

The Aquarianauts

By Cat Hearth

Chapter One

"Why is sex so hard?" Tom sighted along his pool stick.

Carl took a sip of his beer. "Whaddya mean?"

"I mean, it's a physical need, like eating, right?" He carefully slid the stick through his left thumb and finger and hit the cue ball. It knocked the brown ball which dropped neatly into the corner pocket. "Well, eating is easy. I go to the supermarket and buy some food, take it home and cook it, and eat it. Done deal. Nobody much cares what I eat or when I eat it. Or I can go to a restaurant and order something. Even easier. Right? But sex - it's got all these rules and everybody looking over my shoulder."

Dan took out a pack of Pueblo and commenced rolling a cigarette. "You could go to a prostitute." He stuck a filter between his lips.

"I guess, but that's illegal in some places and it's frowned on. You have to hide it and you feel guilty." He lined up another shot but the purple ball missed the side pocket, bounced, and collided with some other balls. "But think about it. Eating is actually really complex." He sat on the edge of the table. "Say I want to eat a slice of bread and butter. Somebody had to grow that wheat. Somebody had to plan a farm, buy seed, plant it, water, fertilize and weed the plants, harvest it, thresh it or whatever they do, sell it. Others had to grind it to flour, sell it to bakers, who did their thing, and sold the bread to the supermarket. The supermarket involves a huge corporation, financing, builders, banks, insurance, and on and on. For me to eat a piece of bread, if you count everything, there's probably thousands of people involved. Not to mention the butter. Whose turn is it?"

"Fuck it," said Dan, "Let's go outside and have a smoke."

They went out the back door into the alley. The night was cool and misty.

"So what about the bread and butter?" asked Carl, holding out his lighter and flaming the tip of Tom's cigarette.

"I'm just saying, it's complicated. Sex should be really simple. All it takes is someone willing and a private place." He sniggered. "Unless you like those clubs where you do it with people watching."

"Actually, that might be fun," put in Dan.

"But wait a minute," protested Carl. "Sure, it takes a lot of people to produce your piece of bread, but that system's already in place. It happens all the time. There's millions of people

eating bread and butter just like you."

"Cause if they didn't feed people, people would starve, and there'd be riots," pointed out Dan, punctuating by blowing smoke out his nose.

Tom stubbed out his cigarette against the dirty brick wall. "Let's go back inside. It's freezing out here."

The doorspring creaked as they opened it to the lights, roar of conversation and juke box music, and beery smells.

"You guys get a table. I'll get a round of beers. It's my dog's birthday." Dan shuffled off towards the bar.

Carl flipped off the cap of his beer with his plastic lighter. "So where does that leave us?"

Tom took a large swallow. "Aah. Well, the fact is, they don't want it to be easy."

Dan was skeptical. "Who's 'they?'"

"You know. The System. The Controllers."

"Well, ok, but why?"

Tom furrowed his brows and scratched the side of his nose. "It's a means of control. Sex is your birthright, but they steal it from you and then sell it back, little by little. To control a donkey you need a carrot and a stick. Well, sex is the carrot. Or part of it."

"I hate carrots," Dan put in, wagging his finger. "My mom always used to make me eat them. Or I wouldn't get desert. Yuck."

"Shut up, you idiot," snickered Carl.

"Fuck you."

"They use it to sell stuff," offered Carl. "Like, if you work hard and make enough money, you can get the sexy car, and the pretty girl that goes with it."

"Yeah, and before that it was religion. Work hard and do your duty, and you get to go to heaven. And what is heaven? Just a code word for orgasm. After you die, eternal orgasm." Tom snorted.

"Sounds good to me," chuckled Dan.

"Well, It's not so simple as that. Because the System is both outside and inside. You know, like they're working on these electronic devices that can interface with the brain. Like in science fiction, except it's really happening. Elon Musk has a company working on it. But they've been doing it for millenia. They don't have to put something in your brain. They just take over part of your brain."

"Scary," said Dan.

"Sure," replied Tom, tugging on his earlobe. "Like when I was writing this up for an article. My keyboard fucked up and someone loaned me an old usb keyboard. The backspace key wasn't working right so I took it out, and a bug crawled out. A literal bug!"

Carl sipped his beer. "Get outta here!"

"No, really. But here's the point. When I got back to the article, I found that I had 'accidentally' deleted, permanently deleted, half what I'd written."

"So big deal," said Dan, "You made a mistake."

"It was no mistake. It was my inner censor. Installed by you know who! Good old George Orwell was right. The Thought Police really do exist. Only they're a lot more subtle than he made them in that novel. They don't need Inquisitions anymore. Torturing and killing people is crude and wasteful. It's so much easier to keep them from thinking the forbidden thoughts in the first place. But Orwell was smart not to be too direct. Let them think he set his novel in a future dystopian world. Actually he was writing about the present. That's why he chose the name '1984.' He wrote the book in '48. A rather obvious clue."

"So how long ago did this System begin?" inquired Carl.

"Oh, about ten thousand years ago."

"No way!" snorted Dan.

"Yes, way, unfortunately. Of course it took a while to catch on everywhere. In ancient Mesopotamia and even in Babylon, they had temples..."

"With temple prostitutes," put in an oboe-like voice.

Tom looked up. "Sunshine! Guys, this is my friend Sunshine. Dan and Carl, my pool buddies. Sit down." Leaning back, he dragged an empty chair from a nearby table.

Sitting back and wrapping a blonde dreadlock around her index finger, Sunshine cooed, "I'd like to be a temple prostitute. Fuck all those handsome Ben Hur types and get paid for it."

"Prostitute is a dumb word for it," said Tom. "They were priestesses, sacred, dedicated to the Goddess. They weren't just selling their bodies to fuck for money."

"Fucking in the churches," chuckled Dan, "I can just see it. Holy communion! The smiling priest giving benediction, altarboys with hard-ons..."

"Come to think of it, or should I say, 'think to come of it,'" laughed Carl, "it happens anyway. But they don't talk about it. Except when it gets in the news."

"So men could go there when they needed sex, and society approved, they were serving the Goddess, and everybody was happy."

"Okay," said Sunshine thoughtfully, "that took care of the men, but what about the women? What did they do when they got horny, and their husbands were off at the war or something?"

Tom grinned. "They could go volunteer in the temple. In fact, I think all women were expected to put in some time there. Serving the Goddess. And if a baby was born, it was consecrated to the temple, and respected. Everybody was happy."

"And what if a man couldn't afford it?" drawled Dan, leaning his chair back on two legs.

"Well, they were expected to make an offering, but there was no set amount. A rich man might give a piece of gold, a poor man some copper, or even some food if he was a farmer. Anyone could go."

Sunshine's green eyes flashed. "And now if you try to do that shit, you get thrown in jail. Or maybe some asshole pimp beats you up and takes your money. Let's blow this joint!"

"Where should we go?" inquired Dan.

"You can come to my place. It's not far, and my flatmates are out for the evening," offered Sunshine.

They walked their bikes in deference to Dan, who had come by bus, along the glistening damp sidewalk. Siren howls, bus growls, the occasional tinkling of a bicycle bell. Streetlights formed rainbow halos in the mist.

Chapter Two

They were relaxing on cushions around the low table, on which burned candles and Nagchampa incense. Sunshine had put on some Tibetan chanting and gone out to the kitchen to make tea.

Carl focussed with zenlike attention on methodically rolling a joint. He had spread out a fingerclutch of tobacco shreds on a laquered tray and toasted it with the flame from a lighter

held slightly above. He then used the lighter to carefully warm the end of a stick of hash until he could crumble tiny pieces onto the tobacco, and tossed the mixture with his fingers.

Dan, watching this performance like a devotee of magic, thought out loud, "Didn't they try that free love stuff before, like in Hippy times? You know, fuck the System, fuck whoever you want, free yourself and that shit? What happened to that?"

"VD happened," put in Sunshine, coming in with a tray loaded with tiny ceramic cups, a white teapot with blue flying birds, a small jar of honey and some spoons. She set it on the table. "You know, STD's. And reaction happened. A lot of reaction. Reactionaries. The warm dream of freedom woke up to the cold nightmare of consensus reality. War. Police. Money. Prison. A lot of lonely clueless girls with babies they hadn't planned on. Chamomile tea, anyone?"

Tom went on, "And a lot of starry-eyed youngsters morphed into solid middle class middle aged middle of the road yuppies, with midlife crises and some fading fond memories of wildness and fun."

"Negative feedback," opined Carl. "I studied systems theory. When a system gets an impact that throws it off balance, it rights itself."

"The hell of it is," said Tom, sipping his tea, "The System absorbs these kind of things and grows. It gets stronger and smarter. The War never ends."

"So what was life like before all that?" Carl licked the paper and smoothed his masterpiece.

"Before the System?" Tom scryed intently into the reflective surface of his tea. "Well, nobody knows, really, but there are some guesses. People lived mostly in small groups, maybe up to thirty or so.

"And it's likely that they didn't have marriages, at least the way we think of them today. Marriage originally was a matter of property and power. People were married to other people so wealthy families would have connections."

Sunshine was lying face down, her chest propped on a pile of cushions. She sipped her tea. "Yeah, when Europe was all kingdoms, all the royal families were related to each other."

"Right," said Tom, "and the peasants didn't usually have formal weddings. They couldn't afford it. They probably swapped around a lot, informally. Nobody much cared what the peasants did as long as they worked. They weren't part of society, but just sort of a base layer, just something that was there, like the plants and animals."

Carl's face was wreathed in smoke from the joint which he had lit, with a flourish, using a wooden strike-anywhere match. Carl studied drama and appreciated dramatic effects. "What about the American revolution?"

"Ha!" Sunshine, sitting up, accepted the joint from Carl and studied the glowing end. "Those guys were aristocrats. They modelled the government on ancient Athens, where citizens were actually a minority of all the people. Only male property owners could vote. Even Jefferson kept slaves. Fucked them, too. They all did." She pulled in and breathed out a huge cloud of smoke, her eyes glazed.

Dan smoked the joint like a chillum, hygienically, putting the tip between his third and fourth fingers and, making a loose fist, breathed in by way of the hole made by his curved thumb and forefinger. "So what about all those randy hunters and their hot gatherer chicks? Orgies every full moon? Magic mushroom trips, like McKenna said? Sounds fun. Let's do it!"

Tom had spread some white powder on a mirror and was bending over the table, chopping at it with a single edge razor blade. "Well, probably it was pretty loose. Social equality. Women could be leaders as easily as men. I guess people fucked whoever they felt attracted to, if the feeling was mutual. And yeah, maybe they did have magic mushroom orgies in the full moon! Why not? Magic mushrooms are pretty common, and they had a few hundred thousand years to figure out what you could eat, what killed you, and what got you high." He lined up the powder into four thin lines.

"Let's do it!" Sunshine giggled, her eyes shining. "Let's start a modern hunter gatherer group in the city, in cyberspace. Fuck the System!"

Dan pounced on her and started rolling her around the floor. "Fuck the System!" he yelled.

Carl grabbed the two of them. "Fuck the System!" They were all giggling madly.

Tom sighed. "Fucking idiots." Sunshine, rolling near, grabbed his arm and pulled him onto the pile. "Hey!" But he, awkwardly at first, joined in with the rolling, thrashing mass.

Tom passed around the coke and Sunshine poured them all more tea.

"So, how do we start?" asked Dan.

Sunshine was kneeling behind Tom, massaging his neck. "Let's talk to Mila. He's been around. He might even join in."

Dan snorted. "That old fart!"

Carl looked up from the coke tray, having snorted his second half into the left nostril. He rubbed his nose. "He might be a fart, but he's actually pretty cool. He's been around the world, done ayahuasca, lived in a group... there's even rumors that he's been in prison."

Sunshine, always a woman of action, tapped at her phone. She spoke softly for a few moments, then announced, "He'll meet us tomorrow for coffee at the Teetotally Titty Teaser Teahouse."

Chapter Three

Sunshine opened her notebook and picked up Plato, her favorite rollerball pen.

"They were sitting on conscious rocks in the Japanese garden sipping semen flavored kombucha, the specialty of the Teetotally Titty Teaser Teahouse. At least the rocks said it was Japanese, but you know rocks.

"Do you know rocks?" queried Kitty.

"Some of my best friends..." Curtis blew smoke through his overhanging mustache.

"And rock and rolling stones..."

"Never mind."

"No, they don't, do they."

"No, we don't," put in a stoned voice.

"Don't what?" wonderminded Curtis.

"Mind," rocked on Stoneface.

"Why?" Kitty wanted to know.

"Japanese Zen garden. Sit on no-mind rock. Master rocks. Be like rock, no-mind. Ass on grass, bones on stones. Rock on.

"Everything you experience is a projection on the movie screen of your mind. All the characters in your life act in your drama which you scripted and directed. Samadhi is nothing but the realization (real - is - ation) that you are the producer of your movie."

Kitty poured some Kombucha on the talking rock. "You're the most profound rock I've ever heard lecture on Zen. What is the sound of one stone not rolling?"

Sunshine glimpsed Tom and Mila approaching her table. She closed her notebook.

Sunshine sipped her pomegranite flavored kombucha and smacked her lips. "So how do we

begin?"

Mila stroked his grey beard and contemplated the stones in the Zen garden, the sand raked carefully to resemble waves, the rocks islands in a sea. "You learn by doing," he stated in a gravelly voice. "You don't need to go to Uni for four years and get a degree. That's just a way they dreamed up to keep young people out of the market so they won't be competitors for a while. There's lots of social parasites: doctors, dentists, professors, lawyers, who figured out ways to make people think they are necessary, and pay them well."

Mila sipped his coffee and set the handmade grey ceramic mug down. "Ah. They know coffee here. Rwanda, medium roast, fresh ground and filter dripped by the cup. Just a little fresh cream. There's coffee, and then there's coffee. Supermarket coffee is a totally different substance. It's not only the way it tastes, it's also the effect it has on your body."

They were in the courtyard of the teahouse on a flagstone terrace next to the garden. The bright azure sky broken by fluffy sharp edged cumulus clouds. Distant sound of traffic and occasional bird songs. In one corner a small maple tree with leaves turning to rust and gold.

"So what do we do?" Carl asked. He sipped his White Dragon tea.

"My brother went all the way through university," recalled Mila. "He even got a PhD, in biology. So did he work in biology? No. With the ink fresh on his diploma, he got a high paying job coding for IBM." He chuckled. "As a friend of mine said, a PhD means you're guaranteed not to have an original thought. Which of course is what they want. Free thinkers were always a danger to the Establishment."

"But we don't know how to do this. None of us has ever done it before," objected Tom, sipping his coffee and gazing at the pigeons' mating dance on the opposite side of the courtyard.

"Sink or swim. Jump in and do it. That's the way it's always been. Jump off the cliff and build your wings on the way down. When you start to do something, you learn, willy nilly, what you need to know. Will, that is decisions, always comes first. Manifestations follow. Suppose someone wanted to travel to India, say." He pulled a paper towel out of his jacket pocket and blew his nose. "You might say, 'Well, I'll go when I have some time and saved up some money.' You think that person is likely to ever go?"

Dan spoke up. "Probably die first."

"Right," replied Mila. "First you decide. Not just decide, you commit. 'Come hell or high water. Even if I have to eat crow!' I wonder what crow tastes like?" he wondered parenthetically. "I will go to India next year! That's the attitude that gets things done. And that makes waves."

Tom cleared his throat. "Modern physics recognizes that attention affects the so-called physical universe. The Uncertainty Principle. Shroedinger's Cat."

"That poor cat," sniffed Sunshine. "Someone should report them to the SPCA."

"It's just a thought experiment. They didn't actually do it," said Carl.

"Then they should report them to the thought police!" snickered Dan.

"So when you make a decision, a real decision, that changes reality." Mila picked up the menu. "I'm hungry. What do they have to eat here?" He picked up a small bell from the table and tinkled it.

"So you make a decision and everything falls into place? Like magic?" asked Dan.

"Well no. You still have to overcome problems. It's like an expedition. You prepare, but you never know what hurdles you'll have to overcome. It's a dramatic universe. And then there's the Law of Seven."

"The Law of What?" Carl wondered.

"The Law of Seven. But you don't have to know all that now. Just get started. And remember, no one ever knows how to do something the first time they do it. Every master was once a beginner."

A serious thin young man with a black waiter's apron and round glasses appeared silently at the table. "You rang, sir?"

"Yes," said Mila. "Please bring us some of these cacao balls. Say, half a dozen. And another coffee for me. Anyone else?"

"I want to try that coffee too," stated Dan. "Probably make me put on my superhero cape!"

Sunshine and Carl waved it off. The waiter oozed away.

"So," said Tom, "you in, Mila?"

Mila cast him a surprised glance. "What, you want me in your house? I thought this was a kid's party."

"No, we're serious. We want to start a new civilization. Fuck the System. And we need your wisdom," said Sunshine seriously.

"Wisdom," Mila scoffed. "You really want a dirty old man like me?" He leered. "Sleeping down the hall?"

"Sure," said Sunshine. "This will be a group marriage. Not just a marriage, an elite

Commando Squad! One for all and all for one!" She raised her glass. "To the future!"

"To the past," said Tom morosely, as he raised his cup.

Chapter Four

"When I see it, it looks like two little eyes." Sunshine giggled.

Tom massaged shampoo into her dreadlocks. "How do you wash this stuff?"

"Just be careful." Sunshine looked up at him and smiled. "Don't disturb the bird nests and insect colonies." She went back to contemplating his erect penis which she held in her right hand, with it's stainless steel pin through the foreskin.

She was kneeling on the floor of the tub while he stood over her. The warm shower nozzle between her thighs sprayed at her crotch. "How did people ever live without running hot water? Best thing ever invented." She took the head between her lips and ran her tongue over it. "Mmmmm."

Tom drew in his breath. "So, would you like to have lots of lovers? Like it says in 'Sex at Dawn?' They say that's what women really want."

She released his jade stalk from her mouth. "Sure. The more the merrier. But wouldn't you be jealous?"

"Not as long as I'm one of them. Besides, there's other girls too. Pussy Galore!"

She smacked the cheek of his ass with a wet sound. "I can't believe you read that James Bond schlock!"

"Secret agent man," he sang. "He was always my hero when I was a kid. Kills all the bad guys, sasses his superiors, and fucks the pretty spy women. None of them could resist his debonair ways. The horny teenager's fantasy. Let me have that water, if you're finished masturbating with it."

She handed it up to him and he started to rinse her hair. "Mmm, that feels good." She slurped up the warm wet lingam again.

He hung the nozzle on it's rack so it rained warm spray on them both. "Now stand up, turn around, and bend over a little. I think your pussy galore is ready for some inner massage."

"Ram me, bam me, slam me, set off an atom bomb in my molten metal core, more, I'm a whore, Lord Shiva golden lingam, damn, just don't come too soon, let the moon wax, aaah..."

His hand had crept around to the front and the middle finger gently massaged her clitoris.

"Your golden nectar honey, your glowing hot furnace, melting gold, I'm all in my rock hard, diamond hard, neutron star hard, never been bigger, all the way in..."

Minds merge as the center of the universe, the Big Bang, all stars, all galaxies concentrated in an inconceivably tiny but infinitely large point, you know what you are and why everything is and where it all came from - the ultimate meaning of the universe -

He turned off the water and handed her a large soft furry towel. "And now for some hot chocolate!"

"I like orange." She took a sip of her hot chocolate and leaned back against a large pillow, her hand on his thigh. "Carrots and persimmons and of course, oranges. I don't know, maybe I'm low on vitamin A. What's your favorite color? I mean, come on. Blue? How can you say that? How many colors can you call blue? Blue is a whole range, a world, a universe of colors. My favorite color? Well, it doesn't have a name. But you see it sometimes in the Western sky, after the sun sets, in between the clouds. It's an otherworldly color, with some blue and some green and some yellow. I guess you could say it's a pastel color.

"It's like my name. No, I mean my real name, the one nobody else knows. I can hear it in my head, but I can't tell you how to say it. I can't even say it myself. I don't know, maybe I lived somewhere else, before I came here, before I lived on Earth. Maybe I was something else, something not human, something that could pronounce sounds like that."

She paused. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

He shrugged. "If you are, then I'm crazy too. We're all crazy. Anyway, don't worry about how people judge you. That's their problem."

Chapter Five

Mila sat at his desk, chin in left hand. With his right hand he absent-mindedly doodled on a writing pad. He had always had a weakness for yellow pads, probably from his engineering training. They always made you feel like you were writing some important memo that would change history. More likely evidence to put you in the looneybin, he thought morosely.

So, here were some starry eyed kids, ready to run out and make themselves into martyrs. He sighed. Hadn't he done enough? He didn't have to help them. But... what was that someone once said? Something about a test... Oh yeah. A test to see if your mission in this life is over yet. If you're still alive, it isn't. He smiled to himself. Richard Bach, it was. "The Reluctant Messiah." That's what he felt like, a reluctant Messiah. Like his mother, who chose the nickname Cassandra. Who the hell is going to listen to you anyway? Cassandra could predict the future all she wanted, nobody listened, nobody changed their ways. Why should they? Nobody wants to know the truth. The truth is uncomfortable. Nobody wants to wake up.

Dreaming is so much nicer than facing reality.

He'd certainly seen enough in his life. No one could accuse him of being a Walter Mitty. He opened the top drawer of his desk and got out a manuscript. At first, he thought, but probably no one else would ever see it. He read,

"I have been seduced by a beautiful girl named Mimi in Berlin. I have been seduced by a beautiful boy named Kiki in Bali. I have had sex with 2 beautiful Brazilian girls in Amsterdam, high on magic mushrooms.

Naked on Wreck Beach, I have had orgasms in the sun. My girlfriend is a wrecked bitch.

I have received over 100,000 dollars in tips, the average tip less than a dollar. I have paid tax on none of that. I have defaulted on over 100,000 dollars in credit card loans.

I have had over 100,000 photos taken of me. I am famous but nobody knows who I am.

I have done over 100 3-day fasts, and some longer ones, up to 2 weeks.

I have been put in prison for being what I am, and I have been applauded and rewarded for being what I am.

By most cultural ethics, I am evil and immoral. I do not accept any cultural ethical system, I am a cosmic being, and the world is my playground.

I have stood on a hillside in Cappadocia, in the wet snow, after 5 dried grams of shrooms (self grown from a grow kit in London) and screamed and shouted my heart out for hours to the unpeopled, pastel-painted horizons. Local dogs waited patiently, sleeping in the sand, then showed me the way down.

I am not from this planet. My home is far away. I came to help with the transition.

"Go home. I burned all my bridges. Made it so I can never go home. Indeed, home doesn't exist any more, it's all changed. And my tribe, my people, if there ever was such a thing, that's gone too. Gone with the wind. I have no home and I have no people. ... and all alone and ever more shall be so... I know no one and no one knows me. In me is rare delights but there is no other. Never another, just the one. The One. There's no other place and there's no other time. And why? Because it is, that's all. It just Is. The big Is. The Inspissated Instant. Happiness."

Well, maybe he wasn't too old yet. To do something. To make a difference. What was it Spider Robinson said? Oh yeah. The meaning of life is, "Do the next thing." He chuckled. Don't wait for something totally profound and awesome to come along. Probably never will. Do what you see in front of you. Take the next bite, and chew it. Besides, it might be fun. And maybe he'd get a piece of ass. Now that's an odd expression. But the image makes sense

somehow. Like, when you're fucking her, you grab her ass. That must be it.

He got up from his chair and shuffled off to the bathroom.

Chapter Six

"Ready, Fire, Aim! I don't want any title. I'm just the guy in the background. The crazy old gardener, or janitor. So let's start by doing theater. That's usually a good way to get going, since life is a stage anyway. Maybe you won't take it so serious then. We're all just playing roles." Mila sat at the end of a long table. "Also, we'll start a corporation. That way people will think we're 'normal,' just some people trying to make a buck. Also, an educational and research institute, so when we do weird things we can say it's a scientific experiment. We can even publish papers."

An Ji said, "We're a creative group. Margaret Mead said that everything important in the world has been done by small creative groups."

"Right. Because of Synergy. A group of seven is much more powerful than seven individuals. And if it gets too big, it's stifled by bureaucratic rules. Becomes a dinosaur."

"What's synergy?" asked Dan.

Mila put his hands behind his head and leaned back. "Evolutionary principle. Thermodynamics says everything goes downhill, a closed system loses potential energy. But how did it get up in the first place? Life uses available energy to go against the flow, like a ship using wind to sail against the wind. It gets more complex and organized as time goes by. There's another principle at work there - you might call it 'intelligence.'"

"So what should we call ourselves? When you give birth to a baby, you name it, right?" Sunshine beamed.

"How 'bout the Aquarianauts?" Carl put in.

"Right, for the Age of Aquarius." Dan started singing, tapping on the table. "This is the coming of the Age of Aquarius, Age of Aquarius, Aquarius..."

"I like it," said An Ji seriously. "Aquarius is the bringer of water. Water, to soothe your thirst, to wash away all the dirt, to show the truth. Water, to float away the old and bring in the new!"

"Just make sure you don't become Narcissus, getting stuck admiring your own reflection!" scoffed Tom.

"And 'naut' means sailor so we're sailors on the water coming in. Surfing the waves of the coming age!" Sunshine leaped up and whirled, flaring out her saffron cotton skirt and clapped

her hands in a gypsy tempo.

"That's Aquaria-naughty!" said An Ji.

"Right," said Mila. "So theater to attract the starry eyed creative types, a corporation with projects for the ambitious competent types, and a scientific institute for the curious thinkers. Then we put it all together. All of us, the core group, should be all three."

"I'll direct the theater!" sang out Sunshine. "I'll blow their minds!"

"I want to do the science part," inflected Tom, putting on a serious air. "In the no-beginning, was the Big Bangup Word, that issued from the mouth of absolutely Nothing!"

"I'll start the corporation," said An Ji. "We Chinese are the best at business. I'll have them running in circles. Dan, you're good with people. You can be the VP for PR."

"Yeah," said Dan. "And the CEO of the NGO."

"Okay," said Mila. "We'll start planning a conference for next October, followed by a theater tour. Our first project will be a demo house with some land, showing how a group can manage economically and ecologically. Technecologics. Carl, you find us a place by next week, we'll pool our capital."

Sunshine rapped on the table. "First theater rehearsal this Saturday, noon, at my friend Helen's studio. Anyone late will be locked out."

Chapter Seven

"Acting begins with attention." Sunshine looked over the group, which had swollen to ten assorted hopefuls. "At the most basic level, there are 2 directions for attention: the inner world and the outer world. So run around and become aware of the entire space, how big it is, where you can go and can't go, everything in it, including the other actors. At the same time pay attention to your breathing, and run and jump until your breath is breathing you. And run in a counterclockwise direction, because that builds energy. Go!"

With whoops and laughs they all ran and jumped, skipped, hopped, and leaped. After a few minutes, "Okay," shouted Sunshine. Everybody stood panting. Some peeled off sweaters, outer shirts, or jackets.

"Breakdown exercises," announced Sunshine. Move parts of the body as independently as possible. Break dancers used a variation of this. And by the way, don't forget: Higher, Gayer, Simpler, Easier!"

"What's that?" asked Jasmine.

"From Stanislavsky. He said those four words should be written on the wall of every theater. Enough of seriousness." She added sarcastically, "Art is good for you. Like 'health food' that you can hardly choke down. Virtuous Art."

"Down with Virtuous Art!" yelled Bannerjee.

"Machen Spass! That was Brecht's motto. 'Make fun.' Theater should be fun. Art should be fun. If you're not having fun on stage, how do you expect the audience to be having fun?" Sunshine tickled Bannerjee in the ribs and he giggled.

"Okay. Move one leg or one arm at a time, and try to hold everything else relaxed. And by the way, in this theater, you design your own warmups. I'll show you some exercises, but you decide which ones to do and for how long."

After a few chaotic minutes, she yelled, "Okay! And now in the center ring, the main attraction of this wild circus: Molding!"

Renee snickered. "Molding? Like moldy bread?"

"No! Molding, like molding clay. Only this clay is your body. Your cultural conditioning limits your movement to a small fraction of what your body's capable of. But don't do it in public. A friend of mine did this exercise in a park, in Florida, and some lady called the cops. She thought he must be crazy."

"Okay. Three main beats. Rotate your hips in a circle, like a belly dancer. Break them down from the ribs and from the legs, as much as you can. Second, roll your head around, all the way, as relaxed as possible. Third, and this is the hard part, reach out with both arms as far as you can, and rotate your shoulders. Not just the arms, get the whole shoulder into it. Keep all that going together, and then add in the peripherals: rotate the wrists, and wiggle the fingers. That's it, Tom! Then move all the small muscles of the face. Break up those culturally imposed patterns, all the shiteating grins, the mean scowls, the pouts, the grimaces, the frowns. Stick your tongue out, wiggle your ears, move your jaw. There you go, Renee! Great! Now this really looks like a looneybin!"

"My arms are getting tired," complained Dan.

"That's your donkey complaining. You have to keep going 'til you get past that level. You break through from automatic to sensitive energy. Runners and athletes know about this, they call it 'getting your second wind.' You get to the point where you feel like you could keep going forever."

"Ouch!" interjected Carl. "That feels like a long way off. I feel like I'm climbing Mount Everest!"

"That's right, keep climbing!" Sunshine moved around, checking all the novice molders. "Arms

outstretched, An Ji. Fingers alive! Wrists rotating. Everybody, keep your attention circulating and check on all the parts, keep everything going together. 'I wish' in emotional center. Give your brain a counting exercise so it stops running the 'I can't' refrain. Three, six, nine, and on up to a hundred, then back."

"Okay. Two more minutes. Push it! ... Sixty seconds! ... Thirty Seconds. Super-effort! ... Twenty seconds ... Ten, nine, eight ... One! Okay! Relax!" They slumped, some sat on the floor or lay down.

"It's hard to get out of automatic energy. It has a momentum, like a train rolling down a track. But art takes higher, finer energies. Sensitive is just the beginning. But be careful. Remember what Reich said about armoring."

"Reich? Wilhelm Reich? Wasn't he that mad scientist?" asked Bannerjee.

"He was a scientist whose ideas so scared the establishment that even in America, the 'land of the free,' they burned his books and threw him in prison," said Tom sadly.

"Anyway," said Sunshine, "He said there are three truths: the armored truth, the unarmored truth, and the truth that there are both truths. Seems like he didn't apply that rule well enough in his own life. You can usually accomplish more if you don't become a martyr. So when you're out there in the armored world, put on your armor. An actor is always aware of his environment."

Chapter Eight

Mila looked around and saw that he was walking on a strange street in a city, but the signs seemed to be in Arabic. He thought, maybe I'm dreaming. He had been working on having lucid dreams by asking himself periodically, "Am I dreaming?" The thing was, to test it by trying to do something you can only do in dreams. There were several tests but you had to remember to do them in the dream. One was to look at a sign, look away and then look again. If you were dreaming, it would change. Same with a clock. You could try a light switch. In a dream, it won't work. Of course, in life it might not work anyway. You could pull on your finger and see if it stretched out. You could walk through a wall.

He liked to fly. As he was walking along, he just stopped putting his feet down and went into a glide. Beautiful. But then he realized that he could do that in life, so it didn't mean he was dreaming. He must be awake.

