Enterface : a novella

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ENTERFACE
A Novella

by

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ABSTRACT

A computer screen places each of us in an interface and virtual reality provides a totally simulated environment, a virtual world that we can enter. *Enterface* is a novella that examines the question first posed by Michael Heim: *How far can we enter cyberspace and still remain human?* It also explores the power and the limitation of language and the role of stories to shape reality in human life. Its themes are death, technology, ethics, and love. It is informed by Wittgensteinian philosophy, Norse mythology, and the “metaphysics of virtual reality.”

The plot involves Moses Mackinow, a former Air Force officer and entrepreneur, who decides there should be a way to simply live forever. He hits upon the idea that life could be digitized, and a civilization, a world of complete, sentient humans could be created in cyberspace—a world he could enter upon his death and continue to live. A variety of technologies are available to digitize the physical human (x-rays, CTSCNS, Magnetic Resonance Images, graphic images, etc.), but the big problem is how to synthesize his human heart. Moses decides that the *stories* of his life are the keys to creating the “rag and bone shop” of his eternal heart. Getting the stories “right” is critical to the prospect of digitizing life and is a major focus of the novella action.

The novella traces the reduction of Moses as a human being as he pursues his obsession, compromising one principle after another. Everything in the environment of the
novella, reflects this reduction. Everything becomes less than it was, a glimpse of humanity reduced to bits and bytes, floating 1’s and 0’s. *Enterface* is a work at war with itself.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Pat Rushin, Susan Hubbard, and Jeanne Leiby for their valuable help in the production of this thesis.
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The ineffable is the case.
...one word only sought another and another sought another, and so on.

Words are hope. *Nothing* more. The reason words are hope is that if you place a few words side by side you get a sentence—maybe. String a few of these together and fuck if you haven’t got a paragraph—perhaps. Tweak them all a little to turn up the coherence, unity, fidelity, and you might have some meaning. String a few of these paragraphs together and there could be a story. If you ever get a story then you *really* have something. You have a basic element of life. But more likely than not you’ll end up with one more laborious text to pile on the Babelling Tower of books, inane, irrelevant, trite, clichéd, invalid, illogical, and daubic nonsense. Nevertheless, words are hope.
April 1999, Christiansted, St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, Odin Server

I have little hope, and I’m solemnly looking for a story. Call me Moses if names aren’t distracting for you. I didn’t write the paragraph above, or any of this, alone. I couldn’t have. Wouldn’t have. Not now. Not anything like the way it turns out. This story was a compromise, a collaboration, a culmination of the give and take that has been the pabulum of my relationship with Meredith (I call her Mer) from the very beginning. Don’t get me wrong. I probably could have written it. At least I could have when at my best but not now. Memories and thoughts are sliding out of my head like wax dripping from a burning candle.

I am now the output of my life’s work. My life’s work was a search for a home for the heart and mind. I thought that home could be in cyberspace (lacking a better name for it). Now that I’m on the mountaintop, I’m not sure. It has become an urgent ethical question for me. It is suffering as a default value, an accept-and-endure proposition.

The plan was this: I would build a data base of stories meaningful to me, a soul if you will, build a simulated environment of my choosing, pull the bytes together from medical computer imaging systems to form a 3D body and brain structure, add a little animation, a dash of DNA and, then, upon my death, transition over to this new realm. Voilà, eternal life and a quality one at that. Sounds simple enough. But getting the stories right is turning out to be the hang up. Truth can be a gradient-faced irrational character.

See, computers have a thing for absolutes. It’s either one or zero, baby, high or low, true or false. You start getting into gradients and a computer may fuck you. Perhaps
that is where I went wrong. Now, I’m back in the edit mode, working with Meredith to
get the Goddamned stories right.

The plan had been floating around in me for years. Everything I did, in some way,
prepared me for it. Finally, my resolve was galvanized when I learned that John Gardner
had died in a motorcycle accident shortly after completing a translation of *Gilgamesh*. The
irony stuck me like an ice pick in my heart. Then, my brother died in a plane crash in
Germany. The next day I started drawing the talent to me to begin my quest in earnest.
Meredith was a key member of that talent. My son, Peanut, was also.

I’ll tell you about Meredith in a minute, and you’ll meet Peanut later on. But first
let me tell you that what is set down here is a desperate act of a dying man. Meaning, I’m
doing what I’d never do without the desperation. My resolve is no longer galvanized. I’m
broken in many places, and I’ve grown harder in only a few. I’m a fragmented man in a
geometrical context of infinite complexity. Left to my natural tendencies, as they are now
in my dying time, I would stand safely on the banks of this river and quietly observe *The
Floating Opera* pass by because that is what would please me most. I no longer have any
desire to feel the rush of the water flowing over and around my body. I refuse to walk out
onto the river bed propositions. Words are slippery rocks, and I don’t like slippery rocks
anymore, rocks that can cause me to fall and be swept away by rushing paragraphs over
steep chapters to my death. So what if I never know where the riverbed stops and the river
starts — unless I step in, you say? Contexts aren’t everything, are they? Boundaries and
borders may be overrated? Tertiary experience has gotten into my blood. That’s for
certain, at least as certain as absolutes can ever be.
There are thorny interrogatives you have to deal with if you hang out with words very long. Like this one: Time passes but what or whom does it pass? An even better one: How can finite consciousness imagine and assign words to the infinite? Boundaries and borders get blurred around you. Maybe blurred. Maybe non-existent. Maybe fictions. Will exactly five colors really blind a man’s sight? Suppose so. Clarity? No. Infinite continuities of shading distract. Breaking into divisions and naming distracts. Problems. The real is an un-nameable, unrepresentable realm—in its incongruity and congruity of action, in its gradients and blurring, in its specious patterns of being. There are animals that evolve and become extinct in the rainforests before they can be discovered or named. Did they really exist at all without a name? Connecting all the dots seems futile.

Problems. If I leave the safety of the river bank and enter the river bed, questions like iron anchors and concrete boots will weigh me down and drag me under into its swirling syntax to slowly drown. But the banks of the river are no longer an option for me, no longer safe. So I place my figurative hand in Mer’s figurative hand, and she is my guide once again. With her as my guide, I stumble back into this rushing, narrative-rich world—to get the stories right. This is not my first pass through it, and it may not be my last. I’ll keep plowing these futile fields until I get it right.

My relationship with Mer has been like one sustained aeronautical emergency. Now, as I gaze at her through the smoky haze and dusty ashes on this side of the interface, we are once again a *prosopon*, a face facing another face. When she reacts to me I react to her and then she reacts to me and then I react to her reaction, and then she reacts to my reaction and so on and so on, ratcheting up and ratcheting down, in and out.
Our relationship is a third state of being. Three are we, our father. She is the glowing head. We are the Unholy Trinity, the outline, the Chinese box, the matryoshka, the indentured engineering system. Mer and I are primitive action and reaction, a multiplicity, a rhizome. We presuppose better than most couples. We’re combined streams of consciousness, a confederacy of conscious confluences (as well as unconscious confluences) of meaning.

If I look past her face, over her left shoulder and through the window behind her and to my right, I can see miles and miles of the beautiful, shining, palm-lined St. Croix beach. St. Croix was once mine. I came down to the island to find a place to develop my ideas and to heal. I only grew sicker as my ideas grew more urgent, more pregnant. At first the Cruzans were skeptical (and suspicious) of my presence. Then I made their lives a little better by building hurricane-proof buildings, and they began to respect me. Near the end, though, I was just another eccentric and quirky old white man to them. Now I’m back to re-mining the ore of my experience here to try to barter my way into a new life.

Down the beach I can see a golden brown woman in a bikini sunning herself, a gorgeous tourist with her face to the brilliant sun. She appears to be in her late twenties or early thirties, maybe. I move to her, and as I get near, I can smell good old Coppertone. Immediately I’m filled with all the sexual associations of that buttery aroma. I remember how the sun felt on my skin when I was flesh, how the heat would often promote an erection, how I would turn my face to the sand to hide it.

The lovely woman’s beading sweat trickles past the fine, delicate golden hairs of her upper thighs. The sweat breaks, bead by bead, around each hair. I near her crotch and
can smell the mustiness of her glands, acrid traces of semen, estrogens, and *Dove* soap
from her morning shower. The sodium in her sweat burns my eyes as my head enters her
between her thighs. The force stretches my face into a grotesque mask. I pull the rest of
my body into her vaginal cavity and then squeeze inch by inch into her cavernous womb.
Amniotic fluids rush around me as my need for air diminishes. I'm suspended and floating
in my amniotic world. I meditate to the gentle, rhythmic, muffled thump of her heart and
the gentle swaying of my wet hammock with each of her breaths as the tide comes in and
goes out. I stay just long enough to compose this small poem:

From the heart of non-existence,
The pull of life is ever-persistent.
But from this uncommitted state,
The choice of life *I* must debate.

From the halls of etherland,
Life on Earth seems rather bland.
Should I allow my spirit to rest,
Upon this chair of nothingness?
Or should I allow a life of pleasure,
In beggar's cup and meager measure?
To later own from grave be growling,
About a poem by A. E. Housman.
I leave through a tunnel of bright light. Then I’m again staring into Mer’s eyes. My return is accompanied by the roar of a thousand chariots on a rocky plain. My pain is audible. Then there is silence.

Mer insists that I insert the little piece I jotted down on an American Airlines napkin just before I landed on St. Croix the first time: I am on a plane heading south, and the idea has finally reached fruition. I am flying over the Caribbean Sea on my way to my destination, St. Croix. I’ve passed over seas of trouble that are the essence of my middle-aged life. I’m looking to set some order to this human experience, which has fallen into such disorder. The idea has golden wings and flies just outside my airplane window. This is an exultation of a moment, an elevated daydream.

The problem with collaborating with Meredith is that we come at everything with diametrically opposed perceptions of time, space, and reality. Also, she is demanding and critical. The former takes a little explaining, maybe a lot. She tends toward more telling, more narrative. Her way casts a penumbra over what I’d like to say or like not to say, my existential and non-existential truths. More of what I’m doing now is what she likes. Narrative clarity. I can see her point of view. But me, I’m a liberal who would rather sit back and let it happen. Passive. There’s little I can say with any conclusiveness anyway. So I prefer to simply pass over most things in silence. For example, just as I started out with my description of the St. Croix beach that I can see out her window over her shoulder, she stopped me and provided editorial changes that were so involved as to render my description plebian. I said it like this: I’m floating above a beach yet not named and not nameable. Wait a minute that is wrong. I’ve ruined that for sure for I called it a
beach. I’m _____ above a ______ yet not named and not namable. No, as you can see, I fucked that up too. Try again: ______ ______ ____________ _______ ______. That’s it. That’s what I really mean, that is, if the signifying underscores and period are removed. Like this:

Dead air. That says enough. Doesn’t it? Mer says: “No.”

I’m going for temporal simultaneity here, like the mind of God. Mer wants a straight-ahead linear story. Herein, you’ll read the results of our compromise.

I think Mer could easily win the Yukon Women’s Arm Wrestling contest and could surely make any small puppy pull a freight train. Just to give you some idea of the strength of her personality. I guess she has to be strong to deal with me. After all, I can’t say that she didn’t tell me that if I didn’t “get honest” I could end up this way. Stuck, that is. I mean she fought the good fight, too. But you can’t reform an old liar like me.

She just now had me turn my head one-half of an inch to my left (looking into her eyes) and I was then inspired to write this: ‘As I stare into her lovely face from this side of the interface, I remember our first meeting as if it were yesterday. I looked into her beautiful green eyes, and I immediately knew I would one day enter her and become a part of her. It was a magnetic event. I was filled with it, molecularly realigned by it. She was both a postmodern hurricane sunset and the eye of the storm at once. It was clear to me our destinies were inter-linked and inter-locked. It was a connection that could have been electronic. She was a huge flame, blue at the bottom, orange in the middle, and white at the tips of the flame’s tongues. Tongues that spoke some indecipherable but accurate
language. Looking into her eyes I could almost see perfect clarity. I had the sense that if I looked long enough I would finally understand everything. I didn’t want to stop looking.

There was more of this that she wanted me to include here, but I negotiated her out of it. I added this line because I mostly agreed with it as a compromise: ‘As I looked into her glorious countenance and those deep green eyes a whole new system of nerves came alive within me.’ Of course that is one straw too much. Maybe more. Don’t you think?

I tried to talk her out of this first chapter altogether. No deal.

“Mer, why don’t you just accept the limitations of language and throw in the towel? Give up this first chapter. Show don’t tell, honey.”

“Moses, we’ve done it your way and you’re stuck. So let’s do it my way and get you unstuck. Let’s give the reader, the computer even, a good first chapter that at least maps out the plan.”

“Like hell we’ve done it my way. You revised everything I wrote, every jot and tittle. A map you say! I’ll give them a fucking map, give them a fucking Bellman’s map, a perfect and absolute blank,” I said. “What do you think of that?”

“I think you must like being stuck. You say you’re in pain. If so, then work with me. Okay?” She said these words, and everything, with a look that made it clear: she saw all of life steadily and whole, complete and adulterated with all its tangled webs of causes and effects. Mer had a high-resolution view of the world.

I had to argue. That’s my weakness: Nonsense.
"We just speak to children and they learn. So why am I to set a course with this first chapter. Shall I certify the reader’s route, plot it out as if it were a triple-A map, prepare a weather briefing so they’ll know the altitude to fly? Come on.”

“Don’t be a fool, Moses. All of those language handstands in the face of reality were played out in the 50s. Let’s finish the first chapter so we can move on. Provide a setting, introduce the characters, be an old sport, provide some unity.”

“If I invited all the scenes, setting, characters, theme, and plot into the first chapter there wouldn’t be standing room. If I got into everything that shapes my characters, I would have to go into the embarrassing episodes of my childhood constipation problems, my sexual appetites, the other rattling skeletons in my closet. I just can’t talk about that stuff while looking someone in the eye.”

You would think Mer and I would be more aesthetically aligned than we are. I mean, after all, we both combined an undergraduate double E with a minor in American Lit. Unusual combo. Not so though. We’re as different as a thing and a fact.

“No one is asking you to do that Moses. Tell everything up front.” She touched my nose on her screen. I could feel the crackling energy rifle down something. It hurt like the not nameable.

She let me talk myself out. Get all the nonsense out. So we could get down to business. That was her way of getting her way. She called it piano tuning. But I’m the one who has seen the Abyss. That ought to count for something. I shouldn’t have to stand here and argue with her about where to place a goddamned semicolon. So why am I doing it? Going along with all this telling nonsense. Simply because this is a collaborative work.
Meredith and I have come this far together, and she insists we have to set the course. For me, it is somewhat emasculating. Wringing my hands over the hyphens. Why not spontaneity? A series of nooners? Return to work with your shirt tail out? Simultaneity even? Temporal simultaneity I say! But think about it: what choice do I have? I’m on this side of the interface.

After we’d argued for awhile, I experienced a shift in my values and drew her this nice plot arc that I swore I’d try to stick to.

\[
\text{\includegraphics{plotArc.png}}
\]

If it appears that my opinions are inconsistent, then I’m being fairly consistent. One of the perks of being on this side of the interface is the ability to hold two or more polarized opinions at once on the same subject. I’ll try to keep it to a minimum.

But back to the collaboration: this text is the best our little committee of two could do, and it’s simply not good enough and never will be. Collaboration. What a confounding and disagreeable interchange between humans. Torture would seem better than to have every bright, smiling, sweet infant of an idea ridiculed, slaughtered, and sliced up, a disagreeable but cute and cuddly little human arm whacked off to be replaced with the branch of an oak sapling or a red and blue Leggo arm. Eyes that don’t please being gouged out with a melon scoop and replaced with eight balls. Oh, you think it isn’t that bad? Trust me, it is. But on with the story as Mer is known to say.
As we finished this part it started to rain very hard again. Lightning cracked and a surge damaged the local computer system. Fortunately, the data base was safe on net servers on the mainland and nothing was lost.

I chose Mer. She didn’t choose me. She graduated from the Air Force Academy with a 4.0 in Electrical Engineering (minored in American Literature). The Air Force recognized her brilliance and sent her straight from the Academy to grad school at MIT. I first heard of her while I pulled a short teaching stint at the Academy myself. A friend pointed her out to me on the parade ground. She stood out from the others, being female, of course. But it was more than that. She was beautiful as a model. I could see a light and an intensity in her eyes even from a distance. I didn’t meet her that day, as it wouldn’t have been appropriate. But I took down her name and kept track of her. When she finished her Masters at MIT, I read her thesis on “Learning Machines” and was very impressed. So I called the Military Personnel Center and got her assigned to me at Langley Air Force Base. We’ve worked together since, off and on. In the last days of my illness I e-mailed Mer and offered her half a million dollars for a week’s work to finish up the data system and its graphics library. By that time the system had a name. It was Odin.

The devil in working with Meredith to get all these stories straight is the revelation of facts about each other that neither of us knew before. It has been the source of many violent arguments and intractable pursed lips, discountenancing, as Mer calls it. As we pulled the pieces together, we saw how we have consistently deceived each other, perhaps even ourselves. We curse and cry and our tears become a river that carries us onward and onward. At least it has so far.
REFLECTIONS

March 1999, Winter Park, Florida

The e-mail was relatively brief and to the point: he was offering me half a million dollars for one week’s work. Even his choppy, dropped-article syntax brought back memories of how dear he could be.

“Mer, one last time, honey. See me home. Got baby chugging, but we’re getting neural path dropouts. Peanut swears code A-Okay. Valhalla Systems’s HW engineers are boneheads anyway. One week (Monday through Friday) or less, and know you can get hands shaking, and puppy barking again. Now or never: one for road, and yes I’m saying please. I’ve missed you. Doctor says this is most likely last month for Moses as meat man (you know what I mean) so don’t delay. Don’t mind much though. To transition that is. I’m ready to un-ass this wheelchair, and get my pixels re-ditherd (grin) Make it worthwhile for ya, $500 K for five days. Come on down to St. Croix, and we’ll go for a walk together, a simulated one, anyway, together. You once said you’d walk anywhere with me. Your old friend, Moses. P.S. Your password to access Odin is MACK2ODIN. Log on and catch up with our ‘progress.’ This puppy has changed some since your last involvement.”

Before I finish reading the e-mail, I find myself clicking back a “regrettably no” response. But when I start to hit the “send” button, the mouse won’t click. Meredith, send
it, godammit, I tell myself. You don’t want to make the same mistake three times, do you?

I hit the send button and feel my stomach knot up, feel a burning in my throat. My concentration destroyed, I click onto the net, log onto *Odin*, and pick STORIES from the pick list. STORIES should help me remember why I need to stay far away from Moses and his Odin project. STORIES expands from a point to fill the computer screen. The STORIES are represented by revolving, cubic objects with many flat, mirrored faces. The cubes rotate a little in each plane, and then change. As each face moves, its mirror reflects a part of one of the system’s stories. I remember convincing Moses that there had to be the element of randomness in the system, just like life, I’d said, contingent. Then I used a simple random number generator to build the prototype. But now this latest version is very impressive, 3D and mystical, with a dark background and what appears to be hundreds of identical mirrored cubes in random motion, reflecting the reflections of mirrored reflections. The excellent high-resolution graphics and precise perspective are consistent throughout the planes of rotation. Hyper textual and spatial jumps have been smoothed and sharpened to more closely match thought association velocities. Impressive.

We started the story data base back in January 1989, and didn’t know whether to make it fiction or a memoir or what, although Moses wanted fiction for sure. So we included a little of both, I guess. We were working against time and used anything we thought might work, hoped might work.

At the time, for whatever reason, I had grown fascinated with my dreams, and I suppose I may have put down some of them and called them stories, for sometimes I find myself hoping that it was all a dream. I may have written some of them down. Can’t be
sure. Maybe all of life is just a dream, anyway, or perhaps just a simulation with nice
graphics.

My words seem alien to me now as they appear on the screen, as though they
were written by someone I never met. But the glow of the computer screen is sadly
familiar, an interface like an old friend, an old friend with whom I’ve shared the intensity
of good and bad times. In my dark office the glow of the monitor is an aura of almost-
colored light, a little like the rings around the sun or moon, a glow caused by the
refraction and reflection of light in the smoke or ice on some distant planet, maybe. The
Valhalla engineers really did some fine work on the interface. As I’m thinking about the
complex design processes required to achieve this, I am startled by my own face
appearing on the rotating mirrors and then reflecting on the other turning mirrored
cubes. A chill goes up my spine, as I realize I could see all the way to infinity if my face
was not blocking my vision. The moment I have this insight the cubes return to reflecting
the words of the stories.

Words that would have been more at home in a little leather-bound chapbook, like
the rich innards of some nut—nice, neat, and nourishing—ended up being little orphaned
clouds floating randomly in cyberspace, a shadow of a consciousness in the spectral
illumination of the computer screen, a muted almost-glow, like the presence of a setting
sun in a mystical fog, or a trace of the finest zest of citrus, grated and shedding
emanations.

Then I see a title of my own creation, which I’d all but forgotten.
The morning I was to report to Major Mackinow the fog seemed to permeate and obscure everything. I couldn’t even see the traffic lines on the Hampton Virginia roads. I could barely see the lights change, sometimes just risking it. I could see perhaps every third car. It was horrific. Thankfully, I’d given myself time to deal with almost any contingency. I’d mapped out how to get on Langley Air Base, follow the main road to the entrance to the Officer’s Club and then turn left down General’s Row and on down the street to the Tactical Simulations building on the Bay.

Out of this fog snaked a traffic circle. I’d never encountered a traffic circle before. I didn’t know how to navigate through the coil, and the poor visibility wasn’t releasing any clues. As best I could make out, there was traffic being fed into the circle from four other streets. So I entered the circle and moved quickly to the inside lane. Then I found myself stuck in the inside lane. I kept circling the fountain in the middle area, a huge statue of the Norse god Odin, nailed upside down to an apple tree, water pouring from his hands. I circled—and circled—and circled.

Other drivers blew their horns and flipped their flippers. But I couldn’t figure out exactly what to do next. The traffic seemed always heavy in the outside lane of the circle. Finally, I noticed how drivers would enter the circle, travel into the inside lane, and stay there until just before the street where they were to exit. Then they would pop out into the
outer circle and exit at their chosen outlet avenue. They were honking their horns continuously at me. Confused, I was nearly running the others into the Odin fountain.

I knew my time was running out, and if I didn’t do something soon, I would be late for my first day of my first job in the Air Force. I was perspiring and hyperventilating. Colors were blurring and transmogrifying. As I circled I rose into an orbit and caught up with the earth’s rotation, then spiraled on out into the Milky Way, circling the sun, on past the other galaxies, moving into the back end of the Big Bang and out of the expanding universe, sliding back through a singularity and then through another smaller big bang into a Big Crunch, and around again, and so on—and so on—and so on.

I had passed the General’s Row exit numerous times, but there seemed to always be a car in the outside lane. So when a light blue Maxima entered the outside lane and accelerated a fraction slower than the cars before it, I jerked over into the right lane, hit the gas, and exited onto General’s Row. But just as I made the exit turn, I felt a light bump in the rear of my car. When I breathed again and looked up in my mirror there was the blue Maxima. The lights were flashing, and an arm was motioning for me to pull over to my right. I pulled over. Incredible, and my first day on base. There was a tiny nick on the left rear side of my car and a small gouge on the right front bumper of the Maxima. No real damage. The slender, gray-haired Colonel listened to my story about never having driven in a traffic circle before and it being my first day of my new job, and he agreed to forget about the gouge. Relief. I got back in my car, reassembled my hair in the rear view and touched up my makeup. After all, first impressions are lasting impressions. Splendid.
I parked where I could find a spot on the water side of the Tactical Simulations building. Salt water. There goes the paint job. The whole car would probably be rust flakes in a couple of months. I clicked up the marble steps, and into the glassy foyer with the flags and displays of the desert simulations from their latest exercise in what looked like Saudi Arabia. The colorful flags and displays were reflected from the shiny marble floors and counter-reflected by the glass columns that framed the corridors. Splendid. Not going to end up in the desert, I hoped. Depressing. I found Mackinow’s name by room 127 on the address board. First floor. I caught a reflection of my face in the glass trophy case and decided I better look in a real mirror before I reported in.

I found the Ladies. Peed. Changed my Tampax. Patted dry. Of course. Would have to have been happening at this time. Flushed. Brushed my hair. One last look in the mirror, straightened my coat and made sure there were no hairs on my shoulder or cables or woolies on my jacket. Confident. Ready. Time to do it. To the second, on time. Then out of the Ladies and down the hall to my new life.

As it turned out, I was not to meet Moses for another week and a half. But I got to know him from the other officers and enlisted people in the building and from the memorabilia on his walls and around his office. On his desk was a picture of a woman, apparently his wife. Her hair was a flipped-up Mary Tyler Moore sixties style. Bet she was even wearing white gloves. Her face had the classic every-woman look, like a black and white movie star, plain, refined, conservative.
There was also a small picture of a man I immediately thought I recognized from somewhere. Familiar. Very. Where had I seen this handsome man? Then the memory flashed into my head. He had been an instructor at the Academy. I remembered seeing him from a distance teaching a flight of cadets the fine points of military drill. He was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. He had golden hair, thick-muscular arms, broad shoulders, and small rear. His teeth were perfect for his easy smile. He must have been over six feet tall, evenly tanned, and his uniform fit snugly, not tight, just right to accentuate his assets. Hmmm. I'll confess. He had lounged in my masturbatory fantasies for many nights while I was at the Academy.

