3:23. *That can't be right either. Shit.*

With the door still open, he continued to stare at the watch. It stayed at 3:23 a.m. It didn't change. He inspected his gun. There was still a round in the chamber.

He closed the door.

Knock knock knock

He walked upstairs and checked on his sleeping wife, kissing her forehead. Back downstairs, he sat down on his couch, considering. There had to be a way out of this situation. *Maybe in the morning, I could....there's not going to be a morning, he realized. Should I keep killing this thing? Will it accomplish anything?* In stories, this is where people will kill themselves, but he knew he

wasn't

Knock knock knock

that type of guy. Not yet. He opened the door, and shot the thing again, center mass this time instead of the head. Like it would do something.

Knock knock knock

He went upstairs to bed and lay down next to his wife. She put her arms around him and snuggled up to in her sleep.

Knock knock knock

He looked at the clock. 3:24. He looked at his watch. 3:23. *Damn.*

Knock knock knock.

He slept for a long time and awoke refreshed, but also awoke to darkness. 3:23 a.m. He went back downstairs.

Knock knock knock.

He shot the thing a few more times, just for the hell of it. He wan't wasting ammo,
it was the same shell.

Knock knock knock

Knock knock knock

Crop Signals

There are some calculations that are simply too difficult to describe with words. And there are some that would take longer to explain than to implement. This particular calculation should have taken about about forty Earth years. And it should have saved the planet. The inhabitants, however, seemed to be adamantly opposed to their own salvation.

Room 212, next to the only broken ice machine on Missioncraft 18 *Earthsaver*, was the Math room, and the key to their current mission. 212 performed the calculations necessary to mask the signals that the earth was constantly throwing off. And what amazing signals - massive amounts of water, plants and animals, a universal fresh air supply... it's as if the entire planet was screaming to be attacked, plundered, colonized, or whatever the custom of the first empire to attack.

“And how are the natives supposed to defend themselves?” STH asked himself. “They have not even split a proton.” Their quantum and string theories were getting close to a piece of the truth, but their thinkers just seemed to want to be thinkers. They ask “what if” and then run nine hundred experiments, and then waste a year writing a book that says, “see, I told you so!” Meanwhile every single one of those particles that they love to watch so much is under threat of attack from so many empires that they would all faint if they knew.

STH's job on the *Earthsaver* was to make sure that this never happened. He was the Mathematician on this quest. With a very unimpressive CV, he never

expected to have this title. However, one lucky break, being overheard in a diner back home explaining to a friend how **X signals worked, he was approached that very night to see if he wanted to work. 187 years later, here he was on the Earthsaver. 187 years later, still hoping that his friend was back home waiting for him. He had the urge to send a text, and shrugged, remembering that this craft would return to his planet before the text. Someday, when this god-forsaken mission was done, he would invent an inexpensive means of non-linear communication wave boosting.

**X signals are what planets use to communicate. Not that planets themselves are alive. But everything communicates some way or another. Using these signals, magnets understand if they should be attracted or repelled, static knows how to pull something toward it, and objects know how to act towards gravity. There is more information given in an **X signal than any civilization will ever be able to comprehend. But the technology is there, and the empires are all starting to figure out which characteristics to look for in a signal in an attempt to locate worlds to exploit. STH sometimes wondered if all these salvation missions were worth it, given that the nature of life seemed to be theft and exploitation. Fortunately, the Morality and Ethics room was in room 4242, several kilometers away in the nice part of the ship. That's where the Cats and the Priests just sat around talking and writing all day. A shiver went down one of STH's spines when he thought of the Cats. They creeped him out.

This fear jarred him back into the present. Time to get to work. As soon as he entered the Math room he saw that every one of the circuits was snapped shut, a clear indication that another signal had been read. His fingers were drooling with anticipation as he hoped that possibly, maybe, his formula had worked this time and sent a masked signal. He wiped his fingers off on his jeans before pulling the lever. This opened the circuits again and readied the computer to see if he could finally finish this and go home.

“Motherffffucker!” STH shouted. “They did it AGAIN!!! It’s hard enough to do this without humans constantly screwing it up.” Months of planning, calculations, and meetings, followed by a very rough 3 day trip to cut the formula itself into the planet, and then months of waiting for the return signal to see if it worked. And the humans seemed to continually interfere.

Sadly, humans were in fact screwing it up. Changing the **X signal is a finicky thing, and although it has been proven to work time and time again, the precise placement and timing of the formulaic symbols is always trial and error, until it works. Scientists have known for millions of years about the power of symbols, and how they can influence fields and more specifically, the **X signal of an object. If a symbol can be placed in the correct position on a planet and add or subtract certain pieces of data from the **X signal, then the original signal given off by the planet is able to be manipulated. The Earth’s resources would be masked, and the planet would be sending a signal stating in no uncertain terms

that it was a dead planet. The finicky part is the mathematical symbols, and their placement on the planet.

The symbols have to be placed where they can have the most influence on the entire planet's signal. The rocky or sandy parts of the planet were no good, because they barely give off signal to begin with. Green and growing areas of the planet naturally push **X signals so that is a more productive area to place the symbols. In a strange part good/part bad situation, the most productive areas on the planet have been cultivated by the inhabitants of the planet themselves. The spots on the earth that were specifically engineered by humans to grow plants. The more fertile the crop, the more productive was the formula that was cut into the crop. The not so good part of the situation: since the calculations needed to be sometimes more than 100 meters in diameter, they could be seen by the inhabitants.