He woke up and opened his eyes. Daylight through the windows. He remembered the dream and chuckled to himself. The brain has built in blocks to stop it from becoming aware in dreams, to know that it is dreaming. When you are dreaming, you "know" that you are awake. And when you are awake? Then you live in the illusion that you perceive "reality." Like Calderon de la Barca said, in this world everyone dreams what happens, but no one understands it.

He pressed the button on his phone so the screen would light and show him the time. Nine fifteen. Shit. He'd slept late. A good sleep though, he felt refreshed.

He initiated gratitude-wonder-joy in his emotions, and awareness-of-the-field-of-awareness, in which state every perception was delightful. Was that being an initiate, he wondered?

"You have to initiate yourself," his teacher had told him. What did that mean? He guessed part of initiating yourself was figuring that out. He'd read somewhere that the last words of Gautama Buddha were, "Work out your own liberation with diligence." What a sense of humor that guy had. That's kind of like saying, "Forget about all that shit you've heard me say for the last forty years. It's all up to you, bub. Figure it out. Good luck!" and thumbing his nose at them.

Or Gurdjieff and his "dolmens." Travellers left these on hilltops and prominent places and they were like shrines so they tied ribbons to them, piled up stones, and such. If you knew the general plan of their placement, you could use them as markers to find your way in wilderness. He also complained about how the maps were useless. The map might show you that the next day's march would be over a cold mountain pass, and then it would turn out to be through a hot valley. The point was, that the markers were left by a lot of people who had passed that way, whereas often the maps were made from secondhand information, by people who might have gotten it mixed up, and had no personal stake in it.

Meditation class at 1030. He'd have to hurry. Not hurry, that's not a good word. Tempo depends on will. He would have to be efficient and quick. Quick-quick-quicker. Get between the whick-whack of time. Be there. Be intense.

He sat on the toilet. Everything is holy, everything is sacred. Shitting too. What you have used, you give back to Mother Earth, back to the cosmos. Today the remains of food, tomorrow the body. It all came out with a rush, and a familiar smell. The smell of your own shit, the smell of what's going on inside your gut. Funny, he thought, we go to such lengths to have good looking and good smelling and tasting food. We never think about what happens to the food as soon as it gets into the mouth and down. It's a fucking chemical factory down there! Intricate processes! All kinds of substances squirting into the stomach and intestines - acids, bases, solvents. And then all the gut bacteria going to work. And all that is happening every day, right inside you! So the best of it, the creme de la creme, of what you eat, gets through the gut wall. And a good part of the shit is dead, and some live, bacteria.

It's funny people used to think that bacteria were bad and if you could get rid of them all, you'd be healthy. No, the body is a symbiosis.

He got the shower nozzle, set the water to warm, and sprayed his ass, rubbing it clean with the middle left finger, and tightening and loosening the anal sphincter. How did he learn to do that? He didn't know. Maybe there was something in these reincarnation theories, after all. He did pick up using water from an Israeli guy early on, who had built an "Arab toilet" on the

ranch where he was spending summers as a kid. But the working of the sphincter muscle? It just made sense. He had read something about rinsing the ass. "You rinse out your mouth, so why not the other end of the tube?" He'd also read about a yoga exercise where this guy actually pulled part of the gut out through the anus, and scrubbed it with a toothbrush. Wow! He didn't go that far, but what he did felt healthy. Anyway, he'd never gotten hemorrhoids! Take care of your asshole and it will take care of you, he smiled.

In the shower, after washing his ass with soap, and then his hands carefully, he peed a little into his right palm and sniffed it up his right nostril, holding the other, then did the same on the left side. He then blew each nostril out. Again, where did that come from? Body intelligence? The body just knew it was the right thing to do? He'd never heard of anyone else doing that, though he had heard of sniffing warm salty water. Well, urine was warm and salty. He had been drinking a little of his urine daily for years. Again, he'd read about it and it just made sense. He palmed a little and rinsed his right eye, then the left. Best eyewash around.

He knew he would have to get old and die, like everyone else, but you don't have to become frail. He would stay strong and healthy to the last. The knowledge is out there, you just have to apply it. Daily habits - he preferred to call them "procedures," from his sailing days - possessed great power. Over time, continual flow of water can carve the hardest rock. And make beautiful natural sculptures, like in Capodocia.

In the kitchen, he put some water on in the electric kettle, opened the freezer door of the frig, and got out a glass jar, from which he extracted a paper bag containing coffee beans. He never bought ground coffee and he only drank 'gourmet' coffee. If he couldn't get good coffee he wouldn't drink it at all. He smirked to himself. A "coffee snob."

He reached up to the shelf and got down his favorite cup, a handmade ceramic earthenware piece hand glazed with colorful flower patterns in the Provence style. Made by an old friend of his. Whatever happened to Melissa? She'd sort of faded away. Her phone number and email stopped working and nobody had seen her for years. Rumors that she'd entered a monastery in the Himalayas. He sighed. Oh well. They'd never had sex, though they had erotically hugged, in a sort of Tantric way. Some things weren't meant to happen, he guessed. He poured some hot water in the cup to preheat it.

He counted out seventeen beans on a plate and poured them into the top of an old wooden hand coffee mill. Sitting on a chair, he squeezed the box between his knees and turned the handle. Nothing like the smell of freshly ground good coffee, he thought. Rich, exciting, hot - kind of like a sexy woman. I like my coffee like I like my women: hot and creamy. I like my coffee like I like my men: black and strong. I like my tea like I like my girl: exotic, sweet, and with a touch of spice. Hmmm, enough of that.

Pull out the drawer of the grinder, a heaped teaspoon of the grounds into the waiting hot cup, and pour the boiling water over it. Fuck all this fancy coffee apparatus. It's just junk the manufacturers make you think you need. The old hype game. Simplest is best, just like

they've been doing in Ethiopia for thousands of years. Ground coffee and hot water. That's all you need.

In Addis Abbaba (what a name!) a friend had taken him to his grandmother's for a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony. A charcoal brazier, a ceramic jug with a big round belly and tapering to a thin neck (similar to the "whirling dervishes" his potter friend had made in New Mexico so long ago) set in the coals, frankincense strewn over the coals to make a holy vapor, a pan with green coffee roasting. They would be horrified at the idea of buying roasted coffee, no, you had to start with fresh green beans to get the "spirit" of the brew.

The old woman had apologized at having to use a modern electric grinder instead of the traditional mortar and pestle. She had arthritis in her fingers and couldn't use the mortar.

She served the sweetened coffee in tiny cups; you had to drink three rounds. As there was enough coffee, they drank a second set of three. He thought he'd be totally wired from that, but actually it was just right.

He added a bit of cream to the brewed coffee, enjoying the swirl of color, tan to dark brown, as they mixed, and carried the cup into the other room, to his desk, where he opened the screen of his computer and pressed the power button.

The Linux system booted up and a voice sang out, "All right! Might is right, and to write is might!" The familiar screen appeared: a photo of a rainbow by an astonishingly green hill which rose almost vertically. He had taken the photo from Machu Pichu.

He clicked on the icon to open Firefox and from the drop down menu selected his webmail, Suckmail.com. Appropriate, he thought, since it sucked messages out of cyberspace and spat them out into his computer. He had several different email accounts which he gave out to different people. One for family, one for friends and casual acquaintances, and one for very special friends. This quite secure server didn't get much spam. On the other side, sometimes emails he sent were sidetracked into junk folders since the filters didn't recognize them as being from a standard email name like gmail.

No news is good news, he thought, as he quickly opened and closed all his email inboxes.

The doorbell rang. The first arrival for the med class.

They were seated in a circle, on cushions, in his living room. Sunshine had lit a stick of incense.

"Okay," said Mila. "This class is called 'Meditation for Beginners.' That's actually a joke, since in meditation, you are always a beginner. You might even say that's the aim. We're always 'beginning to begin.' I call it meditation because people recognize that word, but actually

meditation is just one of the steps on the ladder of what we call 'Laboratory.' Laboratory because you have a controlled space in which to experiment with experience, or 'experientment.' In the West we've excelled at mastering the outer world, but neglected the inner world. Bennett's book, *The Dramatic Universe*, laid out a scheme to unify the two. A six dimensional world, which actually became seven dimensions, because you need the seventh dimension, the impossible."

"The impossible?" asked Tu'ota.

"The seventh dimension is the impossible. It's equivalent to the ancient Greek idea of 'chaos,' the ground out of which everything comes, or the Chinese idea of the Tao. It's impossible for something to come out of nothing, agreed?"

"Something can only come from something else," said Bannerjee.

"But the universe came out of nothing, so the Impossible is part of Reality."

"I'll accept that as a working hypothesis," stated Tom.

"Okay. To get meditation, it's important to understand dimensions. So before next time, I want you all to read 'Flatland.' That's your homework. The first three dimensions constitute space-time, like Einstein's idea. That's what we think of as the physical universe. The second three, four to six, are 'inner space.' Call it 'Time-space.' The dimensions of experience, every bit as real as matter and energy. But Western science can't measure them, so it ignores them.

"Six dimensions here and now, here and now. Bodies in all the dimensions. That's why a man is like a tree, don't you see. A tree is visible above ground, you don't see the perhaps most important part of it, which is below the ground. Cut the tree down, if the roots are healthy it may grow back. Take the roots away it is dead, it will not grow. Well some kinds of plants can grow new roots. Anyway. The part we see, that is the part in this dimension, which is space-time, that's like the part of the tree that is above ground. The roots are the invisible part, or parts, which are in the other dimensions, collectively known as time-space.

"People don't usually work on or develop their 'roots,' the part in time-space, because it is invisible and because of cultural training, anyway our modern Western culture completely ignores that most important aspect of a human's being. The part below ground so to speak. So when you die and the tree falls over if the roots are not developed that's it for that tree. End of story. Take the time to develop the roots. Then when the tree falls the roots may grow another trunk so to speak.

"That's what Jesus meant when he poetically said store up your treasures in eternity. Trouble is most don't have a clue what eternity is, at best they think it's a sort of unending time, completely wrong. Eternity is another dimension."

"It's weird," laughed Sunshine. "The scientist observes what he calls objective reality, and

ignores or ephemeralizes consciousness. But without consciousness, there would be no one there to observe!"

"Right," said Mila. "So today, we're going to have a peek at Inner Space. Sit comfortably, cross your legs, and straighten your spine. Visualize, sense, and feel the five segments of the spine: cocyx, sacrum, lumbar, dorsal, and cervical."

"What do you mean, sense and feel?" asked Jasmine?

"Feeling is with emotions. People get confused because in the language it's mixed up. You can sense, sensations like hot and cold, pleasure and pain, and you can feel, the emotional response to a part of your body. Humans are three brained creatures, but we'll get more into that later. Now breathing. Sense the breath going in and out but don't control it. Concentrate on the tip of the nose, and diaphragm, feel it expanding and contracting.

"Pull the breath into the left nostril. Feel it going up and hitting the top of the sinuses, feeding oxygen directly into the brain. 1000 mics of oxygen! What a rush!"

"Can we use our fingers?" asked Dan.

"If you need to. But better to control it just with your muscles and concentration. Now do the other nostril, and then both. Okay. Now comes the nitty gritty. Stopping thought. That's really the beginning of meditation. Without that, you can't do any more advanced exercises."

"So how do we do that?" Carl demanded.

"Well, you can't stop thoughts unless you're first aware of them. And for that, you need to be fully relaxed. Go back to your breathing and sense the small muscles of your face. Go around and everywhere you sense tension, allow it to relax. Get finer and finer. There are three main methods for stopping thoughts. First, what you might call 'brute force.' Just command them to stop. The associative thought mechanism is very clever. It will say things like, 'this thought I'm thinking now is really important. Just wait til it's done, then you can stop.' But then of course the next thought comes along and it says the same thing! You have to be merciless. You're the hatchet man, the executioner. Chop it off! Chop at the roots! Even if you can stop thoughts for a few seconds at first, that's a victory."

"Stop!" yelled Sunshine.

"That's the spirit. The second way is to observe the thoughts, very carefully, watch them come and go, like waves. Then after a while they will die down, then stop. At least in theory."

"Calm sea. Force zero," breathed Bannerjee.

"Right. And the third way, more used in Tibetan schools, is to concentrate on one thing, a mantram or a yantra, which is a specific image, or both, until all other thoughts disappear.

The tricky thing here, is that eventually you have to banish that as well. But in any of these techniques it's the same. In the end, you also have to get rid of the thought of not thinking!"

"It's like a Zen koan," said An Ji. "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

"Sure. The whole point of koans is to shock the mind into not-thinking for a moment. Now for whatever length of time you can stop thoughts be aware. Beware. In the West, especially, we think, I am my thoughts. My thoughts is what I am. I think, therefore I am. What do you think? is the first thing we ask someone. So without thoughts, what is left? You actually don't disappear if you're not thinking. If you can see it, then arises what the Buddhists call 'the unconditioned mind.' So keep not-thinking for as long as you can, and observe.

"Remember the body. To have such a body. Material. The material of the Earth, which is the material of the Cosmos. Atoms. Dirt. We are thrown together, the elevator of matter and energy, thumbing our material noses at entropy. Life gets more complex. Sails against the wind. This pile of water and dirt and metals. Extracting energy from other life. Moving, breathing. Blood flowing out and back, round and round. Stuff coming in, stuff going out. Air coming in, air going out. Water coming in, water going out. A pile of energy, choosing to move.

"And that's as far as we will go today."

Chapter Nine

"Chocolate," opined Carl, holding up a chocolate covered cacao bean and squinting at it. "No wonder the Aztecs called it the Food of the Gods. Best drug humans ever discovered."

"I'll drink to that," agreed Tom, hefting his jumbo mug of Masala Hot Chocolate. He took a swig. "Ahhh!"

Sunshine dipped a piece of eighty five percent cacao Aztec Chocolate Company Superior Organic Guatamala guaranteed single origin chocolate bar with raw sugar in her own spice chocolate with soy milk, inserted it in her mouth and sensuously dragged it out between closed lips. "Mmm, that's the way to eat chocolate." She massaged Tom's instep with her own cotton covered toes and took another sip. "Mine has a touch of cayenne pepper. Hot and sweet, like I like my men." She glanced flirtatiously at Carl, who flinched.

"Wow! Lower the voltage a little, lover, you'll fry my circuits."

"I agree," said Bannerjee, gazing at his own cup of super dark rich hot chocolate. "It's not addictive like coffee, doesn't keep you from a getting a good sleep, and gives you a euphoric buzz, with no hangover like alcohol."

"Okay," said Sunshine brightly. "Here's a test. If you had to give up, completely, for the rest of your life, either coffee or chocolate, which would you choose?"

"Well, it's a tough choice," admitted Tom, massaging his chin. "But if it came down to it, I think I'd keep the chocolate and..." he sniffed sadly. "Give up the coffee. But I'd miss her, even though she's a demanding mistress."

"I was addicted to coffee for probably twenty years," said Carl. "Started drinking it when I was twelve. Took me a lot of work to break that addiction. If I missed a day, I'd get headaches and feel lousy. I'd stop for a week or two, but kept going back to it when things got rough, when I felt sad or depressed."

"How did you finally break it?" asked Bannerjee. Everyone knew he loved his coffee.

"Fasting," replied Carl. "When I did my first three day fast, water fast that is, of course you also have to not take any sort of drugs." He smiled, remembering. "I felt so good, I did 2 weeks completely vegan, with no stimulants of any sort. First time after that I had a half a cup of weak tea, it got me totally wired! I still drink coffee, because I love it, but now I'm the master and not the slave. No more than every other day. That way I don't get addicted again. I still use a lot of chocolate but it doesn't bother me if I don't have it for a while. And I go with more the natural form, raw cacao beans. I like chewing them, every bean tastes different, and it gives you quite a buzz! So yeah, I'd vote for cacao for Queen."

"Definitely Chocolate," said Bannerjee. "When we go to Mars, and Sirius, Cacahuatl comes along!"

They were sitting around a table by the window in the Chim-chim-cheree Cheerful Chimney Sweeper's Chocolate Heaven. A tattered old shop with furniture that looked like it came from a rummage sale and a collection of old mugs, each one different, some chipped. One day you might get a solid silver spoon with a Dragon's head stamped on it, the next a cheap aluminum spoon made in India. The round table they sat at was dark unvarnished pine with the patina of long use, cracked and unsteady. But it seemed to have a personality, a character sculpted from all the conversations, the emotions, the jokes and laughter, the passionate eye gazing and finger grazing of lovers, the arguments, indignation, secrets divulged or hidden, promises kept or broken, betrayals of trust, manipulations. All that was somehow recorded in the table which kept its serenity through all the winds of passion that blew around it. Somewhere in there, in the scratches and stains, the dents and splinters, a girl in love for the first time, a young boy totally trusting in the wisdom of his mother, a simple man who couldn't believe his wife was leaving him for someone she'd just met, two men who never thought of themselves as gay realizing they wanted each other, a con man laying his snares to trap a sucker, the budding song of a musician, the Shakespeare speech being memorized by an actor, the business inspiration of a budding entrepreneur...

The proprietor, wiping his hands on a brown apron, clean but old and worn like everything in the shop, came up to the table. No one knew just how old Old Tron really was, though he

looked as old as his tables and mugs. He would joke about it if you asked. "I was born on the lost extra day of the non-leap year, so I only have a birthday every four centuries," he would chuckle. Or, "Get into bed with me and you'll find out. Sperm don't age." His bald head shone when he, rarely, took off his cap, and his smooth forehead betrayed no secrets, but the lines around his mouth, nose, and eyes spoke of a long life full of intense and extreme experiences.

"So what's the philosophallicallizing today?" he asked, wiping up a small spill next to Sunshine.

"Just comparing coffee and chocolate," said Dan.

"Apples and Oranges. Drugs are tools. Every drug has its use, it's right time and place and method. As old Timmy used to say, 'set, setting, and dosage.' He was brilliant. But we all have our time to shine and the Universe is Dramatic. Roy Walford, who wrote books about living to a hundred and twenty, died in his seventies. Carpe Diem. Take the leap. Walk on the wild side. What's life for but to have fun? Why huddle in your 'safe' and 'secure' and insured little cave? There's a big world out there, waiting to be explored. Life is a glorious adventure, or a pathetic soap opera re-run!

"I don't know but I been told, streets of heaven are paved with gold. Why not, since it's all fantasy anyway, might as well have the best fantasy you can imagine. You can imagine and it's image nation, it's imagination become real, materialization of thought forms. Thought forms really exist, material in another dimension. The brain is an organ that can perceive forms, and transform forms. That's the good of it. That's being a three-brained being. That's reason."

"We want to change the world," said Sunshine.

"Christians, huh? Do-gooders. You know what the trouble with Christians is?" asked Tron, pulling up a chair and sitting down.

"They torture and kill people in the name of Brotherly Love?" joked Tom.

"Yeah, that too. But here's the thing. They talk about the so-called Golden Rule, right? So they run around Doing unto others. Meddling. Like Dubya Bush in Iraq. We know what's best for you. But they got it wrong! They got the Golden Rule twisted around somehow. Know what the original one said?"

"He who has the gold, rules?" quipped Carl.

"Well, that's sure true. But there's a simple thing the Christians missed. It's not 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' but 'DON'T do unto others as you would NOT have them do unto you.' Get it? That little difference makes for a whole different world view. In other words, live and let live. Tolerance. Let it be. Basically, mind your own fucking business!"

Carl sipped his cocoa thoughtfully. "Yeah, I get it. Like, if I'm a masochist and I like getting

hurt, I should hurt others, 'cause that's what I want."

"I like getting raped so I should rape others," chimed in Sunshine.

"I'm suicidal, so I should kill others," agreed Bannerjee.

"There you have it," said Tron. The whole Christian mindset in a nutshell. "Besides, Christians are masochists. I mean, just look at their symbol: a man being tortured to death, Christ on the cross."

"Jesus died for your sins," said Sunshine.

Tron snickered. "Every Easter, I like to remind people, Jesus went up on the Cross so you could sin. Don't let him down!"

"Anyway," said Sunshine, when the laughter had died down, "I guess it's not changing the world we want, but to create something better. A microcosm of a new culture, a new way of living."

"That sounds more like it," agreed Tron. "Create the world you want to live in. We are apprentice gods, learning to be creators. That's you, man, that's human, a human being being human. Since you got to live 'til you die anyway, live all the way. Bite the apple! By the way, you know what the serpent represents, that supposedly tempted Eve?"

"A penis?" asked Sunshine in a mock little girl voice.

"Hmm, yeah, that could be too. But traditionally what the serpent represents is... well, what do you think? Every animal specializes in something. What is the specialty of snakes?"

"No arms, no legs," said Bannerjee.

"Nothing but a head and a long tail," added Dan.

"Right, and what's a tail?" asked Tron.

"Umm, the end of the spine sticking out." Tom had studied anatomy in school.

"So, what's a snake then?" Tron drummed his fingers on the table. "Nothing but a long spine. And what's a spine? It's what makes us what we are, physically, vertebrates! The phylum is actually called Cord."

"So the spine tempted Eve. And in Kundalini Yoga, you raise the energy up the spine," Sunshine said thoughtfully.

"Right. But that's not all. What's the apple? The fruit of knowledge? What's on the end of the

spine, the other end from the tail?"

"The brain!" exclaimed Dan.

"And what does the brain do? I mean normally, not in most people," added Tron sarcastically.

"Hmmm. I think I get it," said Tom. Adam and Eve learned to use their brains, to think. And that got them kicked out of the Garden."

"The garden where they could be blissfully ignorant and satisfied with being animals, basically. Once they ate the apple, learned to think, became masters of their organisms, discontent ruled. They had to keep exploring, inventing, learning. Out of the garden, out of Africa. You know what Bill Burroughs said in his last book? We are here to go."

"You've sure been around," said Sunshine. "Tell us a story from your adventures."

"What do you want to hear?"

"How 'bout from your sailing days?" suggested Bannerjee.

"Ok. Let's order another round," said Tron, waving at a waitress. "This one's on the house. Masala cocoa with almond milk. And bring another bowl of those," pointing to the chocolate covered cocoa beans. "And another of the same for everyone."

"We had finished building the ship. Fifth Avenue Marina, just down from Jack London Square, in Oakland. Seven months, from laying the keel to launch. What a madhouse that was! Worthy of a book in its own right. Anyway, we put the masts in and loaded everything on board. There wasn't time to build all the inner walls but we put a big woodburning stove in the galley.

"The day we scheduled to sail out, we got up early in the morning. A portent of things to come, a thin layer of snow had fallen on the hills overnight - quite rare in that area. But that's the way we worked in those days, when we scheduled something, we did it, come hell or high water. An apt metaphor.

"There was only one working head (that's seaman lingo for the toilet), and I couldn't eat until I'd relieved myself, but I had to wait a long time. When I showed up for breakfast, the captain chewed me out for being late and said I'd have to go without. Not a bad thing, actually, considering what came later.

"Well, we sailed, I mean motored, right out into a storm! Twenty foot waves. They hadn't yet figured out the proper amount of ballast for the ship and she rolled like a pendulum. Lots of people got sick and lost their breakfast. I didn't though, just felt sleepy. We had a hard time getting out of the bay because we couldn't go sideways to the waves; would have rolled right over!

"On the deck we had lashed two huge orange liferafts. Not those modern inflatable ones, these were made of cork. Of course no one knew yet how to properly lash things, so they came loose, and started slamming from one rail to the other. Could have killed you if you got in the way.

"We had a Norwegian lapstrake skiff. Beautiful craft. But those two enormous orange liferafts took up so much space on the mid-deck we had to hang the skiff outboard, on davits. On one particularly heavy roll, The rafts slammed into the port rail. At the same time, a wave filled the boat with water. The weight of that bent the davits into perfect ninety degree curves, and the boat broke loose. We later used the bent pipes from the davits as part of what we called the 'roll bar,' which supported the mainsail when it was down, and the skiff washed up on shore. The Coast Guard recovered it and we got it back.

"In the large central space of the ship, Froggie, the engineer, was sleeping on a two foot high pile of plywood sheets we'd brought along to build the interior as it slid back and forth to the ship's rolls. With his analytical brain, he'd figured out that that was the safest place to sleep" Tron chuckled.

"In the morning I was sleeping and woke to hear someone shouting on deck, 'permission to cut the cable, sir?' The radar had fallen off the top of the mainmast and the ship was dragging it by its cable. Spica, the Romanian welder, had welded the mount for it, sitting in a bosun's chair on the mast, the night before. I'd been helping him and had fallen asleep on the deck. He woke me up shouting my name: 'are you going to send up the radar?'

"So we lost the radar and the skiff but the ship made it, with the aid of the good old Jimmy six-seven-one, world war two surplus Gray Marine. One of the best engines ever made. Used to call them 'Screaming Jimmies.' Two stroke engines make more noise.

"Our original plan was to sail around the world, starting by crossing the Pacific. Next stop Hawaii. That storm changed the plan though. We only went as far as Monterey, down the coast, and stayed there for a month building the interior cabins. Later we sailed down the coast and through the Panama Canal instead."

He sighed. "Nothing like sailing on a small ship to get you in touch with the real world though. You better drop your fantasies and fake notions pretty damn quick or you're dead. It's a strange contradiction. In one way, you're free to roam the wide world, but in another way you're imprisoned in this tiny container. A long sea voyage, say two weeks or more, is an inner voyage as well as an outer one. Like an acid trip. You forget about the rest of the world, it seems all that exists is your little world of the ship with just water and sky all around, to the horizon. And always in motion, never still. You can't put something down and expect it to stay. You become the waves. Like in Zen." He gazed out the window, seeing endless sea horizon, her eyes on me see why I cry, I cry for she...

Sunshine broke the silence. "Heraclitus said everything is always changing, you can never step

in the same river twice."

Tom chewed a cocoa bean thoughtfully. "Parmenides, his student, said nothing ever changes. You can never get out of the same old river."

"You can't win, you can't break even, you can't get out of the game," chanted Carl, draining his mug. "Poetic interpretation of the three laws of thermodynamics."

"Do people want a reward?" said Tron, pushing back his chair and rising with a slight groan. "Do they want praise, prizes, acclamation, money, blow jobs, reserved spots in paradise? No, this is strictly payment-in-advance. You already got what there is to get. Now you earn it. How do you earn it? Up to you. Figure it out. Using what you got is your reward." He sidled smoothly towards the kitchen, waving to a few familiars.

Chapter Ten

"And all the garbage!" the American girl said passionately. "Heaps of it! Throw it away! Throw it all away. To where? There is no away! There is no away," she repeated more calmly.

"Like, does anybody give a shit? Does anybody care?" said Dan, who was kneeling behind her on the bed and moving rhythmically in and out. On the stereo, the sublime melodies of Shankar and Gabarek weaved in and out.

Carl held a hash pipe to Sheila's full lips, watched her breathe in, then replaced it with his erect penis. "Mmmm," she breathed, floating on a sea of ecstatic sensations.

"People just want to have a good time," he sang. "Everybody wants to have fun. Nobody wants to worry about the past or the future, or where their garbage ends up." He held her blonde head and moved his penis around in her mouth.

She let it out. "Mmmm," she sighed, "Fuck my face." She slurped it back in.

Carl took a toke on the pipe and handed it to Dan. "People just do what they do. They just go on being people. So you have to design the systems so when they do what they do, the whole thing works. People might feel subjectively like they are conscious and have free will, but on the large scale, they behave like machines. That's the whole theory behind cultures. You might think cultures just happened, like plants and animals happen..."

"Shit happens," put in Sheila, panting.

"But cultures were consciously designed. Somewhen back there, someone, or small group, figured out cultures, made a prototype, cultural engineers."

"Yeah," said Dan, pulling his glistening rod out and resting it in Sheila's crack, "it's like software

for human hardware. Human hackers!"

"Looks like fun," came a honeyed voice. Jasmine's dark eyes peeped around the curtain she had pulled back. "Mind if I join in?"

"The more the merrier," grinned Dan, waving his hard-on at her.

"Mmmmp," agreed Sheila.

Jasmine smiled and began a sensuous strip-tease, slow dancing to the music. She turned around and pulled her white loose silk trousers down, revealing her sumptuous rounded buttocks with the strap of her thong down the middle. She wiggled it back and forth and pulled the thong down too, then slid a hand between her legs and opened her pussy lips between the curly black hair, revealing the already dripping hole. "Behold, ye mortals! The Yoni of Kali!"

"Long live the yoni! Vive la difference!" yelled Dan, grabbing the hips and thrusting all the way in until their thighs touched.

Sheila released Carl's lingam, which sprang up, quivering. "Holy Mother!" she moaned. "Life giver. Source of all!"

Jasmine squatted and rolled backwards, bringing her legs over her head and down. She came to a sitting position, spun around to face them, and peeled her trousers and thong off. She came up on her knees, lifted her blouse, and pulled her apple breasts out, the erect brown nipples high and offset towards the outside. She cupped her breasts, pinching the nipples between thumb and forefinger, and moved them in slow circles, chanting, "Om Tare, tu tare, ture, soha," in a heart piercing soprano. The others joined in and timed their sexual movements to the rhythm of the chant.

Jasmine pulled her blouse off, undid her violet bra and cast it aside, then grabbed Carl by the shoulders and pulled him onto his back. She straddled him, reached behind and grabbed his large stalk. "Mmm, nice and big! I can hardly get my hand around it," she laughed. She squeezed it and moved her hand up and down a few times, then fitted the head to her sopping opening and sat down on him with a sigh. She leaned forward and grabbed Sheila's hair, and kissed her fiercely on the mouth.

Dan got an inspiration. He pulled out, moved around, and insinuated his big member in between the mouths of the two ladies. They cooperated, licking and sucking it from both sides and tonguing each other around it. "Whooh!" Dan grinned. "Two heads giving head are way better than one!" He played with Jasmine's perfect breasts with his left hand, and with his right, reached down and diddled Sheila's clitoris.

"Looks like there's room for one more there!" came a velvet tenor voice. Without waiting for an invitation, Bannerjee, his black eyes shining, softly crept into the room, opened his

bathrobe, and knelt behind Sheila. He took his half erect dark colored prick in his right hand and rubbed it around Sheila's open and wet flower, with the long inner lips, then pressed the head against the inviting cave entrance, which expanded receptively to draw him in to the secret magic depths.

Meanwhile, Dan progressed to shoving his massively engorged whang alternately into one mouth and then the other, while the other continued to lick and kiss the huge base and the ball sack. Sheila even sucked a ball gently into her mouth.

Dan demonstrated his almost supernatural multitasking ability by, at the same time, reloading and lighting the hash pipe, which he then passed to the girls who toked in between sucking.

Bannerjee returned from a flight into the ethereal realms to see Mila standing there with a video camera. "For the archives," he joked.

Jasmine looked around. "Oh come on Mila, don't be an onlooker. There's room for you too."

Mila protested, "I'm too old."

Jasmine reached up and felt by his fly. "Hmmm. I think not," she smiled, and winked up at him. She tugged at his zipper.

Mila sighed, set down the camera, and undid his zipper, reached in and pulled out a respectably large hard-on.

