

Text Samples

BLIND.FAITH 2.0.50 - TWO ZERO FIFTY (English)

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Taschenbuch

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THE BIRDS

The velvety dark of night commenced its unhurried morning retreat just outside the bedroom window. The deep inky thick blackness of the night sky, seemingly impenetrable just a short moment prior, seemed to yield silently but visibly to the next turn of some eternal cosmic cycle. It appeared almost as though an immense black bolt of fine silk had begun to unravel, wearing thin and ultimately fraying at its now-opaque Eastern fringe. The quiet and seemingly stagnant void of the nocturnal sky at this moment grudgingly acknowledged the first fleeting touches of ash grey and, shortly thereafter, reddish-violet flourishes that heralded the imminent arrival of dawn. All was quiet now. The muted energy of an insistent low breeze that had tapped the steady rhythm of time's passage, almost as though it were a metronome punctuating the seconds, minutes and hours that the Earth spent enveloped in darkness, was now finally spent. It no longer ruffled the building's slipshod tarpaper roofing. It no longer tugged steadily at the rain gutters, causing them to rattle and sometimes creak ominously at odd intervals throughout the night. The resulting exhausted calm was somehow reminiscent of the fitful sleep of an asthmatic. In the gloomy obscurity of the bedroom, directly adjacent to the bed, stood a narrow hardwood nightstand. But for the still unfathomable darkness in the room at this moment, one might have noticed or even appreciated its fairly ascetic clean lines as well as the slightly spartan waxy appearance of its timeless industrial-age imitation beechwood finish. Perched precariously atop this piece of modern utilitarian furniture, standing next to a near-empty water glass smudged with fingerprints and a plastic vial containing a few generic aspirin-ersatz tablets, was a clock whose alarm began at this very instant to buzz offensively, thereby signaling to Chase that it was once again time to rise and shine. The sound that this device produced to underscore its unhappy message at such an inhumane hour was, probably like that of any given alarm clock anywhere else on the face of this planet or thereabouts, as thoroughly obnoxious as it was stubbornly unrelenting. The clock buzzed its vicious buzz with such a supremely assertive – even repugnant – air that it might easily leave a more gullible observer wrestling with the impression that it derived its sense of urgency not through some fallible, fickle human hand but from someone or something vested with a degree of absolute authority that was nothing short of astronomical.

This clock had a real attitude.

Under any other circumstances, any display of a similarly dogged persistence at this early hour might well have given cause to stop and think. Was it an exaggeration to regard it to be as compelling and dynamic as a surge of lunar gravity, perhaps inexplicably set in gear at the very dawn of Creation? Where did it derive its authority from, commencing its rude exhortations at the emergence of the first traces of daybreak on this particular morning, much in the same fashion as the ancient Nubians eons ago meticulously aligned their temples at Abu Simbel to allow the first rays of the sunrise, on two sacred days of the year, to illuminate the two middle statues – out of a row of four cosmic VIPs – tucked away in its rearmost chambers? It wasn't entirely implausible to reflect that it might lead a person of more unstable persuasion to assume that perhaps this clock was somehow synchronized by some higher force, taking its cue from some ominous linear constellation of planets so breathtaking that it would leave a modern-day Copernicus with an uneasy frown frozen on his puzzled face. If it were indeed so, then a mere clock might well be sufficient to inspire a small crowd of lunatics of the likes of Nostradamus elsewhere on the planet to conjure up yet another beanie full of dismal prophecies, thereby

managing to successfully scare the collective wits out of humanity for countless ages to come.

The possibilities were nearly infinite, but only if one were really foolish enough to simply allow the mind to wander at random to think through them, repose in the gloomy pre-dawn darkness wondering whether it is really necessary to get out of bed. Was it just because something as trivial as a clock suddenly demanded it of one? Or if the person in question happened to possess the inclination to believe in the kind of things best defined as supernatural by the numerous Ethernet tabloids that continued to dominate the many screens strategically positioned in the checkout areas of mega.Marchés, virtual or not: that ubiquitous netherworld where the purported virgin birth of domesticated hammerhead sharks in a saltwater basin in places as inauspicious as Omaha still effortlessly qualified as breaking news. But in reality, however, things were nowhere near being this extraordinary on this particular morning. This was a rather simple, regular, unremarkable, run-of-the-mill alarm clock owned and armed by Ch.ase before he retired to bed on the evening prior.

The motive behind this therefore rather unremarkable action was actually quite plain and straightforward as well. Ch.ase had manually, and thus quite deliberately, set the alarm because he simply could not afford to be late to work on this particular morning. In actuality, it was just like every morning, more or less. In the vast majority of modern societies which continually and ceaselessly pride themselves for their advanced level of social, economic and technological development, this, from the earliest days of so-called modernity onward, has always been a sufficiently driving force behind the collective effort of devising, manufacturing, selling, purchasing and arming products as seemingly innocuous as these mass-produced alarm clocks, however repugnant they might ultimately be considered in the wee hours of the morning, when they regularly do precisely that which they are intended to do. The particular model standing on the hardwood nightstand in Ch.ase's bedroom was actually a visibly cheap one. This particular clock, along with dozens of others of similarly questionable design, was stacked haphazardly late one afternoon in a blue plastic corrugated bin on rollers standing to the right of the aisle that led to the scanners at a local mega.Marché. Ch.ase had picked it up on a whim, valiantly warding off a fit of boredom while awaiting his turn in the queue that led to the scanner station. Having repeatedly watched the headlines – LOVE HER TENDER: ELVIS REINCARNATION BAPTIZES 48 LB. BABY IN EUREKA, followed by CLONE YOUR OWN: FOR DETAILS, USE LINK TO PAGE 3 – flash by, his gaze soon fell upon an irregular stack of clocks in what appeared to be pseudo-chrome-wire packaging stored in the aforementioned plastic bins that lined the aisle next to him. Within the wire packaging, each clock was wrapped in a cheap, but somehow trendy-looking, transparent plastic bubble foil package similar to those used to sell soft-rubber chewable pet toys that squeaked annoyingly prior to being inadvertently swallowed by flustered canines or bitten to pieces by the more ignorant ones.

Ch.ase wasn't absolutely certain why he felt spontaneously obligated to purchase this ugly clock, but he did nonetheless on this one fine day do exactly that. Perhaps he did so because the clear soft recyclable polyurethane packaging proclaimed it in bold lettering to be a genuine freedom.Day limited edition super-saver real!Deal, at least this was the way Ch.ase seemed to recall it. It was hopelessly tacky, liberally adorned with a flag motif on giddy futuristic stellar black plastic and a welter of tasteless ornate neo-gothic, pseudo-chrome trimming. Perhaps it was some subconscious impulse that had driven him to purchase the clock, underscoring his

personal patriotism in the face of a never-ending onslaught of various ongoing national emergencies – in fact, the alert level had actually escalated to magenta for a few hours on that particular day. More likely, however, was that he may have felt some inward swell of anxiety as he pondered the existence, activities and motives of an anonymous store detective whom he couldn't see, but who he instinctively guessed would no doubt be eyeing him, and all others in the store, on a barrage of softly luminescent screens or on a next.Gen MindøSet as he sat tucked away in the stuffy confines of an otherwise darkened back-office cubicle, leaning far back on his chair and likely scratching his crotch as he watched the queue inch forward soundlessly all day long. Indeed, it was conceivable that it might even be considered outright unpatriotic to pass over such a great bargain.

WE BE ONE NOW

Almost overnight, it seemed the entire worldmonde.Planet had virtually reorganized itself and, as one might expect in the aftermath of any such helter-skelter situation, it had resulted in an incredibly enormous amount of confusion and, at least from the perspective of those hapless souls less than enthralled by this new development, yet another sorry state of affairs to be lamented as loudly as possible.

What had actually happened was, on the face of it, quite simple. Major portions of the civilized worldmonde.Planet as everyone had known it had, for any one of any number of reasons, elected to transform their respective societies by fast-forwarding at something approaching breakneck pace for fear of finding themselves shut out of the many blessings of modernity if they continued to drag their feet while so many others welcomed the liberating spirit of progress without reservation. The cumulative result of such an endeavor was bound to initially be what resembled a huge incomprehensible mess to a significant number of the worldmonde.Planet's somewhat less enlightened – or privileged – citizens. Seen after the fact, this whirlwind culmination of the globalization.bliss process had asserted itself in the manifestation of a relatively sudden cultural and economic revolution that was not entirely unlike the Big Bang theory regularly purveyed by legions of ostensibly educated heretics to describe the origins of the universe. The Clash-of-Civilizations and Crash-of-Currencies phase of history appeared to have finally sputtered to a halt and had in the meantime given way to largely rhetorical skirmishes staged to obscure an uncomfortable truth: that not many people were willing to admit or even consider the logical tendency of economies of scale to quickly run out of steam when they elect to tailor them to fit the needs of rapidly shrinking entities.