For the most part, the earth people just looked at the symbols in wonder, and talked amongst themselves, guessing how they were created and why? Some said that they were natural, others believed that they were hoaxes, while others believed something closer to the truth; that these markings in the crops were made by an alien race for one reason or another. No one had yet guessed the whole truth, though. No human had ever thought or spoken that these crop circles (as they were referred to on Earth) were made by STH himself, standing on a wooden ladder in the center, holding a Mathematician's laser tool as high over his head as he could, for more than an hour, while the tool did its work.

That is what the humans never could have guessed. What STH never could have guessed, was that a handful of humans could so completely ruin his work for forty years in a row. Somehow, these ignorant brats were writing their own formulas in the crops, and so far they have not been helpful. They were using shapes and symbols that STH had already concluded were inappropriate - and had already helped calculate the next configuration. However, these people were copying his old patterns and re-applying them to their own cuts, which were significantly influencing his own cuts, thus negating the experiment. He'd have to do this same calculation again, and hope that for no interference next time.

He explained it his friend 187 years ago like this: If you try A, and it doesn't work, then you try B, then C, and so on. The problem he was facing presently, was that he was trying the C formula, and the humans were adding a B, making the return signal the result of C+B, instead of C by itself. Not only were these creatures hurting their own planet's chances of survival, they were stealing his work! When you spend a lot of time with your own formulas, it's easy to recognize plagiarism. STH knew the irrationality of being bothered by this when his mission was so important - but knowing and being able to control emotion were two different things.

"BZZZZT" shouted the computer. STH whipped around so fast that his tail sent a chair clattering to the floor. The messaging system on his computer was blinking bright green. He had a message. He touched the screen, taking him to his inbox, and read "YOUR PRESENCE IS NEEDED AT 4242. IMMEDIATELY."

“Shit,” STH said.

Upper management was the same everywhere. He hated that this craft was no different than a grocery store back home. “Does anyone, anywhere in the universe understand that all caps is unnecessary?” STH thought to himself as he hopped on the beltway to the Morality and Ethics room. A summons from this room is exactly what he did not want or need right now. He had heard horror stories from other Task and Calc people. And he had heard stories about the Cats since he hatched. He always assumed that they were just that: stories; however at a time like this, it’s hard not to think of them and fear. If he didn’t have so much occupying his mind right now, he would probably have considered that these fearsome stories were spread on purpose, for a reason.

Hopping of the beltway and onto the elevator, STH tried as hard as he could to find himself back home, in front of the diner, saying, “No, I’d rather not take this job.” Unfortunately, you can’t change time. Well, you can, but the Scientists say that if you travel in reverse, you grow extra body parts, and eventually die in pain. But that didn’t keep STH from wishing that he could. He opened the door to room 4242, and the receptionist pointed to a chair. “Wait there. LBO will be out to see you when she’s ready.” At the mention of LBO, STH began to perspire. What could possibly be the reason?

LBO, short for the cryptic name The Little Black One, was a Cat. And not just any Cat, but the one in charge of the mission specifically, and in charge of

Morality and Ethics in general. Not just for this ship, but for the entire known universe. LBO started the entire Missioncraft fleet, and was present on Missioncraft 1 *Cygnus*. She was the only known survivor of that mission. STH did not ever want to talk to a Cat, but especially not this Cat.

First of all, Cats are tiny. They are smaller than the pests from back home. LBO was said to be small, even for a Cat. Second, they are covered in fur, which is just weird. But what makes them scary is how all that intelligence and power can be packed into that tiny little brain. They can choose to form themselves into any shape they want, anytime they want, effortlessly, and still they choose to remain in their natural form. They can see with their physical eyes all of the dimensions simultaneously, and their minds are able to sort out all the information. And then, they can simply step into any dimension, also effortlessly. Imagine the power of a creature that can be anything, anywhere, without effort. And unfortunately for STH, LBO wanted to be right here, right now, to talk to him.

He stared at the door waiting for it to open, when a voice spoke from the couch right next to him.

“Do you know why you are here, STH?”

“Not exactly. I’m assuming it’s about the mission,” he said to the small black shape.

“That’s my home, you know. My original home. All of the Cats are from Earth,” the Cat said as she nodded towards the giant screen showing the planet.

“I didn’t know that,” STH said. “I’m sorry I didn’t know it.”

“You are here because we’ve determined that you’ve failed.”

“How is it my fault?” he said. “The humans are -”

“I did not say it was your fault, STH, merely that you have failed. Your mission was to mask the signal, and it’s not masked yet. Therefore, you failed. There is no shame in it, but it is still the truth.”

“My formulas are working. They are working, we just need to give it a little more time. Another twenty years or so, and we will have the correct one.”

“And how would you guarantee that the humans will not interfere with every experiment?”

“I can’t...”

“No, you cannot. It’s over. You can relax for the rest of mission, and we thank you for all of your hard work. We will be going home soon. We are going to try Plan B.”

“What’s Plan B?” STH asked.

“The acceleration of human technology. We need to teach them how to defend themselves against the empires. The Cats will take the form of humans and join their ranks of scientists and governments.”

“They will destroy themselves with technology like that. They are just too young of a species. Their minds just aren’t ready for that kind of power.”

“That is not your decision, Mathman.”

“Hey, I may not be Ethics material, but I know right from wrong. They’ll pulverize each other. There wouldn’t even be a planet left.”

“Once again, it is not your decision, STH. It is advantageous to our mission that if the planet could not be hidden, it be destroyed. I would not destroy it, but if the humans do, that would still benefit our task.”

“What?” STH said, surprised.

“Imagine for a moment what would happen if an enemy race were to gain control of the vast resources of the Earth. They would be unstoppable. I am curious, though, very curious, why you care.”