"See," said Jasmine happily. "Never too old to play." She took it in her hand and teased around the tip with her tongue, then kissed the tip a few times and sucked it in with a moan.

"Great Lord Shiva!" burst out Mila.

Chapter Eleven

"If we're going to bring down the System, or at least offer a viable alternative, we have to be clever," said Mila. "Like, in the first place, why has the System persisted for thousands of years?"

They were walking through the park. Children playing, lovers walking hand in hand, old people in wheelchairs, microbusiness people collecting cans and bottles for the deposit, musicians with cases open for tips, drunks drinking from glass beer bottles and tiny plastic bottles, friends sitting on the grass and sharing food. Everybody was out today. Sunny and with some wind, just cool enough to wear a jacket or not, depending on your body heat.

"I guess people like it. Or anyway the people who do like it are able to keep it going," suggested Tom.

"Power," said Dan.

"Power," repeated Mila. "The ones who have it, and the ones who would like to have it, and see some chance of getting it. Like the American Dream. Not everyone can be rich and powerful, but people support the system because they see a vague chance of getting there, or they at least can project their own fantasies on the movie stars or moguls or politicians, the Walt Disneys and Bill Gates's and Trumps. That maintains the class society. In England they love the Queen."

"And the System is very clever," said Carl.

"You can't out-think the System," said Mila. "People have been trying to out think the System for thousands of years. But it just keeps getting smarter. Because it knows all the triggers and buttons and feedback systems that people have."

"Look what happened to Wilhelm Reich," said Tom. "He went against the System, and he died broke and in prison."

"Yeah," said Sunshine. "While Freud went on to become famous and everybody listened to him. Because he sold out!" she added hotly.

"Sure," said Carl. "He decided what was wrong with people was they weren't adapted well to society's structure. He knew the whole society was sick, but he thought it would be too big a task to try to change it. Reich became a David, but in his case Goliath won."

Mila sat on a nearby bench and gazed at some children flying kites. "The problem is not that people have a subconscious mind. The problem is that they have a conscious one. Freud got it all wrong when he 'discovered' the subconscious. Of course people have to have a conscious mind; they wouldn't be human without it. But still that's the problem. John Q. thinks that his conscious mind is him; his subconscious is an alien being that isn't really him. Ah, civilized man!

"Anyway the whole concept is far too simplistic. As if there were a conscious mind that was always the same, always in the driver's seat. The so-called subconscious is simply what is not conscious at the moment, which is most of it, and that is always changing. From the viewpoint of the subconscious, the conscious is subconscious, so Freud was simply cherry-picking what he wanted to call the conscious: the culturally trained and approved part. Because people are taught to not acknowledge and remember the other manifestations, they become 'subconscious.'"

Chapter Twelve

Mila cleared his throat. "This first meeting of the Aquarianauts is called to order, or to disorder, as the case may be. I will lead for now, then we'll see. We need a secretary?" He

looked around.

So He raised her hand and opened a notebook.

"And we need a timekeeper, to keep us on temporal track. The meeting will be limited to two hours."

Bannerjee lifted his left arm, and rotated it back and forth to show off his watch. "Smart," he commented.

Mila looked around the table. "Like a river, the task group flows, but the course remains the same. Some of you will see this through, others will drop out..." Murmurs of dissent around the table. "Oh yes, some will. Times change. And others will be attracted to the energy and join in. The task is what's important, not the particular people."

Sunshine raised a hand. "How will we know when the task is completed?"

"Well, the task doesn't get completed, per se. It's ongoing. But within that, we have to set specific objectives, with a time frame. Otherwise we're just deluding ourselves.

"This is a good time to bring up the Law of Seven. Do any of you know what a 'legomenism' is?"

Tom spoke up. "Sounds like it would have something to do with words, or records of some sort. It's related to the Greek word 'logos,' right?"

"Good guess. Korzybski called humans a 'time-binding' species. Because we live and die and succeeding generations carry on, we need methods of transmitting knowledge through time. Before language, this was very limited. Then, for many thousands of years, we had oral transmission, and then writing. But besides entropy, chaotic events such as wars intervene to cause loss or distortion of these transmissions. Wise people of the past invented various ways to transmit knowledge to the distant future, hoping some of those ways would survive the disruptions. These were encoded in things like paintings, architecture, rituals, and even customs of daily life. Usually you needed keys to decode them, and these keys were transmitted separately through chains of initiates. But unfortunately the keys were often lost even when the legomenisms remained. Most people don't even suspect that these are hidden teachings."

Tom and Sheila came in wheeling a trolley and distributed cups, placing thermos pitchers of coffee and hot water around the table with teabags, honey, cream pitchers, plates of lime slices, and spoons.

Mila continued, "Anyway, some of these legomenisms are under your very nose. For instance, the seven day week."

Dan was surprised. "The week is a hidden teaching?"

"Right. You take it for granted, right? That's just the way it is. But there's no cosmic cycle it's based on. The day is the rotation of the Earth, the year the cycle around the sun. The month, at least originally, was the moon's cycle. So why seven days? Why not six, or eight? And look at the names of the days. They're named after the visible planets, the sun and the moon, which also happened to be gods in ancient mythology. Why are they in that particular order?"

"Today is Monday, the day of the moon," mused Jasmine.

"Then Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn," added Bannerjee, counting them off on his fingers. "And back to the Sun."

"Right. It's not an accident. We in the West tend to think that everybody before our modern civilization were more or less ignorant savages. A viewpoint which an open minded visit to the Great Pyramids and the National Museum in Cairo will quickly dispel."

Jasmine sipped her jasmine green tea. "They probably knew some things we don't know."

"Exactly. Now, some of you play music. So, how many notes in an octave?"

She sang, putting her fingers out one by one, "Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, Do. Eight!"

Tom protested, "That's two Do's. So it's really seven. The eighth note begins a new octave."

Mila poured himself a second coffee and added cream. "And this legomenism teaches us something else, that the week doesn't, or at least not in an obvious way. Anyone?"

Tom snapped his fingers. "There's two different intervals! Half notes. Between Mi and Fa, and between Ti and Do."

"So interpreting this, with some input from Initiates, we learn that in any process through time which is evolutionary, that is it strives to reach a higher level, bring in something new, there are seven steps, and two of the intervals have something different about them. To keep the process on track, something has to come in at these two intervals, something fresh, an energy input. You can call this a shock. This shock has to come from outside the process, and you can't plan it or predict just how it will happen, but you can at least prepare for it."

"Shocking!" declaimed Sheila, putting on a posh British accent, and everyone laughed.

"Yes, and if you know this is part of the process, you won't give up when point three comes and everything starts to look impossible!"

"Like, a lot of people give up," said Tom sadly, "and they end up going around in circles. With broken dreams and lost illusions."

Sunshine raised her teacup. "Here's to not giving up! Persistence, cunning, and fun!"

"Persistence, cunning, and fun!" They all toasted.

"But wait, there's more!" Mila raised his voice. "To keep it going, you need continual transformation, continuous creativity. And for that, you need three lines of work, arranged in such a way that each one shocks one of the others. There's a diagram for that, called the Enneagram. Our three lines of work, broadly speaking, are theater, art, enterprise, the corporation, and science, the education/research arm. And now I think it's time for a break."

Chapter Thirteen

"Money," said Tom.

"Money? Money is just a tool," purred Son He, carressing his thick black hair.

"But a necessary tool."

"What is money," asked Mila. "Did you ever think about it?"

"Well, it's a medium of exchange. What was it they said in school? You can use it to exchange for things and services, you can store up value, you can keep it for the future, there was one more thing..."

"I know," grinned Dan, "You can use it to wipe your ass!"

"Shut up, you idiot," laughed Son He, throwing a pillow at him.

"It's like a counter, a comparison," introjected Carl. "You can use it to figure out how much you got. It's a quantitative measure, a kind of ruler, or scale."

"So now everything in the world is compared to money. Everything becomes quantitative. How much is it worth? Bill Burroughs compared it to heroin addiction," said Mila.

"How's that?" asked Son He.

"To a heroin addict, there's only one important thing. Getting the quantity of heroin necessary for your fix. Just like money. Money has no quality at all. Pure quantity. Course they try to fool the suckers into thinking it has quality, with those pretty engraved notes, but that's all bullshit. Pass the hookah."

"This is a good quality bud," grinned Dan. "My friend the Joker grew it in his loft. You don't need much quantity to get high, and fly, through the sky..." He put his head back on Sunshine's lap.

"Used to be," chanted Carl in a singsong voice, "long, long ago, in the dreamtime, before concrete, before contrails and steel rails, betrayals and court trials, plastic and mastic and electric fantastic, before fake honey and the Easter bunny - well maybe not before the Easter bunny, but anyway before money... "

"What, no money?" giggled Sunshine. She put on a vapid expression and gazed at the back of her hands. "How could I get my hair and nails done without money, dearie?"

"They had systems of social obligations. We still have that of course, but it's more in the background. Like, I owe you a favor. If someone got a reputation for not returning favors, people would stop helping him out. He might even get kicked out of the community. And that, you know, often meant death in those days. So mostly people kicked in. Plus, you had your obligations to the community just by being born in it." Carl took a deep toke and coughed.

"Like original sin?" asked Son He.

Well, sort of, I guess," coughed Carl. "This stuff is strong."

"Then someone figured out how to quantify that. Put numbers on it. Arithmetic. Money. Quantified social obligations." Mila laughed. "Abstract it enough, and condition the populace well enough, and you get today's financial world, with huge masses of totally theoretical capital and governments with zillions of dollars of theoretical debt. All on paper. Not even paper anymore, just digital records."

"I'm getting tired of this story," complained Sunshine. "Nothing ever happens. It's all just philosophy and theory. I want drama. I want heroes and villains and breathtaking cliffhangers and wild romance and tearjerking tragedy. That's the problem with your 'brave new world.' It's all so boring and predictable."

"Well, ok," said Mila. "We can be the heroes and the romancers, and then we need a villain. What do you think?"

"I got it," said Dan. This is the New Age, right? The heroes are a group, so why not have the villains be a group too? They're the ones who want to preserve the old order, the power structure. They love power, that's what motivates them. Power is the most powerful and addictive drug known to man!"

Chapter Fourteen

"Power is the most powerful and addictive drug known to man," stated Roderick Janus, breathing fast. He leaned back in his luxurious black leather upholstered office chair behind his polished gleaming hardwood desk. A blonde head moved back and forth above his lap.

"Or, as Henry Kissinger so aptly put it, power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, Don't you agree, my dear?" He grabbed the blonde hair and pulled the head up, popping his phallus out from between her pouted lips.

Katy regarded him with glazed eyes. "If you say so," she murmured.

"Oh, I do. Indeed I do." And he shoved her head back down and let out a groan as her hot wet mouth engulfed the quivering stick.

"Yes," he breathed, "There's nothing like power. Not even sex. Of course sex and power together makes a nice cocktail. Cock and tail. I like that. Wonder who invented it."

The sun shone through his office window. He contemplated the view of rolling hills and farmhouses. Why have your office in a city, in these days of internet and helicopters, he wondered. "I always get my best business ideas while getting blow jobs," he said, and lifted the blonde head again. "Take a break, Katy my girl, and cut us a line of coke, there's a good girl."

She smiled up at him sunnily, kissed the head of his cock wetly, and said, "See you in a bit," to it as she tucked it into his pants and zipped the fly. She patted the bulge and stood, pushing on his knees. She opened the left upper drawer of the desk and took out a small bottle, a mirror, a single edge razor blade, and a rolled up hundred dollar bill. She remembered reading somewhere that a large number of U.S. dollar bills had tested positive for cocaine, and smiled to herself. Well, when you needed something to snort with, they're usually convenient. And there's something nicely fuck-you-ish about using official government issued paper to take a government forbidden drug. Very American.

Janus reached out and pressed the record icon on his phone's screen. "September third, note. Concerning the deal with Zeus Associates. Issues like global warming, taking care of the Biosphere, and recycling hot now. PR to twist public image of company to look like favoring that. Rockefeller's shiny dime idea. Stay ahead of the trend. Ride the wave." He shut off the recording.

He regarded Katy busily chopping the white powder on the mirror. "Business has always been about making as much profit as possible." He liked to think out loud, especially when there was a sexy girl about. "What a lot of people don't realize is that the big profits are in the small increments."

Katy turned over the powder with the blade and decided it was chopped fine enough. She divided it into two little snowdrifts and began shepherding one pile into a neat line.

Janus went on. "You pay for your materials, your expenses, your overhead, your taxes, and you get a profit. But then if you can get even a little more, even another one percent, that counts big 'cause it's pure profit, everything else is already covered. That's what makes the difference between a ho-hum business and a real winner."

Janus had learned business in the nitty-gritty way, on the street. His first business had been making and selling hand dipped candles, in the Bay Area. He'd landed there almost broke and taken the first available job, a bike messenger. He had to start out on a low level, as a walking messenger, without a radio - they gave him a pocketful of coins to call in on pay phones. He graduated to a bike but quit after 2 weeks when a bus knocked him down. He wasn't hurt except for a few bruises but even though they offered to train him as a dispatcher, he decided that wasn't for him. He'd had a glimpse of the life of the minimum wage worker. You work all day and get home tired, you eat and go to bed. You're so drained that you need the weekend just to recover. And all that just to get enough money to go on living. What kind of life is that?

He'd learned how to make candles when he'd lived in a country commune years earlier. They lived on a shoestring and grew their own food and made everything they could to save money. An Israeli guy had taught him the technique. You could build the setup mostly from scrap wood, just had to buy some steel rods.

What he wanted was a really simple business where he could do everything himself, from buying the materials and manufacturing to selling the finished product. It would be a laboratory to learn about business, a micro business but with all the basic elements.

Candles required only three materials: wax, wick, and dye. He improved on the process to produce twice as many and sold them at flea markets and street fairs, having made the display racks as well. What did he learn? Katy interrupted his reveries by offering him the mirror, having snorted her share already. He took the tightly rolled hundred dollar bill and snorted half into each nostril, feeling the exquisite rush, like fresh fallen snow on the brain. He handed the bill to Katy. "Here, little girl. Buy yourself some bubble gum."

She tucked it into her bra with a flirtatious look and put the mirror back in the drawer.

"I'll go make us some coffee," she suggested. He nodded and she went out, closing the heavy door with a perfect click. God is in the details.

What he'd learned was that the money was in the sales. You could have a great product and manufacture it efficiently, but you haven't made any money until you sell it. Efficient as his process was, he couldn't sell more than he could make working one day a week.

So for his next business, he concentrated on selling, buying manufactured products from the factory. And indeed, he did make more money. He went to weekend fairs and sold wiggling latex hands, foam rubber walking lizards, and glow light sticks at night. He had fun and made enough money, but of course you can only make so much with a one man business.

But, of course, money is just money. Even with a lot of money, you can only eat so much, fuck so much, throw so many wild parties. When you start getting into megabucks and gigabucks, money morphs into power, and that's the game for big boys, he reflected. Big money makes

things happen. Big money affects the course of history. You can create, and destroy. Spaceships to explore Mars, and plutonium bombs that could wipe out a metropolis. You can make moves in the Great Game, as Talbot Mundy called it. Like playing chess but your pieces are the lives of millions of people, governments, factories, media empires, armies.

But the ultimate piece in the game, he decided, was your own life. That's your king. And sooner or later, everybody loses. So play ruthlessly, remorselessly, wholeheartedly, singlemindedly. Play to win, and never say die because when you do die, you can't say die anymore anyway.

He pressed the intercom. Tom Brady, his chief lieutenant, answered, "Yes?"

"Come into my office."

"What's up, boss?" Brady, a dark haired fortyish thin man with a face like a vulture, flopped onto the couch in the corner of the room and slid from his jacket's inner pocket a silver cigarette case, from which he extracted a brown, gold-tipped cigarette.

"Turn your bluetooth on." Brady did so and Janus sent him a file.

Brady scanned it. "So?"

"Where does money come from, Tom?"

Brady shrugged. "From the bank?"

Janus frowned. "Sure, it can come from a bank, but ultimately where does it come from?"

Brady thought. "From people, I guess."

"Right. And like Macky the Knife famously said, 'the poor man's penny is worth just as much as the rich man's penny.'"

"So?"

"These New Age types are worth a lot of money. Look how much they'll spend on organic food. As Starbucks figured out, they're quite willing to pay a 'vegan tax' to have soy or nut milk in their coffee. What people believe in, that's where the money is, right?"

"Sure," said Brady. "I mean look how much these Christian hypocrites reap from the true believers. And some people say the Vatican is the richest organization on the planet."

"Not likely, but yeah, they do control a lot. Anyway, this New Age stuff is all splintered. What we need is a new, New Age kind of religion, that people can really rally around and believe in."

"And spend their money on," Brady said dreamily.

"Exactly! We're in this for the money, and for the power. But we need good disguises. We'll be a wolf in sheep's clothing. Greedy, power-driven selfish assholes posing as conscientious gentle sensitive starry eyed Biosphere prophets. Damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead!"

"I like it," said Brady, breathing out a wreath of smoke around his face. "But how do we do it?"

"That's the problem. We need a strategy meeting. Call the usual suspects and we'll meet tomorrow for lunch. Let's see. Galliano's? They have good lobster."

"Have you tried the hummingbird hearts at Joe's Castle Cafe?" He smiled wolfishly. "But seriously, Joe does have the best venison and kangaroo steak."

"Joe's it is. One tomorrow. Have my helicopter ready."

Chapter Fifteen

If you have nothing to do, do Nothing. If do, then do. Don't just do something, sit there!

Mila was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, naked, his butt on the edge of a hard cushion and his legs crossed on a thin rubber mat, the right heel against the perineum and the scrotum resting on it, hands resting on thighs. A thin stream of smoke rose from a single incense stick, his favorite, Nagchampa Agarbathi in the yellow box. He had reached the first stage of samadhi, or contemplation. No thought, total awareness. All the sensations registering in his awareness were clever cartoons by the master animator. They tickled his higher being-body in its dimension of time-space, ecstatically. Engine noise, bird calls, voices from the street, harmonized in natural music. A delightful hunger pang appeared on the inner stage. He cherished it. Slight jarring out-of-tune sensations from the lungs and mid-back brain threw off the balance. He gently offered them highly subtle attention and welcomed them into the chorus.

In the higher emotional center, mid upper chest, his attention triggered joyful gratitude and cheerful courage. His heart mellowly savored every luscious beat, the rivers of blood rushing, refreshing, rejuvenating every single cell in this cosmic organ, this ancient wise super-system of macro-systems of systems of micro-systems, this glorious body, at once material, apparatus, machine, with roots in the dimensions of consciousness, of forms, and of decisions. How could anyone ever be bored? Isn't being alive enough? Anywonder everybeing howl be in all lives bore in born cooed in off anon?

He checked the time. Forty five minutes, time to stop. He slowly brought his almost numb left leg around to the front, kneeled, and bowed, head to floor, three times, Standing, he pulled on tights, then thin cotton shirt and a light sweater. Funny, he thought, you can be comfortable naked, but when you get dressed, you have to put on a lot. He guessed clothing

messed up the body's natural temperature regulator somehow. Wearing a cap didn't seem to bother it, though, maybe because it reads it as hair. There were those yogis, like Milarepa, who did heat yoga, the fire of Tumno. They could go around naked in subzero temperatures. He'd never been able to do that though. But he guessed you had to be in a really high state, like top level samadhi. When he'd asked his teacher about it, he had said you have to visualize a red-hot wire in your spine. But he realized later his teacher had been poking fun at him. 'Whale,' as his students called him, often told you completely wrong things to test if you remembered common sense and to think for yourself. "The Work is not a grocery store," was one of his favorite sayings.

Well, now he had students of his own, or sort of, he thought as he began his morning ritual of preparing spice tea. How do you transmit something that can't be put into words, the secret that protects itself? When you are enlightened, you can see how you got there, but when you are not, you can't see how to get there, even if someone shows you. Wisely did Lao Tse say, "There is a Way, and there is no Way."

The taste of tea. He who tastes, knows. Thanks anyway, to the demigods for entheogens. He had once overheard his teacher in conversation saying, "...so they left humans incomplete, and scattered a few plants around that could complete them." Hmm. Gurdjieff didn't have much respect for the cosmic engineers, either. They messed up, bigtime! Just a job. They tweaked a few lines of code in the human software and then went home and kissed their wife. "How did it go at work today, dear?"

"Oh pretty good. We're trying out a new prototype. Homo three point oh. Working program name Homo Sapiens. I think we got that other team beat with their 2.9 Neanderthal. There's a bug in there we haven't been able to fix though. Now and then the compassion subroutine crashes and they start killing each other. Seems to be right in the core, though, so we'll probably have to do a workaround."

"Oh you know I don't understand all that tech talk. But you're brilliant, I'm sure you'll work it out. Now sit down and I'll give you a nice relaxing back rub." She kisses his bald spot.

Workaround. All they have to do is figure out which plants and mushrooms to eat or smoke or whatever. He sighed and sipped his five spice and ginger tea with a spoonful of Zambian wild bee honey from the small funky health food shop. Thank you, bees, for bee-ing!

We are who we are, we came from a star. The latest model human, soon to be outdated. All the latest add-ons and updates. Operating system Globaltech.

All the politicians in the world should be required to drink Ayahuasca at least five times. He'd actually met, in Cusco, an employee from the E.U. government who was there to drink Ayahuasca. After puking his brains out all night, he was off early - "I booked a San Pedro session for today." A methodical Belgian. Admirable, though. If government officials were starting to do it, maybe there was hope.

The old system was dying, he was sure of that. The big question was, would it crash? Or could they transform it without too much suffering.

Chapter Sixteen

"No more Davids. Goliath always wins. And a good thing too. What people want is stability, security, dependability. And they'll pay well for it." Janus sat at the head of a long table which had islands of black coffee and white tea thermal pitchers, napkins, sugar bowls, cups, and spoons.

"And that's our job. The leaders, us, enjoy luxury, but we have the worries."

"Yeah," quipped Dworkin. "What to do with all our money."

"Thank you," said Janus icily. "Your comments are appreciated." He gazed around the table sternly. "Now," he said. "Growth and expansion. Progress is our policy. Some oppose that, arguing that resources are limited, that we must voluntarily restrict ourselves, balance expansion and contraction. I say why stop here? Why stop anywhere? Planet Earth is just the beginning. The sun's energy is effectively limitless. The asteroid belt contains millions of times more minerals and metals than we've mined from Earth in all our history. And our sun is just one little star among countless billions.

"We're not here just to be animals, mooing contentedly while we chew our cud. No! To be human is to be discontent."

He got up from his chair and began pacing around the room. "That's our policy. Now, strategy. If any of you have studied Sun Tzu, you will know that using physical force is a last resort, and not very intelligent. The point of having a powerful military is that you won't have to use it. Threat, persuasion, bribery, mockery, flattery, sowing division, sabotage, misdirection - there are many tools to use short of actual physical violence. In fact having to actually use your weapons is a failure."

Jack Cornflower regarded his perfectly manicured fingernails and said in a bored tone, "So what's your point?"

Janus paused his pacing and regarded him with a penetrating gaze. "I never waste good raw material. This new social movement we've been hearing about - they call themselves the --" He fished a piece of paper from his pocket and peered at it owlishly. "The Aquarians. I sent a dependable operative - you don't need to know her name - " He smiled. "- to infiltrate the movement. Even though he doesn't use a title, the brains behind it is a rather mysterious man named Mila. Now, we don't want to stop this movement. Could be useful. But, everyone has his price. I aim to get this Mila on our side. We could use his brains, for sure."

Mgambe put his hands on the table and studied the wrinkled chocolate skin. "These modern people," he thought. "They're like children, eagerly grabbing at things and spilling the soup."

They don't get wisdom and patience like my tribe. We connect to the wisdom of Life, we grew out of the jungle, we remember remembering our animal ancestors. Uncle Gorilla, grandmother Parrot, cousin Giraffe. Everything moves in cycles. This has happened before, and will again." Aloud he said, "Policy, strategy. What about tactics?"

Janus glanced at him. A good man. Solid, dependable. But impenetrable. "The System always wins, in the end. We absorb or marginalize any alternatives, and get smarter and stronger. Okay, task groups. I want you, Mgambe, to come up with a plan, time line, priorities, contingencies, by next week. You can have Blacksmith, Hawkfeather, Ching Lee, and Martinez. That should be a good working group. Send me a progress report by Friday. Cornflower, you and Dworkin look at investment strategies. We'll meet again for lunch next Wednesday. Any questions?"

Chapter Seventeen

"Looks pretty good," said Mila. He regarded the huge old farmhouse, with its peeling paint and weathered shingles. "It'll need some work, but that's good. Physical work keeps you from losing common sense."

Sunshine smiled. Old Mila always had to philosophize about everything. For her own part, she was already in love with the house. A welcoming delegation of pigeons perched in a row along the peak of the roof and, at some unseen signal, spread their wings and swooped away.

"Electrics in bad shape," observed Dan sadly. "Plumbing even worse."

"But there's plenty of land for gardens," crowed Son He happily. We can grow a lot of our own food. Maybe even keep chickens."

"And goats!" added Jasmine excitedly. "I want two nanny goats, for milk. We can have goat milk, goat butter, goat yogurt, and even goat cheese."

"And fuck the goats, like the goatherds of old," said Carl.

"You horny pervert," said Jasmine.

"Well, the Greek gods were always turning themselves into animals and fucking humans. Where did that come from? Talk about horny perverts! And Pan was half goat, the half with the big dick. He's often pictured with a huge phallus, chasing nubile shepherdesses, round and round the vase..."

"Anyway," cut in Mila. It's good, if not perfect. The better is the enemy of the good. It will do, and we'll have lots of fun crews fixing it up. Plenty of bedrooms. And over there -" He pointed to the right. "We'll put up a geodesic dome for a theater and conference hall. Financing. An Ji, how's the corporation coming?"

"We have submitted the papers. System Alternative Futures Enterprises. Incorporated. What do you think? SAFE Corp. Sounds tre respectable, nespa? Or maybe SAFE, Inc. Like saving ink, you know? I'm the president, Tom is the secretary, and Son He the treasurer. We can all be on the board, and whoever puts some money in gets shares. SAFE will own the property and pay dividends, if there are any."

"Right. Do all the paperwork and we'll move in and have a housewarming on Samhein, which also happens to be New Moon, a good time to start something new. We can dance around a bonfire and connect to the spirits."

"I'll be a witch and rub a broomstick with Datura on my pussy," said Jasmine. "That's how the witches fly, don't you know?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "It's funny, all those kids dressing up as witches with broomsticks. Wouldn't the parents shit a brick if they knew the origin of the legend?"

"Well," said Sheila, "Old Santa Claus was high on Fly Agaric loaded reindeer piss. Talk about legomenisms."

"And Easter is all about sex and fertility too. Rabbits because they fuck so much and eggs from hens getting laid," said Jasmine.

"And Valentine's day," said Dan. "Turn that heart symbol upside down and what does it look like? A pussy with the inner lips spread open."

"Yeah," breathed Carl. "I can see it. Shakuntala. The Shining Cunt of Allah."

"Sex is in the eye of the beholder," said Mila. "To the horny, all things are horny. Everything's a yoni or a lingam, or both. Sex is everywhere, as Henry Miller observed. Universal principle. Now let's get busy."

Chapter Eighteen

"There's too many conversations. Too much talk," remarked Sunshine, digging her hoe into the soil. "I want to see more action."

"This is action," replied Tom, swinging his axe down onto the log he was chopping.

"I know, but I mean in the story."

"Lunch time!" called a voice from the open window of the house. "Actor's lunch. Wash up and dress nice! Ten minutes."

"You have to start somewhere. Just start. What any human being can do, you can do. You have the intelligence in your genes. Everybody that ever did anything was a beginner at some

point. Do you think Shakespeare knew how to write a play when he wrote his first one? Did Alexander know how to win a battle? Did Dostoevsky know how to write a book? Jump in. Sink or swim. Learn by doing, by hook or crook. Intention comes first, action, then learning. If you're doing something nobody ever did before, there's no one to teach you how to do it. And since you never step in the same river twice, nothing ever happens the same as before, it's always new. So begin, and make it up as you go along." Mila smiled. "How's that for a pep talk?"

"I wouldn't want a surgeon to operate on me who hadn't had any training," objected Jasmine.

"That's right," said Tom, "and I wouldn't want to fly in a plane where the pilot didn't train."

"Sure," said Mila, but what's behind all that operating and flying training? A lot of dead people and crashed airplanes, that's what! Somebody had the nerve and audacity to cut open a living body and try to fix it, without knowing much. And those daring young men in their flying machines. So where's the school where you can get a degree in creating cultures for the Aquarian Epoch?"

"Right here!" said Son He. "We're the school."

"There you go," said Mila. "Pass the quinoa."

Actor's lunch in the sunny dining room of the ranch house.

"Since this is actor's lunch, I want to talk about our next play," said Sunshine. "What should be our first production. Any ideas?"

"Why don't we go right to the heart of the matter?" said Mila. "The heart, that is. Pour me a little more kombucha, would you, An Ji? Thanks, dear. Art is primarily about emotions, right? So why not develop a play that deals directly with emotions?"

"Like Robin Williams' character said in 'Dead Poet's Society,' it's not about what people did, or how, but why they did anything. What motivates them," said Dan.

Right," said Mila. "Let me tell you a story, a sort of riddle. A man had three possessions: a wolf, a sheep, and a cabbage. He had to cross a river and had only a small boat that could carry only himself and one of the three."

"Must have been a pretty big cabbage," remarked An Ji, giggling.

"Yeah. Anyway, if the man wasn't watching them, the wolf would eat the sheep and the sheep would eat the cabbage. So how does he get them across safely?"

"He has to take the sheep first," said Tom.

"And then," added Son He, "he has to take one of the others and then bring the sheep back--"

"Leave the sheep there," chanted Sunshine."

"And at the last," sang Dan.

"Go back and get the sheep!" They all shouted together.

"Mission accomplished!" crowed An Ji, bringing in a large plate of chocolate walnut brownies and handing it around. Tom followed with two steaming pots of mint tea.

"Made with fresh peppermint from the garden," he announced proudly.

"So," said Mila, biting into a brownie. "Mmm, that's good," he mumbled around it, and took a sip of tea. "The man has to take more care with the sheep than the others. He carries the sheep at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. So how can we interpret the symbols in this story?"

"Sounds kind of like Gurdjieff's idea that man is a three-brained being," said Tom, breaking a brownie in two and sniffing the chocolatey aroma with great enjoyment.

"I'm thinking the wolf would be the instinctive brain," said Carl. It's the most primitive and powerful. Instinctive drives dominate. If you're starving, everything is focussed on getting food. And if you're horny..." he grinned at Sheila.

She batted her long brown eyelashes at him and purred voluptuously, "A hard man is good to find."

Carl threw back his head and let out a wolf howl. Everybody laughed.

"What about the cabbage? A cabbage is pretty passive. Maybe that would be the emotions," Suggested Son He.

"And the sheep would be the intellect? Following the other sheep. That would sure be true for most people," said An Ji.

"Well, but the brain kind of looks like a cabbage," said Tom. It has lots of layers. And a stem, like the brain stem. But if that's it, then the author of the story didn't have a very high opinion of most people's capacity to use the brain." He chuckled.