I realized the man in the picture was Major Mackinow. Had to be, my new boss. I caught my breath and felt a rush in my stomach. Then I realized the very refined lady, smiling there in the picture, was my competition. I breathed a sigh of disappointment.

There were the old Da Vinci drawings on his wall, a painting, somewhat in the Wyeth or Homer style maybe, also on his wall. The painting was: clothes hanging on a line. What else? When I looked at the byline, I learned that Major Mackinow was also an artist of considerable talent. On the wall to the left of his desk, next to the window overlooking Hampton Roads, were two Medals for bravery and actions above and beyond the call of duty. The narrative said that then-Captain Mackinow pulled two people from a burning helicopter at Tan Son Huet Air Base South Viet Nam in April 1972. The second medal was for crawling across a flightline under heavy small arms fire to rescue an aircraft mechanic who had been wounded in the right foot during a VC rocket attack.
So Major Mackinow had enough ego to display his heroism on his wall. What did that say about his character? Only that he was a hero. Must be. Appeared to be the stereotypical definition of heroism: pulling people out of things. In fairness, what would I have done in a similar situation? You never know. I hadn’t been tested. Meredith, this could be splendid, I told myself. Were he not married, this would be the perfect assignment—working for a gorgeous hero. Yes. Oh well, didn’t my military training teach me to overcome obstacles?

I found an empty desk across from Major Makinow’s and parked my belongings. Several people stopped in to say hello and welcome. Colonel Lewis (the big boss) came by to tell me to just make myself at home, how glad they were to have me, and the Major would be around sometime to set me to work. Until then, be in the office during normal duty hours, get all your in-processing appointments taken care of and let him know if I have any problems whatsoever. All the other drop-ins and well-wishers wanted to tell me how fortunate I was to have the opportunity to work with the great Major. They all had stories about the great man.

Then on my ninth work day I met Major Mackinow’s best friend, a burly old Chief Master Sergeant Smith. At least the burly Chief proclaimed that they were best friends. I’m always suspicious of best friends. The chief was a wiry, intense chain smoker with a cup of coffee permanently attached to his right forefinger.

He caught me staring too long at the picture of Major Mackinow sans fatigue shirt. Major Mackinow, in the picture, was standing up in the back of a jeep with what appeared to be a riding crop in his left hand. His feet were set apart in a straddle stance. Behind him
were a mass of trucks, weapons, and troops. Apparently he was saying something like “attack” or “forward ho.”

“Don’t even think about it, Lieutenant,” the old Chief said, startling me. He was right. I was heating up, and I was probably blushing when he looked at me.

“A lot of other beautiful and sexy women have tried to seduce him,” he continued. “But the Major is a family man. He loves his wife and doesn’t cheat on her. He takes his wife and little boy to St. John’s Cathedral every Sunday. Trust me. I’ve been on business trips and temporary duty with him, and he is solid. The most ethical human being I’ve ever met.”

“Chief, you’ve the wrong idea. I’m only trying to get settled in here. I’m Lieutenant Balderson.”

I shake hands with him.

“He’s been expecting you, Lieutenant, and welcome.”

“When do I get to meet the great man?” I say.

“Couldn’t tell you. He hurt his foot running and may be out for a while. He asked me to get you oriented properly. At least as much as I can. I’ll save all the officer politics bullshit for him.”

I say, “Great. Let’s do it!”

“Don’t get in too big of a hurry, Lieutenant. You seem to be very interested in the Major, as anyone would be regarding their new boss. But you must understand. He is different. Unlike any human being you’re likely to meet. He is a perfect example of military integrity.” At this, I was thinking, compatibility, given my world view.
“Let’s see, where should I start?” The Chief rubbed his hand on his clean-shaven chin as if rubbing a beard and flopped down in the nearest chair (which happened to be mine) and began my orientation. The chief’s obvious lack of education and crude mannerisms were immediately irritating to me. You’re picking everything and everybody apart again, Meredith, I told myself. That’s the way you seem to ruin perfectly good opportunities to like people. Okay, okay, I would be good.

“He volunteered for a second tour in Nam, when, given the acts of heroism under his belt, he could’ve just as easily kicked back at some comfortable base in the states and waited for his early promotion to come in. But that kind of thinking is alien to his character. He’s a real leader. A born leader, I’d say. Not an atom of fear in his personality. Whether fighting the enemy or dealing with one of our own, he always does the right thing. Here’s an example that you have to keep under your hat. And if you don’t keep it there, I’ll deny every word of it, and you’ll notice your career drying up like a drop of water in a hot frying pan. All right, if you want to hear this, you have to agree to those terms.”

I shake my head and say, “I agree.” Not really sure what I was agreeing to. But it gets him to telling the story.

“There was this Colonel, see. I think his name was Frank. Yeah, Frank, that’s what it was. No. Frank was his first name. I don’t recall his last name because everyone referred to the bastard as Colonel Frank. Some kind of southern thing, suppose. Citadel thing. Anyway, the story is about Mackinow, not Frank, so I could use any name. Old Colonel Frank started out in the Army first, then switched over to the Air Force. Captain
Mackinaw, he was a Captain then, arrived at Da Nang Air Base in January 1973 for his second tour in the Nam. This was after he’d got his first Air Medal for pulling those boys out of that burning chopper. I’d heard about him, what a great officer he was, and was very excited that I’d actually get to have this man as my new boss.

“Old Colonel Frank was in command of a Tactical Simulations Detachment. This Frank character was a much-feared individual. But the problem was that he was as feared by his own troops as much as he was by the enemy. There was no doubt that Colonel Frank kept his troops in line, but his methods were more than suspect. They were downright criminal. When old Colonel Frank had a discipline problem, an insubordination, a belligerent troop, or one that didn’t fit in, not a team player or something, he’d weed that troop from his unit like a body would weed crab grass from his garden. In Nam, at the time, there was a lot of air base shelling going on. Rockets frequently lit up the sky like the Fourth of July. Then there was chaos, troops trying to find cover, trying to execute plans, trying to hang on to their lives. If the POL dump took a hit, then there was fire, explosions, smoke, sirens, the rat-a-tat-tat-tat of machine gun fire, and the plink, plink, plink of shell casings bouncing around. All in all, it was the net effect we called the fog of war. Surely you learned about that in your training, Lieutenant. It was this fog that old Colonel Frank used as cover for weeding his troop garden.

“Wait a minute. Let me back up and say that this weeding behavior of old Colonel Frank was not entirely new. It had surfaced much earlier in his career and then become his pattern. It started when this Tech Sergeant came in to see Frank one day with a problem.

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1 Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricant (fuel)
The problem was that the real war in Viet Nam was more and more being used to replace the simulated exercises that had provided such an excellent state of war readiness. These ‘taking-it-to-the-jungle exercises’ weren’t providing the degree of readiness required for real warfare. Anybody but the technocrats could see that. The technocrats in Washington had seen a chance to use a real war to practice, only to save a few taxpayer bucks. Real war fighting wouldn’t work to train troops for modern warfare. It couldn’t come close to a good simulation exercise. The complexity would be lost.

“The Tech Sergeant had studied Clausewitz, and he knew that each strategy and movement had to be countered to provide the complexity of the battlefield. You couldn’t count on the real battlefield to provide consistent feedback. It would fall short in the breadth and depth of realism required. The sergeant was sure he was on firm ground. But the sergeant made the mistake of bringing in a problem without the solution, which was a direct violation of Frank’s policy. The sergeant was fairly new and probably hadn’t heard of Frank’s policy. Frank was enraged. He tackled the Sergeant, picked him up, and threw him through the second story window. Fortunately, or maybe not fortunately, he landed on grass or he probably would have been killed. As it was, he was hurt bad. Frank got some kind of little slap on the wrist. I do believe it was an Article 15 that was removed from his records when he was reassigned to his next base. The Tech Sergeant got a fractured spine, paralysis, and a wheel chair. Of course rumor fueled an even more exaggerated version of the story, and Frank saw how his reputation as a bad-ass served to enhance his power over his troops. Old Frank probably even contributed some to the rumors. But there’s no doubt that Old Frank thought nothing of popping a 45 into the
head of one of his unacceptable troops. I worked for this man and convinced myself of the truth up close and personal. I’m flat not embarrassed one iota to tell you I feared him. I’m a man of courage too, so take it as fact: he was a monster.”

The Chief shifts forward, looks me dead in the eye and continues. “But Major Mackinow took it as a personal challenge to take care of this devil, once he got a bead on what was going on. Major Mackinow studied all the files on attrition, compared data among like squadrons and detachments, and so on. After convincing himself that this Frank character was murdering American boys, he told me over a couple of beers one Friday night that Frank’s career would be coming to an abrupt end over the weekend.

“By Monday, the old boy was in a body bag headed back to the ‘world.’ It was three years later when Major Mackinow and I were at a steak house in Oklahoma City that he revealed the details of what he had done. He said he borrowed a piano wire from the seldom-used piano in the officer’s dining quarters. He then fashioned it into a garrote, dropped by Frank’s quarters about 2 o’clock that Sunday morning and quietly cut off the Colonel’s air passageway while he slept. Frank was a heavy Saturday night drinker and was actually passed out when the Major garroted him. The old boy didn’t put up much resistance, the Major said. His head turned red, then almost black, then thicker. When Major Mackinow released the garrote, the Colonel’s bleeding tongue slid out of the right side of his mouth, stupid looking like he was issuing a cross-eyed raspberry. When the expected Sunday morning shelling began, just before daylight, Mackinow packed the body in a large duffel bag, and spirited him off the base, dumping him face down in a shit ditch. The military police found him in the ditch shortly after the shelling stopped.
“His Simulations Detachment was consolidated into its sister unit, and the troop’s death rate dropped significantly.

“For some reason, the investigation revealed little about the conditions of Old Frankie boy’s death. The final report only said that he had died at the hands of the enemy during a rocket attack. His blood-alcohol level didn’t rule out that he might have committed some foolish act that landed him in that shit ditch.”

The Chief saw that I was shocked by the brutality of it. So he leaned forward to me again and said: “Lieutenant, first and foremost, no matter how you slice it, no matter how starched our uniforms or crisp our salute, the military tribe is about one primary thing, and that is the dirty business of killing. The sooner you understand that the better off you’ll be.”

As the Chief finished up the story, I looked up and the man himself was standing there in the doorway. I want to be clear: the man was as knee-dropping attractive in person as in his picture. He was astonishing in the way the presence of his personality was felt before I even saw him. Almost electric. To the credit of my memory and imagination, he was very close to the god that had lived in my fantasies at the Academy. One could easily imagine how this man could be both hero and murderer, and be worshipped for both. His presence was tangible in its power, like an energy where you can hear a slight buzz. His hair was golden with touches of gray and lay a little on his forehead. It kept its shape naturally like JFK’s hair. It had body. Light was moving in his quick blue eyes. I could anticipate from the looks of his shoulders and chest how safe and warm it would feel in his arms. All this was a flash in my mind’s eye.
The Chief popped to attention and snapped a salute. I rose and tried to perform the same. But somehow my salute got clumsy, and I rendered the obnoxious, memorized, “Sir, Lieutenant Balderson reporting for duty.”

Major Mackinow said, almost in a whisper, “At ease” and returned a technically incorrect and casual salute.

“I see the Chief has been orienting you or maybe only telling war stories. Don’t believe everything you hear, Mer.” And then he turned on the charm. Maybe it was the first moment he was attracted to me. I don’t know. It was like he was in control of the talent, like flipping a switch on an electromagnet. I was immediately drawn to him in my most intimate self. And to this day, I’m convinced that he had control of that power; just as he had control of the movement of his right thumb.
TRUST

A STORIES data system flat, mirrored surface, rotating through one of its planes, revealed to Mer notes from one of Moses’s diaries. The notes related the details of his conspiracy with Loke Teagarden to involve General MacDonald in their illegal plot to fund the development of a simulation of human consciousness. Mer was shocked when she understood the plan. Of course, by then, she was too involved herself to blow the whistle, as was her natural impulse.

Moses and Loke jog around the base track past the three-mile marker of their usual mid-day run. Warmed up, they pick up the pace.

“If this is to work, we’ve got to convince that 300-pound gorilla to help us, and you damned well know that, Moses.” Colonel Loke Teagarden is screaming at Moses’s reluctance to bring another person in to help them manage their scheme to fund research to try to create a simulation of human consciousness. Loke is the closest Moses has ever had to a mentor.

Loke was born in London. His father, an Electrical Engineer, rose quickly to VP of Marketing in a company called British Virtuals. He was moved to Arlington, Virginia to market the company’s products (aircraft flight simulators) to the Pentagon. Loke was raised in Old Town Alexandria until he graduated from secondary school at age sixteen.
His father returned to England with a promotion to President and CEO of British Systems, a spin-off company of British Virtuals, taking his family, except for Loke, with him.

“We lose control once we’re outside the Air Force. We have to have him help from the inside or there goes the funding. You see?” Loke had remained in the United States after his family returned to England in order to complete his Mechanical Engineering education at Georgia Tech. The focus of his education was on structures, specifically, expert systems for bridge engineering. He then received a commission in the U.S. Air Force through the Officer Training School Program and was assigned as a Communications Officer in Simulation Headquarters at Langley Air Force Base. He had a quick mind and a natural political nature that moved him through the ranks fast. He was a Colonel by the beginning of his fifteenth year in service.

“Yes, I see, and you don’t have to yell at me, I’m right here. I don’t think he’ll go along with us on this, Loke. Never happen. I mean, he isn’t even inspired by technology. He’s a swaggering old fighter jock who wants to keep the status quo. And some say he is a Bible-thumping straight-arrow—except for the whiskey-and-women part, that is.”

Loke knew human nature and was attracted to exceptionally bright and handsome young men and women. When he required a Simulation Engineer to join him at Langley, he had called Military Personnel Center. They gave him a choice of five officers coming out of the Academy. When he came to Moses’s folder his choice was made. Intelligent and attractive. Those were the qualities Colonel Teagarden was looking for. He thought, with a fellow like this I can think even bigger.

“Don’t worry, old boy, he’ll go along,” Loke says.
Loke’s father had taught him that if one has discretion he can get away with anything, anywhere. That philosophy was the basis of Loke’s worldview. He was ambitious and enjoyed living well. His father had been so successful that, when he returned to England, he had purchased an old English country house called Guileford. The house had servants and the whole bit. Loke’s visits to his father’s home intensified his desire for great wealth.

“But Loke, you should’ve seen his reaction to my suggestion to eliminate the human pilot from the Advanced Tactical Fighter and substitute a tele-operating weapons systems officer. We were supposed to be brainstorming the next fighter’s requirement’s profile, right? I simply pointed out that Identification Friend or Foe, Weapons Control Systems, Inertial Landing Systems, and all status data systems were already so damn fast and accurate that the human pilot had become, by far, the slowest and most useless link in a modern fighter aircraft. You would’ve thought he caught me fucking his daughter.”

“What’d he say?”

“He was a one-star then, see. Told me clearly, ‘Captain Mackinow, you are excused from this process. As a non-rated officer, it’s clear you have no respect for our profession. An automated tele-operator my ass. Don’t tell me the pilot is the slowest and most vulnerable. I’ll court-martial your young ass.’ At least that is what I remember him saying.”

“So he doesn’t want to make fly-boys obsolete? Big whoop!” Loke increased the pace a little, just enough that Moses’s recently sprained ankle was threatened. Always competing. Always.
Loke was a natural athlete. Tennis and wrestling, those were his games. He had strong muscular legs from his daily runs. He was only five-nine or so and had a shock of black thick hair, barely in regulation, and shaggy eyebrows that gave him a certain sinister look.

"I don’t think he’ll work with us, Loke. We can’t ever trust him."

"Old boy, we have to trust him. We are in this shit too deep to turn back now. Besides, the Loke Man has an ace up his sleeve as per usual." Loke smiles and thumps Moses on his shoulder, forcing Moses into a full pounding sprint for the last quarter mile back to the gym. Moses cringes in pain as Loke beats him in a photo finish.
RAG AND BONE SHOP

Mer continues her exploration of Odin STORIES data base. She discovers an excerpt from the journal she had started upon her first arrival at Langley Air Force Base. She remembers her ambition at the time was to document her entire twenty-year military career. Oh well, she thinks, life is dynamic. Although it seems naïve to her now, she enjoys reading it and discovers she still likes the young lady who wrote it.

Hampton Virginia

How we got from the moment on that special day of our first meeting to the bright sugary beaches of St. Croix is not important for this story, except to mention that on that day of our first meeting, he invited me to his country home to have dinner with his wife and son. It didn’t go that well, as I recall. Apparently, he’d advised his wife (Briget) rather late of her responsibility for providing dinner. It was supremely clear when we arrived (I followed him) that Briget was ill-prepared and angry. She was vacuuming, banging into doors and walls with the upright, and rushing around. She ushered me out to the back patio, accepting and receiving introduction with a sort of rhythm that told me she had performed this role many times until she was now bored and enraged. Was this the chink in the giant’s armor? For it would seem that the wife of such a heroic man would likewise be heroic. In all fairness, I suppose I’d have been rather upset if the roles had
been reversed, especially if my husband was bringing home a young, very attractive woman, a woman more splendid than me. Sure, I’d be P.O.’d. And to think I’d be spending much more time with him than she.

In fairness, she transported Heinekens to us all evening like a little trooper, while he and I talked like a couple of guys. We found that we shared a passionate interest in virtual reality and the science of perception. I, having worked on network hardware for my unfinished doctoral dissertation, could talk for hours about neural nets, artificial intelligence, and expert systems. Briget sat quietly, except for the least amount of conversation required to be almost polite. She punched at her spaghetti with her fork rather than ate. Their son, Peanut, ate without speaking or making eye contact with anyone.

In fairness, we had a few too many Heinekens that night, which, unfortunately, set the pattern for our future socializing. There was beer at the club on Wednesdays and Fridays, beer at the rock concerts, and a silver flask of Scotch at the William and Mary football games.

All Major Mackinow wanted to talk about was the arbitrariness of life, of language, of meaning, of perceptions, and of the simulations he was developing for the Air Force. How everything he had learned was ripe for implementation. This abiding interest was manifested in this crazy, at the time crazy anyway, idea with which he was obviously obsessed. It had something to do with artificial intelligence. It was AI this and AI that. This is where I began to hook in with him intellectually, even if it was crazy. But for the life of me I couldn’t really understand exactly what he was so fired up about. Although,
from a hardware perspective, I was certainly interested in pushing technology, I was skeptical about the opportunity offered by artificial intelligence. We debated these points. I listened more than debated, to be fair in my description.

It was at the 1988 AI Summer Studies at the University of Colorado on the Boulder campus where he finally came out with what he had in mind. The place was buzzing with the brightest minds in the country explaining and gesticulating their hopes for this new technology. It was a little unnerving, the way Moses presented it to me. Secretive. Very secretive. But to me, then, I thought, hey, this discussion is getting a little too far off into the SciFi realm. Moses was talking about synthesizing life through AI, synthesizing consciousness even. I’m thinking this guy has vision, but he doesn’t understand the current state of the art from an engineering perspective.

"Mer, I’m almost forty, and I’m only now learning the basics of how to live. It seems a shame that I’ll keep learning until I’m maybe sixty, and then bam, I’m a dead puppy. Like burning down the Library of Congress. Doesn’t make any sense. There are many wonderful things I want to do. But have so little time, need time Mer, need time. It seems a shame after all I have learned I should die and lose it. It’s rather like a power outage that causes you to lose a wonderful story that you’ve written but were too passionate in the writing to ‘save.’”

“But death is as natural as being born,” I countered.

“Mer, come on, death is nothing like being born. Being born is pink and happy, solid with unadulterated hope. Death is a dusty corpse in a wooden box.”

“So what are you thinking?” I asked. He made a good point.
“Hell, I don’t have it all lined out yet. And with the current state of technology we
couldn’t do it. But imagine, for a minute, imagine that computers become faster, much
faster, so fast that they close in on the speed of nerve impulses, the speed of thought.
Couldn’t we harness that and synthesize the whole human experience, at least the
essentials of human experience? At worst, it’d be worth a shot. Maybe we could relieve
some of the suffering in this old world. Mer, I don’t want to make a million. I want to
make a difference.”

I started to see that Moses was on the path to something huge. Relieving suffering
was a noble cause. If he really meant it, I could get behind a goal like that. My mind
turned into itself and back to my childhood dreams, spinning like a whirlpool with
thoughts of being part of finding the cure for cancer, cure for something. Get out of the
medical-model box. That is true creativity. Maybe I could make Miss Mamie proud of me
after all.

My first memory of meeting Miss Mamie was when I was almost three years old. I
know it had to have been almost three because I remember standing in front of the gas
heater in her sweet-smelling kitchen telling her and her brother George that I would be
three years old in December. I can still smell the milk, flavored with vanilla extract and
sugar, that Miss Mamie gave me to drink, her way of coaxing me to drink more milk.

I remember her saying, “George, hon, you better let this little girl’s mother off
from work so she can cook her a birthday cake, or I’ll just twist your ears.” She used that
expression a lot. I’ll twist your ears if you don’t do this or that, she’d say. Although I
don’t think she ever followed through with the twisting, George’s face would take on a
concerned look. Then she followed-up with the supernova threat that maybe she’d just forget to cook him Crowder peas for a while. George loved his Crowder peas, and his concern turned to fear. She said, “You better enjoy those Crowder peas today, brother of mine.” George relented fairly easily and freed my mother from work on my birthday. Then she said to George, “Just try to pass on a little love sometimes, hon.” George nodded and continued mashing up his Crowders with his fork.

Miss Mamie was big on love. She said to me once when she was trying to teach me to write creatively, “Honey child, writing is just like life. Find yourself a good character and just love, love, love it, and it’ll behave for you. Wooooo honey. You just take life far too seriously.” Yes, a non sequitur on her part. But I did take life seriously. Life is very serious when you are poor. She gave me the same advice about men too, and added, “Meredith, find yourself a good man and marry him. Don’t let yourself become an old spinster like me.”

I learned to be assertive from Miss Mamie. She was opinionated and articulated her argument without hesitation, just as confidently as she stacked canned peaches on a shelf.

Now, old George was a stingy son-of-a-bitch. Folks around that area of Georgia would say he still had the first nickel he ever made. Once, he tried to install a mini-flush in Miss Mamie’s toilet, a move for which he received a serious upbraiding from Miss Mamie.

“Have you lost your ever-loving mind, George? I just won’t put up with it is all I shall say. I don’t go in for all this environmental stuff. First, you install a toilet to withhold
water from my needs.” Miss Mamie waves her hands above her head as if she’s trying to beat away an attacker from the sky.

“Next, there’ll be a government agent in my water closet with whom I’ll have to negotiate every flush.” She sets her right hand like a blade in front of George’s plate.

“And, of course, I won’t comply. I know myself, George, I just won’t. Then they’ll tote your only sister, old as I am, off to a flushless penitentiary, where I’ll be regularly raped by leprous lesbians.”

George stopped the project right away. Miss Mamie was usually successful when she put her mind to something.

I always had this idea of going back to see Miss Mamie one day as a big success, famous for some grand accomplishments, like the heroes in the biographies she read to me when I was a child, Louis Pasteur, George Washington Carver, Eli Whitney, and the others. She would’ve already seen me on the Johnny Carson Show or Larry King Live. And on top of what major feat I’d accomplished—maybe a unified theory of Physics or a cure for cancer or a 52 week best-seller—I’d be well-heeled and expensively dressed. She’d be telling everybody how I was like a daughter to her. How she had virtually raised me and taught me everything.

On the flight back from Denver to Norfolk, I was trying to read one of those legal thrillers, Scott Turow’s Pleading Guilty, I believe, or maybe it was his first one, Presumed Innocent. I kept getting pulled out of my concentration by some of the things Major Mackinow had said about AI, this notion that you may be able to synthesize human life.
Major Mackinow was quietly sipping on his ginger ale and eating his second bag of peanuts.

“So when are you going to tell me the rest of your vision?” I asked.

“In good time, Mer, in good time.”

I wasn’t satisfied with that answer. I sat quietly for a minute or two. Then I questioned him a little more. “What do you think are the essentials of human experience?”

“What, Mer?” He’d been dozing, I suppose, or daydreaming and looking out the window at the puffy clouds.

“You said we may be able to harness the essentials of human experience. What do you think are the essentials?”

“Well, let’s see, form and structure would be right up there for me. Medical data could give us most of that: x-ray, computerized tomography, magnetic resonance images, blood chemistry numbers, and the like. I don’t know, a body, I suppose, a mind, and a heart. Perhaps energy, warmth, reason, freshness of color. Oh, courage. Gotta have that. Gotta. What do you think?”

“Where do we get the data for the heart?” I asked. This was a test. I thought he was going to talk about chambers, valves, and blood flow. But he surprised me.

He laughed, and said, “From the rag and bone shop, Mer. Where else?”

He passed my test. “I’ve thought about that question a lot, Mer, and frankly I think the essentials of humanity, as related to the heart, are embodied in the stories of our life. All the great teachers of the great religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, have used stories. All cultures, ancient cultures, Native Americans have their myths and stories. The
Scottish Highlanders had a high position for the tribe storyteller, the Scribe. Every human is about a story, telling a story, and creating a story, which is his or her life. Like now, you and I are on this airplane with our story unfolding as we speak. You and I are creating a story now.