“I don’t know. It’s people. Beings. Living life, eating, breathing. That’s why I care. Aren’t you Morality and Ethics? How could you not care?”

The Little Black One looked angry. “Of course, STH, I care. M&E have to make the big decisions, decisions like this. It is not easy, and perhaps you wouldn’t understand.”

“Look, I understand all right. I understand that you are giving up. It seems like there would be more than Plan A and Plan B. Is that all you’ve thought of?”

“Time is almost up. The empires are coming. If those signals are not hidden, and the planet still exists in the next twenty years, all will be lost. These options were all that the M&E determined to be viable.”

“I’ve got another option - how about we keep trying? I can do this.”

“You cannot. You will not. We are done. STH-”

“What do you know about **X signals, LBO?”

“I understand them vastly more than you, Mathematician.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Your brain and intuition can do the calculations faster and more accurately than our own. We tend to look more towards the spiritual aspect.”

“Spiritual aspect?”

“God is in the **X signals. That is where He exists, that is the only place that he exists. He loves and controls from within.”

“God? What are we talking about here? What does God, or any god that may or may not exist have to do with my work?”

“You are aware, STH, that no Scientist or Mathematician can ever understand **X signals entirely. We understand some of the data that you don't, because we approach it from a different perspective.”

“So you believe there's a God?”

“There is.”

“Is this God good?”

“Good is relative, but we tend to see him that way, yes.”

“Would he be happy that you're willing to destroy the Earth?”

“STH - “

“Then for the love of that God, give me another chance. Because He or you just gave me a better way, a better idea.”

“What idea is that?”

“You don't want to destroy the earth, but you are willing to let it happen. Give me another twenty years with the humans. Take me to Earth, and I will

teach them what I can about **X signals, without teaching them anything about weapons or advanced technology. If they are smart enough to mock my signals and cause them to fail, then they are smart enough to make their own.”

“They will not believe you, STH. It will be a waste of precious time. No government will believe or understand.”

“There are a handful of people that will. Not the government. People that are dedicated. And they already know how and where to place the formulas. They’ve made plenty on their own. If I were to find them and explain what’s happening, they would be willing to help. To learn. To take over our job.”

“It is a nice idea, but there is no time.”

“We can make the time. If I fail, you can go to Plan B in twenty years. Then they can either survive for themselves or destroy themselves. But give me that twenty years.”

“We had not considered that idea. Your boldness and passion makes your Math much smarter. I did not expect the conversation to go this way, and that is unusual for me. STH, I will grant you your twenty years. You and I will go to the Earth. For their sake, I hope that it works.”

STH left the room, shaking, not being able to believe what he had just done, what he had just accomplished. He walked into 212 still unable to control the shiver. He had to get control of himself. Had very little time. And these humans, these ignorant humans, one way or another had just twenty years to

grow up. Such a small amount of time. He pulled out his suitcase, and began to pack for the trip.

An Unforgettable Event

I heard the footsteps upstairs when I was alone in the house. My wife was vacationing in Roanoke, Virginia, on her yearly hike with her best friend. She was due back the next day, so I was cleaning the house, trying to help her extend her vacation a little bit by coming back to a home that she could relax in. This is how I had done things in the past, however in these current times there is no more relaxing, no place that you can really call home.

It felt kind of trivial, too, to be working so hard to have a clean house for her, when I wasn't holding on to a lot of hope that she would actually be coming home. And even if she did come, I still wasn't sure she'd be the same. Some folks are offing themselves, but some folks are just changing. I tried to stop her from going, and I think I almost had her convinced, until her friend called her and said that she found a perfect spot, a hiking trail that had very few reported events. I could almost read my wife's mind - her friend sounded so excited, she just couldn't say no. And I couldn't put my foot down and say no to the woman who has been maintaining my sanity for all these years, even before the events started.

This left me to mind the house, which in some small way helped me feel a little better, some miniscule piece of the normal past, a time-consuming task to occupy my mind. I was actually starting to believe that I was crazy, and that none of the events of the past few years had actually happened. Then I heard the footsteps. I was in the cellar, cleaning some of the old recycled products that we

had stored for various crafts and projects, things that I knew at this point would never come to pass. I didn't hear my front door open, I didn't hear anything outside. Just footsteps in the house. And I knew I was about to experience an event.

A friend had recently told me what to look out for. "Look for the anomaly. Look for what doesn't make sense. None of these events take on a logical pattern. There has to be something out of place. If someone runs into a bank with a gun and holds it up, you can bet your ass that the bank is being robbed. But if someone runs into a gun store with silly putty in his hand and attempts a robbery, you're about to experience an event." Two days later, he changed. Now he wanders around Wal-mart all day long, looking like he lost something important. They don't all go to Wal-mart, but he did.

The axe I had in the basement was the first thing I thought of. The second thing was my gun collection on the second floor. Could I make it into the house, up the stairs, and into my bedroom before the intruder could get me? If I had any idea what I was about to face, I might actually have been able to make an informed decision. Truck keys? In the kitchen right inside the door. I could make a run for it. But this was my house, my refuge. If I were to run off, and have something happen to me out in the world, then I was leaving this unknown horror behind in the house. If my wife by some chance made it home, I was leaving this thing for her to face alone. I couldn't bear the thought of that. I made the decision to fight.

I grabbed my axe and an old Bowie knife and opened the cellar door. At the top of the stairs, standing above me, were six large men in brown robes, standing in a half circle holding candles. Not knowing how hostile they were, I opted for my knife. This unexpected greeting changed my plan entirely, because I couldn't climb out of the ditch with any agility if I was holding my axe. I set the axe on the ground at my feet and ran up the side of the ditch toward one end of the half circle because it would have been suicide to rush the middle. I easily dispatched of brown robe number one, shoving my knife directly into his throat. Pulling it out as the body fell to the ground, I turned toward number two. He was backing away from me. I looked and saw the others backing away as well.