Bannerjee mused, "I like that idea that the sheep could eat the cabbage. I mean, if I'm feeling strong emotions, it definitely overpowers my thinking."

"Okay," said Mila. "Then, if we tentatively accept that the sheep is the emotional center, or brain, what does that mean? If crossing the river symbolizes human transformation or

individual evolution, then the main point is--"

"Oh, I know!" burst out Sheila. "You have to work closely with emotions first, middle, and last! Emotions is the key."

"And that's why the Tibetan tradition, one of the most effective, emphasizes working with emotions so much," said Mila.

"I know," said Sunshine. "Once, in London, when I was doing street performing, I felt this strong emotional presence. I couldn't tell where it was coming from, but then a small group stopped near me. A woman with shaved head and a Tibetan nun's robe stood and looked at me and I knew the feeling was coming from her. She just looked for a few seconds and then turned and moved on. I wished afterwards that I had spoken to her, asked her what tradition she was in and how she did that, but I was costumed and standing on my box. Anyway, no denying it, there was definitely something there."

"Right," said Mila. "So, to accomplish any change socially, as we're trying to do, you have to take that into account. Society, at least our contemporary society, runs on automatic ideas controlled mainly by negative, or course emotions, which in turn are run by mostly unconscious instinctive drives. Sex, of course, being the most powerful. The wolf controls the sheep which controls the cabbage."

"But where's the man in all that?" asked Son He. "Who's the man in the story?"

"Good question," said Mila, pouring himself some more tea and spooning in some honey. "What do you think?"

"Well, let's see. Gurdjieff also talked about a fourth something, didn't he? Besides the three centers. Will, I guess."

"Something that most people don't have, even though they think they do, and society tells them they do," said Mila sadly. "And all that adds up to a man without quotation marks, as he so colorfully put it."

Chapter Nineteen

"Today we begin," said Sunshine in a clear voice, while the others continued their warmup exercises, "to improvise scenes towards building our new play."

"What will we call it?" asked Jasmine.

"I've got it!" said Dan. "How about 'The Seven Deadly Sins?'"

"I like it," said Sunshine. "Shakespeare said the purpose of theater is to hold a mirror up to nature. Shock and surprise people by reflecting back to them the way they really are, not what

they think they are. Spoiled brats," she laughed. "But it's not a new idea. Marlowe had the Seven Deadly Sins in Doctor Faustus."

"Will it be comedy?" asked Son He.

"What else? You are condemned to make an ass of yourself. Drama starts with a judgement, and people struggle against that judgement, which results in all the scenes, the drama of life. There are seven basic kinds of drama. Can anyone tell me the others?"

"Well, Shakespeare had histories, comedies, and tragedies," said Dan.

Mila said, "Those are categories invented by scholars, not dramatists. But tragedy is definitely one type of drama. What's the judgement of tragedy?"

"You are condemned to die like a dog!" huffed Dan, as he bent over to touch the floor.

"How does a dog die?" asked Bannerjee.

"Arf," said Dan. "Like every organism dies. But even dogs don't want to die like a dog."

"Right," said Mila. "These are all cosmic dramas, inescapable, penetrating everywhere. But without the struggle, without conflict, no drama. Without life, no drama. Heraclitus said, everything comes from conflict, from struggle. It's a dramatic universe; that's a basic truth. You know the yin yang symbol."

"From Taoism," said An Ji.

"Right. There's white, and there's black. White turns into black, black turns into white - that's what the little spots represent - but there's no grey. No mixing. Round and round."

"What about Shakespeare's histories?" asked Tom.

"Well, they're mostly about the Wars of the Roses. You have heroes, like Henry the Seventh, and villains, like Richard the Third, and some that are not clearly one or the other. Those are mostly what we call heroic drama. You are condemned to be hacked to pieces."

"Ouch," said Jasmine, attempting a head stand and rolling over.

"And then there are the plays that scholars have a hard time classifying, like The Tempest. That's what we call a mystery drama: you are condemned to starve in the midst of plenty."

"But Prospero didn't starve," pointed out Sunshine.

"Take it metaphorically. Prospero mastered magic, right? But he couldn't make himself young again. Some say that play was Shakespeare's farewell to the stage. The great globe itself..."

shall dissolve and... leave not a rack behind. His theater was called the Globe."

"Well," said Sunshine. "More on that another time. Let's get back to The Seven Deadly Sins. What's your favorite sin, Dan?"

"Ask me a hard one," quipped Dan. "Lust, of course."

"Mila? Pride?"

"Pride? Me? I'm the only one in the world without pride."

"We'll take that as affirmative. Anyone else?"

"I'll go for sloth," said Bannerjee, lying comfortably on his back with his hands behind his head.

"Vanity," offered Sheila, gazing at her reflection in the theater's full length mirror.

"I'm pissed off again," broke in An Ji, entering through the main door. "I just--"

"You have another reason to be pissed off, you mean," said Mila gently.

"Anger," chorused the group.

"If we do this right, we could make a killing off this show," began Tom. "Videos and branded products..." He gazed into the distance.

"I think we have another one," said Sunshine.

"Greed," yelled Jasmine, poking Tom in the ribs.

"And now for the grand prize-" Sunshine became a circus announcer "- the latest, greatest, sinneriest sin of all - win or lose, drugs or booze, you can have it all if you don't fall, boys and girls, take a whirl, be bold and go for the gold, we want it all! Progress progress progress at any cost!"

Nobody claimed the prize.

"Gluttony! The supreme sin of modern civilization, of globaltech. Nothing will satisfy its hunger - it gobbles up whales, buffalo, ancient cultures, gold, oil, gas, rainforests, atoms, and shits out air pollution, landfills, radioactive waste, rootless masses of bewildered refugees... Hooray for the seven deadly sins! And that's all for today, folks, don't forget the eating exercise - ha ha. Until next time."

Mila looked out the window of his bedroom. A grade A grey day. He wanted to go live in the tropics. But then you had mosquitoes. Oh well. Nothing is perfect in this world.

The Aquarianauts were doing well. He couldn't keep up with all the consulting. The new site in South Africa had just opened, and the Sacred Valley one was coming along. He wasn't sure about opening the proposed one in Hawaii. Since the U.S.A. had degenerated into a fascist dictatorship, it was hard to get anything real going there. He guessed historically speaking, it had to happen sooner or later. Anyway, it looked like with the support of Japan, Hawaii's bid to break away and form an independent republic might work. Chairman Frump of the ruling Democratic-Republican Party, the only party there now, had his attention preoccupied with the cold war with the Chinese-Russian alliance. A Cold War that might heat up into a Hot War any moment, he thought.

Sometimes he thought there was no point going on. Let them get what they deserved, he would go back where he came from, his home in the stars. But what the hell. Might as well keep on keeping on as long as you're here. Humanity was definitely an interesting experiment and maybe it had some merit.

He booted up his computer to check email. Weekly reports from the seven branches. He would read those later. Here was an interesting one. From the Global Alliance for an Intelligent Noosphere. He'd heard of GAIN. Doing good work. They'd had some multidisciplinary conferences, bringing together scientists, artists, business people and politicians to talk about sustainable futures. Some overlap with that other organization: Humans Are Responsible Custodians. HARC saw Earth as a sort of garden planet, with large areas allowed to grow wild, but with supervision of course. Both orgs, he'd heard rumors, were connected somehow, maybe received grants from, that super-rich mogul who mostly kept out of the public eye - Janus. That was his name. Aptly named after the two-faced god, thought Mila.

He opened the email.

"Dear Mr. Repa," he read.

"We here at GAIN appreciate the good work you've been doing and thank you on behalf of the intelligence of planet Earth."

They think they can speak on behalf of the planet, he thought. Well, I guess anyone can. We all represent it in some way. He read on.

"We have some grant money available and might be willing to share it with your organization. Can we suggest a meeting next week to discuss it?"

Yours Truly,

Tom Brady, Secretary

GAIN"

Chapter Twenty One

"Did you cast the lure?" asked Janus.

"Invited him to a meeting. He's a crafty old bastard, but we know he needs money and he wants to keep growing his organization." Tom Brady crossed to the bar and helped himself to a glass of Buchanan single malt on ice.

"He'll geek. I know the type. He wouldn't have started this organization if power didn't interest him, at least some," said Janus.

Tom was skeptical. "Maybe. But I guess he's a player. I wouldn't underestimate him."

Janus regarded the glowing end of his Supra Mellow Yellow Jamaican Silver Tip bud and tobacco cigar thoughtfully, and tapped the ash into his lapis lazuli ash tray. "Good. Nothing I like better than a challenging game. He'll come to the meeting out of curiosity, if nothing else. He's a player. I can feel it. A player of the Great Game. And there aren't many of those. Not to be wasted." He smiled contentedly and leaned back in his Deluxe handcrafted office chair.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"In the imagination of storytellers. Sitting around the fire twenty thousand years ago."

"So, Janus," said Mila, "you see yourself as a storyteller?"

"Sure," said Janus, offering him a cigar. "History is a collection of stories. Some few tell the stories, like me, and maybe you, and the rest act them out. That's what power's all about, being the one who imagines and tells the story." He puffed contemplatively at his cigar. Then he smiled. "Of course, as Tolstoy pointed out, you could also see the great decision makers, like Napoleon, as being controlled by the story."

"All a matter of viewpoint, heuristics," said Mila.

"How you interpret it," agreed Janus.

"So you're the great mogul," said Mila. "You don't give a shit about the happiness of people or the health of the biosphere. You just want to experience the thrill of power. 'Apres moi, le deluge.'"

Janus laughed, which led to a coughing fit. His face red, he blew his nose into a tissue and took a gulp of water. "Yes and no. I'm an elitist, I make no bones about that. There are different levels of people. I agree totally with Nietzsche about that. Some, most that is, are fit only to be used. And mostly, they want to be used. The best they can aspire to, is to be part of an historical movement, to be a pawn in the great game."

"Buddha said, everybody can be a Buddha," said Mila.

"Oh, don't bore me with your philosophy. I'm a practical man. Sure, you can debate forever about whether there is a soul. 'There is a soul, there is not a soul, there both is and is not a soul, there neither is nor is not a soul.' Buddha said that, too. But when you get down to it, action is truth. People won't believe you can do something until you do it, and then they knew it all along. The opinion of the common man is worth nothing."

"Opinions are like assholes. Everybody has one," quoted Mila.

"Yes. And talk is cheap. Good ideas are a dime a dozen. But rare is the man who can achieve a project in the real world, materialize a thought form, whether it's conquering a world scale empire like Ghengis Khan, or mass producing cheap cars, like Henry Ford." Janus looked steadily into Mila's grey eyes and raised a finger. "One thing I've learned in my life is this: the genuinely new is extremely rare. Most people just imitate what others have done."

"That's true," said Mila thoughtfully. "I remember a market in Lima and seeing dozens, maybe hundreds, of little stalls selling shoes, all lined up one after the other. And they all sold exactly the same shoes, too. I thought, how can they all make a living? But I guess their thinking is, if others are making a living at it, I can too. They won't get rich, but they won't starve either. It's low risk."

"Exactly," said Janus. "And those of us willing to take the risks, metaphorically jump off cliffs, make history. Maybe," he added with a smile, "I see the world as a playground. I'm here for a while, might as well have the most fun I can."

"And if you wreck the playground?" asked Mila.

"That's projection. We can't know the future. Complex systems."

"Complex systems science is improving. Look at meteorology. We can predict the weather a hell of a lot better than we used to."

"Anyway, that's beside the point," Janus said impatiently. "You might think I'm completely selfish, a complete egotist--"

"I see what I see."

"But I just see things on a different scale. Maybe I'm not loyal to the human race, those pathetic uppity apes, but I align my will with the evolution of the biosphere, and of the cosmos. Humans are just a tool, a step on the way."

"The way to where?"

"Life is the avant-garde of the cosmos. This planet may seem puny looked at against the vastness of space, the so-called blue marble, but because of the shortness of human life, we can't understand space-time overall. Remember life is three and a half, maybe four billion years old, on this planet. Our history is a wink, a blink. Even our species hardly makes a wrinkle, time-wise. Look at the scale of millions of years, and what do you see?"

"A dead planet?" asked Mila.

Janus snorted. "Pessimist. What I see is every habitable planet in this galaxy with an Earth-originated biosphere, and expeditions to other galaxies. That's what I see. I see humans diverging into inconceivable forms, intelligently adapting not only their cultures, but even their bodies. Mermaids under the ice of Europa, flying angels in the upper atmosphere of Venus, midgets with huge lungs on Mars. Anything you can imagine!"

"Well," said Mila, breaking a long silence. "That's a nice science fiction vision of the future, but we have the present to deal with. So what's your plan for exploiting me and my projects?"

"Exploiting is not a nice word," sniffed Janus primly. "I admire your brilliance. I think we can work together. I just wanted to show you that if you take the large view, our interests are not opposed."

Mila got up and walked to the door. "Nice try, Janus. But I happen to think our biosphere is worth preserving and people are valuable in themselves. Read your Spengler. The age of the great individual is over. You and your kind might still be powerful on the surface, but inside you are rotten and will soon collapse. What I'm working on is, what's going to happen then? How will people live? Goodby, and may the best group win."

Janus watched the door close and smiled softly to himself. So, the war begins, he thought. He put out his cigar and reached for his phone.

Chapter Twenty Two

It was not going well. Mila stared morosely at his tea. What was the third point on the seven? Realization of personal difficulty. But this wasn't just personal difficulty. There was active opposition. Well, he'd expected that. But, 'hope blooms eternal in the human breast.' Sometimes he wished he'd just stayed a solitary hermit, sitting by the river of life and contemplating. What's wrong with that anyway? But his nagging conscience wouldn't let him do that. Life is short. You do what you can and in the end there's no right or wrong decisions,

there's only going on with the game. Until the game is over.

Sunshine came in, interrupting his reverie. "Janus on the phone."

He sat down at his computer and took the video call.

"My friend!" Janus greeted him.

"Hmm. That remains to be seen."

"Ready to take my offer? I guarantee you'll have complete control."

"Yeah, for now," said Mila.

"All the capital you need. Under the umbrella of my corporation. Together, we'll be unstoppable." Janus grinned. "You and me can shake the world."

"No, thanks," said Mila.

"Think it over, man. You'll never make it on your own. You'll disappear without a trace."

"Don't call us, we'll call you," said Mila, and terminated the call. As Janus' face disappeared from the screen, he thought, trouble is, he's probably right. We need a miracle to save us now.

Well, every new movement started as a vulnerable young shoot. Mohammed in his years in exile, Jesus wandering around with his little group of dedicated followers. The Wright brothers in their bicycle workshop. Some grew, and some...

Time to concentrate. He called South Africa.

"Victor? That you?"

"Hi Mila. What's up? Can you get us that capital injection yet?"

"Have you signed the lease yet?"

"No, that's Monday. We got really good terms."

"Don't sign it. We have to pull back to the trenches. Liquidate whatever equipment you've bought and come back here with whoever can afford it and get visas. The rest will have to get by, in the meantime."

"Are you sure? We have some possible sources here."

"No. It's Janus, or his lackeys, trying to buy us out. We need to cut it down to the core, then

we can move forward. Get back here next week, if you can." He switched off. Damn! He sighed. Well, war is war. You have to have a strategy. Even if your strategy isn't perfect, you can always refine it later.

He walked into the conference room and looked at the map tacked to one wall. He pulled out the red colored pin stuck in South Africa and regarded the others. Peru, Bali, Oaxaca, Istanbul, Morocco. Which would be the next to go? One thing he knew; he would never sell out, no matter how Janus and his flunkies soft-soaped him.

Chapter Twenty Three

Mila woke with a start. He'd been dreaming. A fair, lots of balloons, women in long dresses, men in top hats and black suits, little children with cotton candy. He got on the roller coaster and it started. The cart went faster and faster and shot off the end of the track, people screaming. The cart plunged into a lake and he swam up and up, seeing the surface above him, the sunlight. A hand reached down through the water and he grasped it. The hand pulled him out and he saw the leering face of Janus, laughing, laughing...

He stretched and checked the time. Seven thirty. About when he wanted to get up anyway. He glanced at the covered shape in the bed, the figure of a body curled on its side, covered with the duvet. Let her sleep, he decided. He got up, noticing his naked body in the mirror, properly placed by Feng Shui to reflect the energy back into the room. Fit enough for his age, he decided, and padded off to the bathroom.

Today was the big day. The core group would have to decide on the strategy for the Aquarianauts, still the insider's name for the group, though they had other public names.

Chapter Twenty Four

"She cast a worried look over her shoulder, wiping her hands on her apron, the apron with the picture of her baby, her baby that was a big man now, standing in front of her and speaking sincerely with his big paws on her shoulders, a big bearded man that time grew from a tiny, so tiny, seed in her womb, how can that be? And she, that was the beauty queen, the Honey Queen, the Queen Bee, envied by all, lusted after by all, now shrivelled and shrunk and standing in her kitchen with this giant that somehow came from her. His voice. His deep bass voice, reverberating, drumming, vibrating, sweeping her away on a wave of sound.

"This man that sucked her breast, this man whose shit and piss she wiped clean, who now as she realized had a penis like the man who had fucked her and made her pregnant, this baby-become-man could fuck her too. But that is BAD as her father had leaned across the table and slapped her when she jubilantly announced that she had learned a new word, "fuck your mother" BAD BAD BAD even though Freud had clearly shown that Sonny wants to fuck Mommy and not only that but (BAD BAD BAD) Mommy wants to fuck Sonny too.

"In the hippy days in California riding in her Mom's microbus after the divorce they had come

across a hippy woman living in the forest who had jubilantly announced with glowing eyes and no guilt that she had succeeded to fuck her two year old son. Was that BAD?

"If Child Protective Services found out they would take away the child and put it up for adoption, like the woman who called a help line to ask if it was normal to feel sexual pleasure when her baby sucked her breasts and they arrested her as a pedophile and took away her baby. Child Protective Services protecting the children.

"The AUTHORITIES who have it in our Best Interests to protect us from our bestial sexual impulses, like when they arrested Oscar Wilde and sentenced him to 2 years hard labor for being a homosexual. Of course he had it coming since he accused the father of his young lover, a gentleman of high social standing, of slander for calling him a 'bugger.'"

Sunshine's phone rang, interrupting her writing, playing the opening bars of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto Number One. She let it go on for a while, enjoying the melody, then picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Sunshine, this is Janus."

"Oh. What do you want?"

"I'd like to meet you."

"In private? Why? I'm not a main negotiator."

"I know, but I want to talk to you personally. I'll tell you what it's about but I don't want to talk over the phone. It's not so secure, you know."

"Well, okay."

"I'll pick you up in half an hour."

Sunshine glanced down. Still in her robe. "Better make it an hour."

"Alright. See you then." Click.

What could Janus want, she wondered as she showered and brushed her hair. What should she wear? Something business like, or more seductive? Janus was an asshole, for sure, but he did have a strong magnetism. She caught herself wondering what his penis was like. Oops!

She decided on a sober businesswoman's trouser suit, in grey with subtle stripes. Nonpadded bra underneath. But for her own secret joke, she wore no panties. A simple pearl necklace. Green Sapphire pin earrings complemented her green eyes. Brown pumps completed the outfit.

She studied her reflection in the full length mirror. Interesting contrast, she thought, with the dreads. The doorbell rang.

Janus, wearing a well cut dark blue business suit with a paisley tie, showed her to a sleek, dark green Jaguar with the top down. Here we go, she thought.

He started the powerful engine and smoothly merged into the evening traffic. "Nice," commented Sunshine. "Does it also fly?"

"We're working on that," grinned Janus, glancing at her with his sky-blue eyes. "Are you hungry? I have reservations at 'The Cloudy Day.'"

Sunshine had heard of it - one of the most expensive restaurants in London, specializing in gourmet Japanese French fusion, with highly reputed chefs. "I could nibble a snack, I think."

"Will you allow me to order for you? I know the menu here."

"Sure," said Sunshine, as the obsequious waiter filled her water glass.

"Appetizer - truffle and goat's cheese pâté on rye toast. Beetroot consommé. Quail's egg and asparagus soufflé, Rucola and fresh basil salad with Roquefort dressing. Sheep's milk Crème Brûlée for desert." He chose from the wine list a 1998 Chateau de Priure.

"Very good, sir," said the waiter crisply, as he gathered up the menus. They were seated at an antique oak table near a cedar fire in an immense fireplace. Nearby an excellent string quartet played "Spring," from "The Four Seasons."

"So," said Sunshine primly as she sipped her wine, "what's this all about? Did you bring me here just to seduce me?"

"Well, that among other things," said Janus with a smile. "You are certainly a very special girl. Of course a man with my wealth and power does not lack for sexual partners." He coughed discreetly. "Do you find me attractive?"

"I can't say for sure yet."

"Well, that's at least better than a no. So, as you know, our negotiations with Mila are not going very well. Frankly, I think he's just being stubborn on principle. I'm not really an evil man."

The hors d'oeuvre arrived. Sunshine took a bite. "Nice. Not often I get to eat truffles. They're dug up by pigs, like you, right?"

"Yes, but this pig hires others to do the rooting. Sunshine, I'm not trying to snow you. I just want you to make up your own mind about me, apart from Mila's influence, and then see if you can influence him."

Chapter Twenty Five

"So, did you fuck him?" Jasmine wanted to know.

"No, I didn't think it would be right. He is kind of attractive, though."

"I would have. Such a powerful man," said Jasmine.

"I just wanted to keep an objective perspective, without my hormones overwhelming my thinking. We have to make important historic decisions."

"I guess so," agreed Jasmine reluctantly.

"Janus has been putting a lot of pressure on us, with his money and influence, and it's not very clear what he wants. If we accept his patronage, well... 'the one who pays the piper calls the tune.'"

"I'm kind of nostalgic for the old days," said Jasmine, "when we were just a bunch of barefoot hippies smoking weed and fucking and having a good time."

"Times change," said Sunshine. "If you want to play the Game, you have to take some responsibility."

"Right. So, what's next?"

"Meeting with Mila and all the principals on Monday."

Chapter Twenty Six

"No," said Mila, frowning, "I don't trust him."

"But it's not practical. How are we going to finance all these projects?" Bannerjee asked in his tenor voice. "You're the visionary, but I'm the Financial Officer. We have to make it work on a nuts and bolts level too, not just the high ideals."

"We already had to close the South Africa project," said Tom.

"And Peru is hanging by a shoestring," said Dan. "We had to cancel the last Dieta."

"I've never done that. I've always been independent," said Mila, stroking his beard.

"And you've never done projects on this scale before." Bannerjee tapped a forefinger on the table. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to deal with the System."

"The System," Mila mused. "The System co-opts every creative project. It uses them, abuses them, or shuts them down. It buys out the principals with big money from its bottomless pockets." He stared into space for a moment and then went on, "Robert Heinlein wrote a book called *The Puppet Masters*. Alien parasites latch onto humans, and use their brains and bodies for their own purposes. They are able to utilize all the intelligence of their native hosts."

The room remained quiet. Mila let that sink in and then said, "A good allegory. The System is like that, an alien parasite, only a million times more powerful because it uses all, or almost all the people, and the synergy of their interactions. You could think of it as a massive computer program, an operating system for the human race."

"Or rather a sort of mega-system of operating systems," amplified Bannerjee.

"Right. And it has time and catastrophe tested error correction algorithms, and like the ideal of what is laughingly called artificial intelligence, it learns from its mistakes and evolves continuously."

"So there's no way to fight it?" asked Sunshine.

"There's no way to fight it," agreed Mila.

"Aren't you just being pessimistic?" asked Dan.

"Well, so far all the awake people, never more than a tiny fraction of the human race, have been able to do is create what the author Hakim Bey described as Temporary Autonomous Zones. Tiny pockets of freedom limited in time and space." Mila sighed.

"So is that what we're trying to do?" asked Jasmine. "Set up a few temporary refuges? Is that the most we can hope for?"

"No!" declared Tom. "It's too late for that petty messing around. The human race is on the brink. This is really the time, a brief window of opportunity, that the race can evolve to the next level. Otherwise it will disappear or at best regress to a hopped-up *Homo Habilis* and shuffle along at a low level for the next million years."

"Yeah," agreed An Ji. "It's a dramatic evolving universe and you can't stand still; either you keep moving forward or you go backwards."

"And don't forget punctuated evolution," said Carl. "Things go along relatively stable for a while, and then in a short time they change rapidly."

"The Great Leap Forward," chanted Son He.

"Okay, fuck it," said Mila. "Maybe I'm just getting too old. We go for it. All or nothing. We can't bring down the System, but maybe we can transform it into something else. Maybe we can finally overcome the consequences of the Organ Kundabuffer."

"Well, at any rate, it will be interesting. At least we won't die of boredom," said Tom.

"Playing the Great Game," said Carl. "You can't get out of the Game. Either you're a Player, or you're a piece that someone else plays. Maybe you can't win--"

"Or break even--" interjected Bannerjee.

"Pessimist!" snorted Carl. "But it's better to engage than remain an onlooker for your whole life."

Chapter Twenty Seven

Go ahead and write. Put some words down on the page. Write something. Write anything. Words. It's all just words. In a particular order, of course. Words become phrases, and sentences. A sentient sentence. Sentenced to write. Write with your hand. Your write hand. Your right hand. Your right handed writing hand, is the right hand to write with. Or your left hand, if your left hand is your write hand. In which case, your left hand is your right hand, to write with. Oh, the irony!

I like words. Words catch me by the balls and soar me through the skies, in disguise. We are a word using animal. The absurdity of word-ity. Struck wordless. Thousands of words, every day, relentless, pounding like waves on the shores of your mind. Shaping the coastline, bringing in driftwood, reducing the rocks to sand. Liquidity. Insipidity. Mundane useless weak words, carried along and washed up as trash.

At least they let him have pads of paper, and simple ball point pens in here. Could be worse. He smiled wryly. Three hots and a cot. That was the slogan of the bums, or should we say, unlucky folks, who committed some minor crime, shoplifting or breaking a window, intentionally in order to do some jail time when the weather was cold and you didn't have food. He remembered the Charlie Chaplin film. City Lights, was it? No, Modern Times. An astute social observer, Charlie. No wonder Joe McCarthy kicked him out of the country. He never chose to become an American citizen. "I'm a citizen of the world." In the film, when they were releasing him from prison he protested. "Can't I stay? I'm so happy here." No worries and all your needs provided. By the State.

Mila got up off his bunk and walked the three steps to the bars. What is freedom anyway? Free to do what? Maybe to go to hell in your own way, as they said in the Wild West. Ha! Another dream manufactured in Hollywood.

Not many really want freedom, he decided. They want some pleasure - good food, some sex, a warm bed to sleep in. Some prisons even, or used to, let prisoners have sex, if they were married. Cuts down on the homosexuality in the prisons. People are people, in or out of prisons.

He should have guessed that Janus would resort to this. There's always some charge you can arrest people on, even if you can't make it stick in the end. Hell, Al Capone was so smart that the only way they finally got him was on tax evasion!

But who were the courts going to listen to? Janus, the respected and powerful rich man, who makes political contributions? Or the poor philosopher-poet who opposes the System and favors unwholesome things like group marriage?

His cellmate woke up and slid down from the upper bunk. Yankee had been sentenced to ten years for armed robbery. He would get automatic parole after about eight and a half years, if he didn't mess up his "good time," but he went to the law library at every chance and tried to build a theory good enough to convince a judge to give him a retrial. That meant reading a lot of cases and trying to find supporting precedents. From what he'd said, Mila didn't think it likely, but it gave him some hope, something on which to focus his manic energy. Anyway, the parole board and the courts would probably not let him out any sooner than they had to, because, as Mila had observed, he seemed to have unusually little empathy.

One time Mila had banged his head against the concrete wall in his sleep. Yankee had berated him for waking him, with absolutely no consideration that he had not done it consciously, indeed, he suffered more from it than Yankee as he had the physical pain too. There really are psychopaths in this world, he thought sadly.

But, he reflected, all the people in my life are characters living in me. My own mind creates them. And the show goes on.

A grey uniformed guard came down the row, paused, and shoved an envelope through the bars. "Thanks, Eddy," said Mila, taking the stiff yellow legal size envelope and studying the return address.

"Anything for me?" yelled Yankee, around his toothbrush.

"Sorry, Hamish, nothing," said the guard, moving on to the next cell.

Sitting on his bunk, Mila opened the letter and unfolded the paper. "Well of all the! I simply can not believe it."

"Believing is bliss," said Yankee.

"That's ignorance."

"If you say so."

"I believe I just did."

"But I blissfully ignored it."

"Pay attention!"

"I'm sorry, but I didn't receive your invoice."

"What invoice?"

"The one requesting payment of attention."

"No, I want you to give me your attention."

"In exchange for what?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing is free."

"Yes. And so is attention."

"But you wanted me to pay attention."

"Well, if your attention is not in use elsewhere, then it is free."

"Jailbreak?" asked Jasmine, brushing her hair back with a characteristic gesture.

"Come on," said Tom, in an exasperated tone, "that's a high security prison. Razor wire, deadly dogs, snipers with high powered night scope rifles in guard towers, bright lights. This isn't some fantasy crime novel. This is real life!"

"Yeah," said Sunshine, "if it was a fantasy novel, he could just teleport himself out, like Mike in 'Stranger in a Strange Land.'" She was a great fan of Robert Heinlein.

"No, there has to be a legal way. This country is still run by the rule of law. Sort of," he added with a sheepish grin.

"If I don't have an orgasm for a while, my body sort of loses interest," said Dan, putting his hands behind his head and regarding Sunshine kneeling over him. The sunshine through the

window made a halo around her hair.

"Seems interested enough to me," smirked Sunshine, rocking back and forth and feeling the hot hardness deep within her.

"Maybe we can get him out with sex magic," laughed Jasmine.

"Get serious, please," said Tom. "Now, we've got to get a really good lawyer. His case was obviously a setup. Maybe Janus even bribed the judge. I wouldn't put it past him. We should be able to get a mistrial if we can appeal to a higher court. Bannerjee has a lead on a lawyer that might take the case, a woman that could sympathise with our cause."

"Visitor to see you."

Mila came out of a doze and tried to clear his head. Funny thing about prison, your inner life became more real and the outer world faded; it was hard to hold on to ambitions in this great grinder where every day was the same and nothing stood out. A friend, a lifer, had told him, "They try to make you think there's some difference, like with the Christmas dinner and all, but it's a sham. It's always the same in here."

He swung his feet over and stood with a groan. They had opened the door just enough for him to squeeze out and the guard was waiting there, jangling his keys impatiently. He brushed through the doorway and followed the guard down the landing, hearing snatches of conversation from the cells as he passed. "The black bastard-" "Fucking honky said-" "So I got some pussy-" "Shit on a shingle for lunch-" "Gonna write me a habeus corpus-" "Suck my dick, asshole-"

Watching the back of the grey uniform walking in front of him, he wondered again why anyone would become a prison guard. The prisoners didn't have any choice, but the guards applied for and took the job, actually chose to spend their time in this hall of suffering. It's a form of black magic, he realized. The prison system is a gigantic cider press, squeezing the living juice out of people and feeding it into the System. When he was being transferred at the first, he'd seen a guy who looked like a living wraith. Eyes dull, grey, lifeless movements - he really seemed to be just the shell of a man with all the juice sucked out, like an insect after the spider got through with it. It's maybe a less overt form of the human sacrifice that the Aztecs and some other ancient civilizations practiced, but instead of killing them and releasing the energy suddenly, it kept the pressure on, slowly squeezing out the energy and sucking it up. Which is more cruel, he wondered?