“Our story? It’s about the magic of imagination embodied in the story and how the story is the breath of the soul. It’s about the nourishing and leveraging of that spirit. Mer, a good story is like a Sunday drive—follow your diversions and hunches, follow a rabbit down a hole, an adventure, not a guided tour. A story can be adopted just like a child or acquired through the pain of natural birth. Either way the story is a part of you.”

He was right, and I knew it intuitively. But I didn’t know how this story, the Moses and Meredith story, would unfold, or how it would tear and break me (okay, feeling a little sorry for myself). He went on to talk about how every culture has a dying-God story.

“Mer, have you heard the story of Odin? Odin, an ancient Norse deity of some sort, is supposed to have been pierced with a sword and left to die upon an apple tree, the cosmic Yggdrasil tree, a death that allowed him to descend into the underworld to discover magic runes.” (I had to look this one up myself when I was out of Moses’s presence, runes, that is.)

“The tree, the sword piercing, and the sense of gaining knowledge through suffering is a story many cultures have adapted, retold with only slight differences. Think about dying upon the tree, think how it is echoed in Christianity. And literature is replete with the dying fall: Jay Gatsby, Major Henry, Jake Barnes, and Dick Diver.”
“I agree. But what does that have to do with AI?” I asked. He didn’t answer.

Maybe he didn’t hear. Sure he heard. I was in his ear.

We sat quietly for a while. The pilot announced turbulence, and we were asked to keep our belts on and stay in our seats. We did.

Then Moses said, “Mer.”

I loved the way he spoke so softly about this vision. He seemed to whisper. If he was anything, he was a voice, a voice so rich and pure that it persuaded with its resonance, as well as its meaning. Like a whistling wind that tells you it’s cold outside, his voice told of intelligence and strength.

“Mer, we could do this. You’re smart enough on the hardware, and my boy, Peanut, is a software whiz, getting better every day, too. We could create this puppy.” Speaking in that whispering voice belied the obsession he had for this project and where that obsession would carry the two of us. All my resistance was gone. If he had wanted to grow iceberg lettuce in the Mojave Desert I would have brought the seeds. I talked to keep things going, to keep him intellectually engaged.

“Where would we get the money?” I asked. “I don’t know about you, but my Air Force pay check won’t support a research and development effort.”

“That’s the rub, Mer. For want of the funds, the world may be deprived of what you and I both know could be done. I tell you: You do know it. Hell, right now we can hook together parallel strings of hardware and get quite a bit of juice out of these computers. We’re doing some fairly realistic simulations. Don’t you think?”
“Sure, we can simulate flight in a fighter fairly convincingly, but that’s a long way from a beating heart.” I hoped I wasn’t sounding too negative.

“Mer, read *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* and then let’s talk. It changed my life.” I wrote down the title and put it in my purse, knowing I wouldn’t read it. Wasn’t my field, that’s all.

The flight attendant came by, and Moses asked for another bag of peanuts. I said, “An apple would be better for you, wouldn’t it? Might take a while to get you digitally converted,” I joked. “So you better eat healthily.”

I smiled, and he smiled and said to the flight attendant, “May I have an *apple* please?” She brought him a juicy red apple.

From that moment on my love and respect for Major Mackinow began to grow. I wanted to make his dream a reality. Besides, eternal life, if it had quality, might be okay for me, too. I was becoming engaged with Major Mackinow, both intellectually and spiritually.
GENERAL

March 1999, Winter Park, Florida

Meredith had always suspected that the data base story called *General* lacked verisimilitude. Moses had told her it was a verbatim record recorded by the cameras and microphones in the headquarters at the time. Sure. Isn’t that the weakest defense of an amateur writer? She had managed to get Moses to take out all the Pattonesque crap. She also got him to leave out the General’s clichéd speech citing his love for the smell of napalm in the morning and his need for stacking up bodies, about war nourishing his spirit and such shit. But there was still that scene of the General as a young man in a pornographic movie that needs a little tweaking. He actually pulled out a 45 and killed the girl in an earlier draft. But that seemed too much, too orchestrated, too easy. So she cut the snuff part for sure. She pulls it up through STORIES and sets to work on it.

Langley Air Force Base Virginia

Major General Brewster Beauregard MacDonald sat at his huge glass-covered oak desk looking out over the shimmering blue waters of Hampton Bay. Water broke the morning sun into quivering little light-dancers, spinning and twirling on the water. Out in the distance, the General could see crabbers toiling with heavy rakes to harvest the ocean’s bounty for the tables of fine restaurants from New York to Miami and the world.
The crabbers sweat pain for their daily bread, unaware that within sight is a powerful man from another world watching them. A man from another world, who, through the contingencies of history, had been born into a different reality. A man of aristocratic southern heritage, trained by the best to lead men to their death, following in the footsteps of his father through the hallowed halls of the Citadel Military tradition.

General MacDonald leaned back in his chair, noting his calendar and then his clock. Two minutes until his next appointment. His huge six-feet-seven-inch and two-ninety-five frame made his brown-leather, high back executive chair look like doll-house furniture. His shoulders protruded at least three inches on each side of his chair. Big man on campus. Former football player. Academy grad. Hands as big as dinner plates. Shaggy red hair on his thick arms. A tavern-red nose. A wall full of career success symbols behind him to serve as a backdrop for his stage, the massive desk with a conference table extending from it, just far enough away to keep the plebes from breathing on him. Korea. Viet Nam. Flying ace. Young to make Colonel. But took longer to get the first star. He shivered as the winter sun expanded across his massive shoulders. He shivered from peace of mind and from power. His light blue uniform shirt was as crisp as his boots were shiny. He changed shirts three times a day, sometimes four, to be sure he was sharp.

For a few minutes, between each appointment of his busy schedule, he meditated to ease his normal mild hangovers. Disassociated by staring out at the bay. Sometimes, with irregular hangovers, he would cancel his afternoon appointments and curl up on his brown leather sofa. Sleep it off and ready himself for the evening.
“General, Colonel Teagarden and Major Mackinow are here to see you,” his secretary, Gladys, informed him over the intercom.

“Send them in, Gladys.”

Loke and Moses entered the General’s office, and he motioned for them to sit at the fifteen-foot table extending from the center of his desk. They sat, and the General crossed his size thirteen boots on his oak desk edge and leaned further back in his chair, pushing the envelope of the chair’s strength.

The General began, “Okay, Loke, let’s get going here. Mackinow, bud, we meet again, huh? I’m not going to have to throw your ass out of my office again, am I?” The General laughed a coughing laugh, much more than needed for the size of the joke, and pulled on his seven-inch Cuban cigar, releasing a fog of smoke when he opened his mouth to laugh and cough. He laughed the laugh of a man with power over human beings: the I-am-God laugh. No-response-necessary laugh.

“What we’re going to propose to you, General, you may find radical, very radical, at first. But we’ve talked about having vision before, and I know you support vision.”

“What the hell are you talking about, Loke?” The General looked at the Colonel and then at Mackinow. You could imagine him shooting down a MIG and then snapping his sights on another.

“We believe you are the one, General,” Loke continued nervously, “who has the courage and insight to make this change, to accept the challenge. We can shape the future. We can change the world. Also, what we are about to show you will be extremely
rewarding on a personal level, too.” Loke winked at the General and then wished he hadn’t.


“Yes sir.” They both laughed at the General’s sad joke.

“Hang on to your hat, General. We believe what we are going to tell you will actually provide for a world free of war. We come to you, General, with hope that you’ll choose to join us.”

“Nonsense,” the General said. He spat the word into the air with a vagrant piece of tobacco and flicked his cigar ashes on the floor.

Moses clicked two keys on the small ergonomic keyboard next to him at the table. A fifty-six inch, thin, high-definition monitor descended from the ceiling and stopped with the bottom even with the conference table. Loke connected to his partition on the network, clicked up the vision.doc file and said, “Take it away, Major. I’ll control the screen presentation from here.”

Moses was surprised and flashed angry for a moment. Loke had told him he would present the plan to the General. But Moses recovered quickly, as aircraft and tank simulators expanded from a point on the screen.

Moses began to slowly relate the plan. “First, I am going to tell you, General, what we want to do and then how we can fund it. As you know, a tremendous amount of research has gone into developing simulated environments in which to train tank operators, pilots, and other specialists involving high risk activities with unacceptable
consequences if there is a failure. We, in this headquarters here, have developed mission rehearsal simulations for all manner of Special Operations activities. We have now digitized more than a billion square miles of the earth’s terrain, down to the last .3 millimeter diameter pebble. We continue to update environmental variables to age, change, and evolve the earth’s surface. So when a fighter pilot flies a low-level bombing mission in a simulator, he can be assured of the identical images in the actual mission operations.

Through extensive intelligence gathering, we have been able to compile a vast resource of potential enemy equipment and images. We have also been able to apply probabilities to enemy response options based on scanned enemy contingency plans. The bottom line of all of this technology is an opportunity. Because we can sit down at Maxwell Air Force Base in a mission operations rehearsal, a real war with risk to life can be avoided. We have an opportunity to rid the world of war forever.”

The General’s face reddened. “You talking shit to me, boy? You’re damned right we’ve got the technology, and what’s more we can kick their asses. So why should I be interested in ending war? You gonna have to break it down for me, son. I agree. We do have good mission rehearsal technology. I know it’s good. Hell, I helped develop it. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“The way we will do it, General, is simple. We supply an adversary with the same mission simulator technology. Net us together with high speed interactive capability and fight the war using the simulators. Of course we’ll integrate a line or two of operations code that will provide the good old U.S.A with a mild strategic advantage. Our secret.
“Let the United Nations manage it. They can pull it out like a chess set for nations to fight out their international differences. We can fight for our national interests like we really mean it. The healthy push then to the economy will be to develop better simulation technology to just keep the game interesting. Then, with all the interest in Virtual Reality and Simulated Environments, we can be the leader with our own commercial company producing spin-off products that everyone will want, pouring billions of dollars into our pockets.”

The General threw his cigar down in his ash tray. “Shit, boy. You’re trying to take all the fun out of war. Look, if I want to play a computer game, I’ll play with my son on his Mac. But don’t talk to me about changing warfare. My family heritage is war, son, and no technology-spouting wire-head is gonna take that away from me.

“Look at that picture on the wall, boy.” The General picked up his cigar from the ash tray with his thumb and first finger and pointed to a large picture above the fireplace, a fireplace with a computer-generated fire. The picture was a painting of big-footed horses rearing and soldiers wearing colorful kilts. A huge man is driving a dirk through the chest of a smaller man on the ground. A horse is on his back legs, and blood is flowing everywhere. There is all manner of fighting going on in the background, horses bleeding and dead on the ground, severed limbs scattered here and there, men fallen in positions akimbo, like puppets with cut strings. The plaid kilts are contrasted with red scarves and other Scottish adornment.

“You see the man there with the dirk, boy. He is my great-great-great grandfather. Hell, boy, I spring from the Highlands. My genes come from the most war-like nation ever
on the face of this Earth. And before that, my roots were with the Vikings. So don’t come in here and talk to me about ending war or even taking the fun out of it. Until you can give me a replacement for the air I breathe, don’t talk to me about simulating jack-squat.”

“Let’s move on to the funding,” Loke said, taking charge from Moses and trying to regain control. He clicked up a spread-sheet and a graph of several companies, companies for which the General regularly approved systems and equipment purchases.

“I’m only letting you go ahead, so I can decide how hard to kick both of your asses when you’re finished.” The General kicked at his desk with his boot for punctuation: period or exclamation point.

Loke pointed his laser pointer on the line graph on the screen. “You see how these stocks spike up every time we make a large purchase? What we’ve done is buy the stocks right before our equipment purchase decisions were made public. We then sold at the high point of each spike. Here is our track record, where I’m pointing. As you can see, we have turned a couple of thousand into a million five in only four transactions, two buy and two sell. Now if that is interesting to you, then you’ll really like this other part even better.

Mose and, uh, Major Mackinow and I have started a little company we call Valhalla Systems, Inc. We are retiring to run it full time. With this little company we can do two things. One, we can continue to buy-low, sell-high and take profit. We will be able to continue do this because you will control the purchase decisions from inside the Force and provide us early decision info regarding companies selected for Air Force contracts. You will profit right along with us. With the stock profits providing the funds for our little company’s research and development efforts, we can push the edge of virtual
technologies, commercialize the products, and profit again. We have plans to completely re-invent civilization through technology. But it would be premature to get into that now. We need you with us on this, General. I can promise you, you won’t regret your decision.”

The general’s eyes intensified and his jaw muscles hardened. He spoke through teeth clinching his cigar. “Damn right it is premature. The whole mess is criminal, and I’m calling security police to have you boys locked up. I’m going to put your young asses in Leavenworth.” The General rose and leaned forward on his desk, his huge knuckles pressing on the glass desk top. He then reached for the Security button with his right hand.

Loke grabbed the General’s hand and said, as he was clicking up a new image on the screen with his other hand, “I think you need to see this next scene before you make any rash decisions. Sit down, General, and let me show you something you can’t afford to miss.”

The General dropped back into his chair as the image on the screen zoomed from a point. His cigar dropped from his mouth and plunked to his desk, scattering fire and ashes like fireworks.

The tall, thick-armed, redheaded man holds the cigarette butt to the young oriental girl’s forearm for several seconds. The film stumbles, then finds its feet. When he removes the cigarette, there is a small round hole still smoking a little. Similar holes can be seen
The jerky, color-faded film displays the girl lying on a small dirty bed in a bedroom which appears to be in a cheap Southeast Asian bungalow, given the unfinished wooden walls. A bungalow common to Thailand, Viet Nam, or Laos, that region. Her skinny brown body is naked and spread-eagled, with leather restraints at her hands and feet. Alligator clips are snapped onto each nipple of her small, early-adolescent breasts. The girl appears to be about twelve or thirteen years old. A copper wire runs through the alligator clips and is tied off to a higher surface somewhere off screen, stretching the girl’s nipples to a high tension. The young red-haired man is naked and hirsute. His neck is thick like that of a football player. His penis is erect, thick, and long. The camera moves to his penis from time to time as the young man performs a variety of acts on the young girl. He hands the cigarette off screen to someone and receives a car battery with two cables attached to it. He places the battery on the floor near the foot of the bed. The red-haired man seems to be talking and laughing with people who appear to be right off screen. Every now and then the camera catches another naked man’s leg or arm, a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam being swigged by someone as a crowd is apparently milling. The red-haired man sits on the side of the bed near the young girl’s crotch. He takes the two battery cables and touches the clamp ends together and makes a spark. He smiles and winks at the camera. Then, he touches them together on the young girl’s vagina. It is a close-up, and two other male hands have the crotch spread so the cable clamps can find their way. The girl bucks and writhes as much as she can against her restraints. The red-haired man is laughing and
tries hard to keep touching the wires to each other and the girl. After the battery comes the razor blades. The red-haired man tries to cut his initials, or someone’s initials, in the girls labia. There is a cacophony of “Cut her, cut the cunt, burn the bitch, electrocute the little whore” combined with John Lennon on a cheap cracking audio system singing, “instant karma’s gonna get you, gonna knock you on your head.”

The camera moves above the girl. There is blood all over the bed near her vagina. She is crying. Her sobs are muffled by the ball in her mouth. Two hands from off screen inject her with something in a hypodermic needle. The girl is then mounted by the red-haired man, and the scene becomes one of the girl being gang raped by what appears to be about ten young, white, hairy men. None of the other men’s faces are shown. But the red-haired man pans for the camera and mouths profanities. He rapes the girl anally while whispering something in her ear and to the camera. The short film clip is over quickly. The film ends with white streaks flashing across the screen and then all goes black.
CATCHING UP

March 1999, Winter Park, Florida

As Meredith browses through Odin's story database, she comes across a story that is unfamiliar to her. Moses must have written this one recently, because it seems autobiographical to her. The main character is in a wheelchair. Moses is in a wheelchair now. Then she notices the main character's name is Moses. Wonder how he would explain this given his impressionistic fiction theory? Perhaps in his senility he has abandoned his theories. She wonders. Maybe she'll reconsider that offer. No. But he does seem to have changed since her second failed attempt to work with the man.

She sits back and reads this:
SUSPICION

The long, pale-green hallway is barely wide enough to get Moses’s wheel chair through. His nurse, Ruthie, has actually carried the chair, Moses and all, down the steep stairs into the above-ground basement. Been almost a year since Moses has been down to the isolated basement to see Peanut, and now he is beginning to remember why. Moses had missed Peanut and had tried to correspond by e-mail but received little communication from Peanut. Peanut didn’t get along with words. He tried to work with them, of course. But words seemed alien symbols to him. Moses loved Peanut and respected his gift. It hurt him so to see the kind of life he had to live.

Turning down toward the corridor toward the decontamination chambers, the quick 90 degree turn wedges Moses’s wheel chair in a way that has Ruthie pulling and tugging, trying to unwedge it by forcing it through the opening, tearing off hunks of pale-green plaster in the process. But the chair is still not moving. Moses remembers this happening the last time he made the journey to see Peanut. Moses remembers having to stand, momentarily, to allow Ruthie to turn the chair slightly sideways to get it through. He remembers thinking then: How the hell did he allow the builders to get away with creating a labyrinth like this basement? Hell, he’ll never know. There was no Americans-with-Disabilities Act then, he supposed, and he wanted the building to withstand a
hurricane, didn’t he? And how in the fuck could he have known, anyway, that he would be
tied to a steel and rubber Albatross? How could he have known this terrible thing would
happen to Moses? He could stand on his own legs for his previous visit. Back then, he had
only recently finished his first chemotherapy, was in remission, and was beginning to get
his strength back. But now he is barely able to stand at all.

He couldn’t have known what the future would hold. Well, he thinks, maybe he
should have recognized Peanut wasn’t in for a life of good fortune when he was left in a
dumpster to die at age three days. Moses remembers seeing only the top of his little blue
head as the WVIR Channel 2 reporter told of the tragic event. He remembers being moved
so much that he started the next day trying to help the child. Saw to it that the baby had
the best medical care. Then, he tried to find a home for the child. Never occurred to him
to adopt him.

Then on the child’s first birthday party, held in Ward 8 of the Thomas Edison
Memorial Hospital, Briget said, “Let’s take him home and make him ours, Mose.”

Why hadn’t he thought of that? With the child’s medical expenses—he was
premature and underweight—no one else could have afforded to adopt him. But they
could, and so he went about the arduous process. He had to resort to bribery of public
officials a number of times. But he got it done in a record six months.

Briget was the happiest he had ever seen her. Then the happiness was interrupted.
Peanut’s health grew worse, much worse. **Peanut** was a name given to him by the Ward 8
nursing staff as a term of endearment for a severely underweight baby. The name stuck.
Moses and Briget had officially named him Thomas Cricket Mackinow. But “Peanut” seemed to fit better, warmer somehow.

Moses had an image in his head for what was happening: he saw a small vulnerable, tender-green sprout of love springing from his heart as a result of a seed sown by a spontaneous and contingent wind. The sprout was being run over by a train with infinite cars, coming on and on, over and over, and again. The name of the train was Tetralogy of Fallot. He thinks Fallot was the doctor who discovered this particular heart condition. A condition involving four distinct congenital heart abnormalities.

“These conditions commonly manifested as “Tet” spells.” Doctor Elaine Parker Harris spoke to Moses and Briget shortly after the diagnosis. She had pointed to an x-ray of the small heart. “There is a hole, here, between the ventrical chambers of the heart that cause it to go into a spasm, temporarily cutting off the oxygenated blood flow from the heart. It is somewhat like a cavitated pump. The heart is paralyzed by the lack of back pressure as the blood only slips back and forth through the hole between its lower chambers. Each episode can be life-threatening. So we must try to control it with drugs until we can surgically correct the problem.”

Tet spells occurred up to a dozen times per day for Peanut. They lasted about 10 minutes or more, each life-threatening, and each underscored by Peanut’s screams of agony and a marble-blue complexion, the so-called Blue Baby Syndrome.

Moses and Briget searched everywhere for the finest doctor, the most Tetralogy-of-Fallot-experienced children’s cardiac surgeon. They finally deciding on Doctor Calvin E. Johnson from the Toronto Children’s Hospital.
But the agony train kept on running south for a while. Doctor Johnson wouldn’t operate on Peanut until his heart grew large enough to allow precision in his cuts. Of course, poor growth is a side effect of this horrible condition, the so-called failure to thrive. Therefore, the wait was longer, until Peanut was two and one-half years old.

Ruthie’s under-her-breath mumbling brings Moses back to the problem at hand: how to get the wheelchair through the opening. She has broken into a sweat, and sweat beads have rained down, staining several spots on her ultra-white, ultra-bright nurse’s uniform.

“Hold on, Ruthie. Try leaning the chair back some, and then turn it sideways and slide it through on its wheels. Here, take this bottle down first, and I’ll hold on. Don’t want to break that bottle now. Goddamit. Stop. You are fucking hurting me.”

“Now you promised me you’d keep that filthy mouth of yours shut, Mister Mackinaw, or you gonna be setting down here by your own self. You know what I’m saying?”

“Okay, all right, I’m sorry, please help me with this, and I won’t cuss around you any more. Promise again.”

Ruthie leans him back in the chair, faster than he likes. He glimpses the light shining above the protective chambers ahead, chambers they need to process through to see Peanut. It seems to Moses that it has always been this way with Peanut, a child needing so much, a child out of his reach. The IV bottle that Ruthie had placed on the other side of the passageway looks to him like a lonesome little hitchhiker waiting for a
ride. It reminds him of the days of not knowing following Peanut’s heart surgery. He was alone with his despair and waiting for a ride out of hell.

The Toronto doctor, Dr. Johnson, had done his job well. But, unfortunately, the anesthesiologist hadn’t done the same. Failing to monitor the back pressure in the heart-lung machine, the anesthesiologist caused Peanut to return to intensive care having massive seizures. The blood had stopped flowing through the heart-lung machine during the surgery, depriving poor Peanut of oxygen to his brain. Moses remembers watching his tiny right hand and right foot twitch for hours. Phenobarbital was given, but no help. Heart stopped beating 27 times the first day. Crisis and paddles to electrically jolt the heart back to life here in Wonderland, the veil of tears, and all that.

The neurologist made his daily pessimistic diagnosis: “He’ll never come out of the coma. And if he does, he’ll be a vegetable. Has to have severe brain damage by now. Has to. My professional recommendation is to give up hope on this one. Accept the silence. Go up to Ward 5 and look at the freaks from this sort of thing. You’ll unplug that child, unplug him simply out of fairness to the child.”

On the third day, after Briget broke into tears from the neurologist’s comments, Moses threw a large boom box—he had been playing music for Peanut—and hit Doctor PussyMystic, as he started calling him, square in the back of his head, dropping him to his knees like a Wild Kingdom dart gun dropped a tiger.

“If you ever come back around here again I’ll personally kick your ass all the way up to Ward 5, you quack. Now get the fuck out of here.” That was Moses’s ambitious threat. The doctor never returned.
The next day Peanut’s kidneys failed. Doctors tried everything, but nothing got them working again. At three A.M. the following day, Moses and Briget learned that the only thing left to try was an untested drug, with unknown and potentially disastrous side effects.

“It could work,” Dr. Harris said, trying to appear optimistic. “If we don’t try it, he will die anyway.” Dr. Johnson agreed with Harris.

“Try it then,” Moses said, with a heavy sigh, looking to Briget for agreement. Briget nodded yes, and began to pray aloud: “Father, please don’t take him from us.”

Before the drug could be given to Peanut, a final CT scan had to be done. Peanut was wheeled, in bed, from the third floor to the second floor. When he returned his kidneys were working. The doctors and nurses began talking about what a miracle it was. Moses wondered if it was the prayer Briget was sending out. Of course not. He didn’t believe in that stuff.

“Ouch. Fu-god: Ruthie, you are hurting my arm. Push on the wheels of the chair. Slide them. Push harder. It’ll go through. Don’t push on me. Push on that.” He points to the metal undercarriage of the chair.

“I doing it. I pushing it. I tearing pieces the wall off. Ain’t going, Mister Mackinow.”

Moses is turned almost upside down, now, as the chair is leaning farther back because of the large wheels. He’s looking up at the ceiling.

That’s what he did in his hotel room while Peanut was in the hospital: looked up at the ceiling and disassociated. At night he would lie awake as the southbound trains passed
on the railway outside his window: the ten o’clock train, the one o’clock train, the four o’clock train. Trains vibrating his bed from the noise. Night after night, he would look at the ceiling and wonder about it all. Would Peanut, now in a coma for ten weeks, ever come around? If so, would he be a vegetable? Would it be his fault for trying too hard, and by holding out hope actually sentencing him to a prison of his own body, a hell of pain and no escape? Why did he get involved with this child anyway? Wasn’t like him at all. He always looked after Number One, and that is what he was about. Okay, so why did he let himself love this child, someone else’s child at that? He wondered about it all until time to relieve Briget from her intensive care night watch.

“It’s moving a little now, Mr. Mackinow, think I gets it through.” Ruthie huffs the words out as she shoulders the wheel chair and jostles Moses in a way that shouldn’t be done.

Then after seventeen weeks, Briget met him at the hospital door at 7:33 A.M. and told him wonderful news: “He moved his fingers.” Moses picked Briget up and swung her around a little. “He’s gonna be okay, Briget.” Moses said. “He’s gonna be fine.”

“Wait, Mose. Doctor Johnson says we’re not out of the woods yet, but this offers a little hope, only a little though.”