Taking my chance, I rushed number two, pushed him to the ground. There was more resistance this time, and I took a few fists to the face before I could entirely pin him to the ground and plunge the Bowie into his chest. I missed the heart twice, but on the third time I nailed it. I heard the wet sucking sounds from the other stab wounds slow down and stop within seconds. I looked up for the positions of the others, but they had backed off into the woods, beyond the treeline, and I saw and heard nothing.

My eyes were watering from the punches to my face, and there was blood pouring out of my nose. I had to take care of that before dealing with whatever entity was in the house. I had just thrown away some old shirts during my cleaning, so I walked over to my large garbage bin to get one out and clean up a little bit. As I opened the bin, a giant hairless dog-like thing popped out of the bin

like a jack-in-the-box. If normal proportions are any indication, there is no way this thing could have fit in my garbage bin. But it was there, and I had to stop it from getting out. If I tried the knife on this creature, I was pretty sure I'd lose a hand. I ran around behind the bin, and started to close the lid. It took all of my strength, and quite a bit of pounding, on the lid and on the back of the dog's head, before I could close the lid all the way.

I used my knife to stab into the lid a few times, to see if I'd find purchase, but I felt nothing. There didn't seem to be a lot of movement, so I took a chance - I ran to my truck, where I had a full five-gallon can of gasoline in the bed. I reached into the cab and grabbed my cigarettes and lighter. I doused the garbage bin with probably a gallon of gasoline. I was too close to the house, or I would have used more. With bloody hands I lit a cigarette, then I lit the garbage bin. I'm not sure which was more satisfying.

I wiped my hands and face off on the dewy night time grass, and rehearsed my game plan for whatever was inside the house. Go for the gun. Which gun? The shotgun - most effective in this situation. Isn't the pistol easier to carry? Power, it's all about power right now. And the shotgun has the most power. I rehearsed barging in the door, heading straight up the stairs, and making it to my gun. And that is precisely what I did.

I didn't sneak, I didn't look around, I made a beeline for the upstairs bedroom. I got to my always-loaded shotgun, opened my nightstand drawer,

found a box of shells, and started stuffing them into my pockets. Now, I could investigate.

“Are you okay up there?” My wife. Or, at least, my wife’s voice.

“I’m fine,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Dinner’s ready,” she informed me.

I looked down to see her standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“I thought you went to Virginia,” I said cautiously.

“You talked me out of it, remember?”

I laid the shotgun down and went down the stairs to the kitchen. My wife, or something that looked a lot like my wife, was making stir-fry. It smelled good. But this didn’t make sense. It could not have been her footsteps I heard. I looked at the smeared blood on my almost-clean hands. Out the kitchen window, I saw her car in the driveway, right next to my truck. That hadn’t been there, had it? I don’t remember now. I walked to the north window and looked out, at two dead bodies and a flaming, melted garbage bin. I touched my tender nose. I peered into the woods, looking for the other four brown robes, but I saw nothing.

“Come on, sit down so we can eat. Tell me about your day,” my wife said.

I sat down to eat. I couldn’t harm what might be my wife. And I couldn’t say no to the woman who has been maintaining my sanity for all these years.

gtfo

Courtney knew that something was strange the moment they took Exit 223 and pulled into the small town. After putting in six hundred miles, she and Isaac were ready to set up camp, and neither had any desire to put a tent up in the dark. They were five days into what Isaac called a “working vacation”. Courtney was looking forward to seeing more of the country, even though both were working on a research project. Drive eight hours, work eight hours, sleep six, which leaves two hours every day to see whatever there was to see.

At this particular exit, somewhere in West Virginia, she didn't like what she saw. At first, it was difficult to ascertain... just a feeling. The big chain gas station immediately off the exit appeared to be normal. There was a sign advising that the campground was to the right. She glanced at Isaac. She wasn't sure what she wanted from him - either a confirmation that things weren't right - or for him to be in normal spirits, categorizing her strange feelings as an illusion. He looked back at her without speaking, but she knew from the look that he sensed something wrong as well.

As they took a right towards their destination, they saw a sheriff cleaning out his cruiser at the pay-per-vacuum in front of a run down car wash. The man stood up and watched them closely. They passed, trying not to look. Fifteen seconds, then twenty, Courtney couldn't stop herself. She glanced back to see if the sheriff was still looking. He hadn't moved, his eyes were just following them, presumably until they were out of sight. Creepy.

The houses on the route to the campground were a mixture of very wealthy and very poor. Crazy town, she thought. Unpainted wood houses with rusty tin roofs and unkempt yards were nestled in between what had to be million-dollar houses. In a way, she thought, that's a really good statement about the social structure of the town, possibly even worth a little bit of research. The peculiar nature of this neighborhood, however, only added to her feelings of discomfort. Tension washed over the two as all along the road they saw people peeking through curtains, closing shades, hollering at their children to come inside. Courtney had never felt so conspicuous in her life.

The scene didn't change much over the next half hour, more houses, more people looking at the strangers driving through their town. Isaac said that they had driven too far, and must have missed the turn to the campground. "I can't believe that they would put a sign at the exit, and then not put up any more signs. That's just bad business. Like they don't want my money," he said. They were the first words spoken since they pulled off the interstate. Courtney felt as if they sounded surreal, hearing such a normal statement in such an odd situation; like finding out the world was going to end tonight, and then someone asking you to pass the butter.