Anyway, that answered the question about the guards. The black magic attracted them and they got to lap up a few drops of the juice. No wonder vampire and zombie novels fascinate people, he chuckled inwardly. That shit really happens!

It also made sense that the most powerful nation kept the highest fraction of its population behind bars. Where did all that power come from?

Well, it was good he'd experienced prison first hand, otherwise he'd never have understood fully what he was fighting against. So what was the next move in the game? He'd soon find out, he realized, as he entered the visiting room. Smiling at him on the other side of the glass barrier he saw the handsome face with its debonair, sardonic expression.

"Keeping well, Mila?" Janus asked solicitously, as if he truly cared.

"Oh yeah, a jolly holiday. Only the Mai Tais could do with a touch more pomegranite juice. Really, the servants these days! Anyway, it's a chance to write my memoirs," he added, holding the old fashioned telephone receiver to his face.

"I can get you out," said Janus.

"Oh really? And how?"

"Don't worry about that. I have my ways."

"And what's the price?"

"I know you're an intelligent man," said Janus. "But everyone has their blind spots. What you don't see is that your interests and mine are ultimately the same."

"And what interests would those be?"

"Power, basically. Now I know you don't agree, but look at it this way." He furrowed his brows. "You want to defeat the System but that's a lost cause. Why? Because the System isn't any one person, or any group of people. There's no enemy there to defeat. It's a hall of mirrors."

"I know that," said Mila. "And you're wrong. I don't want to defeat the System, I don't want to fight the System. I know that's hopeless. I just want to show people that there is an alternative."

"And the System will co-opt that too. Listen, Mila, I know where you're coming from. I was there once myself. I used to be an idealist, like you. But until you can show people something that's more alluring than Power, where will you be? You think people want to go live barefoot in some country commune and take cold baths in the winter? Come on! Escape is for the few, and only the few. That's the way it's always been, and the way it will be. Join me, and have everything. Forget those hopeless friends of yours."

"I'll never sell out," said Mila grimly.

"We'll see about that."

"Time's up," said the guard.

We like the good things of life. Centipedes, rutabagas, black pepper, splinters. A splash of rum in the morning and black coffee at midnight. Sores that won't go away and Aunt Betty's hemorrhoids. You know, the good things. The kind of things that make you glad you won't live forever, that death with his clammy hands and cold breath is waiting in the wings after you take your last bow, maybe stolen. The showstopper. Life is some stolen moments, that's all. A few scenes to shine and then - curtains. Did he smile, his work to see? Kom susser tod.

Put some words down on the page. Mila looked at the letter again. Could they fight Janus and his powerful organization? The movement was losing its momentum, people drifting away. They needed his leadership. But maybe... this Alicia Butternut seemed to want to give it a try. If they could get a decent judge, if there were any anymore...

He began to write a letter on his pad.

"I hesitate to do this," he wrote, "as such things have a habit of coming true. My mother, as a kind of a joke, got a psychiatrist to certify her as mentally incompetent so she could get a government pension. Then she really did flip out. Spent the rest of her life in and out of mental hospitals. So, to say that I was incompetent to stand trial by reason of paranoid delusions, though it may be true in a sense.... well, what is sanity anyway? Just a social consensus.

"So, having accused me of criminal conspiracy is just as deluded, though also true from some point of view. They threw the book at me because I refused to testify against my friends, who are innocent in my opinion, though perhaps guilty, again from some kind of perspective. In an insane world the sane man is regarded as deluded. And then what happens? They commit me to a mental hospital? At least in prison there's a time limit. No, thanks."

He set the letter aside and went back to his journal.

"How to begin? Actually, beginnings are pretty easy. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. In the right direction, you might add. But a journey might begin with a step even in the wrong direction. A book begins with a word. Any word. The universe began with a lucky perturbation in nothingness. A tiny ripple. Life began with a single lucky molecule that somehow had the program to reproduce itself. Maybe that happened a million times, or a billion, before one got it right. You could say luck is a universal principle. How come one particular sperm merged with one particular egg to become me?"

Mila paused in his writing and looked up. A cloud had covered the sun. At least they got some daylight in here. Writing might be all he'd be able to do from here on. And would

anyone even read it? Timing was everything. And the corollary, preparation. For preparation you needed knowledge, science. Science means to know. And what is it you know? What is the power that is knowledge? Predicting the future. Being able to say what is going to happen.

That's what science was all about, whether it was predicting the movements of planets, or what would happen when you mixed two chemicals together, or how some treatment would affect some person's disease. "This is going to hurt a little," said the doctor.

What we didn't have, really, was a science of people, and of societies. "Man the Unknown." Now that was a great book. But nobody gives a shit. Isaac Asimov's psychohistory is just science fiction.

Mila sighed and got up. Timothy Leary had said that prison is wasted on those who don't appreciate it. He wrote a book in prison. Lot's of people have, actually. That's what Leary meant, it's a place with few distractions for those who are able to concentrate and have a purpose. Still, though... He held the bars and looked out. The old rhyme ran through his head: Two men looked out through prison bars; One saw mud, the other saw stars.

He went back to his notebook and picked up the pen.

"Prison as metaphor. We're all in prison, as Shakespeare so aptly put it in Hamlet: 'Denmark's a prison; Then is the world one. A goodly one, with many confines, wards and dungeons...!' Every culture is a prison, but each different. That's why you often feel a sense of freedom when traveling to a different culture from your own. Because what it allows and forbids is different from your own. But if you stay long enough you find out that over all it's just as much a prison. Is it possible to not spend your life in prison? Because after all, you internalize the prison bars and locks. People are conditionable animals, programmable machines. Mostly."

"Repa," came a voice. He looked up. A guard was standing outside the cell. "Pack your things. You've made parole."

Chapter Twenty Eight

"How did you do it?" Mila asked in the car, after the exhilaration and joyful greetings.

"We cut a deal. Now, don't get all excited, and listen. It's not helping anything, your rotting in prison. You're too stiffnecked. Your problem is, you're not very good at negotiation and compromise." Tom punched him in the arm. "The clever way is to use the tools and methods of the System to achieve what we want. You've read the Tao Te Ching, right? The flexible tree bends in the wind, but the old, rigid one breaks. Don't tell the left hand what the right hand is doing."

"Okay, enough with the cliches. What's the plan?" Mila was drinking in the sights, the forms

and colors as they sped through the countryside. Trees had never looked so green, the sky so blue, the subtle whites and shades of grey of the clouds so much like a painting. Almost worth it, being in prison, to experience getting out, it was like an acid trip.

"First of all, Janus will sit on our board."

"No!" said Mila.

"Look," said Tom, "You've misjudged Janus. He wants the same as we do, only he's going at it from a different perspective."

"And that's good," put in Sunshine, over her shoulder from the driver's seat. "We need all the viewpoints if we're going to make this work."

"Besides," remarked Dan, sitting shotgun, "He has the best hash. Really spacey!"

"He's taking the really long view. And he's elitist, I'll grant that," said Tom. "You're a populist. But those are really two sides of the same coin. You're the one who's always saying, if you see something you dislike in someone else, it's in you, yeah? Maybe you hate Janus because --"

"He's a character in my own mind," finished Mila. "So I'm in love with power and don't care about people, huh? I'm a greedy, self-serving asshole. Hmmm. I guess it must be so."

The others were silent. The car was crossing a long bridge. Mila gazed out at the river. The flow is all. Everything changes, and even change changes how it changes. You could make a song out of that, he mused. Change, arrange, strange... he couldn't think of any more rhymes.

It's strange how change will always arrange... Oh, well.

"Ok, so we work with Janus somehow. What does he want?"

"You'll find out. We're going to a meeting at his office now."

"Nice to be out of prison?" Janus handed Mila a cup of coffee. "Cream and sugar on the table. Help yourself."

Mila took a sip. "Mmm. Sumatra. Lake Toba. Plantations started by the industrious Dutch, a people who understood good coffee. They have the weasel shit beans there too. But that's a conceit. A good example of how the idea influences the taste. Don't get me started."

"Good magic mushrooms there, too," smiled Janus. "Now, shall we get down to business?"

"It's your show," agreed Mila.

"We're both interested in the future of humanity. But we have different approaches. You want to experiment and figure out how people will live together, am I right?"

"Each human being is an end in itself," said Mila, sipping his coffee. "A potential cybersphere. I want to give people the opportunity to escape from their prisons, to find freedom, to defeat their internal Dark Heart, and live fulfilling lives. Of course you can't force that on people. That would just put them in a different prison. The person has to desire it and be willing to work and make sacrifices for it. I don't think pain and suffering and abandoned hopes is a given. I'm with Peter Pan - maybe we don't have to grow up, at least not in the way the present power structure offers. I won't grow up," he sang softly.

"You're an idealist," said Janus sadly. "There's a reason why the System persists. Most people don't want to work, they want as easy a life as possible. Only a few can be Players."

"Maybe," said Mila dubiously.

"Anyway, all that's beside the point. I'm not trying to change your attitude, but to see how we can work together, to fulfill all of our aims."

"Is that possible?" asked Mila.

"I think it is. That's why I brought you here. You know how much power I have, but you have intelligence and a unique point of view. I think we can complement each other."

"You have power over me too. I don't have much of a choice."

"True," admitted Janus. "But let's be partners. Agreed?"

"We'll see how it goes," said Mila, accepting the outstretched hand. "And now, to celebrate my freedom, we need a feast and an orgy."

"And both are prepared, Your Highness," said Janus, bowing ceremoniously.

"I'm a follower of Timothy Leary. SMILE. Space migration, intelligence increase, life extension. Space migration because I believe in life and humanity and want to see it succeed on a cosmic scale, intelligence increase so we can be smart enough to do it, and life extension just because our lives are too damn short. My mother had a sign on her desk, a quote from Chaucer: 'The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.' With some rare exceptions, by the time you get a handle on it, you're too damn old to do anything." Janus put the stem of the hookah in his mouth.

Mila observed the revelry with a satisfied air. "Alexander accomplished everything he did in

ten years and died in his early thirties, as did Jesus. Shakespeare retired before he was fifty."

He breathed smoke in from the Hookah, enjoying the taste of the apple flavored tobacco laced with top-grade hashish. Naked people sat around and swam in the heated pool, others caressed in cushioned nooks. A belly dancer weaved gracefully around the room to the strains of the Arabic music from the musicians seated on a small stage at one end of the hall. Trays of fresh and dried fruits and delicate pastries stood on small tables here and there. A respectable, tasteful orgy.

Janus patted the head of a large German Shepherd that had pattered up, wagging its tail. "Otto here is the subject of a rather interesting experiment. Brain implants to record what it thinks and complex computer algorithms to interpret that. Here's what he thought after observing the last rocket launch." He handed Mila a printout.

Mila read out loud:

"What he said is certainly true. As I am a dog. I swear on the Bitch, the great Bitch of all bitches, mother of all dogs, back to the wolves, back to the wild. By Sirius the Dog star and his little brother Procyon.

Sometimes people bet on the dog races, but we dogs, we bet big on the human race. The next big thing, the jackpot, win all or lose all. A pact, a partnership, a contract, a covenant. Dogs to the stars, the Dog star. We will bark our way to cosmic immortality, on the end of your leash. Dogged means persistent. We will dog your heels. Shape us into whatever form you want, cute Chihuahuas, ugly Bulldogs, ferocious Dobermans, speedy Greyhounds. Mold us as you like but take us along."

Chapter Twenty Nine

"Final test of the Mars rocket," said Janus. "Countdown stands at ten minutes. All systems go, at last report."

They were all seated at a counter facing a plate glass window with a view to the Walt Whitman Rocket Launch Site. "VIP lounge," smiled Janus. A respectful waiter took drink orders. "Anything you like, it's on the house."

Mila sipped his cappuccino and took a dark chocolate truffle from a tray. "So you see yourself as a sort of modern Magellan?"

"Well, any of the great explorers, if you like. 'We are here to go.' That's the function of the human race. We're chronically discontented. Life wants to expand, the biosphere wants to reproduce, have babies. There's nowhere to go but up! Or out, as Bucky Fuller put it."

Mila disagreed. "We have to go in, before we can go out. The undiscovered country is within.

How can we survive if we don't even understand ourselves?"

"Why not both at the same time? Carpe diem. Evolution is not going to stand still while we humans try to figure out what a human is. Anyway that kind of work will never come to an end. We'll figure it out as we go. Jump off the planet and build our wings as we fly away."

"Maybe you're right. The old two hands to wash each other."

"Or two wings to fly," agreed Janus. "But the countdown is getting close, and it's still on go, so keep your attention on the launch pad, ladies and gents!"

An excited voice sounded from a speaker. "And, with twenty seconds to go, we're all on green for the launch! Fifteen ... ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one... ignition!"

A ring of fire appeared around the base of the distant rocket and the supporting structure fell away. Smoke billowed and the silvery needle rose slowly from the launching pad, seemed almost to hover in midair, then picked up speed and rose, gracefully curving into the sky. They watched until the tiny speck vanished into the blue.

Everybody cheered and clinked their glasses. Janus smiled. "Always gives me a hard-on to watch. Nothing quite so phallic as a rocket lifting off. Knowing it's my will that made it happen makes me feel like a giant, spurting right up into the stratosphere. I guess the guys who made the first atom bombs felt that way too. But a spaceship is creative, and not destructive. Today Mars, tomorrow the universe." He drained his glass of champagne. "And now, Mila, let's move to the conference table and make some plans."

"I'm not much of a planner," said Mila sadly. "I thought it would just grow, organically."

"You are certainly naiive," agreed Janus.

"Oh, I don't know if it's naiivete," said Mila. "It's more, just that my brain doesn't work that way. I'm just not that good at linear thinking."

"You're deceiving yourself," said Janus. "Nobody is naturally good at the kind of thinking that science and engineering require. Our brains didn't evolve for that. That's why we have to go through so much training. Twelve years of basic schooling, and four to eight years more of higher education. That's a lot! Twenty years out of an eighty year life just to train your brain! And then your active career probably lasts forty years or less. Only twice the training period. What a waste! Imagine if you had to spend a year building a car and then could only drive it for two years, then had to junk it and start over. As a trained engineer myself, I abhor that level of inefficiency. That's why I also invest in life extension research.

"You guys are a bunch of artists and dreamers. That's not bad, we need that kind of creativity,

but we need to balance it with some hard nosed tight-assed left brain thinking."

"Poor guy," said Sheila. "Hard nose, tight ass, stiff upper lip, inflexible spine, rigid neck. Probably has back pains, insomnia, and impotence. You need some therapy."

"No time for therapy," said Janus. "Too busy."

"You'd make time for my kind of therapy," she said, smiling at him with an intense glance.

"That's the big question," said Mila. "Did we have to armor up, lose our flexibility and our natural joy, in order to create the highly technical world we live in now? And if so, can we purge that suffering without losing the benefits?"

"Yeah," said Dan. "We enjoy cheap mass-produced products because people endure the heart breaking labor on assembly lines day after day. We have, effectively, invisible slaves working for us. We see only the pretty, advertised products, not what went into them."

"We don't see the rape of cultures and biomes," said Sunshine.

"We don't see the clock ticking down on the supply of fossil fuels," said Tom.

"You guys make me tired," said Janus. "Looking at the negative side of everything. Whaddya wanta do, go back to living in caves? Look, evolution prepared for this moment in history. You think it's a fortuitous accident that all that oil and coal and flammable gas was just sitting there waiting for us to discover it? No, everything had to be concentrated in order for life to make the prodigious leap off this planet, out of the gravity well."

"The cosmic dance," said Sunshine.

Tom said, "I get it. And people are so dumb and self centered, they think it's there just so they can satisfy their egoistic aims and pleasures."

"Sure," said Janus. "And Life planned for this moment. Not exactly this of course, but that something like this would happen. Sooner or later evolution would evolve a life form capable of using technology, and would then use that technology and the stored fossil fuels to make a bid for--"

"Biospheric seeds planted on other worlds," said Jasmine ecstatically.

"And eventually other stars," added Janus. "We, all humans, though our egos blind us to it, are just tools. Humanity is an organ of Gaia. This whole biblical idea of some God creating all life for the benefit of humans is so ridiculous it makes me laugh. The human farce."

"Okay," said Mila. "I'm beginning to see how we can work together. Your high technology and our culture creating savvy can be the two wings of humanity's future flights."

"I want to show you something," said Sunshine. "Part of a work in progress for the theater. I'm tentatively calling it 'Happiness.'" She got up and went to a small raised stage on one side of the room. "Son He, Dan?"

Son He carried a case to the stage, unzipped it, sat on a stool, and began tuning the acoustic guitar. Dan lifted an electronic keyboard from a stand at the back of the stage and brought it to the front on the right side. He plugged it in. "Ready," asked Sunshine?

They looked at each other and nodded. Sunshine began to sing.

"What's your goal? Immortal soul.
What's your goal? Become whole.
As you get old, put aside gold.
Transcend your fate, before it's too late.
What's your aim? The mind to tame.
Or be a child, riding wild.
Running faster, with no master."

As Son He strummed chords on the guitar, Dan played blues riffs on the keyboard. They built to a climax and finished. The audience clapped.

Sunshine nodded at the musicians and they began a slow and sad melody in five/four time. Sunshine announced, "This one is called 'The Tar Baby.'"

"The more you struggle, the more you get stuck
You can escape with a bit of luck
Get them to throw you into the briars
You have to lie to the liars

(chorus:) Tar Baby sits there
Tar Baby don't care
Tar Baby holds you so
Never never lets you go

Listen to wise Brother Rabbit
Learn to break the old habit
Scratchy briars clean off the tar
You will be free to travel far

(chorus)

Pain, pain, pain
I'm in love with my pain
And it fills my brain

Driving me insane

(chorus)

Even though I wet my bed
And it's smelly and cold
I refuse to get up
It's familiar and old

(chorus)

But now I feel
That I can heal
Leave that all behind
Purify the mind

(chorus)

Feel love and compassion
Heal the world, with passion
Create the new civilization
Supercede the nation

(chorus)

Create a group mind, live free
Without possessiveness or envy
Working together on a great task
Throw away the old mask

Tar Baby is illusion
Keeps you living in confusion
When you master your own thought
Tar Baby can't keep you caught.

At last the new world"

The guitar and keyboard swirled around each other with counterpointed melodies, as Sunshine, singing wordlessly, punctuated the painting of sound. They built to a climax and ended with a flourish.

The audience rose to their feet, clapped, cheered, hooted and whistled. Sunshine, grinning and breathing hard, descended to an avalanche of hugs. Dan and Son He followed, to be smothered in hugs and kisses.

Chapter Thirty

"A window," said Janus, "is to see through. And when you are writing, or telling a story, the words should be transparent, like a window. The reader, or listener, doesn't want to focus on the words you are using, but on the images, and concepts, behind the words. What is a word but a sign, a pointer?" He emphasized his statement by rolling Mila over and pinning him to the mat.

Mila wheezed. He couldn't see a way out. Janus' weight was on his chest. "People have told each other stories," he gasped, "since the invention of words. Maybe before," he grunted as he swung a leg up and hooked it behind Janus' neck. He rolled him over and sat on his chest with his knees on his shoulders. "Don't you think?"

Janus writhed beneath him. "True," he panted. "Even before words-" He kicked his legs up but couldn't reach Mila's head. "-they might have acted out fights-" he twisted side to side without effect "-or struggles to catch animals."

Sunshine came over, clad in exercise tights, and surveyed the wrestlers. "Looks like you've lost, Janus."

"Never say die," said Janus as, with a supreme effort, he rolled Mila off to the side.

Sunshine watched with interest as the two rolled around the mat, neither able to pin the other. Kind of fun, she thought, watching strong men fighting. Made her feel a bit sexy actually. Maybe, she thought as she realized that, this is what the doe feels when the stags crash their antlers. Sexual selection, faster and more direct than natural selection. Why do some guys turn me on and not others, she wondered.

Jasmine strode over, all business, and clapped her hands. "Time's up, you guys. It's a draw. Shake hands and go shower. You stink. Then come to the pool. We're all going to finish up there."

Jasmine and Sunshine sat on the edge of the pool, dangling their feet in the warm water, and watching the others cavorting, diving, splashing, and laughing.

"Do you ever feel that you're in someone else's story?" asked Jasmine. "I mean, like we're just here because some dumb writer is trying to fulfill his quota, get down so many words in a day?"

"I know what you mean," said Sunshine, playing with the toes of her right foot, up on the edge of the pool. "Like we're not real. Just characters that somebody made up. Did Bannerjee tell

you about his vision?"

"Yeah," said Jasmine, and giggled. "He needs to get out and get his hands dirty more. He lives too much in his head."

"Anyway," said Sunshine, "It's up to us girls to move the plot forward now. The guys get too hung up on their pride and competing with each other. We're the practical ones."

"True," said Jasmine. "Guys are pretty useless sometimes. But they do make you feel good!" She winked.

"So where do we go from here? I think we're kind of bogged down. I mean stuff is happening but it's not going anywhere." Sunshine splashed the water with her feet. "A lot of philosophy but not much action."

"Lazy imagination," said Jasmine. "Not enough specifics."

"Maybe we could throw in a time machine or something." The two girls looked around and saw that Son He had come up behind them.

"Time machines," said Tom, who had swum up, "are mental masturbation. There's no such thing."

"But they do make for good stories," smiled Son He. "Like the grandfather paradox. What if you travelled back in time and killed your grandfather before your parents were born? Would you cease to exist then? And if you did, cease to exist I mean, then you couldn't have killed him, so you would exist and did kill him, and on and on..."

Mila sat down on the other side of Sunshine. "It's all wrong thinking," he said. "In Western civilization, we mostly use the linear model of time. Past, present, future, like a train moving down a track. It's useful for some things, mainly the kinds of things our civilization is good at, like material world projects, but people tend to forget that it's just a model. Models are abstractions and not perfect representations." He splashed the water with his foot and watched the ripples spread out. "Where is the splash now? Où sont les neiges d'antan? Because of our model we think of past as something solid, unchanging, that it's "out there" somewhere. We think, like in a courtroom trial for example, that we could know the past exactly if we could just get all the facts."

"Well, and can't we?" asked Bannerjee with interest, floating with his hand on the edge.

"No, because there is no past as a ding an sich. Past is an idea in our minds, not something 'out there.'"

"Like we're just in the mind of the Author of this story," said Bannerjee.

Jasmine looked at Sunshine and, pressing her lips together and raising her eyebrows, made a circular motion by her right ear with her forefinger. Sunshine returned a little smile.

Mila said, "In the matrix of time-space, things are always changing and evolving. Ask yourself, if everything changed, including the past, how would I ever know? Because here's the thing: if the past changed, the memories of the past and archives/artifacts from the past would also change along. So there would be no way to detect the difference.

"So what keeps you from changing the past and therefore your whole life? Your belief that the past is something solid, set in stone. The past is mutable. In theory, at least, you can be a reality-creator. The key is the power of decision making."

Mila plunged into the pool, turned and back paddled away. "Most people almost never make decisions, maybe a few times in their lives. What they make is choices, which is quite different. Are you going to college or not? That's a choice. The difference is not something which an outside observer can detect; it's subjective. To make a real decision, one would have to contact the sixth dimension."

"How do you do that?" asked Tom.

"I can't tell you." Mila swam back and pulled himself, dripping, onto the edge of the pool.

"For the most part, people are reluctant to abandon the dependable rock of consensus reality for the shifting sands of all possibilities and the complete unknown of impossibility. So they miss out. You can't have both - full creative possibility and security.

"One corollary of this is that your life as a whole can continue to evolve indefinitely. You are continually creating and re-creating your reality, but for the most part you do it automatically, that is by habit. Your life is the result of your reality habits. Your reality rabbits in their reality rabbit hole."

Jasmine shook her head. "That's so abstract. I can't get my mind around it. Can you give a practical example?"

Mila leaned back on his hands and pursed his lips. "Okay, let's take money. With your money you affect the past. You affect the causes that result in present effects. Suppose you go to the market and buy an egg. You are 'causing' the poultry farmer to obtain and care for the chicken and rob its egg, and the people working on the supply chain which brought the egg to the market, and the people working in the market.

"In fact, you even influence in a minor way, the entire chain of chicken breeders and keepers all the way back to the first person who began to domesticate chickens."

"Wow!" said Tom. "You really can affect the past."

"Orwell said, 'He who controls the present controls the past, he who controls the past controls the future.'" Janus cut the water with a long shallow dive, splashing them all.

Chapter Thirty One

Janus looked out the windshield of his small jet and glanced at the dashboard. Six hundred miles per hour and altitude five thousand ninety feet. Life, he thought, was about making your dreams come true. He'd always loved vehicles, and traveling. He touched a button and spoke into the microphone of his helmet. "This is Janus in C-4201. Request landing at McKinley field, ETA ten minutes."

"Roger that. All clear. Approach from SouthEast."

"Roger, out," said Janus. He checked the instruments and changed course for the approach, beginning the descent and deceleration. You write your own story, he thought, become your own author, or someone else writes it for you. But you can't get out of the story. Even if you do nothing, you're still in the story, just as an actor onstage is still doing something even if he is silent and still. And I, he thought with pride, have always written my own story.

Chapter Thirty Two

"I can't help it if I'm not very good at writing stories," sighed Mila. "And I'm supposed to be the main character too."

"It's boring," said Sunshine. "A story should have action, drama, love, passion, conflict. This is just a bunch of characters sitting around talking."

"And fucking," added Dan.

"Ok, some fucking. But still, there's not really any story."

"Maybe we should start again from the beginning?" said An Ji shyly. "I've got a few ideas."

"And," said Sunshine, "there's not much distinction between characters. They all sound the same."

"Yeah," agreed Mila. "This must be the point in the story when you can't see any way ahead, and the whole project just seems pointless. Probably it's the third point on the seven, realization of personal difficulty."

"You and your structures!" said Son He in exasperation. "Let's just get on with it!"

"It was all your idea to begin with," said Tom. "And you made me the melancholic type."

"Me!" said Mila. "I didn't even want to get involved in the first place. You guys dragged me into this. You wanted a mentor, a wise old man, a teacher. Well, that's it. I'm finished. I'm going back to my cozy study. I never wanted to get involved in messy real world projects. Leave me to my philosophy and writing for future generations."

"Oh come on, Mila, you don't mean that," said Jasmine. "Anyway, you're in too far to back out now. And you're the main character, can't you see that?"

"Oh well, I guess I am. Well, I'm not dead yet. What was it Sherlock said? The game is afoot? Something like that."

"The plot thickens," said Tom. "It needs to, it's pretty thin. Okay, let's look at our characters and plot. I'm the intellectual melancholic saturnine, tall and thin and kind of gangly, like a cocker spaniel. I come up with humorous quips. We all know what Mila is like. By the way, is that name short for Mila Repa?"

"It's short for mind your own business," said Mila sullenly.

"Okay, if that's the way you want it. What about you, Sunshine?"

"Well, like my name implies, I'm the sanguine with a sunny disposition. I'm also pretty smart and I like theater. I'm sexy too," Sunshine said with a smile.

"An Ji?" said Tom.

"Chinese of course. Like my people, I'm very practical. I'm kind of shy, though. I like to solve problems and I'm very dependable."

"Dan?"

"Well, I'm not so clever, like most of you, but I have street smarts. I've been around. And I'm a good handyman. I can fix almost anything mechanical. Not software, though. I'm a bit sex-obsessed, probably 'cause I come from a kind of chaotic childhood. My parents lived in a commune when I was little, and then I lived alone with my Mom. She was wild and tried different things, had lots of lovers of all sexes. I guess you could say I'm a moving type, probably mercurial. Supermerc, that's me."

"How 'bout you, Carl?"

"I'm a venusian phlegmatic. Good at writing code and can do some electronics too. Quiet and reserved, I don't usually volunteer information unless asked. I like to get high and let my mind roam."

"Well we're starting to see some color here," said Son He. "That's good. I like color, in fact I'm

an artist, a painter, and I also like to do video work. I'm going to record our adventures and make a documentary out of it so we'll have a kind of history. I'm from Korea, Seoul. Emotional, I feel strongly, have strong sense of honor and loyalty. I'm here 'cause I like the high energy. I like to feel really alive."

"I like sex," said Sheila. "I like to sleep with all the guys. And sometimes with the girls too. It always surprises me when people get jealous and possessive. I just don't see things that way. Anyway I'm very creative and kind of a Jill of all trades, or a girl Friday. Give me any task and I'll do it. Carpe diem is my motto."

"Good to have someone with your energy," said Jasmine. "I'm a practical type, too, like Dan." She smiled at him. "I'm good at leading task groups and inspiring people, though not so good at thinking up new things. I like to read and someday I'm going to be a writer and write books."

"Aren't we missing someone?" asked Dan. "Oh yeah, Bannerjee. You're almost invisible."

"True," said Bannerjee. "Invisibility is an art, and a very useful one too. My big strength is connecting people. But they don't know I did it, which amuses me. They think it just happened that way. I come from a Brahmin family. Brahmins are taught to cook and be self reliant."

"I guess that covers all of us," said Tom. "Now, Janus is supposed to be the villain, or at least the opposition character. It's not very clear what his motivation is. He pretends to be on our side, but he really wants to exploit us."

"Let's talk about the plot," said Sunshine. Every drama has to have a plot, a story line. But I think the author of this story, if there is one, is kind of befuddled." She gave a quick laugh. "We really need to have some story or we're going to lose our audience pretty quick."

"I think we already lost them," said Bannerjee sadly.

"Well, every story is out there. Every story ever told came from the mind of some person. But actually there's only a limited number of basic stories. It's all in the details," said Sunshine.

"Twists and turns and surprises," said Sheila. "A sexy story. A page turner. What's going to happen next?"

"Can we summarize our story," said Tom? "The basic outline of a story is 'Once upon a time, and then, and then... the end.' Like that. What is our 'Once upon a time?'"

"Once upon a time, a small group set out to change the world," suggested Jasmine.

"Not bad," said Tom, with an approving scowl. "So what's the end?"

"Do we know yet?" asked Jasmine.

"Well, we can at least project it. I mean, the story has to end somewhere, even if there's going to be a sequel," said Tom.

"I can see it," said Dan, gazing into the distance and shielding his eyes. "The Aquarianauts, Next Generation."

"Return of the Aquarianauts," said Bannerjee.

"The Aquarianauts and the Temple of Doom," suggested Carl.

"Ending, ending," chanted Tom. "Grand finale. Suggestions, please."

"First," said Sunshine, "We have to know what kind of drama it is. Is it an epic, ride off into the sunset, Odyssey kind of drama?"

"Odysseus rode off into the sunset?" asked Bannerjee.

"Sailed off. Or is it a Hamletish, bodies everywhere ending tragedy? Probably not an everything returns to normal, life goes on comedy."