As a result of this minor oversight, and within the span of just a few short years, immense numbers of people found themselves plunged into unbelievably deep crises of identity and otherwise. Almost everything that people had managed to take for granted in the former, and very conventional, political order of the traditional worldmonde.Planet was, with one fell swoop, suddenly murky and awash or no longer valid at all. Who was now going to uphold those icons and idiosyncrasies, prides and prejudices which had given such cohesion and comfort to so many societies for such long periods of historical time? What would become of all of the ordering principles that had enabled some nations, some races, or some faiths to loom large or to sometimes prevail over others? Or which at least successfully deluded them into sleeping quietly in the smug assumption that they were doing so. The worldmonde.Planet had become so damned confusing. It was full of friends now.

In theory, this was a fantastic development.

But few people were really willing and able to consider the wider ramifications of such a superficially positive development upon that club of nations and societies that derived some or all of their identity through the perception that they were hapless underdogs. That there were some who actually fared quite well or, if this wasn't exactly the truth, at least derived some well-earned comfort from the fact that they were hopeless basket cases, capable of surviving the onslaught of a civilization whose ideals cloaked some incestuous uniformity only if they succeeded in distilling their own exclusive witches' brew of cohesive elitist identity. There were some societies, or segments thereof, that took pride in the fact that they were subject to persecution or even eradication if they allowed their vigilance to drop for even a fleeting instant. Or that they were simply the wretched victims of insults, injuries and injustice forced upon them by the hands of others who were bent on dominating or even destroying their most deeply ingrained values. Some people who were otherwise probably quite astute were apparently not willing to fathom the extent of the problem while no small number of others simply had little or no interest in coming to terms with it. And, for whatever reasons, even as many people eagerly embraced this change without the slightest hint of reservation, a vast number of people were still equally determined to simply sit it out and wait for a return to what they had grown accustomed to regarding as normalcy. But like it or not, nearly everyone had gone global in recent times, whether deliberately or not. Ironically, even those doggedly against this development embraced globalization.bliss eagerly, recognizing it to be the most expedient way to organize the resistance.

And, in hindsight, it truly did seem as though a global revolution had happened overnight. The old worldmonde.Planet order, based on its various constellations of nation-states, quickly and permanently evaporated as it became clear to all that the concept of the custom-tailored so-called domain.state was here to stay. With easily discernible identities then suddenly in short supply, it was hardly surprising that a sharp rise in ideology soon made itself evident. The real irony behind this development was that this tendency was accelerated, or even largely made possible, through the emergence of an obviously irredeemable, but tantalizing, promise of collective virtual identity: those erdenburgers who suddenly perceived themselves adrift in a worldmonde.Planet suddenly fragmented through its rush to unification through globalization.bliss once more had ideals toward which they could strive when they were not too distracted through work or busy with shopping or just idling before the telly.tube. And they could employ the virtues of this very same globalization.bliss to make their dream of cultural downsizing efficient as well as fun and enjoyable. Technological advances meant that it was no longer necessary to watch helplessly as good, solid, virtuous identities were swamped by those surging tides which were said to be nudging the whole of humanity toward an ideal vaguely defined as a universal, worldwide community of enlightened, and ostensibly democratic, consumerism – unified in spirit as they sat and chilled or steered their eco-friendly minivans and buena.Vistas to the nearest mall, virtual or not. It all started in the not-so-distant past with CNN and the AFL-CIO. And IBM and MTV. OSCE, HIV, UNESCO and NAFTA. People learned how to spell HTTP and RDA and MPG. Then there was a Poppy Generation.

Reality TV quickly followed, proving that truth can be more disgusting than fiction.

There were Mad Hatters and pot parties, party caucuses, royal weddings and divorces and pot luck caribou roasts peppered with petty Palinions. A gazillion times each day, an informed but mostly clueless tweety population popped their messages around the globe: "Where did you, um, kind of, you know, want to be today?" Tupperware and Tea parties raged everywhere, reigning supreme around the worldmonde.Planet.

"Think Global Act Local," many of the ads proclaimed loudly. Half of the planet seemed to rise at once to the thrill and challenge of modern media-enhanced grass-roots democracy. Daily referendums exhorting the virtues of an active and empowered citizenry swamped the airwaves and networks, demanding instantaneous participation.

"Got a gripe? Say HELL, NO! to something today to make your voice count!" It was Vancouver that led the charge into the future.time. It simply declared itself to be independent one fine day. Almost overnight, everything changed. Vancouver went west and soon found its its roots and soul in the Far East. There were pot-bellied golden Buddhas smiling in every shop window on every street. Feng Shui counselors eagerly purveyed their services on every corner.

In response to the Middle Kingdom's acquisition through incorporation, the remainder of British Columbia was quickly annexed by faraway Quebec. Eager to exploit their inherent recognition value, and the potential commercial worth as well, Canada's red and white maple leaf flags and banners were brazenly declared to be Québécoise. An ecstatic citizenry bellowed: "Let Ontario eat quiche and design its own flag!"

From that crystallizing moment onward, national downsizing was all the rage. The word was out now that states possessing a vision had to be small and lean and mean to be adequately responsive to the rapidly changing requirements of their ever more discriminating populaces.

Following its race to independence not long thereafter, the proud denizens of Florida began stamping out tin license plates proclaiming their young nation to be the SeniorCitizenNation. Meanwhile, the proud enclave of West Palm Beach County resolved to celebrate its achievement of independence by ritualizing the recounting of its votes over and over again – and, observing a tradition anchored within their new constitution, hanging a handful of chads now and then in respectful acknowledgement of this important holiday. Bingo reigned supreme everywhere south of Tallahassee, not even stopping the proverbial ninety miles short of Havana. For the first time in recent history, the heirs of the Maximo Lidero, who continued making a limited number of dignified public appearances despite the emblematic awkwardness of the dolly cart required to transport him to and from his appointments, had a valid reason to feel truly besieged.

Nevada, never a slouch in the past.time, quickly countered with Keno. And a hostile takeover of Colorado.

Silicon Valley – famous now for its vast breast implant industry as well as its microchips – declared a merger among equals with a number of nearby or adjoining maquiladoras and faraway Bangalore.

The result was world-class bintis and boobs. It was absolutely citron!

The remainder of California collectively declared itself to be the Litigation Nation. On the opposite side of the continent, the citizens of Manhattan, DC predictably took issue with such a preposterous claim and collectively sued.

Queens followed Jamaica Bay's lead and seceded. Scotland and Wales shut their borders to the English.

Even further afield, the New Hanseatics began kicking ass – especially those of immigrants under suspicion of what could be construed to be negligent or malicious non-integration.

Newly independent entities like Martinique, Catalonia, Aden and Corsica established diplomatic ties with a plethora of ministates around the globe – and among themselves – to underscore their determination to prevail and succeed in the emerging new and improved worldmonde.Planet order.

Mindanao and the Spratleys confederated with the Kuril Islands.

The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation defiantly dissolved all ties to the traditionally geriatric leadership further north. Getting the reprisal entirely wrong, the greater Beijing-Xi'an collective metropolitan government inadvertently acknowledged Taipei's claim to nationhood. Taiwan was finally free to seek an attractive partner to merge with.

The greater Phoenix metropolitan area voted nearly unanimously to move northward.

And last, but not least, New Orleans blew up a bridge, literally severing the last remaining link with Baton Rouge that had been painstakingly re-established post-Katrina. That night, even long before the smoke and the smell of gunpowder had cleared, da.Republic.O'Nawlins had declared itself to be independent and partied savagely for years.

Soon after the dawn of the second Millennia then, new nations were emerging everywhere and by the dozens. As soon as they set out on their own, many of these proud entities were often quickly awash in oceans of murky indifference or heartfelt animosity toward any number of the other similar states or, indeed, sometimes even the entire rest of the worldmonde.Planet. To make matters more complicated, emotions such as envy and antipathy, or sometimes both, often contributed an additional and particularly worrisome element to the mix. Irrespective of where all these nations found themselves in the aftermath of this process, this novel development effectively and unambiguously heralded in the age in which the nominally orderly worldmonde.Planet that was still intact in the picturesque but long obsolete hardcopy schoolbooks of young Charles' childhood evaporated once and for all.