As the scenery changed from houses to swampy woodland, Isaac pulled over and put his hazard lights on. He reached into the back seat to grab the atlas, and Courtney glanced at the wood line across the street. There was an old sign, sloppily hand painted in red stating BEWARE OF WOODS. Not ready to break the

silence herself, she just tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the sign. For nearly a solid minute, they both stared. They looked at each other.

“I’ll take the map, if you just drive,” Courtney said.

Isaac pulled back onto the road and turned his flashers off, heading in the same direction. Since neither was too keen on turning their vehicle around near the edge of the woods, they looked for a wide space where they could do so safely. Ahead in the distance, they saw a traffic light. Guessing that there would be a good place to redirect their car, they continued forward. As they approached the intersection, a very large and very modern reflective glass building made its appearance.

“The Wysan Institute of Science and Technology,” Courtney read aloud.

“Ever heard of it?” Isaac asked.

“Nope.”

“Wanna check it out?” he smiled.

“Nope.”

“Neither do I.”

He turned right, opposite the Institute, and into a motel parking lot. In contrast to the school, the motel looked old and worn out. A few scattered cars were parked in front of rooms, but the lack of activity nearby gave the impression that those cars hadn’t moved in months, if not longer.

“Oh great, the Bates motel across the street from the mad scientists hard at work creating the next zombie virus,” Courtney said.

“This whole situation since we got off the highway does seem to scream out ‘scary movie,’” Isaac agreed.

“Are you sure you want to camp near this town?”

Isaac thought for a moment, and said “We’ve been driving all day, and I’m ready to do some work, then sleep. And we’re in the middle of nowhere already. Who’s to say that we don’t get the same impression of the next town, and the next?”

“There is not a doubt in my mind that something really weird is going here, in this whole town. I don’t think the next place we stop will be anything like this.”

Pulling out of the motel parking lot and heading back the way they came, both were lost in their own thoughts. The silence in the car did nothing to alleviate the discomfort they were both feeling. Hoping to lighten the situation and somehow cut the tension, Isaac said, “Did you hear the one about the...”

“You have never, ever told me a joke that I haven’t heard before,” Courtney interrupted.

“I saw a diner in town when we pulled in, maybe we will cool down a little after actually talking to some people. Socializing with locals usually feels pretty good, and once we see that they are normal people, their strangeness may fade,” Isaac said, acknowledging their mutual growing anxiety. She was preparing to respond, when they heard a siren. She turned around and looked out the back window as Isaac glanced in the rearview mirror. The sheriff from earlier was pulling them over.

“That’s just about right,” Isaac said. She grinned, feeling closer to him than ever. His dry sarcasm was comforting in its familiarity, but also because it pointedly revealed that his assessment of the situation was akin to her own.

Isaac put on his hazard lights, and began to slow down. Courtney nervously considered the handgun that he carried under his seat every time they traveled together. He was licensed in Pennsylvania, but never bothered to research to see which states honored that license. She didn’t think it would make a difference, anyhow. Isaac would never go through the effort to get licensed in every state, and he would carry his gun with him everywhere, whether legal or not. She hoped that this wouldn’t become an issue today, but she was also somewhat comforted to have the protection of both her partner and his gun.

Isaac rolled down his window to receive the sheriff as he approached.

“Hello folks. How are you this evening?” the lawman asked. He had a brass nametag on his uniform that informed everyone that his name was Johnny.

Officer Johnny? Courtney wondered. First name or last. She never heard that as a last name before.

“Just looking for a place to spend the night,” Isaac offered, not exactly answering the man’s question.

“I had a feeling you might be lost. I was cleaning my car and saw you drive by. When I saw you coming back this way, I thought I’d stop you to see if I could help. Hope I didn’t scare you.”

Courtney felt somewhat relieved at this statement, and there was something soothing about the man's North Carolina, or possibly even Georgia southern accent. He was definitely not a West Virginia native, so not native to the town. That was comforting, although the thought didn't escape her that this man may be intentionally putting them off their guard. *Am I that paranoid?* she thought to herself.

"You didn't scare us at all. You were right, though we're not exactly lost. KOA had a billboard on the interstate for a campground, but we can't find it," Isaac said.

"Ahh... I can answer that mystery for you. Nobody ever camped there, so the Wysan Institute took it over, and built its facilities on the land. The campground is still back behind the building, and they keep it up. It's available for use, though it still doesn't get many visitors. Some of the locals camped there right after Wysan took it over, just for the novelty of it. But that business dried up some time ago. You can go check them out though, I'm sure they'd be happy to have some visitors. I can take you over there if you'd like, show you around."

"Well, thank you," Isaac said, "but we're going to hit the diner first and grab something to eat."

"You may want to hurry that up a little bit. Nobody likes to set up their tent in the dark," the sheriff said.

"I appreciate your consideration, but we're pretty handy at this camping stuff. We've set up in the dark hundreds of times."

As Isaac said this, Courtney thought she saw a look of disappointment wash over the lawman's face. **Odd**, she thought, that he was going out of his way to help them, and seemed almost let down that they weren't accepting his help.

"Well folks, you have a nice night. I'll be driving my cruiser up and down this road for a few more hours, so if you need me for anything, just flash your lights or flag me down, and I'll help you however I can."

"Thanks again," Isaac said, "we will keep that in mind. Have a great night and um... thanks for pulling us over." The sheriff chuckled at this, tipped his hat, and made his way to the cruiser.

"Nice guy," Courtney said as they pulled back onto the road. "He seemed unusually helpful."

Agreeing with her, Isaac said, "And unusually interested in getting us to stay in this campground, and getting us there sooner rather than later."