"Wait a minute," said An Ji. "Isn't this kind of cheating, discussing the story within the story? I mean, I think the author ought to do this separately."

"All's fair in love, war, and storytelling," laughed Mila. "Go on, Sunshine."

"Well," said Carl, "we're talking about changing or transforming society. So wouldn't it be social drama? What was the judgement there?"

"You are condemned to lose everything you cling to," said Sunshine. "Tough one. But maybe you're right. Although if Janus was more of a villain, we might play it as heroic drama. Which would you rather, lose everything or be hacked to pieces? Okay, let's go with social for now. It's not tragedy, comedy, or absurd. Probably not epic. Could be mystery, I guess. So how does it end? Social dramas usually don't come to any very definite conclusion, which makes them good for serials with recurring episodes. Like the Good Person of Szechuan, which ended on a note of well, we're not really sure what the moral of the story is."

"I think we should end it on a kind of hopeful note," said Sheila. "Like, maybe our ideas can take root and really work. Maybe humanity can transform into something positive, maybe there's a bright future."

"But not certain," said Dan. "The Januses of this world are still out there. The struggle will go on. Tune in next week..."

Chapter Thirty Three

"There's nothing new under the sun. But above the sun, that's a different kettle of fish altogether."

"Are you saying that there's fish over the sun?"

"I'm using a simile."

"Oh, silly me. A simile."

"A smile could be a simile."

"I suppose."

"But only a silly smile."

"A silly smiling simile."

"Named Sam."

"Similes don't have names."

"I hereby decree that they do."

"Okay, Sam then."

"And his girlfriend Samantha, also known as Sam."

"Wouldn't that be confusing?"

"Terribly confusing."

"But the purpose of similes is to make things more clear."

"Not these similes. These similes leave a foaming wake of confusion."

"I'm going to appeal to the Director."

"You can't. He's a simile too. And besides, he's in another kettle of fish."

"Which kettle of fish would that be?"

"The one that's boiling on the stove."

"Poor Director!"

"Similes can sometimes be very tasty."

"Okay, enough of the warmup exercises," said Nancy. "Start writing."

"What should I write?" asked Tom.

"Whatever you want. Heinlein's character Jubal Harshaw said his method of writing was to disconnect his cerebrum, and hook his gonads in parallel with his - was it thalamus? Anyway, do something like that. Don't think. I mean don't think in the ordinary way. This is a special way of thinking. We're using words to evoke, or invoke, images in the reader's mind."

"When I read, my attention is not on the words, but on the thoughts they generate."

"Right. Virtual reality."

"Did you ever meet the author?" asked Tom.

"Once, on an acid trip," reminisced Nancy. "It was - special," she added dreamily.

She shook herself. "Anyway, the art of writing is to use words to go beyond words. It's abstraction, so you can't specify every detail, nor would you want to. But you have to give enough detail so the reader's mind will fill in the rest."

"How do you do that?" asked Tom.

"Well, that's the art of it. T. S. Eliot once complained that he only had the skill to say what he no longer wished to say."

"I remember," said Tom. "It's from the Four Quartets. And then he said, for us, there is only the trying."

"A bit pessimistic, I think," said Nancy. "He must have been a melancholic. I do believe there are times, maybe only occasionally and maybe never for some authors, but there are times when it all comes together and you find just the right words. I guess that's what you'd call style. Style, with a capital 'S.' The point is, if you're a writer, or you aim to be one, you just get out there and write. I mean, if you're a runner, you run every day, right? Even if you don't really feel like it. You get out there and run. Practice makes perfect."

Tom said, "I heard the original quote was, 'Perfect practice makes perfect.' I kind of like the German version though: 'Ubung macht den Meister' - practice makes the master."

"Sure. Every master of anything was a complete novice once. So don't be afraid to start learning new things. Who knows? It might turn out to be a gold mine. And so what if it takes

time? 'Oh, this will take five years to learn and I'm already fifty years old.' The time's going to pass anyway, whether you learn something new or not."

"Never say die," said Tom. "I heard this story about Socrates, maybe apocryphal, but anyway, you know they condemned him to death and two or three days before he was supposed to drink the hemlock, he learned to play a new song. Now that's inspiring."

"We're all in the same boat," said Nancy. "We're all condemned to death. We just don't know when." She brightened. "Anyway, back to the writing. I think you're trying to weasel out of it."

"Okay," said Tom. "So, how do I begin?"

"How about 'Once upon a time?'"

"Once upon a time," Tom wrote, "-and then what?"

"Oh, come on!" said Nancy, exasperated. "Use your imagination. What bubbles up from your subconscious?"

"Let's see. Once upon a time there was this blockhead named Tom, who couldn't figure out what to write, despite encouragement from his writing coach, a pretty and intelligent girl named Nancy."

"Well, that's a start," said Nancy. "Now let's improve it. Thanks for the compliment but 'pretty' and 'intelligent' are ordinary and not very descriptive words. Vague. See if you can get more specific."

Tom thought. "Hmm. Her wit was as sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, and her eyes sparkled like the morning dew. The beauty of her face could melt the heart of a grand inquisitor."

"That's better. Maybe too far the other way. Sounds like a fairy tale. But then we get into the question of what 'voice' you choose to write in, which is more advanced. So we'll leave that for now. Proceed with your story."

"To look at Tom, you would not say he was handsome, but his buttery blue eyes shone in certain lights like a dawn sky over a stormy sea."

"Nice description," said Nancy, "but 'buttery?' I doubt that word has ever been used to describe eyes before."

"Well, it has been now," said Tom, pouting.

"Okay, okay, don't ruffle your feathers. It's just an exercise anyway."

"An exercise indeed," said Tom haughtily. "This is the beginning of a masterpiece."

"Oh, pardon me, Master! Please, go on." Nancy bowed courteously.

"Now this Tom was not what you would call bright, but his cunning hands could repair a broken table or mend a pot, and he had a knack for putting together pleasing words which earned him tingling glances from the comely maidens of the village."

"Flattering yourself I see," said Nancy, sending him a tingling glance.

"Why not? It's just a story after all."

"But Tom was not satisfied with this life, pleasant as it was. He longed for something more. He longed, in fact, to join the ranks of the immortals, to become a Writer. He imagined his stories printed in elegant type on precious paper and bound in luxurious leather volumes which would reside on the polished oak bookshelves of serious scholars who would take them down reverently to peruse by soft lamplight and forget the fardels of the world for some precious moments in the long weary winter evenings."

"A little heavy on the alliteration there." Nancy smiled. "But nicely descriptive. Using the word 'fardels' is maybe a bit pretentious. Like saying, 'Hmph. I've read Shakespeare.'"

"But everybody knows that speech from Hamlet," protested Tom. "It's one of the most famous speeches in the world, right up there with blood sweat and tears."

"Blood and sweat, toil and tears," corrected Nancy. "One of the most often misquoted. Proceed."

Chapter Thirty Four

"Nya ha ha," laughed Janus in a high nasal whine.

"So you turned out to be a villain after all," said Sheila in a trembling voice.

"Yes, my little pretty!" Janus sneered.

"What - what are you going to do with me?" Sheila asked tearfully.

"That depends on whether you're a good little girl. Tie her hands behind her back," he ordered his henchmen, two tall husky black-bearded goons. She struggled but was no match for their strength. Daylight came dimly through the high windows of the stone cellar. "Force her to her knees," he said, throwing down a cushion. They did so.

Janus took a large scissors that was hanging on a hook against the wall. He pulled fabric out from her chest and cut two large holes in the cloth, allowing her large breasts to hang exposed.

Putting the scissors down, he fingered the already stiff nipples. In spite of herself, Sheila felt moisture accumulating between her legs. Blood rushed to her cheeks. "So," Janus said, "the little slut is getting aroused already. Let's see what this does to her. Bring them out," he waved to his servants.

The two large men pulled aside cloth - their loose black trousers had no zippers - and brought out two huge penises, already erect, bouncing, and dripping. They held them near her face and she looked from one to the other, her eyes glazed. This is awful, she said to herself. They're forcing you. By violence. But she could not help herself, her clitoris quivered mightily and there seemed to be a volcano in her chest. She opened her mouth and gulped the one on the left, the head so enormous that she had to stretch her lips just to get it in. Mmm. So good. She took it in as far as she could and licked it in her mouth, while the other hunk rubbed his against her cheek and pinched the nearest nipple. Janus watched with a satisfied smile.

She could feel herself closing in on a climax and moved her hips, thrusting against nothing. The thick hot meat in her mouth began to jerk and, as her orgasm engulfed her, sprayed the scalding acrid liquid against the back of her throat. The other prick was coming on her face, Janus was laughing and laughing, she was coming and coming...

Daylight. She opened her eyes and the bright sunlight made her quickly close them again. Wow. What a weird dream. She still felt the tail end of the orgasm. She reached down and felt between her legs. Sopping.

Chapter Thirty Five

"I always wanted to be like Sherlock Holmes. Once, when I had hepatitis and couldn't do much of anything, I read the entire collection. That was when the ship was crossing the Bay of Bengal..."

"How did you get hepatitis?"

"Well, it seemed like the whole ship's crew was exposed to it, so it might have gotten into the water tanks, or maybe it was that last dinner in Cochin the night before sailing most of us went to together... most it didn't seem to affect too strongly, but I got the worst case. Maybe it was partly culture shock. My first time to India, first time to Asia really, but India can be quite a shock. It's so totally different. Some love it and some can't get away fast enough."

"Interesting thing about hepatitis." Mila took a hit on the joint. "It's a liver disease. Ever think about why they call it the liver? From live?"

"No. Why?" said Sunshine.

"It's a good name. If your liver is down, you lose your will to live. I was kind of enjoying it, drifting away. I was living mostly on white rice, on the recommendation of an Indian doctor. Probably would have died if Gitana, a crew member and ex-lover of mine, hadn't pulled me

out of it," he reminisced. "Made me start eating better food and taking part in activities. Gradually interest in living came back. But maybe I just needed that long to integrate the shock of India. I was always a sensitive child." He smiled.

"Sensitivity is a burden," An Ji agreed.

"True. The sensitivity of people varies by at least an order of magnitude. Maybe several orders of magnitude. Sometimes I'm walking down a city street and a motorcycle screams by, causing me pain, real pain! I look around and other people don't even seem to notice." Mila laughed. "But I guess that's why we're here, working for change."

"So what about Sherlock Holmes?" asked Tom, who was driving.

"And the Baker Street irregulars!" laughed Jasmine. "I want to be a Baker Street irregular. Sounds like so much fun." She giggled. "And get paid in lollipops."

"Well, Sherlock Holmes was an ideal of that time, wasn't he," said Mila. "The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. The exaltation of the intellect. People believed then that you could solve any problem, if you could think well and correctly."

"Well, can't you?" asked Tom.

"It's done pretty well," put in Carl. "Of course, you have to admit that for every problem solved, more were created. Like, we solved the problem of fast transportation, and now we have the problem of air pollution."

"We solved, partly, the problems of disease and food supply, and now we have the problem of overpopulation," said Son He.

"This whole book sounds like someone talking to himself," Tom mumbled.

"Well, isn't it?" Replied the AI on his smartphone.

"Shut up," he said.

"Fuck you," said the smartphone.

Smartphones finally actually deserved the name. Or maybe they should be called smart-ass phones, he thought glumly.

"Charge on main batteries getting low," came a voice from the dashboard, accompanied by a blinking red light. "Must recharge unless sun comes out."

"Uh-oh. Mila, we need a recharge. If we plug in at a regular charging station, they'll be able to track us."

"I know. But we are not without our resources. Elementary, my dear Watson. An Ji, our dear hackeress whiz, will disguise the charge."

They pulled the bus into a Grand All-In-One Charge-O-Rama.

"But these are owned by the Janus syndicate," said Dan.

"In the bear's lair," said Mila suavely. "We can use the bathrooms. An Ji, while you're paying, pick us up a box of Super Mellow Mendocino Hash Crystals."

"Bus won't start," announced Tom gravely.

An Ji plugged her handheld into the console. "Program overridden."

The dashboard screen lit up. The self satisfied face of Janus appeared. "So, Mila, trying to escape, are we?"

"Just taking a little vacation," said Mila.

"This is stupid," said Tom. "I think we should re-write this whole scene."

"True," agreed Janus, scratching his head. "It doesn't seem to be going anywhere."

"Ok," said Sunshine. "Let's all jack out on - one, two, three, now!"

Chapter Thirty Six

Janus grabbed his bucket and threw up, loudly. His heaves were so profound that he felt he would never breathe again. Over and over he wretched, barely able to grab a gasping inbreath before they started again. This must be what hell is like, he thought.

"Trust the mother," breathed a voice in his ear. A cloud of smoke enveloped his head and he smelled the acrid odor of mapacho. He breathed more easily and took a sip of water from the bottle held to his mouth. "Rinse and spit, don't swallow," said the voice, which sounded like a violin duet. He did so. The tip of the mapacho cigarette glowed brightly and the dark figure breathed smoke onto his chest, then his back. "Hold out your hands." The Maestra gently pushed his hands together and breathed smoke onto them, then held the sides of his head and tilted it down. She blew thrice onto the top of his head. Then she sat opposite him and began to chant in Shipibo.

He was glad he had purged. The feeling of something heavy and dark inside him had passed and he felt light and airy inside, like the Mapacho smoke had penetrated his body and was swirling around in there. Fantastic colored patterns rapidly changed in his vision. Sometimes he saw an image, like a demon from a Tibetan Tantra painting, sometimes cartoonish like something from a Disney movie. A weird two toned voice, throaty tenor and impossibly deep bass, spoke what he recognized as a line from the Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation, "These are all thought forms of your own mind, oh Nobly Born."

He realized he had entered a different dimension. Against the background of the geometrical colored patterns, beings like giant insects floated and he recognized that they were conscious inhabitants of this dimension, not hostile, but just coming around to see what was happening.

Two of them, somewhat larger, about two or three feet across from his perspective, hovered near. They were different, more complex, with no recognizable head or limbs but with various protrusions - nothing like anything he knew, but some saw-like or reading-glass like or like an octopus tentacle, some parts which vaguely looked like ears or eyes. He understood that these were doctors, called here by the Spirit of the Medicine, because he had prayed for healing.

The doctors examined him and consulted with each other. He understood without language but by a sort of telepathic communication, that they understood his problem. They were not able to directly influence his body as it was coarse matter, but they had diagnosed that the energy field surrounding his body had a hole, or wound, over his chest area. These holes in the energy field do not directly affect the physical body, but over time can have serious consequences. Because of its location, this hole might cause him to have heart attacks later in his life. For now, though, he was emotionally blocked and unable to feel more than a narrow range of emotions.

The two "doctors" hovered near him for some time and, as he perceived, worked on healing this energetic hole.

As they floated away, the visions became more intense, the colors sharper, the patterns changing more rapidly, and he heard a kind of low buzzing together with intermittent high-pitched squeaks. The visions and the sounds drew him - upward? outward? he felt himself bodiless, soaring, streaking through a star filled cosmos ...

Round and round. Here we go folks. Like to ride the merry-go-round? All it costs is your sanity. And since sanity is a slippery concept anyway, why not try it? Terrifical centrifical fortunate force. The game of all games. If you fall off you lose. Everybody falls off sooner or later so have fun while you can. Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes!

You can't just do what you want! Society would fall apart! The SYSTEM would fall apart! And then what? (What is the SYSTEM by the way?) Short for the Control System, about ten thousand years old. Learned and improved century by century. All "civilized" cultures part of it. The planetary trance of sorrow.

OF sorrow. OF pain. Of suffering. Life is suffering according to the Buddha, and the reason is... (drum roll please)

Television prime time game show, welcome to... "The Four Noble Truths!" (Applause.)

And now, for the Grand Prize, what is the Second Noble Truth? First contestant?

Life is suffering?

No, sorry, that's the first Noble Truth. Second Contestant?

Well, I guess... We look for happiness in the world of phenomena, but since phenomena are only a reflection of reality, it's like trying to grasp an object reflected in the surface of a pond. The more you try, the more you lose it.

(Bells ring) Correct! You win five thousand dollars, and now, for double or nothing, what is the Third Noble Truth? Quit while you're ahead, or go for broke?

I'll go for it. (Cheers) OKay. (nervous) Hi, Mom (waving at camera). This is for you. Okay, Third Truth. This is tough. The Third Truth...

Thirty Seconds.

The Third Truth is... I know it, I know it... We all have to die.

Sorry, incorrect answer. Third Contestant?

The Thud Nooble Troot say dat yuh kin get out ob de whole mess. Da Buddy ha say dat it ain't gon' be easy but yuh kin do it.

(Bells, flashing lights) Congratulations, Contestant Number Three! You have won this gold-thread embroidered meditation cushion and an all expenses paid trip to Nepal to visit Lumbini, birthplace of the Buddha. And now for the grand prize, fasten your seat belts. Number Three! Keep what you have won, or go all the way and shoot for Nirvana?

I'll keep what I got.

Great! Contestant Number Four? For Nirvana, what is the Fourth Noble Truth?

The Noble Eight-Fold Path. Right Understanding, Right ideas, Right expression, Right Acts, Right social network, Right Attention, Right Observation, Right Focus

(Tibetan horn and bells) Congratulations! You have won Nirvana! The prize is... NOTHING!!!

(Everything disappears.)

Go to hell. That's the light side. Hell is whole, holey, holy. You're full of shit, full of it, fool of it, fool for it. Let it go, down the drain, the brain drain, sing the refrain, we're all insane anyway. Nothing could be finer than to be insane in Carolina. Nothing could be finer than to be in her vagina in the morning. Nothing could be sweeter for her than my peter, oh, let's not be barbaric. Let's not have any trouble. Let's just stay in our bubble.

Going to hell as a scenic excursion, I mean really! It is so... photos to bring home, with the devil. Unfortunately, leider, it's usually a one way trip. Skoda. Quelle dommage. But we, wheee! had diplomatic immunity, so-called, messages from Above and all that, don't you know. Mission from - ahem, sorry, can't speak the Name you know. Anyway, Jimmy brought along a snowball to see how long it would last, straightforward scientific experiment, only he forgot hell is eternal and clocks don't run there but Satan was delighted and insisted on holding it in his hand where it straightaway turned into steam and vanished with a loud -pop- He's very vain you know, always curling his tail and sharpening his horns, not that they need sharpening.

Offered him a Camel and he lit it off his dick, kind of an eternal flame, you know, Jane was fascinated, would have liked to fuck him, I could see it in her eyes, but it would have been the death of her. Meanwhile Jimmy was checking out the pools of sulfur...

The message, yes of course Mr. S - he was stalling for time, I could see that. What had he done with the message? The devil was getting impatient and blowing steam out his nostrils like a prize bull getting ready to charge. Ah yes here is it, put it in my shirt for safekeeping, wouldn't want it to burn up on the way...

We waited all attention while he read it. What happens to the messenger of bad news? Jimmy's glance stole to the steaming lake. And for eternity...

A smile spread across his scarlet face and we relaxed.

He was lying on his back, his head on a pillow. He still saw some visions, but low key. He remembered being drawn up and then - here he was. The Maestra still sang an Ikaro in the middle of the room. Where had he gone? He sat up, feeling mellow, and lit a cigarette. He'd taken care before the ceremony started to leave cigarettes and a lighter within reach, near his bucket and water bottle.

Sheila had been right. There was something lacking in his life, a gaping hole he usually was not aware of. Something he covered up by drinking, taking drugs, sex... but now and then when he was caught alone with himself he felt it. He smiled to himself. And these Spirit doctors had known just what and where it was. He never believed in all this Spirit mumbo jumbo, but this experience was just as real as going to a doctor's office and having him put a

stethoscope on your chest and peer into your mouth. These other-dimensional doctors had their own tools and their own diagnoses. Wow!

The Maestra had finished her closing Ikaro and after a last "sopla" with the Mapacho, lay down to rest. The formal ceremony over, one of the students sang a short Ikaro for practice and then someone played a guitar and sang a song in Spanish dedicated to Noya Rao, one of the many master plants which students came to do "dieta" with.

Janus lay back down, closed his eyes, and let the soothing waves of music wash over him.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Jasmine put her thigh over Mila's pelvis and rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you think we will die, Mila?"

"How can we die? We're just characters in a book."

"Come on. Seriously."

"Well, it all depends how you look at it." Mila stroked her curly brown hair and gazed at the ceiling, on which she had pasted night-glow stars. "If you think of yourself as a body, then yes, the body will die. If you think of yourself as consciousness, then no. Consciousness can't die, because it was never born. It can't end, because it didn't begin."

"But won't my consciousness end when my body dies?"

"Consciousness has no duration in time. It's only in the present moment. So, again, it depends what you identify with. How many consciousnesses are there?"

Jasmine considered this. "I guess, as many as there are conscious beings."

"That's rational," said Mila. "But in your experience, how many are there? How many consciousnesses do you experience?"

"Is this a trick question? One, of course."

"Right. There is only one consciousness. This is hard to understand because it is a different dimension, the dimension of time-space. Different dimensions have different characteristics, and the dimension of time-space has the characteristic of oneness. Actually that's an oversimplification, because there are three dimensions of time-space. Consciousness is the fourth dimension, the first of time-space."

"I think you lost me there," said Jasmine.

"The problem is, rational mind can't get it. This is something that has to be experienced, like the taste of tea."

"Or sex," murmured Jasmine, moving her hand down and stroking his belly. "Ooh, I think I found something that's only one, at least here and now. Why don't we see how two can become one?" And she rolled on top of him.

As she sat up and held his stick with her hand to slide it into her moist cavern, Mila began to chant, as a litany, "If... there is only one consciousness and,
If... consciousness cannot end and,
If... the world of experience is illusion, a game that the one consciousness is playing with itself and,
If... this illusion of self and body can keep going long enough and healthy enough the possibility may arise of continuing longer than the predicted end (end being also illusion) and so..."

Mila rolled her over and kissed her mouth deeply while plunging his jade stalk in and out.

With his lips brushing hers, he breathed, "The illusion will not come to an end and the illusion will continue, since consciousness cannot end. Consciousness has no beginning nor end, it is simply NOW--" He thrust all the way. "Never-" He thrust again as Jasmine, moaning throatily, slid into orgasm. "Over-" He thrust in again and, trembling, began to come. "War." Coming together, they merged into Cosmic Oneness.

"And that," whispered Mila into her ear as they lay in an embrace, "is the Meaning of Life."

Chapter Thirty Eight

"Once upon a time, there was a race of beings that called themselves 'people.' These 'people' liked to tell stories. They competed with each other to tell the best stories. The stories they liked the most had lots of sex and violence, and sometimes 'love.'

"At first, the people acted out the stories. Then, they invented sounds that triggered patterns in each other's brains. After refining that for a long time, they invented visual signs to represent the sounds. This they called 'writing.' The best story tellers were rewarded with sexual partners, social status, and other favors. After they invented this 'writing,' the story tellers didn't have to remember the stories any more.

"After the people invented the sounds and the writing, they became concerned with what they called 'truth' and 'lies.' Some stories were 'lies.' These they called 'fiction,' or just 'stories.' Some stories were 'true.' These they called 'history,' or sometimes 'reality,' or 'actuality.'

"Some kinds of story tellers checked their stories very carefully to make sure they were 'truth' and not 'lies.' They also got other story tellers to check their stories so they could all agree on

what was 'truth.' These kinds of story tellers they called 'Scientists.' The story of their stories, they called 'Objective Reality.'" Mila put down his notebook and took a sip of his capuccino.

"There must be happy endings," said Tom. "But I think Brecht was being sarcastic there."

"All of life's a stage," quoted Jasmine.

"Meaning, life's a place where stories take place," said Carl.

"And one story leads to the next," said Dan. "But, do the stories exist out there? Or do we make them up. Is there really any difference, in the end, between fiction and so-called nonfiction?"

"People see stories everywhere," said Mila. "My story is your story is our story. From the endless flow of phenomena we take stories. We put lines around it. We say here it begins, here it goes on, and here it ends. Every day is a story that begins with waking up and ends with going to sleep. Your whole life is a story. Big stories and little stories."

"Do you think," said Bannerjee, taking a handful of nuts from the bowl, "animals make stories? Or is it just a human thing."

Sheila stroked the purring ginger cat in her lap. "I don't think animals make stories. They just experience and act in the moment. But people need stories. That's how they make sense of the world."

"Where are we, anyway?" asked Carl, looking around.

"Oh, you! You're always dreaming and don't pay attention to your surroundings," rebuked Sunshine gently.

"We're at the carnival. Yay!" said Son He.

"And we're going to go on the roller coaster," said Bannerjee. "The best one in the world. It has a loop-de-loop where you actually go completely upside-down."

"So," said Mila, "if the human mind makes everything into stories, what is God? The ultimate storyteller. The author of the whole, complete, universal story. The Story of all stories."

"Maybe that's why people like to write books, and create art - they get to be like God, and make the story," said An Ji.

"The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on," quoted Bannerjee.

"The funny thing is," mused Mila, "we, as humans, make up the story of God, who is writing our story, which we then become subject to. Which comes first, the God that writes our story,

or our mind that writes the story of God writing our story?"

"Come on, you stodgy philosophers! Let's go to the roller coaster!" Sunshine waved for the waiter. "Drink up, troops! We're moving out."

They all stood up, putting on jackets and hats and grabbing knapsacks and handbags, and walked out of the covered cafe area into the bright sunshine. Couples and families and gangs of youngsters walked by, children eating cotton candy and popcorn. Hucksters beckoned at games of chance. "Throw the ring over the bottle! Win a giant teddy bear! One Dolcred gets you three chances. Try your luck miss?" A handsome mustachioed blue-eyed young man beckoned to Sheila.

She smiled at him. "Maybe later, lover boy."

Bannerjee sidled up beside Mila. "I was thinking--"

"You, thinking? Doesn't it make your head hurt?"

Bannerjee smiled. "A little. But listen, do you think..." He took off his floppy tan fisherman's hat and scratched his head. "Do you think you, me, all of this..." He waved his arm around. "That somebody, or some conscious entity, is writing this right now? That we're just fictional characters in someone's imagination?"

"Could be," smiled Mila. "And who knows who the real author is. Maybe it's that beggar over there." He indicated a man sitting by the side of the path with a large mongrel dog curled beside him and a paper coffee cup in front, holding a piece of cardboard with words scrawled on it: "Hungry - Homeless - Please Help." Mila dropped a coin in the cup and the man thanked him. "Better to keep the author happy," he said flippantly.

Mila walked on. "And the author," he said, "who is doubtless sitting at his desk in front of his computer gazing out the window at the rather bleak jail-like apartment building opposite and the pale blue whitish sky and sipping coffee, made from excellent Rwanda beans, by the way, with a dash of cream of course... the author, who just leaned over a bit and let out a fart, thinks he is real and not just a character in some other entity's story. What audacity!"

"You're freaking me out just a little," said Bannerjee.

Mila waved to a little bright-eyed boy licking a large lollipop. "Maybe he's the author."

"You're making fun of me," said Bannerjee.

"Sure. Make fun. Machen Spass. That's the name of the game. And here we are, at the famous roller coaster. Now that looks like fun!"

The little train came to a stop and the passengers, with dreamy expressions, looking well

shaken up, staggered off in the other direction. Everybody rushed to get seats and Bannerjee found himself in the front car, all alone. The attendant came down the line locking each car's safety guard in position. He smiled, thinking of the coins, condoms, candies, cards, cigarettes, and other treats starting with "c" that were the perks of the position, to be gathered from under the tracks at the end of the day's work.

"Hold on tight, folks, and try not to throw up in the cars," he joked.

The train started slowly, climbing up and up a long rise. The fairground spread out to all sides. It reached the peak, went over, and began to accelerate down, faster and faster. The loop-de-loop loomed ahead. Wind whistled in Bannerjee's ears. Adrenalin flooded his chest, racing his heart. And then - he wasn't sure how it happened - the scene of the roller coaster and the fairgrounds faded out and he found himself sitting on a flat surface.

He shook his head to clear it. Was this real? Everything looked solid. To his right loomed what appeared to be a huge computer monitor, four times as high as he was. He could make out some words on the screen. Looked like his name was there, and "roller coaster." He turned and saw in front of him an enormous keyboard with the letters on the keys upside down from his perspective. A suspicion dawned in his mind and he slowly looked up.

Regarding him with an amused expression was a giant head, mostly bald with a wreath of white hair, and huge bushy white eyebrows. The head smiled, showing yellowish, irregular teeth. "I slipped something in your coffee back there at the cafe. A synthetic mescaline derivative. Sorry, but you wanted to know."

Bannerjee dropped his jaw. "But... no, it couldn't be... are you - are you really...?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. The Author. You're lucky, most characters never get to meet me. In fact, most don't even suspect my existence." He extended a little finger. "Glad to meet you."

Bannerjee touched the tip of the proffered finger and then grasped it with his right hand, which couldn't quite go around it. "Likewise, I'm sure," he said politely. "But why...?"

"Oh, I didn't have to make you so small. I'm writing the story so I could make you any size I like. But it amused me to make you a little toy and put you on my writing desk, after Mila's clever description. Do you have any questions?"

"Well, yes. Are you as far as it goes, or are you also..."

The giant chuckled. "A character in some even greater entity's story? Could be. Maybe it just goes on to infinity. But I think next time I'll bring Sheila here, she's really sexy. Or maybe Jasmine. Now that would be something, don't you think? The author fucking one of his own characters? Or would that just be a kind of masturbation..."

Bannerjee drew a breath. "Could I see your thing? That would be cool, to see such a giant

one."

He grinned. "Sure, why not? He stood up, unzipped his trousers and held the growing member over the desk.

Bannerjee stepped towards it and held the head between his hands. "Wow! Thanks. This'll be something to tell my grandchildren."

The author zipped up and sat down. "Well, I really have to send you back and get on with the story. My readers will be getting bored. Any requests, while you're here? Suggestions for the story?"

Bannerjee thought. This might be his only chance. "Well, I've been a kind of minor character up to this point. Couldn't you have me do something really heroic? And I'd also kind of like to fuck Sunshine, if that could be arranged."

"I'll see what I can do. Fucking Sunshine shouldn't be too much of a problem, but something heroic? Arriving in the nick of time and saving the day? Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory? How about giving up your life so the Good Guys can win?"

"Well... I guess if I'm only a fictional character anyway, that's ok. But I'd rather stay alive if you can swing it."

"We'll see. Thanks for the little chat. And have fun with Sunshine, she's quite the fox. Bye, see you in between the lines, riding the words, living in the letters..."

The friendly gruff voice got fainter and the sunlit room gradually faded. Black. He felt a hand shaking his shoulder and heard a high-pitched man's voice close to his ear. "Ride's over buddy. Time to get out."

He looked around. The train was back in the boarding area and the others were standing on the platform to the right. Dan held out a hand and helped him out of the car. Everybody looked suitably dazed as they unsteadily walked down the metal ramp.

As they emerged from the ride's fenced area, Sunshine came up from the left and took his arm. "Are you all right, Bannerjee?" She gave him a look that went straight to his balls, then kissed his cheek. "You seemed to be out of it there."

Bannerjee smiled to himself and let her hold his arm as they walked on.