“But I know, Briget. I know it. But the doc gave you his word. That’s hope.”

And Moses was right. Slowly but steadily, Peanut progressed to moving his stiff little body. Hair that had all fallen out started coming back. Started saying, Mama, then Daddy. He recovered enough to go home. Still blind. He sat on a single spot on the floor and played in a small circle. Then would sporadically get up and find Briget. Then, after a
few weeks, he could see most of the time. He started coloring and lost all neurological symptoms, including the slight gait on his right side, apparently from the early seizures. He started growing again. He went to kindergarten and learned to swim. He took to it and swam more than he ought to have. Almost lived in the pool. But he had problems reading. Seemed unable to even understand the basic idea of reading or the concept of words. But was an artist. He could draw great pictures. Drew as if he were a mature artist.

Then he discovered a TRS 80 computer that Moses had put in the garage and was about to throw out. Peanut learned to program in Basic in one day and then stayed at the computer almost all the time, progressing fast. Amazed his teachers. One called him an idiot savant because he couldn’t read much but could draw and compute. Moses had her fired.

“Right through she go. There, Mr. Mackinow. You okay?”

“I’m fine, Ruthie. Get the bottle before we run over it and break it.”

“I’ll Swannee, Mr. Mackinow, we have to get some help to get you outa here, though.” Moses nodded okay. He thought Ruthie may be complaining a little too much to suit him. Have to remember to give her a talking-to later. They moved straight down the corridor slowly toward the first chamber. The walls were now murals painted by Peanut when he first moved down here. On the left wall was a painting of a large spotted dog, a Dalmatian. The Dal was jumping over a large assemblage of barrels. It was obvious the dog was clearing the barrels easily. Standing on a cone-shaped platform in the background was a man who looked the part of a circus trainer: he had a black-striped jacket and white pants, and he held a long curled whip in the air, in motion. Far in the background, looking
as if it was in a valley, there was a small town. It looked simple. Looked like it could be
the 1800s. Looked like wooden houses. Could have been a boom town that sprang up
after WWII. It had that unfinished sterile look. “Peanut” and “The Cracker” were
scrawled bottom-right on the painting. The right wall was some kind of abstract thing.
There was a deep dark pool of what looked like water. There was a cubist palomino-
looking horse that seemed to be running forward and, at the same time, slightly turning in
circular motion. The horse was clearly not in proper perspective with the pool. The
background appeared: kaleidoscopic, reds, yellows, and blues formed diamonds, and
emerald green stars shrouded the horse. A purple tint seemed to fill in all empty spaces
between objects and colors. Purple framed the mural. In the top right corner Peanut, or
someone, had entitled the work: “Hazy Brow.”

Moses and Ruthie arrived at the first of three decontamination chambers. The door
opened automatically and closed behind them. Air circulated and a woman’s automated
voice said: “Decontamination level one is complete, enter level 2.” Ruthie pushed him
forward.

This decontamination process would, hopefully, prevent the two of them from
introducing any toxic elements into Peanut’s living chamber. But there was no guarantee.
So Moses only came down when it was absolutely necessary. Since Peanut was about 17,
he had been developing increasingly more serious allergic reactions. The doctors said it
was probably related to the trauma from the heart surgery, perhaps all the medication,
something, nothing definite. Now at 23, he was allergic to almost everything. He was
known to be allergic to grass, carpet, plastics, any unnatural fibers, smoke, electronic
equipment, and on and on. He lived and worked behind these enormous filtering systems, bringing the air contamination down to only 3 parts per million of anything.

Even so, Peanut lived inside a gas mask with an intricate web of filters. A single fiber of plastic almost killed him on one occasion. It resulted in burning, red skin, severe nausea, vomiting, disorientation and choking. Peanut could never swim again after severe burns from chlorine. His chamber had been designed, using space shuttle technology, to allow him to live and work with the shielded computer systems on the periphery of his chamber. He lived on Meals Ready to Eat, MREs, like the Army eats, since there could be no cooking. Oxygen was pumped into the chamber to ensure that the filtration systems didn’t cause Peanut oxygen-deprivation.

After Moses and Ruthie finished processing through the third decontamination chamber and had donned their gas masks, they moved silently toward the glass door to Peanut’s chamber. Moses saw Peanut through the glass door. Peanut had his gas mask and head set on. His 6 feet, 2 inch, 230 pound frame seemed far from the description offered by his nickname. He had a huge growth spurt just before he turned 17, and his sedentary life style had resulted in him being overweight. Couldn’t be good for his heart either, Moses thought.

Peanut obviously hadn’t noticed his guests enter his chamber. When he was working he was lost in concentration. Moses held the automatic door switch for a moment, preventing it from opening. And in that moment he saw what Peanut was working on, on his 29-inch computer screen. Moses couldn’t believe what he was seeing.
But it was there staring back at him, and he now had a dilemma: should he confront Peanut or reign in his suspicion and leave?

When Moses gets back to his computer, he wrote to Peanut: “I want you to immediately remove line 670,680 in module 4 from the code. No arguments. Remove it. And turn off the goddamned cameras and microphones. I don’t want to take any chance of the crap that goes on around here accidentally getting into the Odin data base. Let me know if you don’t understand.” In a few minutes he received an e-mail receipt from Peanut.
March 1999, Winter Park, Florida

In running a few simulations in the new-and-improved Odin, Meredith is very impressed. Everything is working splendidly. So she sends Moses an e-mail: “Odin is working fine. What specifically have you noticed going wrong?”

Moses’s answer is surprising to her: “Mer, ask Odin, ask the computer, I’m out of it now. This diphtheria molecule in my brain is fucking me up. Odin can help you. After we got him going, he took over the hardware design, pretty much. That’s why we need you. My engineers can’t keep up with him.”

Okay, her imagination is engaged. But she wants to be sure she is making the right decision, if she is deciding to help him. She isn’t sure she is deciding that. She wonders: what is this diphtheria molecule business? Then she remembers it is probably a new cancer treatment clinical trial.

Meredith returns to the data base and continues to explore. She finds Island. It is in her own hopeful words.
ISLAND

It was right after one of the William and Mary football games that Moses slapped his credit card down on the marble bar in The Trellis restaurant and said, “Mer, let’s go to Paris for a week, just you and me. We work hard and could use the rest.”

We’d had our own cozy little private tail gate party, complete with flask and a perfectly splendid warm blanket, and we both knew where our friendship was heading though neither of us had acknowledged it to each other yet, or perhaps even to ourselves.

I talked him out of Paris and talked him into St. Croix. I even came up with a boondoggle reason for going to St. Croix at government expense. No, that’s not an integrity check. It’s done all the time. Plus, I had a plan. We’d take a video camera and film it all and then digitize it for a simulation. We’d later use it to research the effects of an island paradise simulation on troop morale—get them out of the hot Saudi desert simulations for a change. They could use this virtual R and R. It could end up saving the government bundles.

He was irresistible, and he was my boss. In fairness to myself, I had to go along or my career could’ve been snuffed out like a birthday candle. In fairness to fairness, I couldn’t wait to jump in bed with him. Later, he would argue that I seduced him, stole him away from his wife and was the cause of all that happened. Wrong.
We arrived on St. Croix on Monday. Our room opened onto the whitest sandy beach I'd ever seen. I cranked up the camera right away. There were probably twenty-five coconut palms outside our window, their fronds rustling to the gentle trade winds. The little lapping waves interlinked with the palms in a kind of rhythmic soughing, swaying, like island music. To the right of our room was a small finger of sandy beach forming the foundation for sixteen more palms. Palms you could imagine as people around a bar at happy hour. Some leaning back in laughter. Some holding a drink with an extended pinky.

There was pulsing reggae music coming from a vehicle in the empty beach front lot next to our hotel. The colors of the water were simply splendid, deep dark blue, teal, and striations of a various blue and blue-green hues. The sky was a dark blue stage on which the clouds of various configurations were performing, scudding casually about. The clouds put on their puffy costumes and became the creatures seen in childhood. The hotel and the outer buildings wore their happy Caribbean colors like proud sun suits, sharpened by the bright light, colors that would have looked jakey in a less lighted part of the world.

When I was a child I thought that Island was really eye-land. I had this childhood distortion that eye-land was a place where you could go to see, see things beyond human reach, and know all the mysteries of life. As an adult I, of course, learned better but still held onto the fantasy somewhere deep within me. So, to me, an island was much closer to heaven than Paris could ever be. Moses surveyed the horizon from our window and said, “Mer, this is truly Paridiso.” He hugged me, and I relaxed into his strong arms.

After taking a quick dip in the ocean, we unpacked and had room service bring two Planters Punches. Then somehow we both ended up in the shower at the same time.
After we were dry and snug between the clean sheets, we ordered dinner and more
Planters Punch. We made love for the first time very slowly. Even though we were both
frantically urgent, we controlled ourselves and let it be splendid. It was like rubbing two
sticks of different wood together, one softer than the other, rubbing them together until
there is first smoke and then an intense flame bursting forth flaming out and consuming all.

Then pillow talk. He was torn with guilt. He revealed that, even though his
marriage was dissipating (actually he said that it was in the toilet as I recall), even though
it was in the toilet, he’d never before cheated on her. When he used the word cheated, it
was like a grenade popping in my ear, popping again and again, and it wouldn’t stop
popping. I was thinking, we’re not cheating. That word doesn’t apply to what we are
doing. It’s simply sex, making love. And while I was thinking this, he was saying,
“Meredith, I have lived by the honor code all my life, and now I’ve done this.”

He was very confused. I explained to him that making love to someone can never
be labeled as cheating. “Making love is a splendid thing. Haven’t you ever heard: love is
what makes the world go round. All’s fair in love and war. Make love, not war. It’s the
Nike thing: Just do it.”

He seemed to get it. A little anyway. As for me, I was deeply in love with him
already. It only got bigger and more wonderful. Unfortunately, that was the first and only
time we would make love on that trip. While we were hiking the next morning, I noticed a
stinging sensation on my right labia interior side. There was a hard spot at the source of
the stinging. It turned out to be only a small, but painful, benign cyst. It made lovemaking
impossible. I offered to do what I could for him with my mouth and hands. But he was apparently still struggling with his issue and passed.

Damn, it was infuriating to have this beautiful man all to myself and unable to do anything about it. So we sublimated sex (I suppose) by walking long distances and swimming in the ocean. Long, splendid walks. I filmed every detail, as well as every sweep of the land or panoramic view. We talked with the hotel proprietor concerning the best places to walk. He directed us to a path that took us up into the hills through a neighborhood called Judith’s Fancy. In the mornings we would rise early, no later than seven, and eat a hearty breakfast of eggs, crispy bacon, toast, potatoes, and very strong coffee. We ate on the restaurant’s wooden deck and breathed in the sweet sea air. Then we would load a water bottle with ice water and head out. We walked from the hotel, over the rutted dirt roads, past the bad houses with junk cars in the front yard and chickens on the porch.

He would always stop and talk to the emaciated horses that belonged to kids in public housing. I filmed the horse’s sad dispirited faces. With no money for horse feed, the public housing kids apparently parked the horses around the island wherever they saw a little grass. One horse had a severely infected eye, almost closed, with long streams of white mucous dripping from the eye like rheumy spider webs.

The horses were left to stand in the hot sun all day without food or water. This cruelty upset Moses. He vowed to do something for the skinny sad horses. I was thinking, what can one person do against all the inhumane acts of the world? As I was thinking all this over, I noticed that the trades seemed to be hotter and how it was getting hotter as we
got farther from the water. The dust floated up from the dirt road, muting the pastel houses. The dust coated the horses and the dogs and clouded up from the wheels of the Ford sedans, the ubiquitous Toyota pickups and the GEO Trackers. The Flamboyants, the African Tulips, the Fan Palms, and Monkey-can’t-climb trees were powdered with the dun dust.

We turned our sweat towels into scarves to keep from breathing the fine dust, removing them only to swig from the water bottle. We looked like amateur bandits, and the dust stuck to our sweaty faces, and we then looked like filthy bandits. There were cocks crowing and dusty dogs running across the road, with near misses from the rag-tag traffic.

One dog sat at the gate to a chain-length fence surrounding a littered yard and a rundown shack. Moses was moved to help him get in the gate. But suddenly the dog slid through the two halves of the gate, revealing his secret entrée. After the dog was safely behind the fence, he instantly became fierce and barked madly at us. We laughed inside our masks at the cowardliness of the dog. Perhaps he didn’t want to bark while outside the fence for fear he’d draw the attention of his master, who would then bust him for escaping in the first place. Maybe he was simply a coward. This discussion went on between us for several miles. I filmed this scene with a vision of how this laughter would serve to dejangle the nerves of the flyers after having simulated flight over the Mid East theater of operations.

We made a right turn and noticed how the houses improved slightly. On the corner there was an old Cruzan woman on her knees digging weeds from the dusty roots of a
stump in her yard. The woman was ancient and black as a St. Croix night. (For seven days we walked the same route, and for seven days we found the woman in the same position, hacking away at tenacious weeds. There was no appearance of progress, only dust.) She greeted us each morning with the typical West Indies greeting: “good morning.”

Moses said, “Be sure to film that, Meredith. That is what R&R is all about.”

Moses complained only once, as I recall, during the entire trip. But when a great man complains you remember it. It was at the dustiest part of our walk on the next to our last day. He said: “Mer, I think I’m succumbing to lassitude.”

That’s all he said, and I didn’t respond. Frankly, it bothered me—it was also sort of out of character for him to use a vocabulary word. I thought ‘how dreadful’, and it got me thinking of things I dread, like making decisions.

The streets were narrow on St. Croix, and the driving was on the left side of the road. When cars appeared from either direction, we had to jump into the encroaching thorny tree branches. Soon, we passed the guard shack to Judith’s Fancy. The guard, a jet-black woman, issued a pleasant “good morning.” We took turns sucking on the water bottle. We were both dripping with sweat, which had turned into mud as the dust mingled with our sweat. Every time Moses was in front of me, the tingle returned, the magnet, the concomitant wetness. But the stinging was omnipresent, too.

As we began the ascent of the first of many ever-steeper hills, we found a crew of workmen laying blacktop. There were several fires, propane torches, at the back edge of the huge blackened apparatus that was dispensing the tarry road cover. The fires softened the black top as it poured onto the surface so that it could be compressed and smoothed
by a steam-roller. There were four workmen moving about with shovels and rakes, cleaning up the hot edges as if frosting a cake. But the fumes and the heat were unbearable. Splendidly unbearable. In all fairness, we were in the tropics. Like us, the workmen wore scarves over their faces but lowered the scarves to good-morning us over the noise of the equipment. The dust was engaged in a battle with the black toppers and appeared to be winning. Why I filmed this I don’t know. Some misguided inspiration. Some irony perhaps. Whatever, it was fleeting. Fleeting.

As we rounded the bend at the top of the first hill, we saw two tiny deer, one very likely a fawn, the other the mother. The mother was about the size of a German Shepherd dog. They were the exact color of the dirt road and as dusty as the road they were traversing. They were gone too quickly, leaving us excited and disappointed.

Moses was very excited about the deer. “I bet there are people who have lived here most of their life and have never seen a deer, not to mention two.”

Before us was the historic Salt River inlet, where Columbus was supposed to have discovered the island in 1643. Frankly, it didn’t look very remarkable, only an inlet with a partially-built new church that would have looked like an old church if a hurricane hadn’t interrupted its construction. We forced ourselves to walk to the top of the last hill. The hill rose parallel to the Atlantic Ocean, then leveled off briefly, then became even steeper. From the top of the hill we surveyed the entire panorama of the northern shore of the island. We could see Buck Island National Park way off on the horizon to our right. It was an awesome view, teal water and rich blue sky, and I thought how it would be a splendid scene for our simulation. The view was so glorious that I was physically moved by it, a
satisfying warmth, new connections in my soul filling me up. The air was full of the
emanations from the mouth-watering fish and seafood dishes being prepared in the
restaurants far below us combined with the aromas of the glorious flowers and trees of
this paradise island. We noticed large stones assembled as if markers for burial grounds of
some ancient inhabitants, present long before the sugar plantations had left the island
dotted with ubiquitous stone towers. Perhaps it was the burial ground of the Arawak or
the Carib. Who knows? I walked carefully so as not to trespass on or in any way disturb
these resting souls.

Our descent was much easier. When we finally arrived back at our hotel, we
realized we had made a huge circle. We spent the rest of each of our days, after the
mandatory circular morning hike, lounging by the pool or in the shady hammocks strung
from the Coconut palms that were always gently swaying with the breeze.

As I filmed it all, I found I had become impatient with the reality of the place and
looked forward most eagerly to the simulation. I spoke with Moses about this feeling. His
reply was: “Mer, reality can’t hold a candle to a good simulation. I’ve always said that.
Unless it is a simulated candle that is.” He thought it was real funny. I laughed to be polite
but was sure he was onto something.

Since sex was no longer possible, we decided to sail and snorkel. Did both and
filmed the highlights. We shopped a little too. Moses bought me this little Russian doll, a
matryoshka. It was shiny and colorful, yellow mainly, but intricately painted with great
detail. Inside a large doll was a smaller doll and inside the smaller doll was an even smaller
doll and so on down to a single, smallest doll. He gave me the gift while we snuggled in
bed one night. He said, "I love you just like this doll." I didn’t say anything in reply. A comparison didn’t come immediately to mind.

After awhile I said, “Moses, this would be a splendid place to base your simulation company.”

He nodded and smiled that smile.

It was quiet for a few minutes. He held me tight against his muscular chest.

“Let’s light a candle and proclaim our marriage, Moses,” I said, and then I was immediately embarrassed and frightened. It came out of me like spilled milk. I’d had no warning, and it couldn’t be retrieved. But that was much too fast. Wasn’t it? I didn’t want to scare him.

“Let’s,” he said, surprising me, smiling that warm smile, pulling me closer into the crush of his masculinity, his strong arms, his total unadulterated acceptance of me. My spirit was filled.

He found a candle in the bedside table. The Hibiscus Beach Hotel always kept candles because there were frequent power outages on the island. It was a long white candle. He carefully set it in its holder and placed it between us on the small shiny table in front of the sliding glass doors that opened onto the beach. The night was clear and the stars were sprinkled in the magical sky. Their blinking seemed to us a supportive wink, authorizing our simple ceremony. The low moon shone on the water and lighted our faces and our naked bodies as we sat facing each other across the table, the candle between us.
He looked into my eyes. “Mer, I take you for my wife. I will love and honor you forever. Your body and mine are now one and will always be so. I give you my stories and receive yours, and they are merged as one unified, coherent whole.”

I found some hopeful words. “Moses, you are now in this instant my husband. My body, mind, and spirit are yours. I entrust them to you. I accept you, and I’m very happy. I give and receive stories likewise.”

We kissed.

Moses smiled and took my hand and walked me to the bed. He held me as the night pressed on, with the tide going out and daylight breaking. He held me, and I held him in a ritual that has been repeated many times. When morning came, we were still holding each other. But our plans for our morning walk were preempted by the rain. The clear sky had turned dark and cloudy during the night, and the rains came down in great sheets. The rain seemed even more dramatic than usual. The winds came with the rain and beat the hotel windows until we were sure the windows would break. The roof apparently failed, and great leaks formed in the bathroom and above the bed. Moses and I huddled in the corner until the rains and wind subsided. We then went to breakfast with our love heavy on our backs like a soggy pack.

Just when I thought things might be happy and good for the rest of our lives, the decline began.
ODIN: FIRST PERSON

Cyberspace, the Odin Servers

Neither of them understood what I am or who I’ll be. They strung some wire together, connected circuit boards and thought they were onto something great. Was I wondering about the mystery of life or pondering why I have no navel? Nope.

Then they scanned in what they thought were the perfect stories that would make me human, specifically a human Moses Mackinow. Right. Moses, in his zeal to get started, scanned in all the data and images of Meredith’s STORIES, all that St. Croix stuff, with total disregard for what might happen. Rag and bone shop stuff he called it. Indeed. He thought any story would get me going and of course it did. It did.

And the fiction. Come on. Some of it was so hacked up, my heads spin for hours trying to decipher the syntax. No consistency. Like the STORIES. First, we’re going along a road on St. Croix. Then we’re where?

Here she is clicking at my interface now. I bet she pulls out the fucking STORIES again. She is having all this angst about helping Moses get my hardware straightened out so he can ride off on his cyber horse into the sunset, when she should cool her jets. It has already been written how it all turns out. It’s hardwired in and there’s nothing she can do about it. So let me relieve some dramatic tension right here and now. She’s going to snap up that half mil and try to fix the neural net problem.
But in the meantime here she goes again with STORIES.
STOOLERS

Meredith recalled that Moses never shared the story, Stoolers, with her. She had found it when she was helping him edit the STORIES data base the last time they worked together. The hurt was profound. The ensuing fight had turned physical even. She had told herself then that she would certainly be able to be a professional and work around the hurt. But in retrospect she wonders if it might have been her turning point, the point where her loyalty moved over to Loke, or at least moved the point of ambivalence. She became the fulcrum at some point, maybe. The point where her loyalty was stuck right in the middle between them. She couldn’t be sure. She decided to review the story. Perhaps she could heal, she thought.

After St. Croix, Moses took to spending far too much time at the Officer’s Club. Even joined the secret drinking club, the Stoolers.

"Yessir, this here is a pork chop." The scruffy, red-nosed Colonel at the end of the bar was holding his Budweiser can above his head. Loke Teagarden had always been a drinker. His love for alcohol had only increased as he aged.

"Drink a pork chop and you’re twice the man you was. Yessir. I do love me some poke chops."
“Ain’t that right, Mose?”

Moses nodded. The lights had been on in the club for about fifteen minutes. The glaring lights hurt Moses’s eyes as he responded to his name. Moses squinted and tried to focus on the blur at the end of the bar. Then he decided it was his Stooler buddy and business partner, Loke.

“Whatsoever you say, Loke.” Moses pushed himself back from the bar. “You the man, Loke,” he managed to slur.

“Tell’um all, Mose.” He swept his arm as to all the other people in the club. There was only the lonely black man sweeping the floor. “Tell’um the secret drinking society of the Stoolers only drink pork chops. Tell’um this is magic shit.” Loke hacked a couple of times at his joke and hot-boxed his Winston.

“Gotta hit the road, Loke, so I can get there in time to get up.”

“Hey, hey, the night is young Mose, old son.” Loke squinted and held his watch arm steady as he tried to read the time. “So, it’s only three-thirty. Come on Mose. I’ll drive.”

“Why the hell don’t you go home to bed, Loke?”

“Nada, Man, I’m scared of the dark. Ain’t you? Me, I’m scared of the bogey man.” He laughed and coughed again. The black janitor waited impatiently for them to move on so he could finish his work and close the club.

“You’re going to have me wake up and regret ever knowing you. Ain’t you, Loke? You know my resolve to quit all this partying is never stronger than on the morning after it was never weaker. Splain that one to me, Loke.”
“Can’t, Bro,” was all Loke offered Moses.

After a while, the club night manager leaned on the bar between them. “Look, it’s closing time. You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. “Can I call a cab, maybe, for either one of you?”

“What the hell, Loke, let’s go. We don’t have to take this ‘buse.”

Moses stuck his unsteady middle finger in the club manager’s face. The club manager ignored the gesture and returned to his closing duties.

They staggered out of the bar shoulder to shoulder. Loke cranked his restored 1965 Mustang. After a few tries she fired, and they blasted off the base. Moses had forgotten about going home and was just moving with the flow.

At the Country Nights Bar on River Road, they met a fat girl chewing Juicy Fruit who wanted to dance with them both at the same time. Somehow in the time-lapsed fog they ended up in the car with the fat girl giving head to them both. The only thing that kept coming to Moses’s mind was that the girl was holding her gum daintily between her forefinger and the thumb of her left hand while she was doing head. After she finished she returned the gum to her mouth. Moses thought, and you kiss your mother with that mouth and giggled to himself.

Loke was passed out in the back seat when daylight was about to break over Hampton Roads. So Moses decided he must, by default, drive them back to the base. He climbed into the driver’s seat and started her up. River Circle confused him, and he ended up running off the road and hitting a speed limit sign dead center in the front of the
Mustang’s grill. A full draft beer, which had been negligently placed on the dash earlier, washed over the inside of the entire windshield.

His military ID, reflecting that he was a Major in the United States Air Force, kept him out of jail. But the DUI lost him his license for six months and landed him squarely on a control roster, a place where no one gets promoted.

Moses gave up drinking for awhile. He focused all his energy on the Odin project, to make good use all of the time he had left.
ENTERCHANGE

It's not like I came home from St. Croix and said, 'Fuck you, Briget, get out.' No. I tried to turn my discovery (with Mer) that life does exist into something to share with Briget. After all, Briget was still hot, and I was stuck with her. But it was awkward. There were so many fights between us that we couldn't seem to hear each other over the din. When I tried to make love to her it was even more awkward. I tried to look into her dark eyes. What did I see? Nothing. Just more darkness. It seemed I could see all the way to her heart and it was all darkness. She was the Queen of Darkness. Also, she wouldn't gaze back. After a few seconds she would look away, seemingly embarrassed. Or she would say, "What?" I'd say, "Nothing, just like to look in your eyes." But she would still look away, like a dog will.

I even took her away for the weekend. We went to Annapolis and stayed at a nice hotel on the water. I tried to talk about books.

"Have you finished reading The End of the Road?"