"Can we please just leave, Isaac?" she asked him. She already knew the answer to this. Isaac, was always the investigator, always the skeptic, always the man that just had to know the answer. This is the reason that he was so good at his job. This is the reason that their boss had paired them up, against her wishes.

"You have the know how – the understanding. Isaac has the motivation. I believe that the two of you will be the most productive team we have ever put together," he had said. Courtney hadn't wanted to be paired up with an attractive, motivated man. She knew that a long time on the road could do things to people, make them a couple. She knew that camping and living together, things would

happen. And they had. And she wasn't unhappy about that, but the forced relationship tainted her feelings, and the whole situation seemed too "likely" to happen. She wanted a love story, and what she was getting was more like an arranged marriage. And now, instead of taking control of the situation and just telling Isaac to get them the hell out of this town, well now she just felt disappointed in herself that she was pleading with him.

"We may have to get out," Isaac said, bringing her back out of her thoughts. "But we can't leave until we've figured out if something is really going on. At first, I was spooked and ready to go, too. But a couple of weird things happening that aren't really that weird, that's just not enough of a pattern to make us run away. Every town seems strange at first, and we've got to camp somewhere, or stay at some hotel, and if we leave now and succumb to these irrational fears, next time they'll be amplified and we'll start running sooner and sooner, until all we'll ever want to do is go home or stay in big cities. And we can't do that. Not with this job."

Courtney was pissed at herself. Half of her wanted to overcome this cowardice, force some bravery onto herself, steel her nerves, and get on with things. The other half wanted to run, run, RUN! away from what seemed like inevitable disaster. These halves being truly equal, she couldn't stop the war in her mind. It was easier to just let Isaac decide how to handle the situation. Easier just to trust him, and this thought also pissed her off.

"Whatever. You're driving," She said.

“Hey! Don’t act like that. Don’t be mad. I’m feeling weird about this too, but right now it’s just a feeling. And we can’t irrationally act on those with nothing to back it up. Dammit, we’re scientists.”

“You’re right,” Courtney agreed. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. Just keep in mind that if strange shit keeps happening, I’ll be the first to say let’s get out of here.” Isaac put his arm around her, pulled her into him and gently kissed the top of her head. “Hey – I love you. I am not going to let anything happen to you.”

These words were exactly what she wanted to hear. They comforted her. And pissed her off. She didn’t need the protection, and she hated that she wanted it. There were just too many battles going on in her head right now. Maybe she needed to see a therapist.

The diner looked like a scene straight out of movie. Which movie was yet to be determined, Courtney thought. They walked through the door, and the squeal from the rusty hinges was loud enough to turn every head in their direction, if only for a moment. She felt as if she was the new kid in third grade interrupting the middle of class. She fought back the embarrassment, willing her face against turning red. She saw the sign that said, “Please Wait to be Seated” and was exceptionally relieved. It is so much easier when you’re in strange situation to be led by the locals instead of trying to decide where you’re going to sit. She secretly feared that there was going to be a “Please seat yourself” sign.

“You folks can go ahead and seat yourselves,” a server said as she walked by them.

Of course, Courtney thought. Isaac took the lead, and made a beeline for the closest open booth, walking by the least amount of people. It was as if he sensed her discomfort with this situation as well. The waitress handed them menus and they ordered drinks. “Are you folks camping in town tonight?”

“I think so,” Isaac said. “We haven’t decided.”

“I’m sure they’d be happy to have some visitors. They don’t get too many people staying over there, and they keep the grounds up so well. It’s lovely in the day. If you go, tell them I sent you.”

“And you are?” Isaac asked.

“Patti. Just say Patti from the diner. This is a small town, they’ll know who I am.”

“Thanks, Patti,” Isaac said. Courtney could tell he was curious about the phrase ‘sure they’d be happy to have some visitors’ – the sheriff said something similar. “So do I get some kind of discount, if I mention your name or something?”

Alex asked the waitress.

The question seemed to throw her off track for a second; she seemed confused, like she didn’t know how to respond. “No, but I do,” she said through a forced smile. “I’ll be back with your drinks in a jiffy.”

Courtney pondered this curious transaction as she scanned the patrons as inconspicuously as she could. Her eyes landed on a young man in the farthest

corner of the diner. She didn't mean to make eye contact, but he was starting at her. He looked down as soon as he saw her. The man was decorated with metal in his ears, nose, and eyebrows, and was wearing a blue t-shirt that said: I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING AND YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF. She may have chuckled had the circumstances been different. He looked up, and looked back down yet again.

Patti came back with their drinks and took their order. Isaac asked her about the Wysan Institute. "Oh, all that science stuff is beyond me. I don't know what they do there at all, but I know that they came in and helped this town. We were dying. The town, I mean. People were moving away, we were not bringing any money in. Wysan came in and saved us."

"How did they save you?" Courtney asked.

"They just help us all out. And that's all I'll say about that for now. Your supper will be ready in just a little bit."

"Thanks," Courtney said cautiously. After the waitress departed, she turned to Isaac. "They help them out. And that's all she'll say about that for now."

"I heard," Isaac said. "It's curious, Courtney, but it is not proof of anything."

"Yeah, I know, just creepy. Maybe that's all we need. I'm ready to go."

"When we're done eating, let's just go check out the campground. We've gotta know."

"We don't have to know," Courtney replied.

"Trust me."

They finished eating in near silence, contemplating their situation, both analyzing their own thoughts to see if it actually was a “situation” or if it was just in their heads. Everything was a little too ambiguous to piece together any solid proof that they weren’t just imagining things.