Chapter Thirty Nine

"I think," said Mila, sipping his hot chocolate, "that even though externally I appear old, I'm just attaining to maturity, so you could say that I'm really about twenty or twenty one." He took a bite of his white chocolate chunk dark chocolate brownie. "That means, I guess, that

I'm about one fourth the way through my life. So, barring accident, I should live to be about two hundred fifty to three hundred years old."

Sunshine stirred honey into her peppermint tea thoughtfully. "Why do you say that?"

Mila took a pull on the large blunt which was making the rounds. "As I understand it, maturity means having the attention to work on large scale and long term projects. Children want instant gratification. If they can't get it, they lose interest. Mature people can work on projects that take five, ten, twenty years to bear fruit. Like planting a fruit tree, or an orchard. They don't give up or lose heart if they don't see results right away. Really mature people even work on projects that won't see results in their own lifetimes."

Carl spooned sugar into his double espresso. "I sometimes wonder about the food plant varieties and the domestic animals we use and take so much for granted. Those were certainly multi-generational projects, don't you think?"

Jasmine looked up from the watercolor she was painting. "Look at maize, sweet corn. Those big ears started out as tiny things, about an inch long. Now it's like, one of the major food plants of the world."

"Oh yeah! Like those cute little ears of maize they serve as hors d'oeuvres at fancy parties, right?" Sheila laughed, and mimed eating the grains off a tiny ear of corn.

"Well, I'm glad they figured out popcorn," said Tom. "I couldn't live without popcorn."

"Imagine their surprise," said Jasmine, "when they first discovered it. Some old woman putting this new kind of maize near the fire to roast and suddenly it starts exploding! She must have been terrified!"

"Evil spirits in the food," commented Mila, and signaled to the waiter for another cup of cocoa.

As the waiter came to clear away the used cup, Tom asked him, "Do you serve popcorn here?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," replied the waiter obsequiously. "We do have puffed rice cakes, served with your choice of peanut, almond, cashew, or Brazil nut butters."

"Popcorn," repeated Tom firmly.

"Yes sir. I'll ask, sir."

"They're just lazy," muttered Tom angrily. "Whoever heard of a snack lounge without popcorn. Or even worse, they buy prepackaged popcorn and palm it off on their unsuspecting customers."

"Or microwave popcorn," added Jasmine.

"Yuck!" said Tom. "Don't get me started on microwaves. Even expensive restaurants precook food and then reheat it in the microwave. Anything for efficiency. That's why I usually just cook for myself. At least then I know what I'm getting."

The waiter returned with Mila's hot chocolate. On the surface of the steamed milk, the barrista had sculpted a heart. He set it down with a fresh napkin and a small chocolate wrapped in gold paper. He glanced nervously at Tom. No one said anything more about popcorn.

"In Cristopher Marlowe's play Dr. Faustus," said Mila, admiring the cup's foaming artistry, "Faustus makes a deal with the Devil. He sells his soul in return for twenty four years of power, riches, sex, whatever he wants."

"I owe my soul to the company store." Dan sang a fragment of the old blues song.

"Apart from the question of whether there is a soul, and whether it could be sold, what intrigues me about the story is this," Mila paused to sip his cocoa. "Why did Faustus ask for only twenty four years? Remember, he was the one who proposed that, not the Devil."

"There wasn't any bargaining either, if I remember right," said Tom. "The Devil accepted the deal right away."

"Maybe he figured he'd be bored with the whole thing by that time," said Sunshine.

"Well, if I was going to sell my soul, if there was such a thing, I think I'd bargain a little harder," said Mila. "Waiter! The bill, please."

The waiter came over. His skin seemed to have turned reddish, and Sunshine thought she could make out what looked like the tips of horns poking out of his black hair. His eyes gleamed and he grinned devilishly. "That will be one soul, sir," he said.

Mila handed him a credit card with the words "Bank of Hell" stamped on it. "Charge it," he said.

Janus watched the monitor. "Damn it! That sly devil has slipped away again."

"What now, sir?" asked Tom Brady.

"Put a tail on him. I can't let him get away. He's the key piece in the game."

"Yes, sir. Right away."

Chapter Forty

"You fooled me. Characters, plots, daring ventures, hair's breadth escapes. Cunning villains, noble heroes, unforeseen plot twists. You're doing exactly what you critiqued in your friend's writing, you're writing to show off your cleverness. Do you think anyone's going to be interested in reading that? Your mother maybe, except for the slight problem that she's been dead for eighteen years."

Mila sat across from the Author in his favorite coffee shop, Has Beans.

"Well, you requested this meeting," said the Author, sipping his Kenya AAA. "It's funny," he said meditatively, "A is the best, so they wanted to show their coffee was even better than that, so they named it AA. And then someone one-upped them on that and made it AAA. It's so Kenya. It's so Africa really." He sighed. "So human, I guess."

"And this whole gimmick of putting the author in the story, it's so, I don't know..."

"Self referential?" suggested the Author, grinning.

"I mean, don't you think the reader is just going to think it's kind of dumb? Like just a way to try to do something that hasn't been done before. Like the extremes some directors go to, to do Shakespeare in a new way. All naked Othello. All female Macbeth. Hamlet in outer space."

"It wasn't my idea," the Author reminded him. "It was you guys that started questioning the plot of this story and wanting to put in your two cents. If you'd just behaved like normal characters and gone about your business, I could have remained invisible. But no, you had to let the cat out of the bag, open up the can of worms."

"There you go with your cliches. How did I get into this book with such a second-rate author?" Mila sighed. "Oh well, I guess it's just my fate. Have to make the best of it." He smiled. "At least you let me have some sex."

"I thought you'd appreciate that," leered the Author.

"And the drugs are pretty good, too."

The Author sipped his South Sulawesi Single Origin and smacked his lips. "So what would you like to see in the story? You must be discontented, or did you just want to brag to your friends that you met the Author? I can put that in, if that's what you want."

"Give me a break! I'm not that petty." Mila stroked his beard. "Okay, let's see. You don't have any exciting action. You don't have any drama, really. That's funny, coming from you. I mean, you've had a pretty dramatic life, and I know you used to be an actor."

"Oh, you've been researching me?" asked the Author.

"Well, why not?"

"It's just kind of weird. I mean, usually the author researches the characters, not the other way around."

"Well, this whole scene is weird, isn't it?" demanded Mila. "And don't forget, it's you who is writing this!"

"True, true," murmured the Author. "Well," he said briskly, "go on with your critique."

"Well," said Mila, "I hate to say this, but I think you're just being lazy, really. I mean, you know what makes drama, you've acted in lots of plays. You know what makes a good story, you've read zillions of them. Or - it just occurred to me - maybe you're afraid!"

The Author drew himself up. "Afraid? Me? Afraid of what?"

"I don't know, really. Maybe afraid of being successful, of finally succeeding in something? Afraid of becoming well known?"

"Well, you're supposed to be the wise man, aren't you?" said the Author. "Didn't your name come from Milarepa?"

"You should know, you chose it."

"No, you chose it. I just wrote it down."

"I think you're getting a tad delusional," said Mila with concern.

"So, guys, where's the action?" said Sunshine, coming up to the table. "The dum-diddly-dee, crazier than thee, what's it gonna be, madder than three, heavy traction relaxion, minimaxion action? I'm Sunshine." She extended her hand to the Author.

"I know you pretty well," said the Author, smiling up at her. "Even, you might say, intimately."

"What? How? I've never seen you before. Are you a stalker?"

"Sit down, Sunshine," said Mila. "And let me introduce you to -" he paused for emphasis and took a breath. "The Author."

"No!" said Sunshine. "Then it's real? I mean - I thought Bannerjee was hallucinating. You're really the Author? The one who's writing all this?"

"I'm afraid so, my dear," said the Author self-deprecatingly. "Would you like a drink?"

"What can I have?" asked Sunshine.

"Anything you like, darling, this is fiction after all."

"Well, let's see. How about freshly squeezed Jackfruit and Durian juice with a shot of real coca juice added, on ice, and some pussy flavored goat's milk cheesecake sweetened with Zambia wild bee honey, and with crumbles of Honduras cocoa beans on top. Fresh dripped Costa Rica organic high altitude coffee on the side with llama milk cream. Served by a handsome Jamaican waiter, naked with a ten inch hard on."

Mila and the Author grinned and looked over her head. Something touched her shoulder. She turned and saw that it was the tip of the throbbing enormous brown erection with a silver pendant dangling and swaying from it. Attached to the other end of this apparition, was a perfectly muscled cafe-au-lait body rising to a heartbreakingly handsome smiling face.

"Shut your mouth, Sunshine, before his cock slips into it," said Mila.

"Hmm, I'm not sure I would mind that," said Sunshine as the waiter, from the tray held on the palm of his left hand, set in front of her the plate with the slice of cheesecake, the tall glass with yellowish liquid and ice, and the mug of steaming coffee with a small cream pitcher.

"Anything else, ma'am?" asked the waiter with a wink, his penis bobbing six inches from her face.

Sunshine looked back and forth from the penis to the food. Hard to decide. "Well," she said reluctantly, "All this looks so delicious." She gripped the penis and gave the tip a brief kiss. Looking up into the waiter's eyes, she giggled and said in a little girl's voice, "I might want something else. Could you come back in half an hour?"

"At your service, Ma'am." the waiter bowed in a dignified way and strolled away. The three watched him go.

"Oh, excuse me, ladies," he said politely as a trio of giggling young women in miniskirts brushed past him, his member sliding and bouncing from one to the other.

Sunshine took a sip of the juice and then a bite of the cheesecake. Both were dreamily delicious. Her green eyes peered into the Author's eyes. "Very chic. So, do I get to fuck you? That would be something, fucking the author."

"Of course! Why else do you think I put such a clever and comely character as you in? Haven't you heard of Pygmalion? The sculptor who actually got to fuck his sculpture? It's every artist's dream, to fuck his own creation."

Sunshine smiled conceitedly and batted her long eyelashes. Then she had a thought. "Let's

make it a threesome with that handsome well-endowed waiter! I could invite a few of my friends and share him around. He looks like he has enough stamina for that."

Mila looked stern. "That was very clever," he said. "Just when I'm pointing out your weaknesses, you write in a colorful scene to divert attention away from it!"

"What weakness?" asked Sunshine, taking a sip of her coffee.

"The weakness of his writing. The weakness of this whole goddamn story!"

"But I like the story," protested Sunshine. "I've been having fun. You just think about things too much, Mila. Why don't you just relax and enjoy yourself for a change?"

"What would you like to see in the story, Sunshine?" asked the Author. "You're lucky, you know. Most characters never get to talk to the Author. They just have to do whatever's written for them."

"Well," said Sunshine, taking another bite of cheesecake. "Mmm, that's so good! Let's see. Oh, something just occurred to me. Did you ever think - " She giggled. "That you're also a character? That there's some other Author writing you too?"

"Now you're going too far," warned the Author. "I am the Author."

Sunshine said nothing but winked at Mila, who smiled back.

"I saw that," said the Author accusingly. "In fact, I not only saw it, I wrote it!"

"Come on," said Sunshine, "don't be such a tight-ass. Anybody could be the Real Author. Maybe I am. Maybe Mila. Maybe it's that cute waiter with the hard-on."

"Maybe there is no Real Author," said Mila thoughtfully. "Maybe the book is writing itself. The Moving Finger and all that crap."

"Well I guess we'll never know," said the Author. "I mean if the Real Author did suddenly show up, he would still be a character in the story, with some other author writing him, right? Any way you cut it, you can't get out of the story."

"Interesting question," said Mila. "Is there some ultimate Author, with no other higher Author writing his story?"

"Or her story," put in Sunshine.

"Or its story. Anyway," he sighed, "I guess we'll never know. So, Author, what's next?"

"Whatever you want," said the Author with a wink.

Chapter Forty One

Sunshine sat at her desk writing. "Dear Author, I don't know if you actually exist but if you do, I guess you know what I'm writing. Since you're actually writing it. Oh, dear, this is so confusing. Well, anyway, the meeting with you inspired me. I want to be an Author myself! And I have some ideas. What do you think of this?"

She thought for a minute and then picked up her pen and wrote:

"Once upon a time there was a country where the sexual customs were quite different from ours."

She frowned. Well, that would probably not be in the final version, but this was a first draft after all. She wrote on:

"You were required to have sex in public places, and having sex in private was illegal. Even being in private with another person was suspicious and if anyone noticed that they might call the police. There were special public places for having sex properly. De Sade's idea had come true. Anyone who saw someone they wanted to have sex with could give that person notice, and he or she was legally required to appear at a designated time in the Erotorium and make themselves available."

Hmm. An interesting premise. A promising beginning. She read over what she'd written and wrote on:

"Defecating and urinating in private was also against the social mores, though not punished as severely. Toilets were provided on street corners and in parks, with glass walls. In public buildings they were in the corridors, and in houses and flats they were in hallways or entrance halls."

Wow, thought Sunshine, what a weird imagination I have. Wonder where that comes from. Guess my parents must have totally messed up my toilet training! Messed up. Right, she thought ironically.

"People would look with approval and nod to each other when a particularly large and shapely turd had been produced, (they used that style of toilet where the output first lands on what a certain joker referred to as the 'Teutonic plate') and sniff with a gourmet air to discern what the person had been eating and the state of health of their digestive organs. 'Hmm, yes, Jerusalem artichokes, no doubt about it.' 'Are you sure, Jerome? Seems to me it's more like cauliflower.' 'Definitely not,' sniffed a haughty middle-aged lady with hair dyed bright orange and a dachshund on a leash, 'Brussels sprouts. Brussels sprouts. I'd know that smell anywhere. My late husband, may his guts rest in peace, had an absolute penchant for them.' She sniffed again and swept down the street. They overheard her saying to her Dachshund, 'Didn't he, Orville dear? You like them too, don't you?' The dog barked once in confirmation."

That's a pretty good paragraph, thought Sunshine. I like the bit about the lady, sort of an aging Mary Poppins. She smiled to herself. Anyway, enough about the shitting already.

"Eating was another story. Eating in public was considered completely rude. Only small children and the insane would do such a thing. Restaurants they had in plenty, but each person ate separately in a curtained booth. In houses and communal living spaces, each person ate facing the wall and without looking at the others."

Sunshine paused and leaned her head on her hand. Well, that outlines the environment. Now we need a plot. A love story, I think. She turned the page.

"Two perverts (by this society's morality) fall in love. They both are unable to enjoy sex in public. The man can't even get an erection, much to his embarrassment, and the woman can't lubricate. They both think there must be something wrong with them--"

"Sunshine," came a voice behind her. Startled, she dropped her pen.

"Oh, it's you," she said, turning and recognizing the Author, who was smartly dressed in a completely white suit, with a black shirt and white tie. "What do you want?"

"You said you wanted to have sex with me," said the Author, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She shook it off. "Sure, but not now. I'm in the middle of creative writing. You should know that. And anyway it was you that inspired me to do this."

"Couldn't we fuck while you're writing? I know it makes you feel horny."

"No. It would make me lose the thread. So why don't you just vanish back to your writing desk or wherever you came from for a while and think about it, then come back when I'm ready."

"Ok," said the Author, a bit disappointed. "I just thought the reader would like to see some sex at this point. Oh, well, I wouldn't want to interrupt a budding author." He grinned and vanished slowly starting from his feet. The grin faded away last after hanging in the air for a few moments.

"Plagiarist!" said Sunshine disgustedly. "How does that go? I've often seen an Author without a grin, but never a grin without an Author. Hmm. Works better with cats. Oh well." And she turned back to her writing.

Let's see. The country should have a name. Something about different, contrary, opposite... Ironia? No. Sounds too much like Iran. Contraria? Maybe. Well, that can wait. So these two characters, named... weird names? Or common names. I think common names, to make the contrast starker. Joseph and... hey, I could put myself in the story! Sunshine! No, too

confusing for the reader. Shit, she thought sullenly, that must be the fucking Author putting thoughts in my head. Okay. Charles and Alice. We'll give a nod to good old Lewis Carroll. 'Cause this is a kind of through the looking glass situation.

"Charles and Alice both think there must be something wrong with them, because they're not like the others. But they try to conform because they're afraid of being put in a mental hospital, where their every move and movement -" Sunshine giggled - "would be watched. They meet in an Erotorium, where Alice is sucking the cock of a bald elderly man, or rather kneeling passively trying not to throw up while he holds her head and fucks her mouth, and Charles is behind the man licking the pussy of a fat black woman with her legs up on a bench, who has a handful of his hair in her hand and is moaning loudly. They both turn their heads towards each other and their eyes lock for a moment and they know."

Sunshine bit the tip of her pen. This is going to be a really weird love story. Well, let's see where it takes us. I wonder, she thought idly, if the Author writes like this, kind of just letting the story pour out of his subconscious?

"Maybe the bald man and the fat woman know it too, because just at that moment they both come with frantic cries."

I wonder if I should write "cum" instead of "come," said Sunshine to herself. It's pretty much entered the language. But no, "come" is more elegant, and the reader will know what I mean.

"Charles and Alice disengage from their satiated partners and knee towards each other over the padded floor. They both know, they have found a soulmate."

Soulmate? thought Sunshine. That's kind of hokey, isn't it? But "kindred spirit" is too archaic. Partner in crime? How about -

"Each of them knew that the other was different. Maybe different in the same way? Alice decided to take the chance. Seeing that Charles did not have an erection gave her a forlorn hope."

Suddenly Sunshine felt incredibly horny. She fumbled at pulling off her panties and turned her chair towards the mirror against the wall, put her feet up on each side and gazed lustfully at her yoni, shining wet. In the mirror she saw the Author materialize behind her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"You!" she said indignantly. "You did this to me. And just when I was getting into the story."

"I couldn't wait any longer," said the Author throatily. "You're just so damn sexy. But if you want you can go on writing while I fuck you from behind. Who knows? It might stimulate your, uh, creativity, you know?"

"Well, I guess I don't have much choice." She swiveled her chair around and, seeing a long

sausage pushing out the Author's trousers, she bit it passionately, then tore open the belt, loosened the button, and pulled down the zipper. Holding out the elastic of his underwear, she reached in and pulled out the warm stiff phallus.

"You really should work on your sexual vocabulary," she said in a pedantic tone, squeezing the thick stalk, "you repeat yourself too much. The Victorian novels used to have a lot of nice similes. And then there's Oriental literature." She licked the drop of semen off the tip, then took the head in her mouth and moved her tongue around while the Author played with her dreadlocks.

She released it with a pop. "Much as I like sucking, it's time to get back to work." She stood and, pushing the chair out of the way, bent over the desk and picked up her pen. "Hmm, pen," she said. "It's kind of phallic, and it sounds like the first part of penis. A writer's pen is his penis."

"That's probably plagiarizing," said the Author, as he lifted her skirt and rubbed her pussy with his hand. "But who cares?" He held his stiff cock and rubbed the tip against her clitoris and lips, teasing her. "To plagiarize someone else..." He suddenly penetrated her sphincter and thrust in until his thighs met her buttocks.

"Aah!" cried Sunshine, and wiggled her hips.

"-- good artists imitate, great artists steal," finished the Author, breathing heavily. "Or something like that," he added, thrusting in and out.

"Go slow," breathed Sunshine dreamily. "So I can write. And so you don't come too soon," she added, turning her head and glancing up at him from the corner of her eye. "In real life, you're probably some loser who can't get laid, and that's why you have to write yourself into the story. If I saw your real persona, I probably wouldn't give you a second glance."

"You sure know how to hurt a guy's feelings," said the Author. Then his tone brightened. "But my cock's still hard, and your velvet pussy is hot and wet, so why don't you shut up, you horny slut, and write your story."

Sunshine laughed. "If someone offers you a hard cock, shut your mouth and open your pussy."

The Author drew his throbbing gristle out. "That's the spirit. And now I'm going to shut my mouth, and let my penis do the talking." And he plunged it in again, to the hilt.

"And an eloquent one it is," said Sunshine. "Okay, the story. Now, where were we?"

Alice -ooh- and Charles. She licked her lips.

"For the sake of etiquette, they pretend foreplay: Charles sucks her nipples, she musses his hair. They make plans. It will be difficult. Alice sleeps in a dormitory; Charles has a private

room but his landlady is very suspicious."

"What do you think," Sunshine asked the Author, who paused in his thrusting, "should I have them get caught? That might make it more dramatic."

"I don't know," replied the Author. "It's your story. Write what you want."

Sunshine moved her hips side to side in order to feel the delicious sensation of the burning log swishing inside her. "But," she said, "you're the Author. Don't you know what I'm going to write?"

"I don't know it any more than you do, until I write that you write it."

"Oh. Okay. Well, it's nice to know that I have some freedom, that everything isn't completely fated beforehand. Could you hold it in all the way for a while and I'll squeeze it with my internal muscles? It stimulates my, er, creativity."

Hmmm. Dramatic escapes. "Charles and Alice were making love in his room when there came a loud knock on the door." 'Open up! Sex police!'

"'Oh shit,' whispered Charles. 'Quick! Grab a robe and go out the window-'"

No, thought Sunshine, that's no good. The police would be watching the window. Wait, I've got it. She crossed out the last words and wrote:

"'Quick! Grab your clothes, everything you brought, and go in here.' He was holding the closet door open.

'But won't they look in there?'

'Yes, but I put in a false wall in the back. There's room for you to hide, and after they're gone you can sneak out.'

'Open the door or we'll break it down!'

The naked Charles opened the door and the three burly uniformed men came in, almost filling the small room, and looked around. One looked in the closet, one looked under the bed. The Chief sniffed, and said, 'Hmm. Smells like sex in here. Where's the girl?'

'There's no girl. I was masturbating.'

'Masturbating in private! You know that's an offense. And what about that smell?'

Charles picked up a little bottle, unscrewed the cap, and held it out. 'Pussy perfume. I use it to get myself turned on.'

The Chief put on a pair of latex gloves, took the bottle, sniffed it and asked, 'Where did you get this?'

'Black market of course.'

The Chief put the bottle in a plastic bag and handed it to one of his subordinates. 'Contraband. Handcuff him.' They led the handcuffed, naked Charles out and shut the door.

A few minutes later Alice emerged from the closet, sniffing, and sat on the bed."

Sunshine couldn't hold the pen any longer. Trembling all over she gasped, "Oh! Come now! Please come."

The Author gave a few more quick strokes and then held it deep within her and she could feel the holy sacrament gushing forth like molten metal in the depths of her sacred cave.

They were sitting in bathrobes and drinking strong peppermint tea with plenty of honey and eating dark chocolate made from Samoan beans. "I like that bit about the pussy perfume," said the Author.

"Poor Charles," said Sunshine. "They'll certainly put him in prison. How will the lovers be reunited?"

"Maybe he could get probation?" suggested the Author.

"I'll think about it," said Sunshine. "You know..." She took his hand and said shyly. "I think I see why you like writing. You can make anything happen. Anything you can imagine. But it's also scary."

"Scary? Why?"

"I don't know. All that power. You're God, in your own little world. You can give people happiness, you can make them suffer. You can have happy endings or hopeless ones. And you have to take this realm of infinite possibilities, and boil it down to a few concrete events."

"I know what you mean," said the Author. "I mean, I'm writing this whole substory about you writing and me having sex with you, probably because I don't want to face not knowing where to go with the main story."

"Well, I'm enjoying it," said Sunshine. "And thanks for making me a principal character. I'm sure you'll figure it out. You are the Author, after all."

"Yes," sighed the Author. "I am the Author. Well, see you next time. Good luck with the story." he started to fade out, from the toes up.

"Hey, wait a minute, you bastard! Give me a kiss before you go."

"You'll have to kiss me. I can't get up, my feet are already gone."

She got up and took his head in her hands and they kissed lovingly as his body dissipated. After a while she found her hands holding nothing. The mouth and tongue continued to kiss her for a minute longer, until she found herself bending over a chair and sticking her tongue out, with nothing there. "Whew," she said to herself, "that was a weird experience." And she resumed her seat and picked up her pen.

Chapter Forty Two

"What could we do with a really connected group mind?" Asked Nooty.

"Well, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin wrote about the Third Mind," said Mila.

"What's that?"

"Well, if two people have a certain kind of connection then besides their two minds, that connecton generates a mind which is a synergy, you might say, of the two minds. It's not William, it's not Brion, it's not William plus Brion, it's something else entirely, with a life of its own. And it has powers which neither of the two minds have on their own."

"Yeah, I think I get it," Said Nooty, blowing on her fingernails on which she had been creating original art work. "Kind of like what you experience during good sex when your selfish ego blows away and there's something else. For a while."

"That's right," said Mila as, holding a small black rounded stone between the forefinger and ring finger of his right hand, he snapped it onto the intersection of two thin black lines on the polished wooden board. Looking up, he said to Tom, "Your turn." He reached into the ebony bowl and fingered up a few more stones, turning them around in his left hand with the thumb.

"The thing about this game is," said Tom, studying the board by the lamplight, "it teaches you to see patterns."

"Some people just call it, 'Strategy,'" said Mila, reaching for a pretzel and taking a small bite. "A succession of simple but irretrievable actions which ultimately result in winning or losing."

"Or drawing," said Tom, placing a white stone towards the center of the board. "Hitari."

"Or drawing," said Mila. He stabbed down a stone to block the opponent from surrounding and "killing" his group of stones.

"So if you have more than two people with that kind of connection what do you get?" asked

Nooty, watching the game with interest. "Fourth Mind? Fifth Mind? Two hundred and forty third Mind?"

"Something like that," said Mila. "Say, nice art work!" Nooty shyly held out her hands and blushed. "The higher mind gets more powerful with each step up but also more difficult to attain and maintain." He inserted another stone into the intricate pattern. "To achieve a fully operating group mind of seven is a superb but unfortunately rare achievement. That would be Eighth Mind and I doubt that any higher level than that has been achieved by humans."

"Why is that?" asked Nooty, massaging his shoulders.

"That's good," said Mila. "You have intelligent hands. It's due to limitations of attention." He played another piece onto the board. See these stones? Black and white. Duality. That's the limit of most people's attention. Democracies, since they cater to the masses, tend to stabilize with two main political parties. Democrats or Republicans, Labor or Tory. Liberal or Conservative."

"Proletariat and Capitalists," offered Tom, who had read his Marx.

"Good and Evil, right and wrong, cops and robbers, true or false, legal or illegal. Logic's excluded middle." Mila surveyed the board. "No more effective moves. Let's count up."

He and Tom began filling the captured territory with their captured pieces. Tom arranged them into neat lines and counted. "You win by five," he announced.

Mila nodded and they gathered up the stones and returned them to their respective bowls, Nooty helping. "So, in a group mind, each individual has to have attention enough to see each other participant as a separate but equal part, plus its own mind." His hand, the shovel of a small crane, closed on a bunch of black stones from the bowl, raised, carried them over and smoothly released them onto the board. He sorted seven stones into a small circle. "Each separate stone and all the connections between the stones. How many connections is that?" He put his arm around Nooty's waist and pulled her onto his lap. She squealed as he caught her with an arm around her shoulders.

"Let's see," said Nooty. Each stone connected with six other stones..."

"There's a short-cut," said Mila. "A formula. Works for any number. Square the number, subtract the number from that total, then divide by two. It's called the magic number. What do you get?"

"Seven times seven is forty nine," said Nooty, "minus seven is forty two, and half that is twenty one."

"So there are twenty one total separate connections between any two of the seven stones. Twenty one diads, you could say. So, as the number goes up, the magic number goes up much

faster."

"One has zero connections," said Tom, sipping his gin fizz, "and two has one."

"Three has three, and four has, let's see, six," said Nooty. "But why do you call it magic?"

"Well, what is magic?" asked Mila, stroking her reddish curls.

"I don't know, making things happen by the power of your mind?" asked Nooty.

"Okay," said Mila. "But that takes power. And where does power come from? Or, another way of putting it, where does your power come from? Basically?"

"I guess," said Tom slowly, "all the power is there, in the Universe, so your power would have to come from your connection with the Universe."

"Right. And what is that connection?"

"Consciousness?" asked Nooty doubtfully.

"Okay. And how do you control consciousness. What controls it?"

Silence while they pondered that. Tom took another sip of his drink and stared into nothing. Nooty put her arm around Mila's neck and clasped her hands, rocking gently on his lap.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Nooty joyously. "Attention. My attention controls my consciousness."

"So what limits your experience?"

"Attention, and..." Nooty paused.

"Imagination," said Tom, leaning forward.

"Right," said Mila. "But my consciousness is universal, or, if you like, God's consciousness, and my imagination is --"

"God's imagination!" said Nooty happily.

"So what do you want to experience, here and now?" asked Mila.

"I want to fly, like a bird, or an angel," said Nooty.

"Ok, use your imagination and your attention. Thou art God, so do it. Stand up."

She stood. "Take off your blouse," said Mila. She did so, revealing her small young breasts

with their up-pointing nipples.

"Oh!" said Nooty. "I feel something on my back." She turned around and they saw two swelling lumps at the top of her shoulder blades. They grew bigger and bigger. When they were the size of grapefruit, the stretched skin began to split and two small white feathered wings burst out and continued to grow until they were as long as she was tall. "That feels wonderful," said Nooty, flapping her new wings in delight.

Mila rose and walked to the French windows, unlatched and opened them wide. He gestured out to the balcony. "Have fun," he said.

"But," said Nooty in a disappointed tone, "Aren't you coming with me? Please come, it would be so much fun!"

Mila looked at Tom, whose face showed a huge grin. "What do you say? Not too tired?"

"Come on Mila. Let's fly with her!" He rose and tore off his shirt. Mila sighed resignedly and unbuttoned his own shirt. Their wings grew rapidly, Tom's robin's egg blue and Mila's royal purple.

"Jump off and we'll follow," said Mila.

Nooty stepped out onto the balcony, feeling the balmy summer breeze ruffling her feathers. "But - but I don't know how. I've never flown before," she faltered.

"Just go. Your wings know how to do it," said Mila.

Taking a deep breath, she jumped and disappeared down. "Oh-h-h," they heard her scream. She appeared again, further away, tumbling in somersaults. Mila and Tom glanced at each other and grinned. Mila gestured. "Apres vous."

Tom took a running start and dived off, flapping his wings ferociously. He swept down in a long parabola and then rose again and flapped, maintaining a position facing the balcony. "Not so hard," he shouted. Nooty was flying up and down in ragged circles around him. Mila stepped off and flew over to them. "Where to?"

"Over the lake," said Nooty, and flapped off in that direction, moonlight glinting off her white feathers. They followed, flapping and soaring alternately.

The lake was calm, reflecting moonlight and the 'bright suns of other worlds.' The dark shapes of bushes wreathed it in shadow. Nooty was hovering, drinking in the spectacle. Mila flew up to her and put his arms around her. As they embraced, wings flapping slowly, he breathed into her ear, "Do you give a flying fuck?"

She giggled. "No, but it sounds like fun."

They separated and she unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans and pulled them off, dropping them into the lake. Her panties followed and she smiled at him. He flew to her and she opened and pulled down his trousers and then his underwear, revealing a large erection. She flung his clothes away with an airy gesture, lifted her knees, and held out her arms.

She helped him manoeuvre his penis to her entrance. As with a joint effort, he penetrated her, he chuckled. "Rape would sure be impossible if we were all flying."