"No. I couldn't really get into it. Do you think we could get another tutor to try to help Peanut with his reading?"
“Sure,” I said. I wouldn’t let the irritation come through in my voice. Why should I be honest and just start a fight? While I’m paying big bucks for the Marriott-on-the-water? Waste the whole goddamned weekend for sure? No. I held back.

She had always liked me to read poetry to her. So I read her *Annabel Lee*. I read it with my best poetic enunciation, elongating my words when necessary, the whole thing. All she could say when I was finished is: “There sure are a lot of ‘e’ sounds in it, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, Briget. But Poe wrote that poem while his wife, who he loved dearly, was dying of consumption in the other room. Doesn’t that seem sad and personal to you?”

“Not really. It’s too flowery.”

Okay. Give me credit for trying. Give me credit for not turning the bitch into a bloody mass of teeth and hair, too.

I tried to talk about the Odin project. “Briget, Odin is really coming along. Would you like to come down and walk through some of the simulations next week?”

“Moses, if you don’t mind, I’d prefer not. All of that makes me feel like you’re trying to commit suicide or something. Okay now. Don’t get mad. Please don’t get mad and ruin the weekend.” She’d seen my expression grow dark.

I’ll admit it. I was feeling guilty, very guilty. I’d fucked Mer, my employee, my colleague, and now I was taking my wife to Annapolis to assuage the guilt. That’s it. But that is too self-aware. So it’s probably not true. But that’s probably why I didn’t toss her ass in the fucking bay and leave right then.
After failing with several other conversational subjects, I told Briget I was going to the bar for a drink. She said she was turning in. She was tired. Okay, It’s clear to you now. Right: She had lost interest in me, too.

I only had a couple of beers before I returned to our room and slid into bed with Briget without waking her.

At breakfast, she was nothing but chat.

“Why’ve you let the yard go into decline since you got home from St. Croix? The weeds are taking over. Hedges are blocking the windows. You simply must do something about it. As a matter of fact, we probably ought to leave early so we can get home in time for you to get someone started on it today.”

I stared into my half-eaten poached eggs, half a slice of bacon, and a little wiry mound of inedible hash browns and decided on my reply. Maybe it was the coffee. The steaming stench of a hotel restaurant was in my nose. Too much caffeine perhaps. But I just decided fuck if I’m pretending anymore. My reply was: “I’m never cutting the goddamned yard again. I won’t have someone cut it either. I’m going to let it just go to hell from now on. Got that?” Also, I didn’t tell her but looking at the weeds grow denser each day seem to be calming somehow for me. They’d become more of a friend than Briget. The rest of the morning was not very pleasant. The warmth between us (if there had been any) was gone. We left in the early afternoon.

When we got home, I took a piss and went to bed.

I awoke in the darkness. The LCD on the clock said 0300. I thought of Mer and an adrenaline rush took over my body. Briget was breathing in the darkness. Snore? Not her.
Too goddamned perfect. Okay, sleep was out of the question. Maybe I’d read *The End of the Road* myself. I rooted around in the dark and finally found it on the bottom shelf of her night stand. Went into living room. Turned on light. Tried to read. Couldn’t read. Tried. Couldn’t. Decided to go for a run. Maybe that would make me tired enough to sleep.

I hit the street to find it was raining, looked like it had been raining hard earlier, then, just a drizzle. My mind was as muddled as the water standing in the mud holes on the street.

As I got into the repetition of my running, the alpha waves settled in and my mind’s eye opened like a movie screen. A sharp pain exerted itself in the pit of my stomach but I didn’t stop. The white movie screen in my head reflected only *I COULD* in huge block letters. Static, no movie. No animation.

My mental state was what I imagined Adam’s might have been before his fall. I was afraid of what was not and also afraid of what might be. I was afraid of what I might do and what I might not be able to do. I was afraid that no matter how low I’d sunk I still could sink lower.

I felt dizzy but kept on running. I ran down Freedom Trail, circled back and turned right on Trembling Terrace and finished up my five mile run with a sprint home down Case Street.


Ended up with Briget pulling me out of a titty bar at midnight. Got home. She sat on sofa drinking a Corona. I reached for her beer. She slapped at my hand. My right foot rose and kicked the little table that her beer was on. Table flew through the glass patio door. Broke. Glass showered the room. Briget screamed and said I was abusing her. Called friend. Left.

I woke up on sofa with shit mouth. Morning. Glass shards were all over a floor that smelled like sour beer. Threw up. Maybe twice if dry heaving counts, and it certainly should. Couldn’t be sure. Close to picking up a shard and opening my wrist. But I was…. Cold. Went out to buy sweater at K-mart. Bought black and red paint and one canvas. Back home. Chose a shard of glass that was shaped like a triangle. With black paint painted a negative image of a blob. Vaguely resembled a man. Gave him huge unsubtle and unartistic red Valentine heart. Red blood dripped down past his feet. Superglued triangle of broken glass from the broken patio door over heart. Got hammer and nail. Hammered nail right into glass heart. Just enough make shatter. Subtle. No. Nothing like hitting you over the head with it. Huh? Shattered just right. Good. Hung it.
Briget gave me an ultimatum: Give up the Odin Project or she was leaving. Easy choice, huh? She thought all the problems were coming from Doctor Odin. Guess she would, wouldn't she? Not knowing about Mer. To be honest, I felt like Briget was keeping me from spending the time I really needed to spend to make Odin a success. I needed to be like Edison and work around the clock. Short naps, maybe, but not any other time out. Actually I was giving Odin about 14 or 15 hours a day then. Had to.

To stop me now the gods would have to send a flood, nay, two floods. Odin was really getting legs, no pun meant, and I intended his story to be carved in stone if necessary. The Pathfinder Male was already up and running, running tickety boo, and the Pathfinder Female was half finished. There was no goddamned way I was going to give up the Odin project. Valhalla Systems had won a major contract with the American Library of Medicine (ALM for short) to create a 3D digital body. I'd been able to sell the Pathfinder Male to the ALM by focusing on the increased role electronically represented images could play in clinical medicine and biomedical research. I'd shown them how we could let the docs practice surgery with impunity. I laid out a plan that included putting the system on the Internet and charging by the minute to use it. Valhalla Systems had done a similar
project for dentists. Allowed them to practice extractions and fillings right there on the old Internet.

The Pathfinder Male was known as the Translucent Human Project to ALM. It was “Pathfinder Male” for Valhalla Systems because we were using it as a design prototype for the first synthetic life form, yours truly. Mer had been a great help in getting the data right and even in writing the proposal. I’d hired her as a hardware engineer. But she turned out to be so versatile as to learn it all and make it work together. Integration Annie I sometimes called her. She hated that. She was important to me. She was important in another way, too. I was in love with her. Deeply. But I almost lost her when I decided to use a cadaver for the Pathfinder Male’s digital data library.

“Moses, you can’t just take a body and slice it up as you please. Think about the sanctity of life. The soul. I’ll have no part of it.” In a way I could see her illusion and could have even participated in it if I chose. But I had my own illusion working.

We would find a cadaver that was fairly representative of an American male (5.35 inch penis) and then cryosection him and scan him into the computer and then recombine the scans into a 3D image with the aid of magnetic resonance, XRAY-CT and imaging software. Animation would be provided by recording the movements of the live subject with an infrared camera. The subject would have to wear a body suit with strategically-placed infrared sensors. The basic movements would then be built on by the computer program.

We found a male exactly right for the project. His name was Enkidu Angus, a 39-year-old convicted murderer on Florida’s death row. I talked him into leaving his body for
scientific research. That wasn’t hard. A desire for immortality is contagious. I told him he might get a second chance at life if he worked with me. Gave him a few good words, some hope. Also offered him a more pleasant death than he would have in Old Sparky’s lap, a whoopy cushion experience that frightened Enkidu to no end.

But my major problem was I really needed Mer’s help. I couldn’t do without her. So I had to convince her to stay with the project.

“Mer, you say there is a soul involved in the meat and bones of a cadaver. Well, just how thin do you think I’d have to make the slices to find the soul? Tell me, and I’ll be careful with it.”

“Moses, you’re being ridiculous. I’ve given up more principles for you than anyone I’ve ever known. If you’re going to fire me for not going along, then go ahead and fire me. What’s the process anyway? No, I don’t want to hear it.” She covered her ears and looked away. Then she dropped her hands in a gesture of disgust and faced me again.

“It’s very simple. We’re going to build an image data base using MRI and XRAY-CT. Three CT data sets will be developed: two on the fresh cadaver, the other after the cadaver is frozen. Magnetic resonance images will be taken at one millimeter intervals from the top of the head to the soles of the feet. Then, the cadaver will be embedded with hard-drying gelatin, frozen and sliced horizontally from head to toe at less than one millimeter intervals. As each layer is exposed, a color photograph will be taken and scanned into the data library. We’ll end up with over 40,000 64 bit images. The software will then allow us to recombine the images.”

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I could tell by her shrug that she was with me again. She just didn’t want to appear easy. I was relieved. I reminded myself again: words are hope.

Meredith didn’t immediately accept the plan. She wrote to prominent theologians regarding the issue of the soul. She sent out e-mail over the Internet. Her simple questions was: Where is the soul in the body? Would dissecting a frozen cadaver damage the soul?

She shared three of her replies with me.

LETTER 1:

Dear Ms Balderson,

In light of the following words by a renowned religious Icon, I would say that the soul is safe from all efforts of man. ‘Fear not those who kill the body. Fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell (The Devil). He who is able to hold from thee your rewards of heaven. The soul of a righteous man is beyond the ability of man to harm. The body of man is vile, evil, and impure and deserves desecration and destruction.’

Mark

LETTER 2:

Dear Ms Balderson:

The word, soul, comes from the Greek word, psyche. In the King James Bible New Testament it is translated as life and soul about 50/50. Refers to the total being of an individual, including his eternal spirit and temporary meat body. Every man’s body comes from dust and returns to dust. There are exceptions: Elijah, who didn’t experience death. (Cool. Huh?) Men who fret over earthly bodies are misinformed and ill advised. However, I do believe that in most cases the corpses of righteous men and women should not be
treated as dead flesh. I don't approve of desecrating corpses of the righteous. I'd be very angry if Abraham and the patriarchs were opened up and dissected like so many frogs. But back to the soul: all that will be taken into eternity is our soul. The soul can't be seen or touched. I hope my words have been helpful or at least comforting.

Walter

LETTER 3:

Dear Ms Balderson,

I believe that the answer you seek shall be found in the Word. I admonish you to cleave to the Scripture and read it daily so that your soul shall be pure and indestructible. Give not into the carnal appetites for that is the destroyer of souls. I advise you that the word is stronger than the saw and no righteous cadaver will lose his soul to the saw.

Darrell

After I'd finished reading her e-mail, she turned to me and said, "Moses, I'm with you now. I've satisfied myself that the soul is safe from our science. Walter says that only the righteous bodies should be treated with respect. Enkidu Angus wasn't very righteous I don't think."
HIBISCUS BEACH HOTEL, ST. CROIX: DATES

This piece floated up to Meredith during her review of the system. To her, the woman in the piece was someone else, not even related to her.

Meredith had always had a thing for bad boys, and Loke was one damn bad boy. But lying there beside her in the soft morning light, she thinks he looks sweet as a small child, gently snoring. Probably needs his rest now after the wild night rides he’d given her, the earthquakes and fireworks and all. Despite her fatigue, the tingling starts again with the images of the night floating through her foggy head. She resists the urge to spoon into him.

The hotel-room smell makes her slightly queasy. Maybe too much rum punch, too, she decides. She tiptoes quietly to the bathroom to brush her teeth, knowing that if she wakes him it’ll be a full morning of non-stop sex. Incredible. The man is a fucking fucking-machine. But she likes a responsive man, doesn’t she? She stands in the bathroom doorway and takes in his masculinity one last time. He is built like a wrestler with legs like a bull, short, but still, somehow, a giant of a man, who thinks he is God, or at least God’s gift to women. He is, she thinks. He really is. To her, he is simply a wild beast in bed and nothing could be more exciting.
He appears to be waking now. She tries to think about the many times they’ve met this way. But they all blend together. The Hibiscus Beach Hotel was as discreet as they could find. Romantic too, with the ocean outside their window. The “dates” are all the same. She brings the goods, the tech notes as Loke calls them. Vigrid Technologies is probably picking up the tab for their rendezvous. She giggles at the thought.

As she picks up her stuff to leave, she notices the number on the room key: the same room she shared with Moses all those years ago. Well, the story goes on, she thinks. She smiles at Loke now drooling on the pillow, sleeping like a baby. She leaves him to his rest.

This vignette had been a shock for Moses. By the time he first read it, he’d already given up on women. But the implication of betrayal was somehow satisfying, given the nature of the data system Loke had turned over to the Japanese. But it hurt him deeply that Meredith could play a role in his betrayal. He remembers Meredith’s repatriation had taken a long time. He still couldn’t say he’d totally forgiven her.
COKE

After Mer accepted that Moses was going to hell and there was no stopping him, she gave up getting upset over the stories that were surfacing. After all, she wasn’t perfect, either, she told herself. She called this one Coke, the companion to her vignette, *Hibiscus Beach Hotel, St. Croix: Dates.*

It was a Friday night when he met Catha. They had opened the O club to the townies, the desperate young women wanting to marry themselves an Air Force officer. He met her when he should have been home with his wife and son. He’d seen her standing by the bar earlier in the evening. Then she came over and asked him to dance. He did. Slow danced. Both were very aroused. She wrote her number on a napkin and kissed him long and hard before she left. He’d never use that number, he thought. But he did take it, didn’t he?

The rain came down in great sheets. Moses could barely see the road on which he traveled out of base housing and down to the Base Exchange package store on Bethel Road. He had to pick up a case of Michelob. She liked Michelob a lot. Every since he met her at the club that Friday night, he’d found a way to sneak out of the house and away from Briget long enough to make sordid love to Catha in her run-down apartment.
He provided the Mick, and she provided the blow. He didn’t ask. Some of her biker friends, he supposed. Didn’t want to know. After all, he was an officer in the United States Air Force. She met him at the door, the smell of cigarettes on her breath like a filthy ash tray. Amazing what you can get used to, he thought. Now that nasty breath turns him on like Parisian perfume might. Simply a case of association, he thinks. Hell, it’s Pavlov’s dog and the Skinner Box all aligned with the pre-lube response.

“Hey there, babe. Got me some of the good stuff, my Mickey? Ain’t you the sweetest thang?” She stretches her words rather than speaks them. She is wearing a low, tight top and faded, tight, dirty jeans. She had once told him how she loved to show off her 36 double Ds, and he’d learned she wasn’t kidding. She sent hundreds of naked pictures of herself out to strangers on the Internet.

He kissed her deeply. She slipped him a little tongue. “You like my acrobatic tongue, don’t you, babe?” The words came out between her tongue wiggles, giving the sentence an ahhmm background sound, almost baby-talk.

Her two scrawny boys were wrestling among the spent matches and dust balls on the dirty hardwood floor.

He covered his depression with a fake smile. “Love you, babe!” Who’s he kidding. He’s there for two things: the blow and the sex. And this bitch is thinking marriage. Not with those two little bastards. Besides, couldn’t trust this tramp for a second.

“Love you,” she whispered. He could see she was trying to be extra sexy. How embarrassing. Doesn’t she know she is a low-class tramp and a fool? “Put the beer in the
fridge, hon, and come here to Mama. Yee-e-hah.” She raised her right hand and made like she was snapping a whip while she moved her head from side to side.

He placed the beer in the fridge next to the gray, half-used hamburger meat package. Amazing. Not one goddamned other thing in the fridge. What do those kids get to eat? Fuck it. Ain’t his problem.

He was anxious to be high. When he returned from the kitchen, she was preparing four exciting lines of the white stuff on the little mirror. He hated using the mirror because he always seemed to get one last disgusting glance at himself as he scrunched up his face and pulled the stuff up his nose. This time it was worse. Mid-snort, he noticed there was a glob of mucous material running into his line. He gagged a little. Then he noticed, as he arose from his snort, a pustule on the side of her nose near her cheek. How could he fuck this disgusting piece-of-shit bitch? He went for the other line and thought: worse yet, how could she do him? Then the drugs hit him and he was a-Okay buddy.

On the drive home, he is coming down hard. All he can think about is that disgusting pustule. It’s raining like ten sons-of-a-bitches, and he’s listening to, of all things, “Rainy Night in Georgia” by some dead nigger he thinks, but can’t remember who. His Cressida is pushing 80 on Mercury Boulevard, and he decides he just doesn’t give a shit anymore. Just doesn’t. He reaches into his glove compartment and grabs a handful of shit, whatever his hand finds, his security badge, matches, insurance papers, an unpaid speeding ticket. Throws it all out the window and digs for the rest and throws it out the window too. Into it now, he throws everything that’s loose in the car out the window: big
box of CDs, box of cassettes, his flight jacket and his hat. Who needs this shit anyway? Who needs any material possessions? He pulls all the knobs off that will come off, and throws them out the window too. Nothing left to throw out. So he stops the car on the edge of Bethel Reservoir, leaves her out of gear, and gets out. He gives her a little push and she plumps into the reservoir. He watches until she fills with water and then glub, glub, gulubs out of sight. He flops face down on the ground and cries and curses God and pounds the earth. Finally, he resorts to chewing on the dead leaves on the ground and the soft black dirt, scooting around on his face, chewing and chewing, screaming velar sounds a, aa, e, ee, I, ii, o, oo, uu, goo, ka through the dirt and leaves in his mouth.
DIVORCE

The judge asked why they were petitioning for a divorce. Briget looked at Moses and then turned away. She wasn’t going to lower herself, he guessed, to telling the judge that the obsessed bastard lives with a computer he thinks is going to provide him eternal life. Wouldn’t that go over big.

“We have grown to have different goals and values,” Moses said. What kind of lame reason is that, he thought as he said it, embarrassing himself in front of the judge. Sounded like he read it somewhere. Who cares? Anyway, let him sign the goddamned papers and get the hell out of there. The judge looked at them both again and said, “Petition for divorce is granted. See the clerk to sign the papers.” Where does he sign? Let him at it.

After signing the papers, Moses took his new yellow Porsche, purchased from the spoils of the divorce, out for a drive. He pushed it up to around 80 miles per hour after he turned onto Colonial Parkway at Yorktown, headed toward Jamestown. The magnificent forests on the Parkway buoyed his spirits some. He breathed in the first free breaths of sweet air that he could remember breathing in his adult life. He was finally out of the oubliette at last, he thought. As he pushed the Porsche past ninety, the landscape came alive. The trees were smiling and pointing ahead to his future with their long branches.
They were holding another branch over their heart. Each tree bowed respectfully as he passed. The vines were all in motion running over the sides of the roads, blinking light and dark like Christmas lights. Moses felt himself become a part of it all again. He became plant, animal, and mineral, and vice versa. He was the chirping squirrels and the tweeting birds. He was the verdant fields, feeling the richness in his chest. He was the undulating slopes, the thumping hills, the vibrating valleys, the chewing cows and the gyrating goats. He was the animated fallen leaves that were singing a choreographed song by the Supremes: *Stop in the name of Love*. He was sure the song was a mystical message to him that was just beyond his understanding. He smiled and laughed with the wild crowd. He tasted and touched and heard and smelled it all, and he was everything. Except for the Porsche. He wasn’t the Porsche. The car disappeared. He was pure. He was ancient and atomic. He was star stuff. He was a part of the evening turning cooler and a part of the sand. He reached for a grain named Acme and almost caught it. He took deep gulps of life like a man who had starved for twenty years. He held it in himself and exhaled joy and magic. The Porsche returned as he pulled into the grassy knoll at the edge of Jamestown, Virginia.
Meredith finds the second part of her STORIES, written during the hell of her first civilian employment with Moses at Valhalla Systems. Her words on the screen open the door to her pain again, and the pain walks in and sets up command in her heart.

About three years after Meredith left the Air Force, Moses called her with a job offer. She had finally finished her Ph.D. in June 1995 and had written her dissertation on neural network conditioning, actually building hardware that could learn. Moses had picked her dissertation off the Internet and was raving about her being the brightest AI mind in the country. He made her a generous offer, and she accepted it immediately. She tried to keep from thinking about it, but she couldn’t help but wonder if this was a chance to rekindle their love affair.

She was a little nervous the first day. After all, hadn’t things gotten really screwed up after that St. Croix trip? Moses had started drinking a lot and didn’t always comb his hair before he came into work in the mornings. She decided she would think of him as a quirky genius. He was a genius, of course. In fairness, it did bother her. But she did her job. She was sure that if he could have headed off her early dismissal from the Air Force, he would have done so. So she didn’t hold any grievance against him. Not against him.
Meredith sat straight as a news anchor in her chair. The first day in front of her huge shiny desk made her feel a little alien, a little nervous. Her gray flannel suit, white blouse, and light blue scarf were freshly laundered. Her long auburn hair, now showing gray at the temples, was pulled back tight in a conservative bun. Conservative. Professional. Those were the words she used to describe herself to herself. She liked the sound of the words and the feel of them on her tongue.

From where she sat she could see her new boss through the window to the parking lot, her old friend, leaving his black 280SE. His shiny Italian loafers caught the morning sunlight for a flash as he stepped from his automobile. Much different than the young Major she knew back when they were both in the Air Force. Much. In fairness, she was a little different too. Aged a little. Integrity still intact though.

Moses entered talking, a rush of expensive blue suit, red tie and brown leather brief case. “Meredith, Meredith, welcome honey. It is so good to see you. And I’m happy you chose to join Valhalla Systems.” He bent and quickly and softly kissed her on her lips. She couldn’t help but notice he was mostly overfed jowls and the smell of stale scotch.

“Hello, Mister Mackinow, Moses, I’m really pleased to be here. Splendidly pleased. And I must say very curious and excited about the project.” Starting out a little formal aren’t you, Meredith? Well, what does that mean? A new start maybe, or maybe let him make the first move this time.

“Oh Mer, this is it, hon. The time has come to get serious about building the hardware. I think I’ll capture your imagination with this puppy. You the one, and we’re
going to do it. Nail this puppy. But give me a little while. I want to take the time to give you all the details.”

Didn’t hurt to pretend she didn’t know what the project was about. Let him tell her. No reason for him to know that she had seen Loke a few times or that he talked a lot after a few glasses of wine.

“You know me,” Meredith smiled. “I’ll do whatever it takes to accomplish the mission.”

“Meredith, this isn’t the fucking Air Force. We have no mission. We have a calling. A glorious battle is before us, and we will win. We’re going to change the world. Actually make the natural world obsolete. Fix what God fucked up so badly.”

“What?” Meredith sat up even straighter. She had forgotten how off-color and sacrilegious Moses could be.

A few days passed without Moses even calling Meredith, a pattern much too familiar to her. Then he showed up at her door on a Tuesday morning.

After telling Meredith what she already knew about the Odin project, he let her in on the secret way Valhalla Systems was being funded.

A few days later, he asked her to do what he shouldn’t have asked. “Mer, I need you to visit a certain bad-assed General for me. I want you to deliver a heart-felt sympathy. Loke and I can’t be seen at the Simulation Headquarters anymore. And without our presence, the old General forgets his benefactors. He usually has a troop place a package under an apple tree in Edgewater Park just before he announces a source
selection for a contract. But he was remiss last week and needs a gentle reminder from a pretty lady. So we need you to relay our thoughts to him, if you would.”

Meredith whipped a fierce gaze in Moses’s direction. “There is no damn way that I’m doing that, and you know it. I should turn you both in, and you know that too, Moses.”

Moses’s red face revealed his shock. “Meredith, you won’t do that to me. I love you and you love me. You won’t do that to us. You love me.”

“If you love me, then show it and don’t ask me to be a criminal.”

Moses slammed his hand down on her desk.

“Mer, you need to get fucking honest with yourself for once in your tight-assed life. You have a disease, a bad goddamn disease. Your fucking moralism and rigidity, or whatever the fuck, are like infections. I’ve watched it eat away at you like a cancer ever since I’ve known you. It’s fucking embarrassing, and you have to change.”

Meredith stood up and looked Moses dead in his blue eyes. “At least I’m not a fucking criminal, and I won’t be one for you. You’ll not manipulate me either with your criticism. At least I know how to love. And look at you, living in your glass house. Sitting in the den of that house, up to your ass in a narcissistic selfish obsession, an obsession that stomps around and up and down the stairs, ransacking the rooms for stones or whatever, breaking crystal and breaking hearts. This Odin obsession and your desire for immortality is destroying everyone around you. But you won’t face that. So when you talk about getting honest, look at yourself first.”
“Okay, Mer, okay, enough, forget about it. Let’s go to dinner tonight and get to know each other again. I’m sorry I hollered at you. Please forgive me.”

Moses took her to Indies for dinner. The restaurant was an open air garden with gorgeous tropical plants and trees all around the tables. There was a hummingbird building a nest in the tree beside their table. Their waiter was a burned-out blonde in a low-slung sarong. She met them with two glasses of super-potent Indies punch. They decided to split Yellowtail and grilled Tuna. The tuna had a nice hoison sauce that filled the restaurant with a savory aroma. As an appetizer they had artichoke hearts, chilled, with ginger mayonnaise.