Of course, when viewed from a modern day standpoint, these anachronistic schoolbooks were delightful if for nothing else than their stubborn persistence in portraying both greater and lesser states and their motley collection of political borders in contrasting shades of pale blues, greens, yellows, magentas or oranges to highlight them. Visualized through the innocent eyes of many small schoolchildren eager to impart some kind of logic to each new discovery, though, this perhaps not only made sense from a pedagogic vantage point but also made geography and social studies much more bearable by giving these youngsters a valid reason to fuel their naïve speculations over what an editor's choice of color utilized to depict a nation actually revealed about that particular country. Even well into his adulthood, Charles would later still occasionally recall Azerbaijan's pale hue of post-Soviet yellow and reflect momentarily upon what significance, if indeed there was any, it might have possessed and whether any of the traits he associated with this color at the time might have been absorbed in the persona of Niklas Vladimir Bratislav in some insidious manner.

This was many long years before Niklas' marriage to Jacqueline. In fact, it was many long years prior to his arrival in what was then a still orderly America.

"Was it all about canaries or daffodils or was it all about raincoats?" children likely fantasized as they pored over the pages intently. Or maybe it was the brand of mellow yellow which the pacifist pipe-dreamers of Haight-Ashbury had propagated only a few generations ago?

Did the people there piss a lot? Was it a telltale sign of paradise or cowardice or jaundice? Did yellow stand for blessings or bile?

Was it about twerps on TARP?

White punks on dope? Wonderbras?

Full-body scans? BSE? XTC? ICBMs? G-strings and X-boxes?

Deforestation and liposuction and pythons and flies?

TSA and customized CO² footprint catalogues? Emmision trading schemes?

Was the worldmonde.Planet really only about GNP and IOUs?

MEETING THE MACHINE

"So how does it actually function then?" inquired Ch.ase, his gaze still riveted on the stage and, more importantly, on the lounge chair situated at the center of the dread.commachine. "And, while you're explaining that, maybe you can clarify what exactly the rules are?"

"To answer your questions, Warden, I guess that I can sum it up very succinctly," said Vålbanger, rubbing his palms together absent-mindedly as though he were trying to warm his hands.

"The answer is: randomly and very few."

Vålbanger walked over to the cove and sat down, making himself comfortable in one of the leather seats directly in front of the stage. He gestured to Ch.ase that he ought to do the same. Ch.ase stood stiffly at first at the end of the two rows and cast a nervous glance at the seats. He seemed to hesitate a bit.

"Don't be shy," said Vålbanger. "That one will be yours in the future.time. It's reserved for the Warden. See that little brass plate?"

He pointed to one of the seats directly behind him in the second row. It was located somewhat left of center.

"That one says w-a-r-d-e-n on it. So it's prime time for you from now on. Every WorkDay2 and WorkDay5 at eight-thirty sharp. Up here is where the governor sits," he continued matter-of-factly, patting the cushion of the neighboring seat to his right. The seat Vålbanger identified as that of the Governor was ahead of Ch.ase' new place and offset to the right by approximately one half seat width. Ch.ase leaned forward to inspect the brass plate on the seat Vålbanger indicated.

"Let me guess: g-o-v-e-r-n-o-r?" he ventured.

Vålbanger nodded enthusiastically and flashed his wide grin.

He began to elaborate.

"The governor is a short, stocky fellow, only about a meter sixty five or so. And the stage is elevated, as you can see. So there's no need for you to worry about his obstructing your view of the proceedings."

Vålbanger seemed genuinely eager to reassure Ch.ase about this.

Ch.ase eased himself into the end seat in the first row and looked up to the stage.

The brass plate indicated that it was reserved for the Chief Justice. The center of the stage with its reclining lounge chair was, at the most, perhaps three or four meters away from where he was sitting. Vålbanger, in the meantime, got up out of his seat and began switching on all of the stage lighting and props. Within a matter of a few short seconds, the stage assumed a giddy atmosphere which was both menacing

and merry at the same time. Liquid light seemed to drench everything before them in a fiery glow with the viscosity of amber honey. It reminded Ch.ase of some eerily-lit but empty fin-de-siècle merry-go-round rotating listlessly in the darkness while faceless phantoms grouped around it and looked on in silence, waiting for someone to take the ride of their lives. Ch.ase was not superstitious. He imagined for a second, however, that he could sense a crowd of ghosts in this room.

Vålbanger returned from the lighting consoles and sat down again. This time he let himself drop into the governor's chair.

"So, like, where's the audience?" asked Ch.ase, suddenly turning around and looking behind the seat rows toward the entrance. Like just about everyone else in the nation, he had watched *MeaMaxi.Culpa* many times. Fairly regularly, although not quite religiously, it dawned on him, if he was home from work early enough to tune in. In fact, it was so popular that all the decent channels broadcast it simultaneously anyhow. It was literally the only show which he could receive on his portable telly.tube during the periods which Vålbanger had referred to as prime time. But, unless his memory was failing him entirely on this count, Ch.ase thought that he distinctly recalled the presence and participation of a substantial studio audience during the show.

Vålbanger had finally removed his ridiculous sunglasses and was now rubbing his eyes as he sat in the glare of the stage lights. He turned to face Ch.ase.

"It's virtual," he answered matter-of-factly. "Better handling. Believe me: it makes it so much easier to work with."

Ch.ase leaned back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. He wasn't sure that he understood what Vålbanger meant.

"You mean that there's no audience for the proceedings at all?"

"Well, there is actually. It's just that they're not physically here for the, shall we call them proceedings. They're in another studio nearby. In fact, to be quite frank: they're actually doing something entirely different. There's a bit of creative synergy involved here. We just utilize the opportunity to interface the two... hmm, let me see how to..." Vålbanger turned his eyes away from Ch.ase for a second before he continued.

"How can I phrase this gracefully? We can interface the two programs to make the proceedings both fun and effective. We take advantage of some overlap – we like to call them synergies – that way."

"Did you just say fun and effective?"

Vålbanger leaned forward and looked Ch.ase directly in the eyes.

"Listen. Maybe we need to take a short moment to clarify a few things right here and now. There should be no need for me to explain to you that this is a penal institution and not an amusement park, right? And on the day that you assumed your position, you did swear that you would serve faithfully in the job of administering justice in the best interests of the society that maintains this very institution, or I am wrong?"

Vålbanger's thus far cheery voice had now taken on the sharpness of a steely knife. His eyebrows rose expectantly as he mustered Ch.ase and waited for his reply.

"Of course I did. No doubt about that. But not virtual justice," Ch.ase countered. His voice was flustered, a note of doubt clearly discernible.

Vålbanger relaxed again and smiled upon hearing Ch.ase's reply.

"Oh. Hey, don't worry! I understand where you're coming from now! Hey, it's cool, man. I know where you're coming from now! It's not that we're talking about virtual justice here. It's only the audience that's virtual in this case," Vålbanger answered and leaned back somewhat in his chair. He began searching his pockets for a cigarette. After a considerable amount of effort, he succeeded in producing a single

crooked and yellowing cigarette from the front pocket of his striped shirt. He stuck the cigarette into his mouth and resumed his search, this time looking for a light. "Let me take this opportunity to reassure you about how a couple of things are managed here. First and foremost: how did our candidate make it up to that chair?" Vålbanger raised his left hand and pointed to the chair upon the stage. He rose partially out of his seat, arching his back like a frightened cat as he wrestled with his right hand, which he had plunged deep into his pants pocket.

"Through criminal behavior, of course," answered Ch.ase. No ring of uncertainty was detectable in his voice as he answered.

"In that case, since this has already been established in advance, we no longer have to wrest our hands in doubt on any issue of fundamental importance, do we?" Vålbanger's unlit cigarette dangled in the corner of his grin as he continued to speak.

"The punishment fits the crime. A court of law has established the facts and passed a carefully considered verdict. The Attorney General," Vålbanger pointed to one of the seats in row one, "has the option of assenting by signing the order or referring it back to the legal system for review. In those cases, in which she does sign, we all meet for prime time and justice takes over."

Ch.ase looked over to the seat that Vålbanger had indicated. He could see that Attorney General was scrupulously etched on the shiny brass plate. He had to concede that Vålbanger's argument on this point was indeed compelling. He sensed relief as his uneasiness shifted away from doubts about whether the fate of the person at the center of the proceedings he would be witnessing has been sufficiently legitimized. Instead, he silently pondered the ethics of deceiving the public about their level of involvement in the process.

Vålbanger surveyed Ch.ase as he sat in his seat, reading his thoughts with nearly clairvoyant certainty.