As they left the diner, they saw the young man standing outside the door, apparently waiting for them. “You guys staying at the camp?” he asked.

“Maybe. Why?” Isaac asked.

“Be really careful, just...be really careful.”

“Tell my why,” Isaac said.

The young man stood considering for a moment. He opened his mouth to speak, when the diner door squeaked open. Patti stood in the doorway with hands on hips, staring at the man. He looked at Patti then looked back at Courtney and Isaac. “I’m sure the campground would be happy to have some visitors,” he said as he went back inside.

“You folks have a great night. And thank you for the generous tip,” Patti said as she followed the man back into the diner. Courtney wondered if this was sarcasm. They left almost exactly twenty percent – so it could have gone either way.

Back in the car, Courtney asked if the encounter with the man outside the diner was warning enough about the campground. “Not a warning so much as it’s making me very curious to check out what may or may not be going on there,” Isaac replied.

A stop at the campground now being inevitable, Courtney opened the browser on her phone to look up the science institute. Why would they buy a campground? What do they do? Why do people seem so interested in visitors staying there? What was going on? These questions wouldn't be answered, at least not tonight. There was no cell signal at all. She couldn't even make a call, let alone trying to access a search engine or her academic databases.

"No cell signal," she said. "You don't seem to be reading these events the same way I am reading them, or you'd be hightailing it out of this town."

"Courtney, I am reading them exactly the way you are reading them, which is why we can't leave yet. I feel like I'll know when it's time to leave."

"Like hell you will. It was time to leave an hour ago."

"Maybe so. I understand that you are scared. But we can't leave this uninvestigated. Not with our job. Just imagine if something is going on. We have to know. I promise you this – we will not stay the night. We won't set up a tent. We'll be leaving in just a little while, but we can't go until we've had a look at the campground. We'll check in, take a look around, and then be on our way."

This made her feel a little bit better, though they could still somehow get trapped in the campground. But just having a plan relieved some of her fears. Driving once again towards the Wysan Institute, they passed the sheriff's car. Officer Johnny was sitting with the dome light on, and waved as they drove by him. She waved back, hoping only to seem friendly, and not like she was trying to wave him down. He did not pull out, and follow, and they finished the drive to

the campground without any other local attention - at least, no attention that they noticed. Pulling up the long drive, a sign told them:

CAMPERS – PLEASE REGISTER IN OFFICE

OPEN 24 HOURS

As they walked into the office, Courtney pictured in her head what the registration process might look like. How long are you staying? What's your blood type? Do you have a history of diabetes in your family? But the man at the desk just took their driver's license, and cars license plate. Isaac asked what the camping fee was.

“No charge – this is a community camping site,” the man said. “Just one of the benefits that Wysan provides to the communities where we operate.” Courtney wondered why their waitress told them she got a discount if there was no charge to camp.

“What do you guys do?” Isaac asked.

“Mostly study in social phenomena right now, with an interest in using technology as a way to enhance the social structure of a community. There's a lot to it, we give tours of the facility on weekdays, if you folks are planning on being here during the day, we can show you around.”

“We just might take you up on that,” Isaac said.

“Okay. Well we have you set up in Section A of the campground,” the man said as he handed them a map. “I entered spot A6 into the computer, but seeing as you are the only visitors we have tonight, feel free to camp in any of the spots in section one. Just take a left at the first fork you come to, follow the road, and you can’t miss the campsites. If you need anything during the night, just drive over and come on in. Ring the bell, I may be sleeping. I just need to ask you to stay out of Section B on the map. We had some seriously messy campers last week. We have a clean up procedure scheduled for the morning.”

Curious phrasing for a cleanup. “Stay out of Section B. You got it,” Isaac said. Back in the car, they headed towards their temporary destination. Courtney looked back at the building they had just left as Isaac drove forward. She could see some lights on in the building through the windows, and in one window, it appeared that three figures were inside watching her and her partner as they traveled towards the campsite. Unnerved, but knowing that we would be leaving soon, she pointed out their silent watchers. Isaac put his finger to his lips, warning her to be silent for the time being.

One campsite being as good as any, when they saw the marking for A6, Isaac parked the car. The site was better than primitive, but not much. A water pump and picnic table at each station, and a portable bathroom in center of a circle of campsites were the only amenities they were able to see. There was a stack of chopped wood with a sign that said FOR OUR GUESTS. As Isaac got out of the car, he pulled his gun out from under the seat and quickly shoved it in his

laptop case. He led her away from the car. Once they were over near the picnic table, he quietly said, "You may just be making me paranoid, but I think they put something in our car. I thought we should keep quiet, because it may be some kind of listening device. As we were leaving the building, I think I saw the dome light go out."

"Why would they need to do that?" she asked.

"Not sure. What I do know is that we're about to lose our tent."

"Why?"

"We're going to set it up, then drive over to their mysteriously messy Section B, check it out, and then get the hell outta dodge," Isaac said.

"Sounds like a good plan, except for everything you said before 'get the hell outta Dodge,'" Courtney replied.

"I have some suspicions and I have to find out more before we get out of here," he said.

Their experience camping allowed them to set the tent up in just a couple of minutes. Isaac undid his belt and ran it through the gun holster, untucked his shirt, hiding the weapon. They hopped back into the car. "Moment of truth," Courtney said as she closed the door. Acting as casually as they could, they drove the car over to the other half of the campground. After a drive through the Section B campsites, they saw nothing out of the ordinary. Climbing back out of the car to look around, Courtney spotted a broken syringe lying near the remains

of a campfire. Drug users, or was this more sinister? Isaac started into the woods from where they found the syringe.