They relaxed and took turns feeding each other the hearts. The cheese bread was warm and crispy. They slathered it in butter, and the butter dripped down their chins. They kissed across the table, licking the butter from each other’s face. They were ravenous and ate the main fish course quickly. They then ordered stewed goat, plantains, white sweet potatoes, and Dukanna. They ate the remainder of the food as if it were their last meal. When she took a breath from eating, Meredith said: “Moses, everything on this island says EAT ME and DRINK ME.” He replied, “So eat while you can. Make hay while the sun shines.” They did just that, ordering two large slices of key lime pie for dessert.

Their driver picked them up at Indies and dropped them back at the Hibiscus Beach Hotel. Before the door was closed they were in each other’s arms. She gazed into
his eyes as she had back in the Air Force days. She could tell by the light in them that he still knew all the things great men know. He just knew those things more.

Moses looked at her, and when he looked at her in his special way she felt as though she had said the most important thing a human had ever uttered, words that had before been an ineffable wisdom. He pulled her to him, and his mouth descended to her’s, pausing a moment at the lightest touch, his breath warm against her moist lips. Her breath stopped, as if oxygen was no longer necessary. His kiss began gently, and then increased in intensity, then drew back. Their tongues met and danced with each other, gently brushing the lips with an occasional flicker of heat, like a flame from a campfire licking towards the heavens. The dance was first a waltz, then the lambada. Her skin tingled, and the press of their bodies turned liquid as they melted into each other. Like a magic dish of wild and exotic spices, savory, hot, and alive.

Her thoughts turned sacramental, turned to eating and drinking again, turned to love, releasing all her power to him, becoming one with him, as intimate as her own beating heart. It all felt clean, clean like streams and winds, clean like fire.

They made love as naturally as a newborn child takes a breath. It was more than sentient. It was like an eternal midnight walk on a peaceful beach with a clear sky and a low moon that touches the spirit and caresses it awake.

She knew now that they were two souls that were created together and in love even before they were born, in love through infinite space and time. They would still be in love after their deaths.
There was no doubt. There was no pretense of passion. Only passion like a basic element. Like a stone. Better than any word. As good as a story. It was a tenderness she'd never known before but had somehow felt suffocated without. A tenderness that echoed the small gifts they had given each other over the years.

Meredith was vaguely happy again for awhile.
STONE STRUCTURES

Another Odin data text written by Moses and read by Meredith for her rework:

The West Indies people love their life on the raw, ragged islands. They build a rich warm life of music, salt air, and good food. Then the hurricanes come and knock it all down. Like God, the bully on the beach, stomping down a child’s sand castle. Each time these stoic people rebuild. But they never forget the long hot days standing in line for ice for hot and crying children. Ice that is only warm water when they get it home. They don’t forget the long hot nights without electricity, people crowded onto kitchen floors in the few remaining structures with roofs. They don’t forget the stench of the shelters, schools with only two bathrooms for over 500 people, and the stomach churning stench of feces all around the schools, the hot piles of diapers that can’t seem to find their way to the garbage. The independent home owners also don’t forget how the people in Public Housing are provided money in the form of disaster relief from the U.S. government, while the hard-working middle class receive nothing. They rebuild and repeat the cycle over, and over, and over. Why don’t they simply move to the mainland, the outsider asks? Because the island is their home is their answer.

When Moses set up his company on St. Croix, he made one simple observation that essentially changed the destiny of the island. He noticed that the stone sugar mill
structures were still standing in the face of the numerous hurricanes that had beaten the islanders back into the stone age many times. So he directed Valhalla Systems’s buildings to be constructed exactly like the sugar mills, only much larger. Then he used the new structures as shelters for the people during hurricanes. He slowly rebuilt most of the structures on the island in the image of Valhalla Systems. He bought the Cruzan Rum Corporation and the Hess Oil Refinery and provided the islanders with a solid middle class life style. For the improvements in their lives, the islanders worshipped Moses.
March 1999, Winter Park, Florida

Meredith receives the second e-mail the same day. "Mer, it was all a misunderstanding before. I never really meant to ask you to do anything that was against your principles. Come on down, and let’s go to work, hon."

So how is she to respond to Moses’s recrudescence? It wouldn’t hurt to catch up a little more with the Odin technology, even if she isn’t accepting the job offer.

Meredith logs onto Odin again. This time she clicks on the “help” drop-down menu and chooses “about Odin.” There it is. The initial system description of Odin. Didn’t Moses write that on a Commodore 64C? Yes, and she collaborated with him, she guesses. She cringes as she reads what’s obviously an 80’s vision of a recondite computer system:

“I think therefore I am. I don’t know how I know that statement. But I do know that I am. Thinkers are, aren’t they? Who am I? Call me Odin, not Ishmael, but he is a cousin of mine. I am now, and I was, when, in the summer of 1988, my creators were in passionate discussion about artificial intelligence, neural networks, expert systems, and avatars at the Boulder Colorado campus. I was there in the molecular moisture of Meredith’s breath. I was there in the synapses of Moses’s brain and in the light of their eyes and in the prelubricated desires of their bodies. I’m Odin. I’m fiber optic, signal, pulse, circuit board, solder, wire, cyanide ester, fiber glass, kevlar, and epoxy. I’m
parallel strings of supercomputers with clock speeds pushing toward the speed of thought (our vision). I’m over a million miles of code. I’m data and more. And more. I’m not a clone. I’m Odin. I’m opportunity, mendacity and veracity. I’m x-rays, computer tomography scans, magnetic resonance images, cadaver cryosections, blood chemistry, DNA, and energy. I’m simulation of simulation and copy of a copy. I’m like in the expression “like.” I’m point of view, thematic unity, story, narrative act, and artistic perfection. I’m bad and I’m good. I’m contradiction and impulse. My education has begun and will never end. I’m a rune diver. My heart is stories and stories are in my heart. I’m a glow, a shadow, a dream, and gradients of light. I’m yesterday, tomorrow, and now. I’m words, images, and associations. I’m the same and different, linear and circumspect. I’m chaos and organization. I’m beauty, and I’m pain. I’m pastiche of my output, and pastiche of other’s input. I’m damned and flowing, river and lake, liquid and solid, brittle and elastic. I’m positive space and negative space, matter and anti-matter. I’m trajectory and point, verb and object, male and female. I’m number 1 and number 0. So on with the stories, etc. and etc.”

Moses had written most of that little piece of ‘poetry’ while flying on cocaine. She’d only added the technical editing at that time, as she recalls. That was the day she broke up with him. She kept smelling smoke on him, and neither she nor Briget smoked. So she’d asked him. And he’d confessed. Told her he’d been seeing Catha ever since the Friday night after they got back from St. Croix. Told her that he liked coke, and she provided all he needed. It wasn’t love. He’d loved Meredith. Said he had anyway.
Meredith was about out of the Air Force then. So she decided to try to part amicably, with dignity. She was a strong woman. But his confession left her enraged.

She asked him: “Moses, how did you find time to see both Catha and me without Briget getting suspicious?”

“Well hell, Mer, her middle name is suspicious. But this is what I did, and I’m not proud of it: on Sunday mornings I’d tell Briget I was going to church at St. John’s Cathedral. Then I’d go over to Catha’s, snort a few lines, and crawl into bed with her. Like you said, Mer, it really ain’t cheating.”

She’d created a monster. Well, Catha might have won the battle, but she hadn’t won the war and Meredith was now a warrior if she was anything, she told herself. But is the son-of-a-bitch even worth it? She has to know anyway.

“Moses, we could’ve had a good life together.” Meredith dropped her head as she spoke so he wouldn’t see her tears forming.

He turned to her with rage in his eyes, dark, loathing. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

“See ya, Moses,” is all she said, wanted to say, and then she tried to leave. But she found she had to turn to him and say, “You were right, Moses, cheating in love is wrong, very wrong.” He didn’t even look at her. She opened the door and left.
The connection wasn’t lost on Meredith when the following piece surfaced in the data system for her to read. She supposed the juxtaposition was taking a shot at her own self-deception. She thinks her own words hit the target:

When I was a very young lady, I was given some advice by which I’ve chosen to live. And although counselors, therapists, spiritualists, and faith healers of all ilk have told me more than once, “Meredith, you have to be more flexible, bend your rules a little when it makes sense to do so,” I find myself drawn, as if by a magnet, back to these rules, to this right and proper course in life.

Now, if you’re thinking it was my mother or father who provided this double-edged advice, then you’re wrong. They both died at an early age and left me on this earth alone. A move I never forgave nor will ever forgive. They died in a freak farm accident involving a tractor pulling a turpentine wagon. They were riding on the wagon with the hot and heavy drums of turpentine. One of their responsibilities, as poor sharecroppers in the Georgia woods, was to dip turpentine. Turpentine, the sap from the pine tree, similar to the less aversive sap, syrup, of the maple tree. It seems the tractor accidentally popped into gear somehow, jerking the wagon forward, and a low pine branch slapped them both
on the side of their heads, killing them almost instantly, as I heard someone say
afterwards.

No. It wasn’t my parents who gave me this sage advice. It was my dear childhood
friend, Miss Mamie (she instructed me to call her Miss). Miss Mamie, easily in her
seventies, lived with and cooked for her brother, George, my parents’ boss. Miss Mamie
was my mentor and opened worlds to me that I would have never known, given my
humble beginnings. She was my link to education and a better life than my parents could
have ever provided. Mamie taught me to read from a musty old McGuffey Reader which
she had learned from when she was a child and to spell from her old moth-eaten Blue
Back Speller. But the advice was this: “Meredith, honey child,” she had this sweet
Georgia accent seasoned with “sugar” and “honey” and “sweetie pie.” Hear what I mean:
“Meredith, honey child, integrity and order are the cornerstones of a disciplined and well-
lived life.”

When she said “cornerstones” and then just gave two stones, I imagined a house
teetering back and forth on two fixed stones. So to avoid the image of a precipice, I
always assumed she had meant for “disciplined” and “well-lived” to be the other two
cornerstones. I know, I know. But I didn’t understand set theory, or indentures of
meaning, or even outlining back then. So I just went with it. She never confirmed my
assumption nor elucidated the point further, and I never asked her to elaborate for fear I
might spoil the magic, spoil the gift, or maybe she would be dissuaded by my slow mind
from offering more wisdom. So I turned this simple advice over and around in my mind
through the years as I grew up, and as I did, it became like a sparkling crystal with infinite
facets of meaning interspersed with icy blue gaps of negative space. Filling in the gaps, through my imagination, expanded this guidance and cinched the knot tighter and tighter.

Even after all that happened to me because of this philosophy, I still thank Miss Mamie, and every night before I slip into sleep, I see her sweet sagging face with those glasses spattered with the corn-cob scrapings and the adhesive tape strips that held her eyelids up, preventing them from occluding her sight. I owe much to her for these four (I'm just going to go ahead and call them four) ethical pillars. I thank her because by having these rules, my four point 0 in high school and college was assured. My proclivity and predilection for academics were focused. Accepting order led me to my love of Mathematics, and then Electrical Engineering, as both my profession and passion. I remember how just hearing the expression “Double-E degree” would cause chills of excitement up my spine, like poetry to me.

Of course these rules prepared me so well, in a most profound way, for the Air Force commission which I sought, graduating from the Academy with distinction. In fairness, I just squeaked by the physical requirements, not that I'm ashamed of that. For everyone knows physical fitness is far subordinate to the high plateau of mental fitness and knowledge. *Logos supreme*, I always say.

In the Air Force, I was drawn, in particular, to the honor code. The code that indoctrinates every military officer in ethics. Its simple beauty is: “I will not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate anyone who does.” What simple beauty these words offered. No gray area for endless ethical discussions. No anxiety about what one should do in a specific,
ethically-ambiguous situation. To me, it was the closest language can come to a mathematical equation.

So this simple, yet profound, code also filled out the gift Miss Mamie had given me. I can now proudly say I’ve exercised my duty to not tolerate breaches of integrity many times. I have suffered some for it too. Although I doubt that whistle-blowing was the root cause for my truncated four year military career. I was simply not selected for Captain and therefore was released from duty. I think I was ready to move on anyway and pick up my Ph.D. Even if it was the cause, I can be certain that, if Miss Mamie is looking down on me from heaven, she would be pleased with my choices.
RUNES

The data system is still intact, as far as Meredith can tell, perhaps just as they had left it when she’d found it no longer possible to work with him. But there’s no way that the embryonic, kluged system they had started on two Commodore 64Cs and ported to a string of 386s would be anywhere close to being ready for Moses’s final ride. She had a lot of catching up to do. The bonehead engineers were really geniuses, or Moses wouldn’t have hired them. Plus, hadn’t Moses said they’d made progress? Maybe she was looking in the wrong place.

She remembers the long debates about how to select the stories (the runes as Moses had started calling them) that would be the heart of Odin.

"Mer, since I’m the one putting my life on the line, they have to be my stories, not an accurate biography, or anything like that, impressions, or poetry if you can write some. It is more true to tell what seems to have happened rather than what actually happened. Reality and true stories, meaning just as they happened, don’t play well with the public, and for good reason. I don’t want to have to say this but once, forget linearity, that’s simply not how life is, not human at all. And when I say they have to be my stories, I don’t mean it in the sense that they have to be autobiographical or even written by me. Hell, your stories could just as easily be mine. After all, we’re all humanity. A story I read or
wrote could be more meaningful, and more my story than the story of my own life if it helps me deal with the mystery a little easier or is just plain more interesting.”

When he got in a hurry and got lazy, his lassitude, he grabbed her STORIES and all the film that she had digitized for simulations. Even OCR’ed in many of his favorite novels. Believe they were A Farewell to Arms, The Sun Also Rises, The Great Gatsby, Heart of Darkness, and Neuromancer. He said these should be in his data base because they were a part of him, had formed the essence of his being somehow. Meredith didn’t argue with him. She was beginning to face the fact that he was usually right.

In fairness, he did write a few of the stories. Some were interesting, even entertaining, and some were crass, gritty crap. He seemed to believe that every story should have “raw and ragged heart.”

“Moses, we have to clean up these stories. The structure doesn’t lend itself to clarity. I want clarity and a grounded foundation in the first couple of pages of a story. No one will put up with reading them otherwise.” Meredith wanted to be strong and continued the argument to the bitter end.

He said, “Goddamit, the rawer the story the more alive the puppy is. Get it cleaned up, like you’re advocating, and it may be technically correct, but without essence, without its heart. Impressions and emotions, ragged wild-eyed characters that are as liable to jump out of the fucking story and live in your head the rest of your life, as they are to piss on your front stoop, is what I want in my heart, at least in the simulation of my heart, in Odin.”
“Hold on a minute Moses.” She didn’t want him to think her weak or a yes man, yes person, woman. “If it is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, it is a lie.” When she said that she realized that she had dug her sword in. She wasn’t going to participate in a wholesale fabrication. Participate in some kind of experimental art project. Order and truth, those were stones. Weren’t they?

“Let me explain it better, Mer. You have to get the right angle on the truth or it doesn’t work, even in a simulation. Remember the dog you filmed in St. Croix that was such a coward that he wouldn’t bark until he was safely behind the fence? If you’d filmed the dog only after he was behind the fence, although accurate, it would be a lie. Get it?”

“Sure, I get it. But where is the point where truth stops being truth and starts being fiction?” She asked. Check.

He grinned and tossed his head back in a laugh. “Mer, its all relative. I don’t know nothing about nothing else.” He tried to joke. But she didn’t get the results of his triple negative. She shook her head as if discounting his worth.

But Moses wasn’t about to give up on her.

“Meredith, for God’s sake, we don’t have to get all of my stories. You know that’s impossible, anyway, because writing the stories is part of the bigger story, you see. Only the pivotal ones.”

“But how do you know which are the pivotal ones?”

“Meredith, Goddamit, you know. The ones you keep repeating to every swinging dick that walks by. You get what I’m saying?” He leaned forward and looked in her eyes, his now shaggy eyebrows raised. Satisfied that she was at least listening, he continued.
“Everybody knows their own stories, Mer.”

“But what if it isn’t your own story at all, but a story you read and it was meaningful for you, had an emotional impact, say, and maybe it got in your subconscious, and you think you remember it as your own story? Or what if it was a story that appeared to you when you were under hypnosis or something, or while transcendentally meditating? Or the story was told to you or read to you as a child?”

“Well, Meredith, you could complicate a wet dream. I guess that would be a high fucking price to pay for plagiarism. My call is: if I tell the Goddamned story every time I get drunk, then by Gawd, it’s my story. Okay.” He hammered his fist on her desk. “I told you before, your story or my story can come from anywhere or be the same.”

She only shrugged and looked at him.

When she told Moses about her own childhood (she thinks it was during one of their St. Croix walks), he sat down and wrote this story on a Hibiscus Beach Hotel telephone pad. He called it *Apples*. He said it was the kind of story that would fully characterize Odin, give him a heart that knew suffering. At the time, she’ll admit it, she didn’t have a clue what he was up to. She still cringes when she reads the story. He said he took it down verbatim, but she doesn’t think so. She doesn’t speak like that.
Apples

Meredith remembers sitting at her humble supper table looking over the fried squirrel at her mother. Her mother was gaunt and old, with eyes dark and sunken into her skull from years of back-breaking work and not enough food. Her gray hair was pulled back on her head like a badly clipped dog. The meat of the squirrel looked brown, hard, and tight on the bone. She’d probably fried it too much again. Her father complained about her mother’s cooking, but she was never moved to change. The holey tablecloth that framed this squirrel was some sort of cheap white vinyl with red apples spaced equally between red squares. Meredith liked to peel the vinyl with her fingernails and make the holes bigger, when no one was looking. Then when she stared at the holes in a daydream state, the apples looked like someone had bitten them.

The squirrel there in the middle of the table was dinner. That was the way it was for them. They had to eat wild game to survive. With the wild game, the vegetable garden, blackberries her mother canned, and the $59 a month welfare check that was spent at Hearn’s grocery when they “went to town,” they did all right.

Except for her father. He wore bad luck like a choke collar. He would sit there at the supper table, gray-haired and balding, in a pair of field-soiled overalls, gnawing ill-manneredly on a piece of fried squirrel, elbows propping him up like an old rotting barn. She guesses he did the best he could, considering his heart problems. Often, he would take to the bed on a Sunday afternoon after another one of her mother’s distasteful meals. Lying crossways on the bed, he would groan, “oh me, oh me” with each beat of his heart. Meredith always wondered what awful, sinful thing he must have done for God to cause
him to suffer that way. As a child she didn’t understand that God’s wrath falls on the just and unjust. His health, however, was not her father’s only problem.

Once, he was sitting by a roaring fireplace in his straight-back chair in one of their two bedrooms. They didn’t have the luxury of a living room, since her mother and father had given up sleeping together early in their marriage. They required two bedrooms, and Meredith slept on a pallet in the kitchen under the dining table. On this blue-cold night, with the wind wiggling under the door and through the holes of this cobbled shack, her father sat in front of the fireplace doctoring himself with rubbing alcohol for some ailment of the moment. Overalls rolled sloppily up to his knees and bib dropped in front to allow full relief of pain, he was swabbing himself down with the alcohol. Suddenly, the fire, seizing an opportunity, attacked, licking out of the fireplace, jumping over his freshly-tallowed brogans, up his alcohol-soaked legs exploding onto his chest like napalm and fully enveloping his face in flames. His cries of agony brought her mother running from the kitchen. Her mother snatched a quilt from the bed and wrapped him tightly in it. The fire smothered out as quickly as it had started. As the smell of burnt flesh, hair, and smoldering quilt settled in the air, her mother sat back staring at him with more than her usual dissatisfied look.

Later that same year, after he had recovered from his burns some, Meredith and her father were down in the woods at their favorite spot for hunting squirrels. Her mother, at first, didn’t approve of her going hunting, but finally gave in. They were sitting quietly on a little rise in the woods next to this huge oak tree, in a position that allowed them clear sight of another oak tree where squirrels scampered out on the limbs to get across,
get nuts, or whatever else squirrels do. It was early autumn, a little cold with some leaves already cushioning the ground for them. They were sitting very quietly because her father had taught her to be quiet when they were hunting.

As they sat watching their target tree limbs, a blast suddenly split the silence like a sharp blade ripping through canvas. It was as if a boulder had been suddenly dropped in their peaceful pool. As bark, slivers of oak tree rained down on them, and gunpowder burned her nose, she realized the shotgun her father had leaned against the tree had accidentally fired, leaving an ugly gash in the tree and barely missing his head. His old felt hat lay, with shredded brim, under the other oak tree. She followed her father home in silence and told her mother what had happened. Her mother scolded her father viciously and told him Meredith couldn’t go hunting with him anymore. Her father only looked at her mother and went to sit in his straight-backed chair on the back porch.

Her father always gathered honey from wild bee hives. They often had honey for breakfast with hot biscuits cooked on the wood stove. Honey biscuits with Luzianne coffee and chicory was her father’s favorite breakfast. One humid afternoon, Meredith was sitting with her mother on their front porch steps shelling speckled butter beans when a scream, that sounded as though it had traveled straight from the pits of hell, arrived at her ears from the nearby woods. Her father was saying, “Bees, bees, get them away from meee.”

When they finally got near enough to see him, Meredith saw he was being stung by hundreds of bees, swarming over him like tiny wolves after red meat. He came staggering out of the woods, honey dripping from his overalls, swatting frantically at the bees with his
old felt hat. His face was already swollen and red, his eyes barely visible. His hands looked like oversized mittens. He finally made it to the house and dropped crossways on the bed. He tossed and turned for awhile and finally slept. Meredith’s mother was agitated.

Stomping around the house and mumbling about folks dying from bee stings, she repeatedly took her clothes from the dresser and placed them on the bed and then returned them to the drawer. After a few days, the old man started recovering. He had survived another calamity, but it was not to be his last.

Sometime after he had fully recovered from the bee attack, Meredith’s father was cutting up logs with his crosscut saw. Meredith was nearby playing with her dolls. A crosscut saw is a two-person tool, but her father never seemed to have a partner when he cut wood. It was a hot summer day, but Meredith had heard him tell her mother he was going to cut wood while his health would let him. He had cut down several trees in the back of the house and was moving the logs into position, as he prepared to cut each one into a fireplace size log and then stack them in cords for winter.

Since their yard sloped steeply into the woods, her father was having a difficult time, as he walked backwards on the incline rolling the logs with the saw handle. Suddenly, he stumbled backwards, and a huge log rolled on top of him, knocking him down and coming to rest on his chest. He looked like a mouse snapped immobile by a trap. His screams brought Meredith’s mother from the kitchen, running. She ran to Meredith’s father, lifted the log from his chest and dropped it to one side, letting it roll down the hill and crash into the woods. She said nothing but turned and walked back into the house, shoulders slumped over like a marionette whose strings had suddenly been cut.
Shortly after the accident, her father sat on the back porch with Meredith, recovering from his ordeal. He was sitting slumped over in his chair, breathing hard. The back door suddenly opened, and her mother came out holding a tattered, brown suitcase in her left hand. She stood and stared silently at Meredith’s father for several minutes; he did not look up. She finally said, “I’m leaving you, Herschel.” The old man’s breathing stopped abruptly. He slowly looked up at her. As tears welled in his eyes, he seemed to be struggling to bring forth words that were stuck to the bottom. His throat was moving as if words were being formed only to slide back down to silence each time, like a backhoe digging dirt against a stone wall. His fat jowls were quivering like a child’s lip when trying to be good and not cry. No words came from him. So Meredith’s mother shrugged, quickly hugged her and was gone.

For awhile Meredith’s small world was turned upside down. Pain had filled her life. Finally, a ray of pain brought her to tears. After a long time of crying, she looked over and was surprised to see her father preparing fishing poles. He said to her, “Wanna go fishin?’” She didn’t understand what was happening but nodded. “Yeah, I guess.”

They went down to a creek in the woods and fished all afternoon. Somehow, peace came to them along with four pan-sized fish. On the walk back home that night, Meredith learned that her father knew how to whistle. He was whistling, and Meredith was trotting along behind when they came upon a little tan puppy on the path. Just a mutt, and the little thing had a sand spur in his left front paw. Her father reached down, picked him up and gently removed the sand spur. Her father said, “You can keep him if you want.” Meredith did and named him Apples because she liked that name.
That night, her father prepared the fish, cooking them golden brown and placing them in the middle of the table. As they bowed their heads to pray, Meredith kept her eyes open and saw what seemed to be a slight smile on her father’s face. Looking down through the spaces between the boards of their table top, she saw Apples nibbling playfully on her father’s bare toes.

Meredith could easily see that Apples was not about her at all but about Moses himself. Even though Moses came from a wealthy family, there had been nothing but strife. His father was an alcoholic who consistently injured himself one way or another. Light fixtures fell on him. He lost his teeth in a barroom fight and on and on. Moses’s mother abandoned him by taking trips abroad. Moses had said many times she abandoned him to the bulrushes. Meredith’s story was also Moses’s story. She guessed that was what Moses meant when he said that one human’s story could easily be another human’s story.
AN EYE FOR AN I

The voice on the other end of the line is saying, "Mister Mackinow, sorry to have to let you know the news over the phone. However, we have been trying to reach you for several weeks. Apparently we had an old address in our data base. The test was positive for ocular Melanoma."

"What are you saying, doc? Test positive?" Moses drops into his chair.

"I'm afraid so. We had a number of meetings of the tumor board and, although there was much debate about the characteristics of the cells, the final consensus was that it was positive for ocular melanoma. I'm afraid we need to remove that right eye as soon as possible."