"I suspect that this now leaves you worried about the audience," noted Vålbanger. "If so, please bear in mind that their primary role in this production is to assist in bearing the collective social cost of administering justice. Their involvement, whether in an adjoining studio or at home in front of their telly.tube, relieves us as law-abiding individuals of having to shoulder that responsibility exclusively. Keeping a society within boundaries is not always easy and occasionally it even gets downright unpleasant. Like taking out the garbage now and then. So it makes great sense when justice is served and, at the same time, everyone is content and happy with the course of events."

"I see. And what happens if the candidate manages to hold his own on the dread.commachine?" inquired Ch.ase, who was now genuinely interested in the working technicalities of the system.

"Interesting question but that's not likely to be the case for long," Vålbanger answered and pointed to a small panel discretely mounted on the right armrest of the Governor's seat.

"The governor, of course, always has the option of pushing the default.off button at his fingertips. If and when he does this, that portion of the show irreversibly ends during the next commercial break. After the break, we simply continue with a new candidate from yet another studio. Lots of things to win there, too. Furniture, SpeedScooters, paid holidays and the like. And the viewers just eat it up. At least to my recollection, no one has ever complained."

"It's really that simple?" asked Ch.ase. "One simple push of a button and it's TILT! for the candidate?"

Vålbanger shrugged his shoulders and arched his eyebrows.

"It's GAME OVER! then. It's finito for him then, man."

The steady, monotonous hum of the studio lighting transformers seemed to underscore Vålbanger's curt explanation.

It was immediately clear to Vålbanger that Chase was really impressed with what he had seen and learned today. The institution had made a good choice in promoting him to his position.

"And what actually happens to the candidate?" inquired Chase haltingly.

"Oh, that's the beauty of the entire system. And that's what makes it so wonderfully guilt-free. We don't have to decide, the machine does it all for us. In the end, it's all determined by a sort of random generator that spits out a question or an assignment that the candidate is guaranteed to fail at. Forget about the technicalities of it all, they're way too complex to spell out here. These machines are much smarter than we are these days. Anyhow, all we need to know is that the machine ultimately wins hands down – and it does so very quickly, mind you! – and, as the game ends, the candidate's seat retracts to the rear of the stage. The rear portion of the stage divider then rotates to shield him from the view of the audience."

Vålbanger waved his arms up and down nonchalantly, indicating the two rows of seats.

"I think they decided to make it work that way because it's good for the suspense level. And also because it lends the proceedings a more dignified appearance. Back behind the scenes, though, a lot happens once the dread.com machine is engaged in termination mode. I've got to admit that I'm not all that knowledgeable about how it exactly works in the technical-biological sense but I'm told that it does something similar to fast-forwarding the candidate's VitaMeter. Just like the meat producers do with their cattle, except unbelievably fast."

"In fact," Vålbanger smiled almost sheepishly, "the fellows running the machine backstage call their data transfer module a cattle.Prod for that very reason. And you see that cable connecting the seat to the data module? That's the bovine.Bungee to them. Lots of esprit in that group, let me assure you."

Chase leaned back in his seat and listened attentively as Vålbanger finished his explanation.

"Ultimately, once the candidate's VitaMeter clocks out, he or she simply gets vaporized toward the end of the whole procedure. But that's really only done to kind of keep things tidy back there. Pretty clean procedure, really. All kind of helps keeps the overhead low. That's all I really know about how it works. Any other questions?"

"Wow. And a grand prize, winning numbers. And all-expense paid trips," volunteered Chase in amazement as he shook his head.

ZIPPERCARDS

Of course, seignorage was a serious issue to be considered. It was only natural that even a domain.state like Libertyville@Esperantia would possess and retain an inherent interest in the generation of wealth by whatever means were available and feasible. Printing and distributing banknotes was arguably one conventional method which presented itself rather obviously to the treasurers of most countries and their national banks. But there were also indisputably a number of disadvantages associated with conventional currencies that could not simply be overlooked if considered with wisdom and circumspect. Paper notes and coins, for example, were cumbersome instruments in these modern times.

They could be hoarded.

Banknotes could be embezzled or physically stolen.

The logistics involved in physically moving money around could often be daunting and were always expensive.

Cash could be smuggled abroad with little effort or could be traded in illegal money markets.

And despite the development and implementation of even the most elaborate precautionary measures, customary currencies would always be subject to the risk of being counterfeited.

And, of course, once in circulation, cash had the tendency to become very difficult to control or track.

In light of these serious shortcomings to which conventional money would always be susceptible, the original founding fathers of Libertyville@Esperantia elected to make a radical decision: after carefully weighing the pros and cons of the issue, they resolved among themselves to do away with it forever.

But this resolution was not rooted in any undue ideological considerations.

Quite to the contrary, these founding fathers were in fact decidedly capitalistic in their way of thinking. The key to understanding their intention lay elsewhere.

The buzzwords at the time of this debate were efficiency, consolidation and synergy.

Thus the brightest minds in the young nation were mobilized and entrusted with the task of inventing an adequate substitute that went far beyond the ludicrously limited capabilities of cash or even plastic credit cards. The result of this national endeavor was nothing short of the minor technical revolution subsequently referred to as the ZipperCard.

The officially declared objective of this government effort was to liberate the citizens and consumers of Libertyville@Esperantia from the dreary constraints imposed on them by the hitherto traditional methods of trading money for merchandise and services in the course of daily living. By providing each and every denizen of the nation with a central account which could be efficiently accessed through a multifunction card with an integrated chip circuit, the requirement to make, transport and store money very quickly became a thing of the past.

For the general public, the annoying search for small change to park a car, ride the bus or see a movie was about to become history.

The real competitive edge attained by the introduction of the ZipperCard, however, lay in the diversity of its many functions above and beyond simply enabling cashless transactions on virtually any scale. As a matter of fact, a number of these functions were probably not even directly obvious to the average citizen-consumer carrying it about in his or her pocketbook or wallet.

Although there were initially some misgivings about the potential for abusing the data which the ZipperCard's introduction made available, this was smartly countered by touching on widespread concerns about social ills such as drug abuse, terrorism or pornography, which would always continue to flourish handsomely as long as mind-boggling sums of cash could be generated through their distribution.

The card's proponents argued that its introduction in the place of currency would inevitably dry up the trade in illicit drugs, cheap guns, foreign-made dildos and other contraband goods by making it practically impossible to launder profits or to smuggle them abroad.

And in public discussions, it was consistently underscored that the ZipperCard would streamline and enhance Libertyville@Esperantia's already functionally mature market economy by providing around-the-clock reliable real-time data on consumer spending patterns. Ad campaigns financed by the government and other interested institutions such as banks and chambers of commerce stressed its security – the

holographic picture on the card could not be tampered with without destroying it – which made it easily adaptable to serving additionally as a forgery-proof identity card, passport or driver's license. Using the ZipperCard, access to public buildings, offices and institutions would be secure, easy and enjoyable in the future.time. The state church, for its part, diligently avoided creating the impression of taking any one side in the debate. Behind the scenes, however, its acquiescence was secured at lightning speed through an agreement to make any data collected accessible to what would be loosely defined as worthy causes. It was also implicitly understood that non-sanctioned spiritual groupings could expect to be dealt a financially crippling blow after the successful introduction of the ZipperCard. Following an independent council's recommendation to constitutionally guarantee the assignment of a lottery number to each and every ZipperCard, making each one permanently eligible for all future.time drawings, public acceptance of the concept skyrocketed far above the levels deemed critical to ensure a successful introduction.

But despite all of the public discussion over the merits associated with such revolutionary technology, there were also applications that only a few persons had a real notion of at the time of its inception. The result of this thinking was, within a few short years, the advent of the new and improved ZipperCard. The key to the realization of this new and improved ZipperCard lay in its complete compatibility with a remarkable biotechnical wonder called the VitaMeter, a miniscule electronic chip implanted beneath the skin of each and every citizen of Libertyville@Esperantia. This chip was unique in that it was equipped with a permanently installed recognition feature much like a kind of transponder, consisting of a series of tiny needles with unique patterns defined by varying metal content and measuring just over 1/100th of a millimeter long. This tiny gadget, carried under the skin after a painless implantation similar to an inoculation against the swine flu, premature hair loss or Beri Beri, was legible to specially manufactured scanning devices, known as Spot.Checks, not entirely unlike the ubiquitous barcode readers found in the mega.Marché chain of retail stores around the worldmonde.Planet. The overwhelmingly innovative feature of the VitaMeter, however, and the compelling logic behind its widespread introduction, was its ability to influence the biological rate of aging. This capacity was achieved through intricate manipulation of certain targeted amino acids and enzymes, resulting in measurable, and even sometimes pronounced, variations in the carrier organism's metabolic rates. The origins of this technology can be traced back to efforts to enable the efficient production of hormone-free meat in regions with geographical resources which were effectively too limited to allow the luxury of setting aside grain, water or even land for the sole purpose of raising livestock for human consumption. Since the animals reached maturity much faster utilizing this technology, it was soon possible to use higher grades of feed – whose hitherto prohibitive higher cost was offset by the significantly shorter time required to bring the meat to market – resulting in overall better products for quality-conscious grocery shoppers who were not averse to getting a good bargain.