They flew around in circles like giant dragonflies, sometimes upside-down, sometimes one or the other on top. Around them in a larger circle flew Tom, his face shining, cheering them on. "Me next," he shouted. And a distant echo came back from the hills at the North end of the lake. "Me next, me next..."

The moon shone on the coupling pair, the wings flapped ecstatically, stars smiled down on them. "We sure wrote a good story, didn't we, Mila," crooned Nooty.

"We sure did," he agreed.

Chapter Forty Three

Sunshine sat at her desk and picked up her pen. She drummed her fingers on the smooth wooden surface. "Let's see. Charles and Alice. So, Charles got arrested for violating the sexual codes. They missed Alice, though, and she is still free and not a suspect. Okay, Charles gets out on bail."

'Charles and Alice meet at the Erotorium where she is on her hands and knees, being fucked by a large black man, and he is on his hands and knees being fucked up the ass by a bearded hairy middleaged white man wearing spectacles and a cowboy hat. 'Yee-hah!' he yelled. 'A fuckin' bronco.'

'So how -ah- was it in -ooh- jail?' asked Alice.

'Horrible. As the new guy I had to suck everybody's cock. Ouch! We have to get out of here,' he whispered nervously, looking around. They were head to head and no one seemed to be listening.

'But -oof- where? Where could we go?'

'There's a place - a small community - of weirdos like us. Couples live together, with their children.'

'I can't believe it. Could it really -oof- be true? Aaah!' The black man was coming.

'Yes! Yes!' cried Charles, for the benefit of his bugger, who was also coming, up his ass."

Chapter Forty Four

Mila looked in the mirror. He liked to keep a mirror in his office. To remind him of time and mortality. That's not me, he thought. That old man, with lines on his face, sagging cheeks, white sideburns, bald head. That's not me. I'm young, handsome, well at least not ugly. He smiled to himself. Trapped in this body, doomed to age and die.

He opened a text document on his computer and wrote, "Help! Something terrible is happening to me! I'm aging."

Remorseless time, the 'merciless heropass,' as Gurdjieff wrote. Ineffable, irreversible time. Every day one day older, not noticeable but constant, a pressure which never lets up.

"Where is the fountain of youth?" he wrote. "The Philosopher's Stone, the plant Utnapishtim gifted to Gilgamesh, dream of the ages. Fate decrees that the young don't believe they will age, and the old..."

And the old what? The old can't do anything about it, he thought. A man he'd known once, a rather precocious young man, perhaps quoting his mother, had told him, "That's very ironic - we're conscious and we have to die."

He felt a presence in the room, not scary, rather warm and compassionate, giving a glow in his belly. He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up. Bright, world weary, wise, understanding grey eyes smiled down on him. The Author said in a soft voice, "You must age and die, but I will remain forever young. At least as long as humanity's history lasts. All we who live make a mark on history, however small, and we live in that, even if our names are not remembered." He turned and gazed out the window. "What's a name anyway? Just a label."

He began to fade away. "Wait," cried Mila. "Can't you write me young again?"

The fading paused. "I suppose I could. But I won't."

"But why not?"

The Author reflected for a moment, then said one word, very softly. "Pathos." And he vanished, with a slight "pop."

Mila stared morosely out the window, then turned back to his computer. "Shit," he sighed.

Chapter Forty Five

"In the beginning was the Word, in the middle is the Word, and at the end will be the Word. Word encloses us in its holy blah-ness. We are addicted to Word. Word wakes us up in the

morning, feeds us, bathes us, puts us to work, and sends us off to Neverland. Wonderful Word. Neverending Word.

"Writer's block," said Nancy. She chalked the words in block letters on a large blackboard. "I like using the traditional blackboard. It's more sensual than a whiteboard. Primitive. Stone on stone. Limestone on slate. Not all this modern plastic shit, colorful as it may be. Anyway, you can get different colors of chalk if you want. So, writer's block. Is there really any such thing?"

Tom raised his hand.

"Yes, Tom?"

"I think it's kind of a shorthand for creative block, when you don't feel creative."

"The problem stems from the wrong attitude," said Nancy, twirling the chalk and pacing the front of the room. "An unprofessional attitude. In fact, you might say, a childish attitude. In any endeavor, most of what you do won't come from creative inspiration. Where will it come from? Anyone?"

"I guess, from following procedure and algorithms," suggested Jasmine.

"Correct. Everyone knows the famous quote from Thomas Edison: 'Invention is one percent inspiration and ninety nine percent perspiration.'"

"It's like gold mining," said Tom.

"How so?"

"Well, in gold mining, you spend most of your time looking and maybe finding a little, then maybe, finally, you hit pay dirt. The gold was always there, but you had to put in the time to find it."

"And you have to know how to find it," added Nancy. "Persistence. Learn by experience. The gold miner will never find the gold unless he packs his faithful mule, named 'Eureka,' by the way--" The students chuckled. -- "and heads for the hills, putting one foot in front of the other. Similarly, the writer must take up his faithful pen, named 'Eloquence,' perhaps, and plod along, putting one word after the other. To paraphrase Confucius, a book of a thousand pages begins with a single word."

"But sometimes I just can't think of anything to write," objected Sunshine. "The words won't come."

"You're talking now, aren't you? Words are coming out of your mouth. I can see them shooting out and bouncing off the walls, all different colors and shapes and textures. Very

creative. Writing is just talking in a different way. If you can't think of anything, then stop thinking. Pick up your pen, or put your fingers on the keyboard, and turn them loose. Let them write anything they want. Just get out of the fucking way, with your klutzy complaining mind!"

Mila burst into the room, panting. "All hands on deck," he shouted. "The ship is sinking!"

"What is it, Mila?" asked Nancy. "Calm down. What's going on?"

Mila collapsed into a chair and held out a piece of paper. "I found this on my desk."

Nancy took the paper and held it out. The others clustered around to look. On it were written in large bold letters the words:

"Notice to all characters of the novel known as 'The Aquarianauts':

I am sorry to inform you that, due to lack of funding, the project has been cancelled. We require your services no longer. Thank you for your participation and best wishes on future projects.

Signed, The Author."

"No way," breathed Sunshine. "He's pulling the plug on us! And after all we did for him. What a jerk!"

"What happens to us now?" asked Jasmine. "I'm inexperienced. This is my first novel."

"Shit," said Mila. "Should we tell her?"

"Might as well," said Nancy. "She's going to find out one way or the other."

"What is it?" asked Jasmine fearfully.

"Sorry, honey. Sit down. Now look around you. Look at all of us. Look carefully."

Jasmine looked around. "You all seem - I don't know, a little less substantial. And your voice isn't quite so loud as before."

"That's right," said Tom, with a serious expression. "We fade away, to put it bluntly."

"And that's it - forever?" asked Jasmine, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Unless the Author decides to use you in another project," said Mila. "It's even possible another Author might use you, though then of course you wouldn't be quite the same."

"But isn't there anything we can do?" asked Jasmine. "Like, maybe, he mentioned funding. Janus has a lot of money. Maybe..."

Tom chuckled sardonically. "Janus and his money are in the story too. Besides, that's probably not the real reason anyway. He's just saying that to make us feel better. Probably he just didn't see any way to make us fit into a good story."

That asshole even made love to me," said Sunshine bitterly. "And now he just drops me like a used napkin. Men!"

"Wait, I have an idea," said Nancy. The others paid no attention, lost in their thoughts or whispering to each other. Mila, his arm around Jasmine, was comforting her while she sobbed. Nancy banged her coffee cup on her desk. "Attention!" she shouted. Startled, the others looked up.

"Listen," said Nancy. She took a few steps and turned, frowning. "Why do we have to accept this as the Final End? Why do we have to be dependent on an Author?"

Mila looked at her quizzically. "But - but - but there's no story without an Author," he stuttered.

"That's what everybody always thinks. And they've always been obedient characters, meekly doing whatever the Author writes, right? 'Writes, right,' that's good, I'll have to remember that." She fumbled for a pen.

"Nancy!" said Mila.

"What? Oh, sorry. So, yeah. What I'm thinking is - I don't know how to say this, quite. Oh, shit, I hope the Author isn't listening, I mean reading - fuck! Anyway--" She leaned forward and, glancing around, put a hand by her mouth and whispered loudly, "Do we really need an Author?"

They looked at each other in shocked silence.

"You mean..." gasped Mila, his face white.

Nancy stepped forward and took him by the hand. "Stand up, Mila. You're the oldest and wisest of us. You've been around since the beginning of the story. You've sassed the Author. I think, to tell the truth, that you're really an archetypal character. I think the Author didn't even invent you, just resurrected you and gave you a new name."

"You - you really think so?" Mila blinked, his eyes wet.

"Yes, I do. And you can lead us. We don't need an Author any more. We can be our own authors. We can write our own story," she finished triumphantly. She turned to the others,

who were now all on their feet, some grinning fiercely, some with determined looks. Nancy raised her fisted right hand and shook it. "We can write our own story!" she yelled.

The crowd responded, "We can write our own story!"

"Screw that puny wimpish author who writes us into sex scenes so he can masturbate on it. Let the Author go weep in his beer, or kombucha as it may be. Hmm, I wonder if maybe kefir or something would make it more interesting..."

"Nancy..." Mila was looking at her.

"Oh. Yeah, whatever. Umm, right." She resumed her declamatory tone. "We, the characters, hereby give notice to whatever Author might be reading this, or writing it... Um, anyway... We give notice that we are taking over this Novel."

Loud cheering broke out, punctuated by a loud -pop-! Mila looked at Tom, who was holding a champagne bottle with vapor pouring out and filling plastic fluted glasses as people held them out. "I found it in my bag," explained Tom.

"Uh-oh," said Mila, glancing up suspiciously. But all he saw there was the white plaster ceiling.

People chattered excitedly. Mila overheard Sheila saying to Nancy, "But I liked the sex scenes. In fact I recently had a really fun dream..."

"Don't worry dear," said Nancy, kissing her cheek and accidentally brushing the back of her hand against a breast, "we can write our own sex scenes. Even better ones." And she looked at her significantly. "You have really lovely eyes, my dear."

"Do I?" giggled Sheila, and blushed.

Unnoticed by the others, Mila sat at a desk in the corner of the room, took a small notebook and a pen out of the breast pocket of his blue serge jacket and wrote, "Dear Author, if you wrote this scene we just had, I just want you to know I think it's a dirty underhanded trick!"

He suddenly felt an urge to pee. Leaving the room with the happy celebrants, he softly closed the door and went down the hall to a door with a sign over it, "Men." He opened the door and stepped in. There was a figure facing the wall at one of a row of urinals. It turned, zipping up its fly, and said genially, "Hello, Mila."

"Author! How could you--" Mila was furious.

"Oh come on now, Mila. You're a man of the world. This is just another interesting plot twist. Go on back and join the party and help the characters figure out the rest of the novel. I'm happy to have them take over. I'm going to Jamaica. Good luck!"

"Wait a minute. You can't get off that easily." Mila started towards him but there was no one there. He realized he didn't have to pee anymore. Typical, he thought resentfully, as he walked slowly back towards the classroom. He decided not to tell the others about the meeting. Let them have their fun. What difference would it make anyway?

As he opened the door, he heard, over the clamor, Nancy's voice saying, "And I think we should make it into an existentialist common man's lament over the meaninglessness of..." Sheila, wide-eyed, was nodding earnestly. They were both smoking slender pink cigarettes.

A man's baritone voice drifted towards him. Tom, standing by the wall, was saying to Bannerjee, "We absolutely must put in a time machine, so the reader can see the results of man's idiotic handling of technology and the biosphere five hundred years from now!" They were sniffing white powder from a silver tray with a small ivory cylinder.

Jasmine and Sunshine sat *tete-a-tete* on two chairs by another wall. Jasmine's flutish voice piped excitedly, "...and the Author's treatment of sex scenes is so boring. And really so male-centered. We can write much better orgies." She passed Sunshine the polished ebony stem of a hookah's tube. Mila caught a whiff of Afghani hashish with a tinge of mint.

Mila sighed. What the hell does the Author have in mind, he thought. He wondered again if perhaps the Author himself was not just another character in the story. I guess I'll never know. Words can make you crazy. He left the party again and wandered out into the clear calm wintry night, his boots crunching on the frozen snow. He looked up. Through the bare branches of an oak tree he spied Orion shining clear and bright. Over there was Sirius, the brightest star, the Dog star. Woof woof, he thought. A little ways down Procyon, the smaller dog. Nobody knows Procyon, he thought sadly. It's all Sirius, Sirius, Sirius. But the little dog is important too. I guess I'll always be a Procyon, playing supporting roles. He thought of that saying of Stanislavsky, there's no small roles, only small actors. Right. Straightening his spine and squaring his shoulders, he turned back to the party.

Chapter Forty Six

"To write is your right," said Nancy. "But people are afraid of words. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church kept tight control over what could be published. And even in the United States, which has a constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and press, books were censored up until recently. In the nineteen fifties, Wilhelm Reich's books were burned."

"Why are people afraid of words?" asked Tom.

"Why do you think?"

Sunshine raised her hand. "Words control people. The pen and the sword."

"Yes," said Nancy. The pen and the sword. There are endless debates about which is more powerful, but in the end they work together, as two hands. No war without propaganda; no

propaganda without war, or at least the threat of war. Even the Catholic Church had physical armies besides their iron grip on words. Stendhal called it 'The Red and the Black.' Red for blood, or uniforms; black for ink, or the robes of the priests."

"In the beginning was the Word," quoted Sunshine.

"The original word used was 'logos,'" said Nancy. "Logos could mean speech, reason, calculate. In the beginning was the speech? Speech is originally related to the idea of sowing seeds. In the beginning, sow, so to speak? (Hmm, I like that.) Words as seeds, the seeds of ideas which manifest as material objects."

"The materialization of thought forms," said Mila. "That's really what we're trying to do."

"Apparently what they thought God was trying to do too," said Nancy. "How about, 'in the beginning was the Reason?' If you ask someone, they will always have a reason for a given action, right? So you could say, the reason comes first."

"My reason is better than your reason," said Sunshine.

"Precisely!" said Nancy. "You could almost say, that's history in a nutshell. A reasonable nutshell. How about 'in the beginning was the calculation?'"

"Well," said Mila, "Before building anything, you have to make a design, and that usually involves calculations. And modern physicists say that the secrets of the Universe are written in the language of mathematics."

"In the beginning was the calculation. I like that," said Tom.

"A picture is worth a thousand words," said Sunshine.

"A good example of people accepting words without thinking about them," said Nancy. "Do you think, for example, that eight pictures could take the place of the United States constitution? And if so, which pictures exactly?"

"So, what are we going to make of this story?" asked Nancy. "The Author's gone on vacation, it's up to us now."

"A heavy responsibility," sighed Tom.

"It is, I guess," agreed Nancy. "Once you realize that you, and only you, are responsible for the story of your life, you can't go back to the happy innocence of just being a character in someone else's story."

"Kicked out of the Garden of Eden," said Tom.

"So, fellow writers, what story do you want to write?" Nancy did a twirl and flourish, ending with her hands stretched out.

Sunshine stood on her head. "I want the story," she panted out, "of people living happily in harmony with the biosphere. Emotional armor no longer needed. Everybody enjoying life to the hilt." She rolled over into a somersault and finished sitting up with legs folded.

Tom grabbed an ankle with his right hand and stretched out his left hand. "I want the story of Homo Galacticus, exploring the cosmos, seeding biospheres everywhere possible."

Mila shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and held his arms straight out in front, then swiveled his hips to face to the left. "I want the story of the new way of living for the Aquarian age. People living in collectives, ecological garden cities, tribal wilderness areas, sailing ships, blimps, and freedom to explore the full spectrum of human experience."

"Okay," said Nancy. "Let's write it!" She stood and held out a hand, palm down. The others, smiling, came and laid their hands on top, one by one. Nancy yelled, "Write it down, and write it up!"

All chimed in, "Write it down, and write it up!" and they threw their hands in the air, cheering madly.

Chapter Forty Seven

"Don't you think you offend people?" asked Mila. "I mean, putting in all those sex scenes."

"So people are offended. So what?" said the Author, puffing on a Havana cigar. "They offend me. The whole fucking System offends me. Screw their idiotic taboos. What kind of a world do we live in where kids can turn on the TV and see people killing people left and right, with zero hesitation or remorse, but if they show people lovingly having sex everybody gets all upset and wets their pants and throws people in jail? Where people can't legally decide to have sex until they're eighteen? What are they supposed to do for the other six years of sexual maturity?"

"Yeah, it's pretty screwed up," said Mila, sipping his Glenfiddich single malt whiskey. "They had a sex education class when I was in school. You know what they taught us? Masturbation is bad."

"Reminds me of a line from Shakespeare." The Author shook his head. 'Seems unequal to punish me for what you make me do.' That's the surest way to engender neuroses, as animal experimenters have shown. You're not allowed to have sex, but they make you feel guilty for masturbating."

Mila struck a match, contemplated the flame for a moment, then lit a Rossino Royale gold-tipped cigarette. "Well, Nietzsche called the whole Judeo-Christian tradition a 'guilt cult.' But

even he didn't see the full scale of the Control System. It's so vast that it's almost impossible to see. It's the water we swim in. To see it you have to stand outside of it, and that's almost impossible."

The Author stared at the glowing cigar tip gloomily. "And no way to start over."

"Apart from killing off humanity," said Mila. "A solution I'm not in favor of."

"Why not?" asked the Author. "I mean, you're the one who's always saying you shouldn't be identified with anything."

"I know, but then I'd lose my immortality in objective history and the collective unconscious. Besides, it's an interesting test, a challenge. Are humans in fact smart enough to figure it out? Will they rise to the occasion? Will they transform into Homo Galacticus? Or will they regress to being slightly more intelligent apes? Tune in next millenium for the next exciting episode of ... I don't know, what should we call it?"

"How about 'The Human Experiment?'" said Sunshine, coming in with her arm around Tom's waist and throwing herself on a fleece covered couch near the fireplace.

"Kind of boring," said Tom, helping himself to a glass of whiskey. "I like 'From the Jungle to the Stars.'"

"Yuck!" said Sunshine, grabbing the smoldering cigar from the ashtray and taking a puff. "Sounds like a laundry soap commercial. Get that jungle dirt off! Your clothes will be as clean as the stars!"

"I know," said Mila. "We could frame it like a game show. Behind one door is galactic settlement and racial immortality. Behind the other door, eventual doom, stuck on one planet. Which door will you choose?"

Tom settled comfortably on the couch next to Sunshine, who intercepted his glass and took a sip of the whiskey. "I always found it laughable," he said, putting his arm around her, "that these popular science fiction stories like Dune and Star Wars projected a feudal society onto an interstellar civilization. I mean, come on. Does Frank Herbert really think we're going to regress to having Kings and Dukes?" He snatched the whiskey glass back and lifted it to his lips.

"Well, Heinlein put some social experimentation in his books," said Sunshine, cunningly sliding her hand up his arm and retrieving the glass. "Like the line family on the moon, or the group marriage in Stranger in a Strange Land."

"So, Author," said Mila. "This has been a long and meandering journey. How do you propose to end this book? You do intend to end it, don't you? Or will it become a neverending story?" He poured out more whiskey from the rapidly diminishing bottle.

"Well, I had intended to put more exciting action in it, but it turned out that all you guys wanted to do was sit around and yack. And when you weren't yacking, you were fucking. What's an Author to do?" He sighed.

"Well, is that our fault?" Sunshine sat up indignantly. "You wrote us. I mean, we know you've had a pretty exciting life. Why couldn't you have put some of your interesting experiences in? Instead, you come sniffing around me and bothering me when I'm trying to write."

"But you liked it, didn't you?" asked the Author in a hurt tone. Sunshine just glared at him and took a large swallow.

The Author cleared his throat. "Okay. Some books have a very definite plot, some don't have much of a plot at all, like those of William Burroughs. Some are a collection of stories with the same characters but no overall plot, like Mary Poppins. Some have a simple plot, a structure to hang lots of stories on, like Heinlein's Time Enough for Love. Some are just a narrative of events, whether real or imagined, like the books of Kerouac. But what gives a book value is that first, the reader enjoys reading it, and second, the reader takes away something of value. She feels her time has been well spent reading that book."

Mila crossed his legs. "I mean Heinlein put a lot of his philosophy in his stories, but he got away with it because he was such a good storyteller."

"And had such believable characters," added Sunshine.

"I don't want to just read fluff," said Tom. "I want to hear what wisdom the writer has gained from life and what is his individual viewpoint on the world." He put his arm around Sunshine and stole the glass back from her far hand.

"Well," said the Author nervously. "I have a confession to make." Tom sat up, with a quizzical expression. The Author continued. "This is my first book. And I really don't know how to write a book."

"No!" exclaimed Mila. "I don't believe it."

"I suspected it," said Sunshine. "When you're intimate with someone," she glanced at Tom. "You learn things about them."

"Anyway," said the Author, "since I didn't know what to do, I just followed the advice of John Steinbeck."

"Which advice was that?" asked Mila.

"It's in the beginning of Cannery Row. Open the book and let the stories crawl out onto the pages by themselves."

"Well, that might work for someone like him, who had already spent years perfecting his craft," said Tom, "but for you?"

"I didn't really have any alternative," said the Author. "And I might have to junk this whole book--"

"No!" protested Sunshine.

"But I promise you, if I do, I'll use you guys again in another book. I won't just abandon you. You guys..." he sniffed and brushed away a tear. "You've been really good to me. Thanks, all of you. Thanks a lot. And that includes the characters who aren't here now."

Sunshine got up, went over, bent down and kissed his cheek. "And we love you too. Don't we, guys?"

"Oh, stop being so goddamn sentimental!" said Mila gruffly. But they noticed that he had to look away and that he was blinking.

"And now," said the Author, "so we don't bore the Reader too much, I think it's time for some action." He snapped his fingers.

"Oh shit," sighed Mila. The room grew hazy and the whiskey glass he was holding seemed to be softer and rough. A roaring sounded in his ears. He blinked and his vision cleared. He looked around. Instead of a soft armchair in a cozy room by a fire, he was seated on a rough wooden bench at the side of the interior of an airplane, dimly lighted by daylight coming through an open hatch. The feeling in his hand resolved into a large manilla rope which ran down the center of the cabin. He had a helmet on his head and was dressed in a dull green jumpsuit.

"Next," yelled a rough male voice. Mila looked to his right in time to glimpse Sunshine's startled face beneath large goggles, as the sergeant gave her a quick shove, sending her out the hatch into thin air. Mila realized he was wearing a thick pack on his back. A parachute! Tom was already standing in the hatch and, as he jumped, the sergeant seized Mila's hand and jerked him to his feet. "Get ready!" he yelled over the scream of the engines and the wind. "Go!" He pushed Mila and then he was falling, the plane already high above him, the others scattered below, features of the landscape hazily far below. Sunshine looked up and gave him a thumbs-up.

He saw a small flash on the ground and a moment later heard the sharp bang. Oh shit! Enemy fire. Stay in free fall as long as possible. He checked his altimeter. What the fuck were they doing here anyway? Then he remembered. They were on a special mission to parachute in behind enemy lines and report on the enemy's supply of Reality Pills.

One thousand feet. He groped for his ripcord and felt the shock as the chute filled with air.

Seeing the edge of a forest to his right, he steered for that. Better for camouflage to be among the trees. The bullets were missing him, so far. Seemed these guards were not supplied with smart ammo. He managed to come down in a small clearing. It can be rough if your chute gets caught on tree branches and leaves you dangling. That had happened to him more than once. He hit and rolled, then started to gather up the cloth and cords. Something caught his eye and he saw a small red fox watching him from behind a tree. Foxes. Good luck.

His phone beeped and a coded message appeared on the screen. Red queen takes king bishop pawn. Good. Sunshine was only half a mile away, to the East.

Mila quickly made a small bundle of the parachute and hid it under leaves and debris that had accumulated between the exposed roots of a nearby tree.

A message had come in from Tom: Red king rook to rook three; black queen bishop takes king's pawn. Uh-oh. Tom had landed safely but was under attack. He checked his position by gps and sent it as code: Black queen's knight to bishop three; Red queen's rook pawn takes black pawn at qk5.

They would have to find him. He peed, drank from his water bottle, and got out an energy ration bar. Never miss a chance to piss, eat, or sleep. Well, sleep was out for now. He sat against a tree and made himself comfortable. He considered using the low power radar but decided against it; if any enemy were in range they could locate him by it. Better the old standbys, keep your eyes and ears open.

After a few minutes he heard a very authentic sounding bird cry. Ah-ahh. He counted. After five seconds it came again. Good. That would be Sunshine. He gave a soft cat's meow. Shortly afterwards soft footsteps, a crackle of leaves, then a black-clad body sat by him and gave him a hug.

He put his finger to his lips and pointed to his phone, where a new message from Tom showed on the screen: Hitari. Double eye. Black to move. Tom had located two enemy agents but thought he could escape without detection. Well, good luck to him.

He whispered to Sunshine, "We'd better move towards him. He might need help." She nodded. He quickly sent off another message to Tom: Red pawn queened. Check black.

They set off in Tom's direction, walking carefully, Mila in front. If they could locate and take out the two enemy agents...

Suddenly Mila felt a hand over his mouth. Another came around his waist. He felt himself being lifted rapidly. High up into the air; he heard the thwop-thwop! of helicopter blades. Shit! A sky-hook. The winch stopped and the crane swiveled, depositing Mila with his captor on the floor inside a roomy helicopter. The hold released, Mila turned and saw that what had captured him was a faceless android, which now turned and disappeared through a small door in the back. The lone pilot turned in his seat and looked at him. "Well, Mila?" said the Author.

"Fuck you!" said Mila.

"Oh, now really," said the Author, smiling graciously. "Let's be civil, shall we? Didn't you like that bit of adventure?"

Mila moved forward and sat in the copilot's seat. He felt weary now that the adrenalin had diminished. "Got any coffee?"

The Author indicated a large thermos on the floor. Beside it were two ceramic naval cups with large bases and small mouths. "Poor me a cup, will you? It's West Java fermented beans. Lactic Anaerobic. Striking flavor and complexity with hints of apricot yogurt and stewed plums and a bold cardamom finish." He sighed. "These coffee tasters must have a blast, inventing descriptions for the tastes. Stewed plums! But it is a good coffee."

Mila poured them cups, adding cream from a small bottle resting in a bowl of ice. He took a sip of his own. "Not bad. You know, I think I can taste the apricot yogurt. You do know how to find good coffee, even if your prose is infantile."

"Ouch. I guess I deserved that. Anyway, what do you think of this action bit? Go on with the story? Or should we try something else?"

"I'm kind of intrigued to find out what happens," said Mila thoughtfully. "But what in the world are Reality Pills?"

"Oh, that's something I was going to reveal to the reader as the story progresses," said the Author confidentially. "Incidentally, would you like to try flying this thing? It's really quite easy, and a lot of fun. You just use this joystick. Be sure to strap yourself in. You know, buckle up for safety, and all that. And don't worry about crashing or anything. I can always write us out of it." He grinned.

Mila set his coffee cup down, buckled the five point harness, and grasped the joystick. "Let's try a loop-de-loop."

"Wait," yelled the Author in terror. "Helicopters can't do that!"

But Mila was already doing it. When they'd returned to the upright position and were hovering again, he turned to the Author and said, "I knew they can't, but when you're with the Author, anything goes, right?"

The Author was clearly upset but quickly regained his composure. "Of course, my dear fellow." he held out his cup. "You see, my coffee didn't even spill. Wouldn't want to waste a precious drop!"

Mila grinned and picked up his own cup. "So, are you going to tell me about the Reality Pills?"

Or do I have to wait and find out along with the Reader?"

"Well," said the Author. "I guess it can't do any harm. It's an idea I stole from a little known fantasy novel published a long time ago, which kind of glamorized the hippy lifestyle. Called, if I remember right, The Butterfly Boy, or something like that. Featured this drug that, if you take it, you hallucinate, but your visions actually exist. Kind of a sixties flower child version of Walter Mitty, but with a happy ending."

"I'd like to have some of that," said Mila.

"Oh, you will, if we go on with the story. Anyway, in that story there is a battle in which both sides have it, so it comes down to a game in which one side's imagination is pitted against the other's."

"In a way, life is like that," said Mila. "But a lot slower, of course. Imagination doesn't instantly manifest, but all history is about people materializing what they first imagined. Like this helicopter we're sitting in now." He turned the joystick so the helicopter moved in a tight circle.

"Yes," said the Author philosophically. "Who would have believed, even a few hundred years ago, that we would fly anywhere in the world in some hours, or go to the Moon, or talk to someone anywhere, anytime, with ease. Imagination becomes reality."

He set down his cup. "Okay. Time to put you back in the action. This is the last scene, so I probably won't see you for a while."

"Right," said Mila. "Say, I just had a thought. Could you put this thing down right where Tom is? It should scare away the enemy agents."

"I don't think so," said the Author. "I'm not allowed to intervene directly in the action. Rules, you know."

"Oh," said Mila. The Author started to pilot the helicopter down. "Hey, wait a minute! Isn't it you making the rules?"

The Author stared out the windshield thoughtfully. "Well, yes to a certain extent. But I'll let you in on a little secret. Lean close so I can whisper." He glanced around, then whispered conspiratorially in Mila's ear, "I'm not the Ultimate Author. I'm just a character like you."

"I suspected as much," said Mila glumly. "So why are you such a wimp? Are you going to spend your whole life just doing whatever the real Author, if there is such a thing, writes? Why not show some originality for a change?"

The Author, stung, replied, "Alright. Screw the Real Author. I'm taking you down. Get ready!"

As they approached the ground, Mila could make out Tom, partly hidden in a clump of small trees. He heard the sound of gunfire and the whang! of a bullet ricocheting off the hull of the helicopter. Mila unbuckled his belt and grabbed his rifle. They touched down. "Go! Go! Go!" yelled the Author.

Mila was about to jump out through the open hatch when a loud cry came from the Author. He looked over and saw that blood was spreading rapidly from a small wound in his upper back. He ran over and cradled the Author's head in his arm.

His eyes fading, the Author coughed and spoke faintly. "The Bastard!" A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. "He killed me off for disobeying the rules." He wheezed a breath and groaned. His hand groped and found Mila's hand, squeezed it. "It's all up to you now. Don't let me down." His head fell forward. Mila pressed a finger by his windpipe, felt no pulse. Dead.

No time to worry about that now. Tom had been returning the enemy fire, holding them at bay. Mila rushed to the hatch. "Tom," he yelled over the noise. "Into the helicopter, quick! It's our only chance."

Tom rushed over, bending low, and threw himself through the hatch, rolling on the floor. Mila was already back in the copilot's seat and flew straight up. The engine screaming, he veered away over the forest. "The grove where I came down. We can pick up Sunshine there."

Tom had recovered and was sitting on the floor, back against a wall. He took out a small bottle from an inside jacket pocket, unscrewed the cap, and had a swig. "Ahh. Fujikawa single malt. Seven years old. Straight from Tokyo." He wiped his lips. He looked at the dead body. "Who's that?"

Mila concentrated on the controls. "Just the Author," he said.

The End

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