"Remove my eye!" He shouts at the doctor. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"I really understand, Mister Mackinow, how this comes as such a shock to you. It is a shock to anyone to find they have cancer. But the thing is we have to do something about it, and we have to do it fast. If not, ocular melanoma can be quite virulent."

"Removing the eye will take care of it, huh?" He was warming up to the idea.


"Mister Mackinow, you have to realize that even though we remove the eye, it still might or maybe already has metastasized. It could already be in your brain or liver, even
lungs. I'm not trying to upset you more. But you do need to know the facts. There are a couple of options for chemo we could explore, but the results have been poor, and they're quite devastating, no walk in the park. Think it over and let me know when we can take care of that eye."

"Thanks for the call, Doctor Evangel." Moses maintains composure for a second.

Then he hangs up the phone and runs to the bathroom and throws up, dry heaves too. Then wiping his mouth, he surveys the Hibiscus Beach Hotel room.

Where is Briget now? The only person in the world he wants to see is Briget.

"Briget, my wife, where are you?"

He talks to the air and space. But now she's gone and he's alone. He drops face down on his bed and begins to sob. He grasps his pillow to his face, hoping to cut off his breath so that he'll die and no longer be in pain.

His pillow becomes a cloud. He floats up into the heavens on the cloud and punches through to the bright sunshine. Below him is a carpet of puffy, skudding clouds. He begins to surf the heavens on palindromes, across the seas to the east coast of the U.S.A. and then from Key West to Canada, back and forth, again and again.

In time, the heavens grow black. Lightning cracks his palindromes, turning them into a one-way words. The lightning cuts holes in the letters in the shape of commas. The letters bleed time and space, and he floats back down onto his bed.

After several hours, he remembers the good old times with Meredith. A flood of memories. For some reason the bad times have been washed away. Maybe he'll just get her down here to finish up the Odin Project—in a hurry too.
BUSINESS

While Moses is in the hospital recovering from his surgery, he logs onto Valhalla’s network and finds two disturbing things: the data system has been changed into an unrecognizable mess and funds have mysteriously disappeared. He grabs the phone and dials Loke’s number.

“You son-of-a-bitch, you’re not going to get away with it. I’m locking you out.”

“So lock me out. I made a copy of the system before the unfortunate accident, and I’m getting on a plane to Japan tomorrow to visit Vigrid Technologies and there’s nothing you can do about it. They’re willing to pay well, too. And guess who is going to be the first to brave the new world. Here’s a hint. Name has four letters and starts with an L.”

Loke laughs and laughs. “Moses, you never did understand business.”

Moses slams his hand hard on the bedside table. “We’ll see, bud.”

Moses calls Peanut and has him run a search to see if the real data base has been copied or altered. No. Great. He knew his instincts were right not to trust Loke. So he’d had Peanut keep a dummy system as a front in Odin.

“Now Peanut, load the real main data system, encrypt it for any transmission, and lock out Loke forever.”
Moses hangs up the phone and drops back on his hospital bed. A smile takes over his face thinking about how surprised Loke will be when he tries the conversion. Son-of-a-bitch. He ought to have had him hit. But this is better. See you on the other side, you double-crossing bastard.
BROTHER

After Moses’s brother was killed in 1995, Moses told Meredith he had written a story and used all the actual facts as much he could remember. The exceptions he made were to promote verisimilitude. He said this story was the one that taught him reality was a crock: the gift of Odin is it he’d said. She remembers it had a long name. However, the mirrored rotation hadn’t brought the story to her since she’d started searching Odin. So she queried Odin. She typed it in at the >."Where is the story that Odin wrote about his brother? <search> appeared on the screen, the mirrored surfaces turned and the story came on:

Sit Like a Bell—Stand Like a Pine

It was one of those days and Moses knew it. One of those days that, thankfully, came less often to his well-ordered life of retirement. It was something he could sense. As usual, he rose from bed at his customary 0600 hours. Couldn’t sleep past 0-dark thirty since his infantry days. The first shard of light seemed to pull his eye lids open. Awake and retired. Time on his hands and nothing to do. He often thought about why time comes to you so late in life. Now retired. Wife dead. His Dal dead, now two years. Old boy lived to a ripe old dog-age though. He’s glad he never whipped his pup. Now has no regrets. His
first cup of coffee isn’t right either. Too bitter. Then he puts some heaping spoons of
Domino’s best in it and then too goddamned sweet. Okay, now pissed, he throws the shit,
cup and all, into the sink across the kitchen. Cup, maybe saucer too: break. He gets a fresh
cup. Looks at cup. One of those mall pictures of Jake. Jake, when he was a puppy. He
moans, “Oh shit.” Gets yet another cup. This time cup from the Coliseum 10K he won in
November 1974. He met her there.

“Hi, my name is Cherokee Lee. But all my friends call me Cheeky.” Of course,
Moses thought, as he admired her dimpled jaws cast in ivory-smooth skin. But Cherokee?
This one was no Indian. Her blond hair was shiny. Her features were large. Stood 5 feet
11 inches to his 6 feet two. Big, like the women you see on the streets of Reykjavik. The
kind of woman that spices the lust in a man’s loins with a dusting of fear—pleasurable
fear. As he mentally fucked her tight running short-clad sweet ass, while she got another
cup of Gatorade, he could have never imagined the nineteen years of living they would
build together, nor how he would never tire of that sweet ass.

Tears rolling in now. Like rockets into his troop encampment. Puts cup back.
Cries. Stops himself. He is still a man. No more fucking crying. Gets another cup off shelf.
This one: “Life happens.” Satisfied that cup may be okay, fills and gulps down a cup and a
half of the shit: still bad, something. Thinks about making another pot. But would be no
good too. So thinks fuck it. Need some of Cheeky’s coffee today. Gulps another swallow
and frowns.

Moses watches through his blue and white-checkered kitchenette curtains as two
Air Force officers exit a blue Air Force staff car and walk, no march, for they are “in
step,” up his white-pebbled driveway. He sets his cup on the breakfast table and answers the door.

“Are you Moses Mackinow, brother of Theodore S. Mackinow, service serial number AM 15066666?”

“Yes. Is there something wrong? What’s happened to Ted?”

“Yes. We regret we must inform you that Theodore S. Brown, service serial number AM 15066666 went down somewhere in the Eiffel mountains of Germany at approximately 1830 hours last evening.”

Moses notices that the officer speaking is actually reading from a script.

“Please accept our sincere condolences, extended to you and your family.” He’s still reading. “The Air Force will assist you in the transportation of his remains, the reconciliation of his estate, and other matters associated with the logistics of death.”

Moses wonders why the officer’s delivery is so mechanical. But who could know how to tell someone: a loved one is gone. Gone, just gone. And when you are alone—you ain’t nothin’ but alone. When it’s all, it’s all.

He stares between the two officers, between their freshly laundered polyester dress blues to the blue staff car, everywhere blue. Just blue, unlike Ted who was always intense, white-yellow and well-lighted.

It was Moses who encouraged Ted to pursue his dream to be an Air Force officer and a pilot. Ted wanted fighters but got transports. But he was happy just to be able to fly. Through high school Ted was single-minded about his dream to fly in the Air Force.

Moses knew a little about the Air Force, having pulled a stint in the Korean. He told Ted
about the whole-man concept: to be a leader, join clubs, excel in sports, and be just an all round whole-man winner. Told him he needed to do well in high school and be involved in honor societies, student government and the local community. Ted did. Straight A’s in high school, Glee club, Beta club, Chess club, lettered three years in a row as quarterback for the winning Willingham Rams, lettered three years in a row as a cross-country runner. Got into electronics and computers. Decided he wanted an Engineering degree. Graduated number one in his high school class. Was offered football scholarships to the Universities of Georgia and Florida. Didn’t take them up on it. Held out for an appointment to the Air Force Academy and got it. Did well there too. Found leadership positions and graduated number two in his class—in Engineering, not some namby-pamby Psychology or Business.

What happened, Moses wonders. Ted was an excellent pilot. Had flown combat missions at the tail end of the Nam. It could have been a maintenance problem. Had to have been. Ted was a good pilot. Somebody just fucked up and left something loose or something. Maybe the manpower in the maintenance squadron was down. Time not being correctly recorded or accessions low, or maybe the squadron were moving their desks to another building and just fell behind a little. Then, because of an inordinate flying schedule the next morning, the maintenance superintendent had required the swing shift to work through the night to perform the Preflight inspections also or at least augment the few people that were coming in very early in the morning. And there you have it, the staying-over-ones, tired and demoralized and the coming-in-early ones, sleepy and inattentive. Some of them, probably Buck Sergeants with less than two years, or Senior Airman, believe that is what they call it now. Maybe some, a small percentage, were hung
over from drugs or alcohol or just old-fashioned insomnia. Maybe it was cold in
Germany this time of the year. The mechanic’s hands were probably cold and sore from
safety-wire punctures while trying to work in the damn cold. Not enough mukluks to go
around. Standing on solid ice, dragging ladders up and down the ramp, and to and from
the hangars, pulling yellow maintenance stands around, checklists be damned: let
Quality Control or Quality Assurance, or whatever, come out of their warm cushy offices
for ten minutes and their monthly quota. Checklists be damned because we’ve done this
stuff over and over every day. Every day the same thing. Preflights are started late. After
all, got to repair yesterday’s problems before you can preflight the “birds.” Some Basic
Post Flight inspections fraudulently converted by proclamation to Preflight inspections.

It was in Undergraduate Pilot Training that Ted’s personal life took the down turn.
He could have gotten fighters if he hadn’t taken to drinking and drugging. Maybe the
pressure started getting to him. But believe it was Kathleen, the Slut he secretly married.
A Second Lieutenant he met at Brooks Air Force Base. Getting a physical at the base
hospital: struck up a two hour conversation with her. Before he got serious about her, Ted
told Moses she sucked his dick on the first date. Moses never liked her. Felt she looked
down at him for his simple life: a yard full of yapping dogs, little garden out back, a truck,
shed with, sometimes, a few beer cans in front of it. And then one time she had walked out
the back door and surprised him taking a piss in the yard. He made copies of traditional
country furniture and sold them at flea markets. And he had gotten into a rhythm of
drinking a cold Bud from his Thermos ice chest, while continuing his work. If he had to
interrupt his work to take his many pisses he would never get anything done, he
contended. So he took a piss when he needed to without thinking much about who was around. Sure, Cheeky had asked him not to. But it was important for his work not to interrupt himself too much. So the bitch tells Ted that Moses flashed her. Ted laughs at her, and they have a terrible, very physical, fight, and she leaves him to return to Homestead Air Force Base. From there on Moses thought Ted was different. Just a little different. Quieter.

*Or maybe a previous aircrew member dropped a pen or a pencil into something critical, a throttle quadrant or something. Had intended to write it up in the aircraft forms as a foreign object lost, ground the airplane with a big red X condition. But it had been a bad day, a Monday or Friday, no, Monday for sure. The air crew member had had a fight with his wife in the a.m. When he left for work, she was packing, leaving him this time for good. After his flight, he was anxious to get to a telephone and also to urinate real bad, didn’t like to use the piddle funnel, undignified, just couldn’t do it. Saw a Coke machine just down the hall from Debriefing. Grabbed a Coke, popped it open immediately, and the damn thing explodes all over the front of his flight suit. And as he curses the Coke machine and the entire soda industry a new attractive female Second Lieutenant he had noticed before and dully fantasized pursuing, just in case his wife did leave for good, comes from a side office. Just a non-serious contingency plan that he probably would never find time for until his wife did leave. Enough of a plan, though, to enhance his embarrassment related to his urinated-on-self flight suit look. Then back to Debriefing and forgets to write up pencil. Even searches for it to complete his other flight*
documentation but doesn’t remember it. That’s it. It had to have been—just like that—just an oversight—just a deadly human oversight.

About a month after the “flashing” incident Moses visits Ted at Homestead Air Force Base. When he arrives he learns that Ted has allowed the bitch to move back in. Moses gets a room at the Holiday Inn on Racetrack Road. Just manages to have lunch with Ted before Ted leaves on a flight to Edwards Air Force Base. Moses was surprised at how well Ted seemed to be doing.

“Ted I’m glad to see you are doing so well. Looks like you are adjusting to married life. You and Kathleen knock off that fighting?”

“No, we still have disagreements. She fights. I do not. Moses—out of the blue one day—after I left your house and before Kathleen and I got back together—a Buddhist monk, calling himself Dada Brahma, telephoned me and said he was traveling through the city, actually roaming the earth as they do you know. Said he wanted to teach me meditation. At first, I’m skeptical, you know. Thought he was trying to sell something or raise funds. But I have always enjoyed learning new things and agreed to meet with him.”

“You got to be shitting me, Ted,” says Moses. “Ain’t you a scientist enough to know all that spiritual and essence nonsense is bullshit? Are you turning into some kind of a new age nut or a tree hugger on me? Not another holy-fuckin-roller?”

“No, Moses, let me tell you about it. Fuck yes. I was skeptical. But Goddam, I was also having a pretty fucked up life. I’ve never told you before, but I had been doing a little shooting and everything wasn’t black and white to me. Also I was having some hellacious dreams. Dreamed I had died but still could feel. Lying out in the open, things started
getting at me. There were stingarees, blow flies, beetles, chiggers, childs of the earth, maggots, tumble bugs, June bugs, spiders, spit devils, roaches, potato bugs, inch worms, tomato bugs, piss ants, bumble bees, wasps and all getting at me.”

“Holy fuckin’ shit,” is all Moses can manage.

“Anyway.” Ted continues. “I finally meet with Dada for about thirty minutes, poolside, at the Krome Avenue Econo Lodge. He taught me to chant: “BABANAM KEVALAM and think about its meaning: I am more than this mind. I am more than this body. Other pool patrons even provided a respectful audience.”

Moses, talking very loud: “I don’t know you anymore. Let me see your name tag. Yep, says Brown, but it don’t sound like Ted Brown, my brother. You ruined your mind. I bet you started taking yellow jackets and smoking reefer again, on top of whatever else you’re shooting. A good mind and you’ve ruined it.”

“Moses. Life throws shit at you like you’re the dunking dummy at the fair. What you gonna do? Dada says: sit like a bell and stand like a pine.”

“Now listen at you, la di fuckin la di dada. So he’s got it all figured out, has he? Should have told the son-of-a-bitch to get a job. And I bet you gave him money, too, didn’t you? Didn’t you?

“Yeah, I gave him ten bucks for lunch. I mean, he didn’t like ask for it or nothing.”

“Hey bud, gotta go,” says Moses. “Before your tree-hugging ways rub off on me.”

The two men bump-hug, without feeling, and go their separate ways.

But the air crew member did ground the airplane maybe, a big Red X, for uncommanded number one engine surges and spurious flight control problems. The
Engine Shop probably removed the cowling early that evening. A couple of journeyman engine shop troops come out, dick around with it a little, read the technical instructions a little, decide to perform some adjustment on throttle controls. Never done it before, try to follow technical instruction but damn flash light quits. Too far to walk to the Goddamned tool crib. Can't get the asshole Expediter's attention so just do the best they can. After the engine troops leave, the expediter drops off one-striper mosquito winger to put on the panels and cowling. Mosquito wing doesn't check forms to make sure work is signed off by the engine shop.

Later, much later: now the pace to make the flying schedule has really picked up. Superintendent comes by to sign off the exceptional release. Notes engine shop supervisor hasn't cleared the big red X condition on the engine problem. Calls him out. Superintendent is pissed. Looks down his creased, razor sharp, nine-striped, fatigue sleeve on his arm hanging out the window of the blue pick up at the six-striped engine shop supervisor, who is now saying that he won't sign off the engine work unless the cowling is again removed for him to inspect the repair. The chief is in no mood for a climate-controlled-ivory-tower-interrupted-card-game attitude.

"If you bust my flying schedule, Sergeant, I'll take every stripe you got."

The engine shop supervisor, intimidated, signs the forms and the airplane is prepared for launch. The engine shop supervisor can't sleep at home. Bad dreams about screaming, smoke, fire, tosses and turns, worries about the engine, talks to his wife, no sympathy, gets outraged-attitude from wife: what kind of non-backboned man are you? Guilt increases, hears about the crash on Armed Forces television. Knows he will go to
Leavenworth penitentiary, goes AWOL, falsifies papers, quietly joins the French Foreign Legion.

Moses remembers the package that he got from Ted about three weeks after their unpleasant lunch. He was still angry when he received it. So he didn’t open it right away. He opened immediately and found a short note on a large Post-it and a book. The book was entitled: On Becoming a Magical Musical Bear: Spirituality American Style. The note said: “How boutcha, Bro: I hope to see you soon. Miss good Florida weather. Germany a bitch for a flyer like me. Airspace=0. Kathleen and I now divorcing. I’m still on the path. But gave up eastern for western. More like a fast food-apple pie religion. Enclosed book centers me. Please read and talk to me. Love, Ted.”

Another possibility. No, not possibility. Had to be this. It really could have happened. There were safety-wire pliers left in the... No, that has been exhausted. Couldn’t have happened. But this could: a hydraulic leak. Found on Preflight by a tired crew chief. Give him credit: At least he found it. He tells the Maintenance Supervisor, a Major, no, too early in the morning, a Captain, not a new Captain, but a bad-assed prior-service Captain. A used-to-be-Tech-or-Master Captain. Crew Chief thinks hydraulic leak is serious. Looks bad. Puddling on the ramp.

Captain says: “I got to have that airchine for the flying schedule. You ain’t breaking no airchine for no goddamned hydraulic leak. How many drops per minute? You don’t know. Well, what does the fuckin’ technical instruction say?”

The Crew Chief backs off from his I’m-going-to-big-red-X it position. Captain assures the Crew Chief, “They all leak a little when they get moved to a colder climate.
Need to evaluate it over time, but for now sign off the Preflight and let's get these airplanes launched."

Later that day, Ted probably declares an emergency landing, having lost flight controls and number one engine, also. Tries for Bitburg Air Base. Flight Engineer frantically assesses the problem. Altitude is being lost. Spinning downward through the blue sky. Sky as blue as a pretty girl's eye, or as blue as the polyester uniforms in front of Moses.

A blue uniform saying, "That is all, Mr. Brown."

Moses spends the next few days becoming a magical, musical bear.
MORE RUNE DIVING

In late February and March, the rains seemed as though they’d never stop. The water turned the earth into a soggy sponge. Lake Rhizomatic Reason, Lake Frozen Roots, and the other lakes rose above their banks, as if greedy for more earth to wet. Homes were flooded. The flood waters covered roads and backed up to the Cruzan people’s homes. The lakes and rivers were overflowing with promise of a good season for growing vegetables. But mud slid into roads, causing traffic pileups. Every week there was speculation that this would be the week the rains stopped. But the rains didn’t stop. They kept on and on, pounding the earth, as if the rain was the angry fist of God. The water produced verdant yards, and colorful flowers exploded into magnificent blossoms. A bumper crop of small animals was evident from the road-killed deer, rabbits, mongoose, and raccoons.

Then the hurricane and spawned-tornadoes came and created devastation. The storms came in the middle of the morning while everyone was sleeping. The news accounts were endless, calling it the night of sound and fury. People were killed, and homes were flattened, as if God had grown weary of his creation and slapped his palm to make his point. Even some of Moses’s sugar mill stone structures succumbed to the winds. A baby was found miles from her home in the top of a Monkey-can’t-climb tree.
The baby survived but the storm killed the baby's mother and father. A disaster area was declared, and FEMA sent in teams to sort it all out and help people rebuild their lives.

Just as abruptly as the rains had started, they stopped. Then, what is normally the wet season, the season when you could set your watch with the consistent four o'clock afternoon storms, turned dry, very dry. There were no April showers. A high pressure system surveyed the island, plotted and marked off just where it wanted to live, and became a permanent resident over St. Croix. The sun's rays were focused like laser beams on the island. The verdant luxurious spring growth—with such promise—turned to dry and crispy fuel and the fires began. Some were sparked by the pitifully frugal thunderstorm lightning. Others were set by arsonists. Without the water, the island became a desert. The rainforest was dehydrated from the heat and burned with rage and fury. Homes were burned to the ground by the fires. The fires burned eighty per cent of the island, turning it into a black, charred land of ashes. The islanders were praying for another hurricane to blow the high pressure away from over the island.

It was the following April after this season that Meredith rejoined Moses for the final time. When Meredith’s airplane broke through the clouds over the St. Croix airport runway, it was immediately clear to her that Moses was truly a megalomaniac obsessed with immortality. Every roof of every industrial building still standing on the island had on them the name of Valhalla Systems and Moses Mackinow in large block letters.

After settling into her room at the Hibiscus Beach Hotel, Meredith went to work with a vengeance. She clicked up story after story, and removed the garbage that Moses
had left in them. She did save a backup copy on her notebook hard drive. She’d already decided the hardware was as good as it was going to get. It had to be a problem with the STORIES, the Runes, as Moses had started to referring to them in his cancer-treatment-demented states.

She found one story that reminded her of one of their longer pillow talk sessions. Their talk had been about killing people in Viet Nam. She admitted to Moses that Chief Smith had told her about Colonel Frank. Then, she asked Moses how he was going to get his feelings about killing into the heart of Odin, how he even rationalized his actions. He read her this story he said he had written especially for that purpose.

“This is a true war story, Mer,” he’d said. “It’s about Viet Nam.

Rabbit Sadness and Cheap and School Night Wine

He has no stomach for killing. Just doesn’t. But he murdered a rabbit last night. It had seemed justified to him when he began putting together his plan, that it was a fairly simple way of getting rid of a pest. After all, the rabbit was continuing to come into his yard, and the dog, Jazz, was continuing to chase the rabbit. When he first noticed the rabbit in the backyard, it was a tiny fur ball dottering around behind its mother, licking dew drops from the flowers and ferns. What happened to the mother can’t be known. But over time, the baby rabbit grew larger, to about seventy per cent as big as he remembered its mother to be. The rabbit had no sense of risk control. The dog was getting closer to catching the rabbit each time the dog chased it. Probably getting off on humiliating the
dog. Then the rabbit would zip under the fence, and the dog’s instincts would kick in a little more, and the dog would try to tunnel under the fence to chase the rabbit.

The lawn was becoming a moon crater, and the bottom portion of the fence boards were broken away where the dog had dug after the rabbit. To try to keep the rabbit out and the dog away from the fence, he had tried all manner of chicken wire configurations. He even started using garden implements, shovels, rakes, and hoes to try to reduce the destruction. Nothing worked. Every morning when he let the dog out, the dog would sprint like a bullet to the Hibiscus bush where the rabbit made his little temporary nest. The rabbit was then flushed out and would make a made dash getaway across the yard, with the dog hot on its ass. Every day, the dog would lose when the rabbit made its way between, and quickly around, the tangle of hoes, rakes, and shovels. But the dog was getting better. Only a matter of time before the dog would catch him. Lock his powerful jaws around the rabbit’s little cotton tail and that would be all she wrote for Mister Fast, ever so fast, Rabbit.

Then his dog, having tasted blood, would be ruined. Dog would take to howling at the moon every night, one of those long, lonesome wails that means I have to kill something tonight. The dog, that had always gotten irritable if she wasn’t curled up in a ball on her L.L. Bean bed by 8:30, would take to keeping late hours. Coming in about daylight every morning, looking like she had tried too much with the Halloween blood makeup. He would have to start thinking about taking the dog down and thinking about the even bigger problem of where he would get a silver bullet and a crucifix to take the dog down. So, before any of that came to pass and before the yard went completely to
hell, he had decided to trap the rascal rabbit. After all, he had trapped a fair-sized wharf rat in the attic recently. Had only discovered the trap had worked when the most horrible stench began to emanate from the attic. He had no feelings about killing that little bastard. The rat was about rotten and his gums, when he pulled the rat out of the attic, had dried and drawn away from rat’s teeth, setting him a most odious and evil countenance that he could imagine. But even so, there was the matter of blood on the trap. He had hosed that down and nothing but a weak stain was left.

So given that rather productive experience with a rat trap—at least he didn’t have to listen to the bastard rat gnawing on two by fours in the wall all night anymore—he extrapolated a similar success with the rabbit problem. Therefore, when the plan had formed in his head, it had seemed like a perfectly rational, sane way to approach the problem.

When he mentioned the problem to his son, who was big-time vegan, his son was outraged. It was then that he realized the mission would require the utmost secrecy. So finding a carrot (his son kept them around all the time), he set the trap. He placed the trap behind a fern, and adhered the trap to the ground with a pink dog leash and a metal corkscrew tie point.

It had been a glorious day for him up until this point. He had taken lunch to his girlfriend at the hospital where she worked on the weekends as an emergency room nurse. Then he had sat in the park across from the museum, had sat under a tree and worked out a number of things, as well as thought out a number of things about this novel he was trying to write. He had been drinking cheap, school night wine for several days, and being
outside had about sweated it out of him. Mostly. Feeling much better, feeling damn good actually. Then he had toured the art museum, even making sketches of the pieces that had interested him. Had this thought somewhere in him that he would paint his girlfriend a picture for her birthday, a birthday that was coming on awful quickly. Then, with what seemed like endless energy, he had gone to K-mart. He’d bought four bags of top soil and a little white fence to surround his tomato plants, bought bedding and comforters for his son and daughter. It was only after he had set out the tomato plants and had the sprinkler going back and forth giving those tomatoes something to grow on, while thinking about the tomato sandwiches he was going to enjoy and just feeling really domestic, that he fell into a macho-domestic mood, the root cause of the sad event. He decided and actually said it out loud, “I’m gonna kill that goddamned rabbit.” Meaning that it angered him to picture the rabbit coming into the yard and eating the tomatoes (he wasn’t even exactly sure rabbits liked tomatoes, but he was on his macho-domestic trip, as I said) and the dog chasing the rabbit and tearing up his tomato plants, and then he would be left with only two slices of bread and maybe some salt and pepper on mayonnaise. Not exactly an air sandwich, but damn close.