As was to be expected, though, before long, scientists and politicians began skirmishing over proposals for other far-reaching uses of the benefits inherent in this astounding technology.

At the very beginning, the discussion was couched in purely ethical terms but that soon changed.

A significant political hurdle was duly taken at a time when a consensus rooted in security considerations began to emerge, favoring the widespread introduction of transponder technology to make Libertyville@Esperantia a safer place to live and work in.

Using the latest transponder technology installed in the VitaMeter, the movements of known criminals could be tracked around-the-clock almost effortlessly.

Disappearances of small children or disoriented senior citizens would become a thing of the past.time. Would-be polygamists and palimony slouches would be shaking in their shoes.

And while some doubts were voiced, sometimes loudly, on behalf of civil liberties that could likely be potentially at risk with such effective monitoring capabilities placed at the disposal of the political establishment, there was on the other hand nearly unanimous agreement that the ensuing economic benefits would be immense for Libertyville@Esperantia.

By enabling intelligent communication between an individual's ZipperCard and his or her respective VitaMeter, it would for the first time in history be possible to tailor the entire spectrum of logistic requirements necessitated by a thriving consumer economy to real-time data directly identifying and linking the consumer to his or her economic transactions.

But the benefits didn't stop there. The advent of this technology was just a first modest step about to culminate in a giant leap toward the thus far elusive goal of widespread consistent socially responsible economic behavior.

By tailoring the utilization of this technology in such a manner that it could be implemented to encourage consumer spending habits oriented toward meritorious products and services that were deemed to be advantageous to the health of the citizenry or simply toward the financial structure of the state, Libertyville@Esperantia could simultaneously increase its own revenue substantially and minimize costs for the health care system. Because of the associated immense savings that this could potentially translate into, successful application of this technology would ultimately give each and every citizen more and better services in return for a smaller percentage of their tax revenues. This was, from the onset, an incredibly popular selling point and ultimately paved the way for the successful introduction of legislation making the implantation of the VitaMeter mandatory for all citizens and long-term residents.

The truly ingenious key to this system would be the successful linkage between certain consumption patterns – without exception defined and accepted to be healthy or socially beneficial by an independently appointed monitoring commission reporting directly to a cabinet-level officer of the government – and a marked reduction in the rate of biological aging through carefully targeted manipulation of telomerase enzymes to ensure that the strands of DNA contained within the chromosomes wouldn't be expended as the cells divided. Replenishing the DNA in this fashion was not dissimilar to continually adding wick to a burning candle, allowing it to burn indefinitely: as long as the depletion of the DNA strands necessary for cell division was slowed down significantly or even halted altogether, the cells, and thus the overall organism, were not forced to age in the normal process of regeneration.

To enhance the overall public acceptance of this huge technical revolution, a splendid bash was thrown on the day of its introduction, complete with balloons, free beer, laser light shows, brilliant fireworks displays and buxomly lasses adorned with

bold-lettered CASH SUCKS! slogans emblazoned across their barely concealed boobs.

STAYING YOUNG

Assuming that an individual consequently adhered to what was generally accepted to be a healthy and socially responsible style of living in Libertyville@Esperantia, it was today entirely conceivable that he or she might live for something approaching two hundred chronological years without aging beyond a degree that might otherwise be attained in sixty or seventy biological years. It was a uniquely revolutionary development: because of technically-influenced variations in the rate at which people now aged, the historical notion of linear biological age had largely vanished in many developed societies, among them Libertyville@Esperantia.

At first glance, this amortality could be a very confusing situation.

Biological age viewed in simple and direct reference to measured time, as ably represented in the past using the proven but wholly obsolete Gregorian calendar, for example, had quickly forfeited any relevance it might have ever possessed. The result of this truly amazing development was that it effectively translated into an increasing number of cenegenics, old people who were now living longer and dying young while, at the same time, more young people with irresponsible consumer habits or undesirable social behavior could be observed to be afflicted with or even dying of conditions that were otherwise generally associated to go hand-in-hand with the phenomenon of old age.

The introduction of the revolutionary New Generation VitaMeter had radically changed the demographics of the civilized worldmonde.Planet and just about everything else virtually overnight.

Celebrating birthdays had become a quaint custom of the past.time. Why would any reasonable person bother to observe a meaningless milestone once the notion chronological age had become so antiquated? Some particularly responsible and health-conscious people endowed with modern, conscientious spending habits could be observed, with ever increasing regularity, as they set out anew, embarking on new lives, starting families at the age of seventy-five chronological years – and why not? The beautiful bride was perhaps only thirty-one biologically! – or setting out on their second or even third career at age fifty-two, perhaps this time as a model for OldSparky's swimsuit catalog website.

The system with which the independently appointed monitoring commission overseeing the universal application of VitaMeter technology accomplished its work was in itself relatively simple and straightforward. Its declared objective and guiding principle was to counsel and assist in the implementation of measures designed to structure the demographic composition of the general populace primarily to the advantage of the society at large. It therefore played a decisive role in making, or at least encouraging, the respective segments of society conform to the universally accepted wider interests as decreed by the Domain.State of Libertyville@Esperantia. To facilitate this, this commission was entrusted with the solemn responsibility of meeting in regular intervals to consider, and if necessary debate, the specific effects of any number of variable factors, ranging from an individual's particular consumption patterns to overall social behavior, and subsequently using this data to devise and enforce a uniform matrix system of coded ratings which, when programmed to guide the operating parameters of the VitaMeter, resulted in the rewarding of what were deemed to be favorable habits and meritorious behavior through a marked reduction in the rate of biological aging. And, while it was easily technologically possible, for reasons of ethics, this commission was constitutionally

barred from using forced acceleration in the rate of aging as an instrument in achieving its objectives unless a court order, conforming within the framework of the Uniform Code of Selectively Applied justice, existed to justify this.

The objectives that needed to be considered when programming these parameters were in themselves by nature often very contradictory.

Shoppers favoring generic drugs, for example, instead of the significantly more expensive brand names were considered to be exercising meritorious judgment because their prudence spared insurance companies, and by extension the state health care system, the burden of excessive expenses. This easily resulted in a unanimous and decidedly favorable rating being issued by the commission. Other products were not entirely so unambiguous, though. Tobacco or alcohol, for example, would normally be viewed to be product groups which might rightfully be considered natural candidates for a poor rating because of their proven negative effect on collective health and productivity. In the case of these products, though, the opposite was in fact true. As the state continued to levy astronomically high taxes on both of these products in the interest of fiscal responsibility, their consumption – while indisputably negative from a social health viewpoint – also represented a significant material contribution to the financial welfare of society which no politician in his or her right mind would be willing to relinquish for fear of being mercilessly booted out of office. The cumulative result of this particular contradiction resulted in a rating by the commission ranging only slightly below neutral. This was of course pleasing news to the respective industries and, in returning the favor, generally resulted in monetary contributions to the advancement of both the democratic process as well as politically expedient promises of new jobs to be created, at least temporarily, whenever the need made itself apparent. This generally tended to be the case every four years or so and tended to inexplicably coincide with the election cycle.

But the rating system was certainly not restricted to merely fine-tuning consumer habits. The use of various public services or institutions charging admissions or fees was without exception meritorious. So was voting in municipal or general elections, especially if one made a good choice and didn't squander the vote on hopeless demagogues or tax-and-spend liberals. Attending PrayerDay church services was also rated positively as was investing in a government-sponsored retirement fund or investment return account indexed to biological age and thus the committee's findings. Spending the whole of one's salary on a regular basis was considered positive because it contributed constructively to the collective liquidity of the entire economy. Of course, obtaining credit to purchase large or upscale consumer products was rated even better since it also implied the promise of a long life to enable both the enjoyment of one's purchases and the ultimate repayment of the loans used to pay for those same goods. While naysayers balked at the, as they described it, "Amortality Bubble Creep" that would manifest itself because even the most virtuous wouldn't likely succeed in paying down their debt in this fashion before they would die, proponents were unanimous in their defense of this important feature of the system, arguing that it was more important to put things on track as soon as possible and leave the future time for someone else to fret about.