They looked as much as possible in the dark woods, lit only by the small amount of moonlight that the trees would allow into their domain. About 50 yards in, they nodded assent to each other. Time to give up the search, they weren't going to find anything here at night, and they wouldn't be coming back in the daytime. Turning to leave, they heard a rustle in the leaves. Glancing toward the sound and expecting to see a small animal, they were completely surprised to see man. Not exactly a man, Courtney thought.

Completely naked, and completely bald, the man had a large shackle around one wrist. A thick chain that looked almost nautical tethered him to the tree. The skin appeared to be light blue, and although his mouth was closed, the tips of a series of pointed teeth extended from under his upper lip. He was lying in the leaves with his eyes closed and holding something in his lap. He looked too exhausted to move, he just sat rocking back and forth and looking at the object he held. Another chain lay on the ground beside him, which led up to another tree. He opened his eyes, and saw the two staring at him. He held up the object of his interest. It was his other hand. This unfortunate creature had apparently chewed off one hand to escape, but couldn't or wouldn't chew the other hand off to complete the task.

"I knew it dammit. Can we go now?" Courtney asked.

"We can go," Isaac answered.

While in the woods their eyes had adjusted to the dark. During the fifty-yard walk back to the car, they saw more chains on the trees, with bodies near by that looked just as deranged as the one they had left, but these seemed to have a lot less life in them, if any. At least six bodies, and a couple of them appeared to be the size of children. They sped up their walk, feeling the danger around them.

They came out of the woods to the Section B campsite, and began to get in their car when a voice from the road called out them. "I can't let you leave now," the voice of the man they spoke with earlier said. They turned and saw four men, two of them held hunting rifles. "I asked you not to go into section B. You're going to need to come with us."

"You were going to kill us anyways," Isaac said. "Don't act like it's our fault because we wandered where we weren't supposed to. You were going to turn us into these...things."

"Actually we were – and are – going to use you as feed."

Isaac walked closer to the men. "Somehow I think you're lying," he said.

"That's close enough," said one of the gunman.

Isaac gauged the distance. "Yes, I believe it is," he said. He drew his gun and fired three rounds into each of the gunmen. One of the unarmed men turned and ran back towards the building. Alex pointed his weapon at the first speaker, their campground host.

"Wait..." the host pleaded.

“Relax, I’m not going to shoot you,” Isaac said. He raised the gun to the man’s forehead, and pulled the trigger. Turning towards Courtney, he said, “You were right. Let’s go.”

They drove as fast as they could through the woods, past the institute building, and back out onto the town’s main road. Heading toward the interstate they passed the sheriff. He pulled out and they heard his siren ring as lights began flashing.

“Don’t stop,” Courtney said.

“Wasn’t planning on it. I am pretty sure he won’t follow us onto the highway.” They passed the diner, and were coming up to the gas station, when they saw a roadblock on the ramp to the interstate. Three police cruisers blocked the highway entrance, and the deputies were standing behind their cars with guns drawn and aimed. “Hang on,” he said. Instead of going straight toward the ramp, he spun the car around and went the wrong way down the exit ramp. Courtney prayed that nobody would take this exit. They made it to the end of the ramp, hearing cars on the highway honking at them in warning. Tires squealed as Isaac took a sharp right and began driving the proper direction on the highway.

Looking back, she saw the sheriff at the top of the ramp, out of his car and pointing a shotgun in their direction. “He’s gonna shoot us,” she yelled out.

“Don’t worry, it’s a shotgun, not a rifle. We’ll be okay.”

“What are we gonna do?” she asked him.

“We need to drive for a while, put some distance in between us and that damned town. Then I need to make a phone call.”

They drove in silence for thirty minutes, until they came to a rest area. He kissed her on the cheek, and picked up his phone.

“I need to talk to the boss now...no this is important...Sorry to wake you sir, but ...yes. You need to know that there is a rogue team operating in Shoretown, West Virginia. Yes...saw it with our own eyes...they expected us to be a part of it...the victims. Not too much – they call themselves the Wysan Institute. No, not like that...same thing as we did in Oregon, with the campground and all that. Yeah...yup. They said cleanup was tomorrow morning, but I think they’ve got bigger things on their minds right now...No way. Not my job...You send a team. I also need a cleaner for my car. They bugged it, I don’t know the range, but I don’t want to find out. Yup. Yes. Call me tomorrow after it’s done, if you don’t mind, I want to hear about how it goes down... Yes... Thank you, sir. Thank you. Tomorrow. See ya.”

Hanging up the phone, he turned to Courtney. “You going to be okay?” he asked.

“I think so. When did you know? I thought we were in the middle of some kind of horror movie. I didn’t realize it was a rogue team. So how did you figure it out?”

“I only knew for certain, at the same you did. When we saw the blue Citizen. But I suspected much earlier. I was keeping my eyes open for signs.”

“So what made you suspect in the first place?” she asked.

“They were using all of our tactics, it’s like right out of our training manual. Get them addicted to the money and the free sex, drugs, and the benefits, that’s all the mind control you’ll ever need- think of the people in the diner, or the sheriff, more than willing to send us to the campground because they were rewarded for their loyalty - then you find the on social group that is most likely to be accepted by the rest of the town as outcasts, and perform the experiments on them. Strangers, visitors to the town, they are always the first group to go. Once the first group is dead or changed, you pick the next group, and the next, until the town is desolate, and you move on to the next bigger and better thing.” He set the phone on the dashboard, took Courtney’s shoulders in his hands, pulled her in and kissed her forehead. “Fortunately for us,” he said as he reached into the back seat and patted their work suitcase, full of syringes, “we are far, far more advanced than they are.”