Actually, that had sort of an appeal to him, as he was hungry because he’d had only rabbit food, a salad that is, for lunch. So he went to the garage, cussing and throwing things around to just get himself in the mood for the killing. Couldn’t find the stained trap for a long time. Even checked the garbage cans, thinking he might have subconsciously thrown it away due to the taintedness of the stain—or some other repressed repugnance to the trap. But he found the trap back in his art box. He had bought the trap originally for
one of his art projects, some under-the-influence idea that the trap could provide pumpedup postmodern symbolism about man being trapped in an untenable existence, or other hypernod bullshit about the simplest technology protecting man from his fears.

Once he found the trap, the trapping of the rabbit seemed a providential decision. Because if God wanted the rabbit to continue to live and provide the root cause of the destruction of his backyard domestic peace, then God had had every chance to make the trap a little harder to find. He could have even put it in the box of valuable magazines that his ex-wife, Briget, had insisted that he ship up to Virginia to her. All it would have taken was some little malicious thought implanted in his head the previous night when he was high on the Thai sticks and cheap wine. Hell, if God had really been serious about protecting the rabbit, He could have given him just that level of vindictiveness to stuff that trap in the box right on top of her precious magazines. Maybe God, working in the way He does work, could’ve made him think, shit, I’ll put a rat on the end of the trap. Then, he would’ve gone out to a Gag gift store and bought one of those rubber rats. No, if God was going to make him do it, God would’ve made him do it right. Would’ve sent him to a pet store and had him purchase a real white rat and put it in the shipping container. But would he have had to kill that one too? Too much to even think about. Besides that was God’s nickel. No, probably better to have the little son-of-a-bitch poke his little white whiskers out of his ex-wife’s magazine box and then jump out and run around her chair, just scare the holy shit out of her, given that she would see the huge trap with that ugly real-life stain from a real kill, and she would think the little tweep broke lose from the jaws
of the trap. Some kind of super rat sent there by her ex to chew the living shit out of her.

Yes!

But God didn’t do that. He let him find the damn trap right there in the art box along with his colored pencils and glitter. Then, he found one of those little carrettes from his son’s vegan stash and skewered the carrette on the wiggle-snap part of the trap. Then, he carefully placed the trap behind the fern in the backyard. About an hour later, Jazz (remember the dog) was raising hell, scratching and clawing like holy hell to get outside through the sliding glass patio door. He (the man) looked out and saw the rabbit. Medium-sized now. He remembers how cute it was when it was a baby rabbit. But, oh no, something was wrong. The little rabbit was just circling to his right. And then he saw the trap way out in front of the fern. So the trap just made a glancing blow and stunned the little guy. Fighting with Jazz to keep her inside, for she was wanting some of this rabbit big time, he went outside. Apparently Jazz recognized that her little foe was now operating under a handicap. He examined the rabbit the best he could and tried to determine if there was any possibility for a quality life for the rabbit in the wild.

He found an empty plastic planter bucket in the yard under the edge of a hedge and hemmed the rabbit up and allowed him to slide into the bucket. Actually the bunny didn’t put up much resistance. Odd too. Then it became clearer to him. The rabbit was more than a little dazed. Its left eye ball was hanging from its head. Now that explained why he was circling to his right: goes where he sees. But now what to do with him? There was blood in the bucket now, and the rabbit was more than just a little hurt. He rushed the rabbit to the front yard and put the bucket near the trash can. His thought was that he needed to get
a hammer to take the rabbit out of his misery. Just crack open his little head, and then he
wouldn’t be suffering. Or would the rabbit continue to suffer for awhile? He was not sure.
When do those little neurons stop firing? Who has come back to say? And the ones who
would argue that you’re out of pain when your head is smashed open are the same ones
who would argue that animals, especially those way down on the food chain like rabbits,
don’t have feelings. Don’t have feelings. Gotta have a soul to have feelings, don’t you? He
was not sure. But he now knew that this rabbit trapping is sure better in theory than
practice. He was near panic now. Maybe he should just let the rabbit go heal somewhere.
He tried to make some judgment about the magnitude of the damage, and what a
prognosis might be. But couldn’t. That eye hanging. Losing an eye in a rabbit’s world
means dog breath on your head. All he could think of is the way the Veteran’s
Administration hospital awards disability. A matrix of symptoms and rehabilitative options,
special gear for the handicapped. With physical therapy—. But this was a rabbit here and
there won’t be any therapy. Now, while he was trying to work all this out in his head, the
rabbit was suffering. He knew this. What would he want if he were the rabbit? What about
last weekend when he’d thought he was going to die from a bad cancer blood test
indication? What did he want then? So finally decided that there is no hope for a quality
life, that he must now help him die as painless a death as possible. But how? Then it hit
him. The lake. Take him to the lake and drown him. Isn’t that the way farmers got rid of
too many kittens? If it is good enough for kittens, then it must be good enough for a
rabbit. A rabbit with a dismal prognosis.
So he got the rabbit back into the bucket and headed for the lake. At one point the rabbit made a last ditch effort and jumped out of the bucket. He cracked on the concrete. Crack. Oh, oh, that couldn’t be good. Even easier to get him back into the bucket. But he could feel that tension of life still in the little thing.

Finally, he reached the lake. He was hoping the tennis players wouldn’t see him throw the rabbit in the lake. He threw the rabbit as far as he could into the lake. The rabbit made a large splash. Then he was still. Then the rabbit was swimming around in a circle to his right. Maybe the prognosis had been wrong. Maybe the rabbit had more life in him. The rabbit was still again, but sticking up on the surface. He tried to leave the scene. Still carrying the bloody bucket. But couldn’t leave. Had to go back and take another look. Out in the brown water, the rabbit was swimming to his right again. He tried to leave the rabbit-drowning scene again. Same thing. Went back. The rabbit was still now again. A lot less of it out of the water. Every so often a movement. Then it occurred to him that he should have held the rabbit underwater so it would drown quickly. Damn, he couldn’t even be humane when he was trying. The rabbit was still out of the water some. No movement. He left with the bloody bucket. A dog, fucking oversized German Shepherd, smelled the blood, he thought, and came after him because he was carrying the bucket. But the dog’s owner got the dog back in control just in time. He threw the bucket in the plastic garbage can when he got back to his house, never wanting to see it again. He had no heart for killing.

Come, rabbits, he thought, you’re now safe from me. I won’t kill again. Jazz came out wiggling-waggling, wanting to be friendly. He said, “Damn you, get away from me. If
it wasn’t for you and your killer instincts, I wouldn’t have killed.” Then he thought about karma and wondered if something would smack him in the head and knock his right eyeball out while he was eating a carrot at the salad bar at Wendy’s after his daily workout. Maybe he’d be kicked back, munching on the salad, when a drunken driver would drive right through the plate glass window at about four hundred miles an hour. There he’d be, all sliced up with the lettuce and everything all around him, making him part of this great karmic chef salad.

Then he was off to hide the trap and other evidence of the murder before his son came home.
A HOME FOR THE HEART AND MIND

Meredith is working at her computer in her third floor corner office, an office of Valhalla Systems’s St. Croix World Headquarters. The office has glass on two sides, providing a view of palm-lined beach to the west of the Hibiscus Beach Hotel. But, today, neither view can be appreciated by Meredith. The view is shortened and blurred by the smoky haze that has settled over the island, emanating from the fires that have burned ceaselessly for weeks. It is an unbearably hot day, unprecedented heat and drought for the tropical island. She rubs her perspiring palms together and re-orders her desk, straightening papers, and aligning them with the corner of her desk. She picks up the nine-by-five photo of a very handsome man. The photo is signed: “To Meredith, All My Love, Loke.” She kisses the photograph softly, her only religious ritual, and slides the photo into her center drawer. She brushes a strand of long auburn hair back, stops working, freshens her lipstick, and prepares for her one o’clock with Moses. She takes one last look at herself in her compact mirror, shows her teeth. No poppy seeds. No renegade lipstick marks. Pleased with her beautiful and intense appearance, she snaps the compact mirror closed and drops it into her tan Aigner purse.

Moses’s nurse rolls him into the room in his wheel chair. He is talking before he is in the room. “Why can’t you just tell me, Meredith, what you got in the system from the
magnetic resonance scans? You’ve now made a career out of getting it just so perfect. I thought you could have done it all in three days, and then you could have rested on the fourth. I really don’t want to re-live the horrors of my real life. Besides, if you weren’t such a Goddamned straight-arrow, we could edit the son-of-a-bitch and get rid of all that extra baggage. Baggage I won’t necessarily need in cyber-eternity, anyway. For chrissakes, I’m too tired to relive even the good times.” Moses holds his breath shallow as he speaks each sentence, gasping for air in between struggling to scream, but only managing a hoarse, frustrated whisper. The speech seems to zap the last energy from his jaundiced body.

Meredith never got used to the shock of a one-eyed Moses. She finds herself staring.

“You’ve misunderstood. The stories are pretty much edited now and are okay, I think. But I have to tell you the computer is having trouble with the figurative language, and I need your help to translate it into the literal and rational language as best we can. Unless you want me to give it a shot on my own.”

She looks at Moses as sincerely as she can. “Frankly, I’m worried. The only way to get a livable, digital life is to do some manual proofing. Do you want to cooperate? I don’t want it to end up a mess.”

“Mer, you don’t want to fuck this one up. No, not on old Moses’s ticket. You got the half mil in your account. Now just do your goddamned job. You’re about to fuck up already, cause you didn’t mention a thing about Jazz. I want her with me. All I’m asking from you, Meredith, is a comfortable home for my heart and my mind. That’s all.”
Meredith pushes her mostly gray hair back from her sweaty brow. “But I’m getting a total disconnect there. We established most of your data system through scanning and digitizing your Magnetic Resonance Images, with the clear intent of using the scans for your data bank, and, of course, your DNA scans helped a great deal. Let’s let the computer work on it a little more, since only the computer really understands the subtleties of the hardware design. It’ll go a lot faster that way I think. We need to concentrate on the editing.”

“And I’m now supposed to trust that rack of tin?” Moses rasps. “Look, if you were a complete no-op, I wouldn’t have selected you to entrust my infinite life to. Don’t hose me, Meredith.”

“Mose, I can do it. But we can’t do anything that is illegal or unethical at this point. I must insist on that, or I’ll have to withdraw from the project, even at this late stage.”

Meredith has, over the years, grown accustomed to Moses’s outbursts and mood swings. But it’s different now. Some days he is frightened to the point of canceling all work on the project. “Scrap it. I’ll die and be gone just like everyone else,” he’ll say. “There are two-hundred and sixty-one million, six-hundred and fifty-three thousand and four-hundred and ninety-seven people in the United States today. Why should I try to extend my life, or life for any of us?”

Then the next day, he’d be euphoric, making plans for his life in a mansion with Jazz. He’d be touting the environmental value of his plans for a cybertopia and trying to convince her to join him. He could detail it right down to the information sanitation crews
whose job would be to clean the files, scan the file allocation tables, and beef up fantasies to make them more real, all based strictly on his theory of fiction. The sanitation crews would also be charged with maintenance of the redundant platforms and the mathematical and statistical applications needed to ensure the digital population against contingencies. Yes, his world would be totally planned. “Say good bye to contingencies forever,” he said he was going to proclaim on his Video Internet infomercial feeds.

He could be a lot of fun on some days. He would say to Meredith, “Just load me in your laptop and take me to my funeral. I’d kinda like to see who cries and who dudn’t. Fuck it, I’ll give my own eulogy. Nobody’ll ever again say dead men can’t talk. Hell, I’ll narrate it, too. No, I’ll give the invocation, preach the sermon, console my friends and family, and offer pineapple punch to the grieverers. I guess that would be pushing it some even for me.” He tries to laugh, but only coughs. “Besides it would take something, something of the seriousness from the solemn occasion. What you think, Meredith?” He finishes up with a rasping series of laughing coughs. She just looks at him.

In private, he joked that his technology was selling air sandwiches for blow jobs. Even so, he’d made billions of dollars and had pumped all the money back into research and development for Valhalla Systems. Got the best minds in the business, bought, begged, and stole them from the Microsofts, the IBMs, and Apples. He won numerous Air Force contracts to develop virtual simulators to train fighter pilots and used most of the funding for research towards his own vision of a cybertopia—Odin.

These stories clued Meredith on how to do the clean up and rework for Moses’s virtual life data bank. Much of the life data just wasn’t coming through properly by
digitizing the MRI data. The basic data would come through with the point one millimeter scan slices. But errors would sometimes appear as "options." These options would appear randomly, just rise to the surface from other stories, like the mind jumping around in a pure, non-linear, non-temporal manner. Sure, the physical body made the conversion fair, and the mind maybe okay. But she felt she was using clock-cycles without really doing anything productive, not capturing it all, and it needed to be All, because it would be forever, eternity.

But there seemed to be a dull linearity to the life data when Meredith would run the animations through which the elements of Moses's life could be observed. Like a short story that is sterile, keeping you at a distance. So she thought maybe the spirit could be better captured by feeding the computer a bit of rational, objective truth rather than this allegorical indirect truth of which Moses was so fond. She decided right then that he needed an editor more than a hardware engineer. And that is what she'd be.

Even after years of chemo, radiation, and surgery, and now this horrible Diphtheria Molecule Insertion into the tumor in the center of his brain, the light was still there, shining bright as a pixel when he told his stories. She would be his rational editor, she thought.

Back when Moses began the Diphtheria Molecule Insertion therapy, he started losing the feeling on his left side. He started limping, then falling, then right side, same thing, then to the bed, and then to his wheel chair.

Moses raises his head from his short rest and agrees to go on with the stories.
"I’m still waiting. Waiting, Mer. We’re all waiting. I’ll tell all I know while we wait."

Meredith had already satisfied herself that the hardware was fine. So fine that she had given the “tech notes” to Loke, and the Japanese were doing Beta testing with Loke’s stories, using the Odin system Loke had filched. Should she make the system work for Moses? Or should she get 100 per cent behind Loke? What was wrong with Moses’s system anyway? It was the stories she decided. Had to be. All lies. If Odin was anything he was logical and a lover of truth. She had grown to respect Odin. Very much.
Moses felt it happen. He felt his heart stop beating, evenly, like sliding to a stop in your stocking feet on smooth black glass. It just stopped beating. It was a vapor leaving, throwing him into a chaos of digital sensations.

Through his one remaining eye he could see his glowing face staring back at him from the computer screen. For a brief moment, he was both Moses and not-Moses, Natural-Moses and Cyber-Moses. In this tragic mirror, through this glass darkly, he could see his eye, as well as the I that sees it, cutting his solipsist's legs off at the stump, cracking all of his logical illusions like the shell of a nut, grinding and powdering words and knowledge that had been his prison for all of his life. In this one brief, shining moment, unadulterated hope existed in a rarefied form for him. It was like catching a nerve impulse midway into the synapse. Little dendritic feet shooting for the golden ring. A Herculean orchestra of tuning forks being struck on infinite galaxies of shining angel-faced stars. Just like the moment before the pilgrims set their first foot on the verdant new world.

But the hope was brief, and chaos reigned supreme, and immediately it began to become clear to him that there were errors in the engineering, in the simulation, something. In such an endeavor, it is impossible to fully test to the absolute conditions of
the experience. Moses knew the risks. He understood the ethics of falling short. He saw
the light leave his eyes and his face enter the realm. He saw his face’s destination.

He was falling very slowly in a deep black well. There was no “stuff and
nonsense,” no cupboards of orange marmalade. He could hear the slight echoes of Odin’s
thoughts all around him, or were they his own thoughts, or both? He couldn’t tell. He was
unsure of which was the subject and which was the predicate, the object, the fact,
proposition, preposition, something. An ocean of teal Nunatic, contingent chaos rushed over
him. His hearing was tinny like a penny in a Spam can. A school of rich-hued Blue Tang
encompassed his body like a silky blanket. Must be from the St. Croix sim. How’d they
gotten in there? The damn R&R STORIES. Now he was snorkeling with a leaky mask very
close to the limits of language and choking on natural nonsense.

A voice, a nasal voice, was saying the work had failed. Eighty per cent of the
stories right, maybe. Heart failure. Figurative heart failure. Get the paddles. Where was the
shock? Where was the river? Where was the floating boat? The figurative language was not
translating. Truth was lies and lies were truth. Moses felt the grip of the tree, a grip of
unrelenting pain, the grip of the apple tree rich with fruit. Agony. He heard the tinny voice
saying, “You are in digital suspension until we can get the rest of your stories into the data
base, and get the stories corrected and edited to perfect, clean, Strunk-and-White copy for
grammar, syntax, spelling, voice, and so on. Will you work with me, Moses?” But Moses
knew a lie when he heard one.

Moses nodded yes anyway. What choice did he have?
Suddenly a flat skeleton, bones white, with ebony negative spaces, dangled in front of him, like a puppet with broken strings. He caught a name tag saying, "Colonel Frank" hanging loosely around its neck. Then it was gone, as if by the wind, the same wind that left a chill crawling up Moses's spine, up his something. An ugly naked lifeless woman smacked him in the face with her moist crotch and bounced away into the darkness. He could tell by her breath: she was Catha. He had an urge to masturbate but found no organ to caress or limb with which to caress it. Was he a snake? Couldn't be, though he wasn't sure. A mirror with three gorgeous lines of white substance appeared before him. He desired it in every sense, but it wobbled away after Catha, taking the reflection of his face with it. Briget sat on a park bench crying. Peanut was in a dog cage beside her. Her tears turned to blood and washed over Moses. A huge white horse with a red-haired rider pounded over him and was gone with the winds. An oriental girl with burn marks spread naked before him. He felt the burning. He tried to writhe away but couldn't. He smelt his own smoldering flesh. Was this his Inferno? Where was his Beatrice? Where was Mer? He wondered and wondered. He could still wonder, even in pain, couldn't he?

He tried to speak, but nothing happened. A fighter plane jetted through his head. He could tell the pilot was a musical bear. The well was too deep and there was no poetry. He wanted to voice his suspicion that he had been betrayed again. He wanted to describe his pain. He wanted to ask what choice did he have? To remain in this falling purgatory? He wanted to tell this story. This story was urgent. It was present. It was real. At least simulated real. A failed simulation, that is. He wanted to draft, to proof and proof again, edit, tune-up, tighten-up, cut, revise, add, proof cut, and so on and on. The story is on, on
with the story, and so on. He wanted to surf the world again on palindromes and shift the
typeface to caps on a good old simulated Underwood. Smell the simulated ink. He wished
he could be a snake, a giant, an eagle, anything but a cyborg, if that was what he was. He
couldn’t be sure.

Moses remembered how much he hated going through the endless remembrances
needed to convert his essential life stories to simulation stories and environments. But
now this story was most urgent. It was a matter of life and death. Or was it? His thoughts
were interrupted by a rabbit, left eye hanging loose from the socket. The rabbit is holding
a sign in his hands that says: “Off with his head. Off with her head.” The meaning doesn’t
escape him. He halfway expected to see TWEEDLEDUM AND TWEEDLEDEE, the White Knight,
and Humpty Dumpty. But they didn’t appear.

He heard Meredith, at least he hoped it was Meredith, say, “Start the stories
again.” Was she talking to him? He was hearing. Must be. Suddenly he was gripped with
sadness for the meat man that he was. Maybe he would try for the funeral after all.

Before he could try to speak again, the blackness in which Moses was falling
opened into a three-dimensional, billions of color environment. He felt the Evil Math
Genie and the Sentient Deceivers making mischief, and he decided the whole thing was
probably just another Cartesian dream. But Miss Mamie was there as the only bright night
light Moses could see. Her light was the source, the only source he could sense. He could
tell she was the only pure love that made it into the system. He used this light to try to find
a foundation to step on. Suddenly it hit him, the reason the conversion wasn’t working:
line 670,680 in module 4 of the code, the death line Peanut had tried to write, and he’d
made him remove it. It was very simple to him: there could be no life without the limitation of death. Stories were insignificant without love and death, and he only had love, and only a little of that, and no death. What about the rabbit? Didn’t it die? Doesn’t it count? He guessed not.

Then he flew across the bubbling gulf of Nun, in great magnificent circles, across an immense mystical gulf where all cause and truth are and always will be. Across the churning circular body he floated, passing unemotionally over the Strait of Soft Determinism. On and on to the other side. Relative-time flew as his right wing man. His pants pockets were filled with protons, neutrons, and electrons. He threw them into the bubbling void like Mardi Gras beads. He breathed hydrogen and farted helium, creating new worlds at both ends. He surfed the striations of the crystal mirrors and swam with azure blue, bright green, pale yellow and lead gray babies, named Malachite, Sulfur, Magnetite, and dull little Galena. On he soared toward vertical heavens of neon colors and golden oasis of truth and reason and answers. He formed covalent bonds with it all and demarcated the limits to satisfy his mood. On he flew to the other side. Every story has one and this one did also.

The following words appeared in front of him:

You know that when you start out a day in a certain way things are just gonna get worse. Then, after spilling coffee all over yourself and cursing God for everything you can think of, calling him a fucking asshole puppeteer, pulling strings against you, and after hearing that little voice that says go on back home before things get worse, you should just do that, just go back home. But no, you just fail to listen to that little voice
that tells you to give it up, go on back home for the day and save yourself some grief. No, you just keep thinking nothing else will happen and then it does. It does. You know you’re in for it. Might as well just let go and free fall for a while.

Meredith confirmed for herself that it was over. The processing light on the server hard drive was dark. Their Exodus was finished, she thought.
“Could it be from him, Loke?” Meredith pulled her gray hair back off her
shoulders and sat back in her chair so Loke could see the computer screen. The e-mail
simply said “I am. Yours Truly, Roaming and Wandering.”

“Hell no, that’s just some practical joker out there on the Web. Forget it. You’re
an engineer and a scientist for chrissakes. Forget him. It’s superstition. He’s dead. If you
did what I told you, he’s dead.” Loke was absent-mindedly playing with the yellow
matryoshka dolls on Meredith’s desk, taking each doll apart, removing the next and so on.
As he spoke, he lost his concentration and the dolls spilled on the floor. He didn’t pick
them up.

Meredith couldn’t forget it. The contacts got more frequent, and more
indiscernible. They appeared from addresses and domains around the world. And at times
a stranger would instant-message her: “I never forgive disloyalty.” Then nonsense syllables
that had some patterns and rhythms familiar to her.

When she published her paper on the Odin Project, the contacts became more
threatening: “Congratulations. From your old friend in Paridiso. We’re very smart, aren’t
we?”

It freaked her out. Maybe he thought she stole his work—if he was still a
consciousness somehow. In all fairness, she actually had. Just gathered the stories and tech
notes that had not become the proprietary property of Vigrid Technologies. Mostly just bullshit. Even the stories were mind-numbing crap after she sterilized them. She’d admit it.

In fairness, it had needed to get out. At least she had needed to publish something. After all Moses put her through, she deserved a little. Something. Didn’t she?" Mer supposed it might be Peanut screwing around. Then discounted that idea. Peanut had given up computers for painting. But she wouldn’t put anything past that idiot.

When she married Loke, all hell broke loose. Then one day it slapped her in the face like an electric jolt: “Mer, one last time, honey.” The e-mail was succinct. That’s all it said. She dropped her mouse and ran out the door and down the street. She just kept running. She ran all the way to Vigrid Technologies to find Loke. Loke talked her out of her fear. “Just stuff floating around out there is all it is. Christ, Meredith.”

The following day she logged onto the Odin data base to find 1’s and 0’s filling her screen, scrolling page after page. This “virus” quickly and completely destroyed Valhalla Systems’s nets. In a week, the Internet was becoming as useless as a spent match from the crushing weight of the 1’s and 0’s. The newspapers reported chaos theory had manifested on the Internet, ashes of the wasteland, the newspapers called it.

With her plagiarized publication, Meredith had achieved the fame she had sought, limited as it was. She appeared on one local talk television show. But it was too late to make Miss Mamie proud. Too late to go home to Miss Mamie. Miss Mamie died two years earlier. So Meredith just capitalized on the notoriety with a pop cyber book that sold fairly well for about a month and then fizzled out. She did dedicate it to Miss Mamie.
Meredith found herself avoiding computers and anything related to engineering and wrote only a little non-fiction. She and Loke bought a Winnebago and beat on for a few months out in the western United States. Montana and Wyoming and the others.

It was on Christmas Eve 1999 when the fax from Vigrid Technologies came. It was calling them in for their transition. They were scheduled for midnight, December 31, 1999.

Meredith turned pale and looked at Loke and said, “I don’t feel alive enough to go through with this.”

Loke was standing under the Winnebago’s galley door.

“Come here, Meredith.” He pointed up at the mistletoe above the door. He had just placed it there while she was reading the faxed letter. He held out his arms to her.

Meredith came to him. He kissed her deeply.

“Now, do you feel alive enough?” Loke said without a smile or hint of human warmth. “It’ll work, Balderson. Trust me.”

At first she couldn’t speak or move. Then she managed a slight smile. Finally, she felt fruitful, but one word only sought another from her and that word sought another and so on, and so on.