As advanced as it was, then, the ratings system was riddled with a handful of oddities and peculiarities as well: indulging in fast food, for instance, was considered positive despite the many dangers accepted to be lurking behind the excessive consumption of saturated fats and high dosages of sugar, both hidden and otherwise. The ostensible logic behind this peculiarity was the assumption that more

time would be available for either meaningful work – thereby enhancing collective social productivity – or, alternatively, spending already existing resources on goods and services in the pursuit of ever more sophisticated leisure-time activities – and thus contributing to a marked increase in the aggregate circulation of wealth.

All in all, it was plain for anyone to see that Libertyville@Esperantia was sparing no effort in making itself a society which rightfully considered itself the greatest place on the face of the worldmonde.Planet to live, play and work in.

DEALING WITH THE MAN

It was still fairly early in the morning as a solitary blue and white police cruiser carefully edged its way down an uneven pathway, casting up a small cloud of dust and dirt as it went. The top half of an orange sun was just now peeking out through the shallow, almost sleepy, mist that still hovered in the air. It was not unlike a soft blanket that had been draped across the still-dormant city, concealing and conserving the last traces of the night's solitude while the steely blue sky above quickly displaced the nocturnal gloom in the same fashion as the first early breakfast arrivals at a diner door patiently hold the door open on their way in to enable the night owls and revelers unimpeded egress.

The patrol car moved along in a short series of fits and starts, edging its way haltingly down a small unpaved roadway that snaked almost conspiratively along the rear of a long line of disused shipping containers long ago deposited in end.Zone. The roadway was more of an improvised strip that someone had long ago graded to make it passable and it served to connect a number of scattered lots upon which clusters of containers were grouped rather haphazardly at irregular intervals in a largely barren expanse directly before and along the outer perimeter wall of Libertyville@Esperantia. Many of these containers had been occupied in recent years by squatters and were now adapted to a variety of purposes, including several that now served as makeshift houses and garages. The young lady at the wheel of the patrol car could see, even though everything was locked tight and shuttered this early in the day, that a modest handful of these container abodes even harbored small emporiums or workshops. At times, the squad car would bob up and down erratically as it continued to creep forward purposefully along the uneven surface of the roadway, its suspension being occasionally challenged by the size and depth of the potholes and creaking loudly with the strain as a result. As it rolled past various lots strewn with odd bits and pieces of metal scrap, it painstakingly negotiated a series of furrows in which the road had been washed out by a recent rainstorm.

Actually, to think of this pathway as a part of Libertyville@Esperantia's sophisticated network of roadway infrastructure was nearly a gross exaggeration of fact: for the most part, it was only a moderately wide dirt trail upon which a bit of gravel had been dumped in strategic spots in a futile attempt to remedy some of the worse or more recurrent pitfalls. After a rainfall, it was regularly the case that this route would remain impassable for hours or even days, depending on how long it took for the water to run off or evaporate and the ground to finally firm up again.

Although there were not very many people out and about in this area at this relatively early hour, the handful of people it did encounter as it continued to thread its way along the wall of Libertyville@Esperantia all regarded the squad car very suspiciously.

Dibbuk2 peered intently into the rear-view mirror, turning around in her seat with a determined expression on her face as she put the car into reverse gear. She squirmed a bit, simply due to nervousness, as she steered the squad car backwards onto one of the lots which was quite obviously being utilized as some sort of

scrapyard. All around her, the weed and stubble-covered ground was littered with various junk and bits and pieces of disused machinery. Wherever she looked, she saw window frames, axles, battery casings and engine blocks littering the grounds. Some of the items lying around seemed to her to be somehow arranged in haphazard groupings, perhaps awaiting pickup for recycling or re-use. She could see a number of wrecked cars and even the skeletal remains of a truck chassis, all piled precariously on one side of a container in the center of the lot while, only a few meters away, several substantial mounds of aluminum scrap were heaped along the side of an improvised driveway. Next to this driveway, there was a substantial amount of rubbish as well as stacks of old wooden pallets, rubber tires and several dozen rusty 55-gallon barrels. Having made it this far, only the small group of chickens scurrying about excitedly on their home turf stood between Dibbuk2 and her goal on this morning. As the chickens clucked indignantly and made way for the approaching vehicle, she deftly nudged the car into a somewhat secluded spot directly adjacent to the dilapidated shipping container that dominated the center of the lot. One could see that, back in its heyday, as it traveled the seven seas bolted to the deck of some magnificent ocean-going vessel of gargantuan dimensions, the container had sported a bright gleaming yellow and red coat of paint. This had long since faded.

On the side of the container that faced both the driveway and the squad car that was now parked next to it, two makeshift windows had been roughly cut into the container. One of these windows was wide open now as she approached. A tattered lace curtain fluttered lightly back and forth in the opening directly in front of where she had backed the car into place. Although it was fairly dark inside, she could see that there was a man with a razor or a toothbrush in his hand and peering out intently. Dibbuk2 had registered him immediately although she was fairly certain that he likely believed that he was hidden from view where he stood. He was positioned only a few steps away from the window, his back to the wall, watching very warily as the squad car came to an uninvited stop directly next to his domicile. She switched off the engine and slipped out of the vehicle, exiting through the open window without opening the door to ensure that the engine could be restarted if necessary. Dibbuk2 stopped briefly to look about, taking care to ensure that she had parked it in such a manner that it would not be easily discovered by any passersby who might happen to wander past on the dirt road during the next few minutes. At the moment, however, with not a soul to be seen out here anyway, there was little that could go awry.

Without hesitating any longer, she strolled straight to what might be considered to be the front entrance of the ramshackle container-homestead. As she stepped up to it, she pounded on the wooden doorframe with her left fist and continued to survey the area in a conspicuously casual manner. A coarsely woven burlap door mat at the stoop proclaimed her to be WELCOME! The mat was filthy, covered with burrs and feathers and remnants of dehydrated poultry poop.

The chickens strutting about on the lot were in the meanwhile once again oblivious to both her arrival and to her continuing presence in their midst. They soon resumed their fast but meticulous search of the ground, stopping and pecking abruptly if they chanced upon anything which they considered to be even remotely edible.

At first, no one answered. After a few seconds, she pounded again, this time somewhat harder and louder. Her heart pounded like a bass drum within her chest. "Yeah, what do you want?" came a gruff reply from within this time.

"Hi," she answered in a clear voice and as matter-of-factly as she could. "I gotta show you something. It's really important. Come on out for a minute, would you?" "I dunno. Do I know you?" inquired ChickenOtto suspiciously through the storm window and screen of the still-closed door. "Are you a c-c-cop or what?" She wondered whether he was stuttering because he was nervous or whether he always did.

"Nah, you probably don't know me yet but I've heard an awful lot about you! I think we have a few common acquaintances," replied Dibbuk2 as she continued to eye the chickens scratching the ground at the base of the step. "I think we really gotta talk for a minute. I gotta show you something. Come on out. Please."

She knew that she didn't have much time to do this deal. She was so anxious to get down to business that she suddenly pushed aside the makeshift screen door and reached for the shiny brass doorknob behind it. Without hesitating, she turned it. The door unlatched effortlessly. She pulled it wide open without any further warning, stepping down from the improvised bare concrete stoop to make way as the door swung outward.

Standing in the open doorway was ChickenOtto with not only an expression of apprehension and bafflement on his face but also a few remnants of shaving cream as well. He was holding a plastic razor clamped tightly in his right hand and a small towel in his left hand. Despite his fairly advanced age and just a hint of a beer gut, he was still a very handsome fellow, sporting a ruddy complexion, a full head of jet black hair and the clearest dark brown eyes Dibbuk2 had ever seen. He hesitated a second as he stood eye to eye with her. Finally, without posing any further questions, he placed the razor on a small table next to the entrance door, wiped his face with the towel and hastily withdrew a pair of wire frame glasses out of his shirt pocket. He donned these and then stepped out of the aluminum container into the clear light of the morning. As he stood before the end of this container which he called his home, he blinked his eyes a few times, waiting for them to adjust to the brightness of the morning light outside. At the same time, she could tell that he was trying to peer somewhat secretively around the corner, trying to get a closer look at the car. He stood before Dibbuk2 and fumbled nervously in his trouser pockets for a moment as though he were unsure what he might find in them.

Dibbuk2 said nothing but stood looking in the direction of the parked squad car and waited for her pulse to return to a normal level. She was still trying to suppress the realization that opening the door the way she had done was downright stupid. Had ChickenOtto been armed and frightened enough, she realized, he could have blown her away right then and there. After all, he hadn't a clue yet what she wanted from him or why she had even come here.

A gecko that had been at rest somewhere above the doorway scampered down the wall and quickly disappeared into a crevice next to the doorstoop. It was gone in an instant.

After another moment had passed wordlessly, ChickenOtto took a deep breath and risked a step around the corner of his abode, moving forward somewhat further in the direction of the vehicle before stopping again. He was walking with a slight limp, his right knee having been left stiff as a result of an unfortunate urban head-on traffic incident many years ago in which a fairly large truck loaded chock-full with frozen Mr. Ed's All-Star SurrogateSirloin Sandwiches emerged as the undisputed victor. Dibbuk2 followed him closely now and came to a stop next to him. There they stood side by side in the shadow of the container.

"You don't know me yet but I came here because I wanna make, er, like a proposal, kind of like among friends," said Dibbuk2 coolly as she began to walk in place, maintaining a slow pace. "Can we maybe talk here? I have the coolest idea that I think would be mutually beneficial."

ChickenOtto wiped his face nervously with the back of his hand, sucked on his teeth and rocked back and forth on his heels a bit tensely as he waited for her to continue. He didn't really know what to say yet. Just a few brief moments ago, all was well and as normal as things would ever be in his life on this morning. Now, with no advance warning whatsoever, there was a police cruiser, about which he knew absolutely nothing, standing uninvited on his lot.

He considered the situation. He didn't have an inkling what this might be all about and stood slowly massaging the row of stubbles that remained on his chin due to the aborted shave just a few moments ago.

"You know UniKorn, don't you?" Dibbuk2 asked him unceremoniously.

A long pause ensued before ChickenOtto finally answered. They simply stood there looking at each other and the car. He was being very cautious.

"Well, yeah." He finally answered hesitatingly. "But I-I-like, we're not c-close, though." He regarded her warily, his hands clasped behind his back now and holding his head tilted slightly to one side as he looked long and hard at her and tried to fathom her motives.

She stopped jogging in place and smiled at him when she noticed him looking at her like this. His face reddened suddenly as though she had caught him thinking something completely inappropriate for the situation, perhaps even catching him in an instant in which unchaste thoughts had been reverberating through his head.

"Look, don't worry. I'm not a cop. Just pay attention, please: I just wanna make a proposal that I think you might find pretty interesting," explained Dibbuk2 in a patient tone of voice. "This fellow UniKorn – a friend – he's got a bad-ass cross-trainer. And I've heard that he's also got a fantastic set of barbells stashed away. The cross-trainer's brand new, never been used. The barbells, too, I think. I want them both. And I mean the whole set of barbells, too. All of them, you know? If you can get them for me, and the cross-trainer, then the car's all yours. No questions asked. OK?" ChickenOtto, took a deep breath and shoved his hands deep into his pants pockets. He began drawing a series of circles in the dirt with the tip of his right shoe for a moment, not saying anything in response to her suggestion. Dibbuk2 took a step away from him and started running in place again as she regarded the scenery around her.

A small crowd of chickens began to assemble around him.

"Great!" he mumbled to himself as he continued drawing circles with his foot, thereby attracting the undivided attention of the chickens. "So she t-t-thinks I can just go driving a-around da t-town in a stolen p-p-police car!"

She continued to quietly jog in place and waited.

She made a conscious effort at restraint, resolving to take her time despite the fact that she would have preferred to have this done and over with quickly, to be gone again as soon as possible. She had to remind herself that she had just now come barging into his life with not the least bit of advance warning and that she had to remain cool until ChickenOtto had an opportunity to regain his bearings. She just needed to be fair and allow him a chance to get accustomed to the notion of this excellent albeit very high-risk barter. Seriously considered, she already knew that she had no choice whatsoever but to be patient, biding her time. There was no real alternative. What else was she going to do with the car if he refused to take it? She

just had to give him enough time to think about it and to warm up to the entrepreneurial attractiveness of the idea.

LUNIXX GOES LIVESTREAM

Not too long after the notorious blasphemy.Box video clip had been rendered inaccessible from sources abroad, as well as all related content that was deemed suspicious or questionable blocked from the battery of servers that routed into or through Libertyville@Esperantia, a rogue programmer for a short while again succeeded in commandeering the encrypted web ports that served as the umbilical cord for the domain.state to that immense portion of the web outside its own boundaries. These were the very portals through which all data content to and from the whole rest of the worldmonde.Planet at large was monitored, filtered and, if necessary, censored altogether. At exactly the same moment, a substantial number of the digital channels feeding the programming into the on-demand modules of the telly.tube network were also compromised, resulting in an unexpected change in the evening fare.

Instead of a troop of the local steroid and testosterone-laden Matadors crunching the daylights out of the rival anabolic-driven androgyne Barracudas, or at least valiantly smashing their bones while trying, on the playing field in the modern-day combat version of gladiators!Galore, late night viewers found themselves unintentionally tuning in to a live feed of an electric-glam-combo apparently calling themselves Republic.Thunderbutt. While the smoothness of the video streaming and the overall quality of the picture itself could be judged to be modest at best due to difficulties or perhaps restrictions in buffering due to the unaccustomed formatting, one could, despite just a bit of fuzziness, distinctly see a youngish-looking fellow with a headful of white hair and glasses sporting leopard-spot frames wailing away at a microphone. The song was apparently titled future.World.

Lazing on the shores of the mirror lake
My toes radiating in the breeze of chrome
We've got cellular SpeakEZs
We've got protein breaks
We've got custom-tailored chromosomes.
The telly.tube's here telling us we're happy
Shame it is the program's so crappy.
Pair-O-Dice won't tell no lies
With her haunting fiber-optic eyes...

As soon as the song had ended, the video transmission ceased and every screen in Libertyville@Esperantia went blank while, unseen by the viewing public, hordes of technicians at the provider facilities throughout the city presumably scrambled in an attempt to get the usual accustomed pay-for-view content back online before too many viewers grew impatient and switched off their receivers, thereby sending revenue into a tail-spin. Oddly, there were but a few complaints received about the switch in programming itself but rather mostly due to the subsequent tenacious white-out that lasted for a short period while the network ports were frantically re-routed and channels hastily re-booted.

Instead of resuming immediately, as expected, with the intended programming, a marquee banner, changing colour every few seconds, had emerged and now glided slowly and silently across the otherwise blank screens of the entire state like one of those screen savers of yore.

"Guess it takes a while for the word to get around with all the communication going on ..." was all it stated.

In a smallish, semi-darkened back office in the headquarters of the Special Prosecutor, located somewhere deep within the bowels of the downtown administration building, Special Agent AmalGam reached for the remote control and switched off the telly.tube wordlessly. He turned around, placing a huge silvery, aluminium thermos mug of coffee, still steaming slightly, on his desk as he proceeded to walk around it, and finally took a seat in his chair. He was neither remarkably big nor heavy but the chair squeaked in loud protest as he let his weight settle into the flattened dyed-blue leather upholstery and rolled it forward. Sitting wordlessly at his desk, he brushed away some crumbs and placed his elbows firmly on the desktop, folding his hands in front of his face for a moment, looking as though he were about to begin with some kind of mute prayer, and thought hard about what he had just seen and heard. After a moment, he reached down and quickly pulled a MindφSet out of the side pocket of his suit jacket. He glanced at the screen with a extremely focused expression chiseled into his features, despite the advanced hour, before putting it back on the tabletop in front of him and slowly but deliberately picking up his SpeakEZ.

He took another long sip of the coffee from his mug, still looking again and again at the blank screen of the telly.tube as though he might be contemplating the emptiness, submerged in deep concentration. Then he leaned forward in his chair and pushed the loudspeaker and dial key in quick succession.

A loud, sharp click reverberated through the room as someone at the other end responded.

"AmalGam here," he said flatly as he spoke, skipping any pretense of niceties in his introduction.

"Could you do me a favour and come see me right now? It looks like we have a good solid pick-up on the voice recognition software. If we're lucky, and I'm pretty optimistic here, then the software guys will manage to get the image cleaned up sufficiently so that we'll maybe be able to attach a face to it by tomorrow morning."

NAILED

At AmalGam's signal, the two policemen grabbed LuniXX without any further warning beneath the arms and heaved him out of his chair, one on each side, and handcuffed him as soon as he was standing. As they led him through the kitchen and out the door to the waiting car, AmalGam flashed the officers a thumbs-up sign and a wide grin acknowledging their success.

"Thanks, Dandy-O," he called after one of them. "Awesome job. Book him!"

Then he returned to the kitchenette and removed two bottles of b@rleyPop from LuniXX's chill.Box before leaving the premises.

The arraignment early the next morning was an outright farce to LuniXX. To everyone's apparent astonishment, the Attorney General, who in the reigning public opinion was generally acknowledged to be a real bitch in high heels, unexpectedly made a personal appearance at the hearing as the charges against LuniXX were being read to the court.

The two policemen who had led him handcuffed into the courtroom earlier jostled him to and fro repeatedly, roughing him up a bit, as the trio made its way before the bench. After the judge's entrance, the guard standing to his right whacked him hard without warning against his chest with a pointy elbow, causing LuniXX to lose his balance and keel over backwards into the defendant's chair. He sat gasping for breath as he took in his surroundings. His mouth and throat were dry as cotton.

The legal counsel appointed to defend LuniXX voiced no objections to the roughshod treatment being accorded his client. In fact, he never once intervened on LuniXX's behalf during the entire hearing, preferring instead to judiciously study the indictment documentation on the table before him in complete silence. The prosecutor, however, wasted no time commencing with proceedings. She appeared to LuniXX to be middle-aged lady endowed with no small measure of bitterness in her expression and a similar amount of botox invested in her features, sporting jet-black fingernails as well as a headful of frizzled grey hair that was streaked with intermittent reddish-orange coloring and brushed coarsely upwards and toward the middle of her head. This was sufficiently affixed with the requisite amount of hair gel to lend her the appearance of wearing something that resembled either an Iroquois hairdo or some kind of odd, coarse dorsal fin. A few spots of dried gel or dandruff decorated the shoulders of her dark and somber courtroom robe.

Parked next to her feet stood a wicker hand basket in which her nearly hairless Chihuahua, named Ponzie, patiently awaited the end of proceedings, bedded comfortably on a black pillow that was adorned with a sprinkle of tiny white skull-and-crossbones motifs. Ponzie sported a stylish black leather collar dotted with gleaming chrome spikes worthy of praise from any self respecting S&M aficionado whilst her left ear was pierced with two very baroque-looking silver earrings dangling from it, one of them set with an amethyst and the other with a faux-diamond. The tiny dog's tongue was hanging out of the side of its mouth and its bulging eyes darted alertly back and forth, edgily following every movement in the courtroom and affectionately keeping tabs on her MommyBaby, the one and only person therein who had long ago readily assumed the awesome responsibility of opening canned dog food for her PonzieBaby.

Alternating her glances between her PonzieBaby, a TouchBoard screen before her nose and the honorable Judge Carson Tombstone-Maddox seated at the front of the court, the prosecutor donned a pair of thick glasses with glossy retro black frames and began to speak in a clear, loud voice.

"The defendant stands accused of receiving stolen property, in this case belonging to the Domain.State of Libertyville@Esperantia, smuggling taxable and/or restricted goods..."

She paused momentarily to scroll down the screen of her MindφSet, which was on the tabletop beside her, before continuing.

"...Pianos. As this court is no doubt aware, musical instruments are Class One items in the context of smuggling as per the legal code." She glanced testily at LuniXX and then over to the Attorney General as she provided this information.

"Furthermore, this office seeks prosecution for pre-meditated blasphemy and also first-degree malicious nonachievement. We are also seeking prosecution for tax evasion related to the aforementioned activities. And there will be charges filed in conjunction with the defendant's placing of subversive texts and messages on the net but these will need to be formalized first. Allegations that the defendant is a card-carrying dotcommunist are also still being investigated. As this investigation involves issues pertaining to national security and possible terrorist activity on the part of the defendant, I am understandably not able to comment on it now except to say that further charges relating to offenses governed by these statutes are pending. Last, but not least, the defendant is hereby also formally charged with creating a public disturbance and unruly behavior. In light of the seriousness of the numerous aforementioned offenses, this office respectfully recommends that the court order the defendant held without bail."

As she spoke, Judge Tombstone-Maddox sat in his chair at the bench, leaned far back and listening to her exegesis with a blank expression on his face, his eyes having a slightly glazed over appearance. Now and then, he would carefully remove little fluffs of lint from the sleeves of his dark robe or utter a silent prayer, thanking both the Heavens and the pharmaceutical industry that his digestive tract and bowels had, as hoped, performed their magic, flawlessly and punctually, prior to his entering the chambers this morning.

Although she was physically present at the arraignment hearing, the Attorney General did not really appear to be a party to the proceedings on this morning. LuniXX wasn't even sure why she even bothered to be here as she was obviously very preoccupied – either she was extremely busy or perhaps just outright harried. When she wasn't dedicating her attention to her MindφSet or her TouchBoard or her SpeakEZ, she seemed enormously irritable and, LuniXX thought as he silently observed her sitting opposite to him, quite possibly hung over. Judging by her foul mood and the overall impression she made, not to mention her bloodshot eyes, LuniXX found it didn't require a lot of imagination to surmise that she had probably been pickled until just a few hours prior to coming to court.

His attention reverted back to the court proceedings. The prosecutor was still standing before the judge's bench. She looked directly at LuniXX as she wound down the list of grounds for the blasphemy indictment. He had obviously stirred up a hornets' nest by creating the blasphemy.Box, even though it had not yet actually been found. Despite his deeply avowed agnosticism, he on this morning decided that it couldn't hurt to inwardly thank God that it hadn't actually been discovered by anyone yet.

"It is the prosecution's firm belief that passivity as exhibited by the defendant is a form of refusal or denial when one assumes, as we ought to, that the Divine intent provides one with no less than an obligation to strive and to grow above and beyond one's self. If we understand ourselves as beings that can only retain our legitimacy in God's eyes by wanting to be more than the simple sum of our abilities and achievements, then passivity would be a sin of omission far beyond that of simple negligence. It's man's obligation to actively assert his rightful place in the Divine hierarchy. It lies within our power, and that of all good people, to be the jewel in the Crown of Creation. That's all, your Honor!"

The prosecutor ended her speech with a satisfied look on her face and nodded to Judge Maddox to indicate that she was finished. The judge was somehow visibly impressed by her ramblings and utterances and, in turn, nodded his profound appreciation, if not outright understanding. The outer edges of his mouth drooped in an inverted smile not dissimilar to that of a basset hound which had been scolded for raiding the pantry.

And as the judge's gavel came crashing down with a loud bang, he mumbled through the corner of his canine mouth and jowls to the court stenographer.

"Domain.State of Libertyville@Esperantia vs. LuniXX: Trial date to be set and notice duly served to the parties."

Then he cleared his throat, swallowed some pflgm, and, in a loud and clear voice, declared: "Bail denied. Next case!"

Judge Tombstone-Maddox banged his gavel energetically on the desk once more in conclusion. At this, Ponzie the naked child-ersatz Chihuahua joyfully leapt out of her basket and half-ran, half-scooted across the waxed wooden floor into the waiting arms of the prosecutor, yapping and wagging its worm-like tail with great enthusiasm as her MommyBaby bent over to pick her up with both hands and planted a soggy kiss of victory on her tiny wet nose.

FORCED RETIREMENT

Zabulon Kleistermaul sat alone in the gym on a gray metal folding chair at the head of one of the front tables. His legs were stretched out and crossed in front of him, the tips of his shiny black shoes pointing upward to the rafters of the ceiling. The folding tables arranged in long rows on the hardwood floor of the basketball court were still empty since the final preparations for the evening's festivities were not slated to begin for at least another two hours. The Reverend had arrived far too early today. This was because he had elected to come here directly from his office instead of going home first.

Religious holidays were always a big strain on him and his colleagues.

It seemed to him that the holiday season had arrived at breakneck speed this year, as though he had been pounced upon by his own calendar. The duty and the necessity to display the appropriate level of excitement and good cheer expected by nearly everyone was unnerving to him lately.

He was beginning to feel that he didn't have enough time for himself, that his work-life balance was in real peril of keeling over. It seemed like he was always busy listening to the woes and trivial worries of others, all of whom expected or often even seemed to feel entitled to his consolation and sound advice. And then there was the task of running the everyday business of the church when no one else was around. The pressure associated with a position such as his was immense and it seemed to him as though it was growing by the day.

He took a long drink from a soda can which he had angled out of a bright green colored plastic trash container standing next to the entrance. It was a 55 gallon barrel containing assorted chilled drinks and it was filled to the brim with loads of cans, ice cubes and cold water.

After he had emptied it, he returned the can to the table and watched as the condensation water forming on the outside of it cascaded down in countless tiny rivulets, rapidly forming a soggy ring of moisture on the paper tablecloth. Once the paper beneath the can had become sufficiently saturated, it simply dissolved. He belched aloud and was astounded how noisily it resonated in the almost naked emptiness of the gym.

The paper tablecloth at the spot where he was seated was quickly mutating into a few alternating patches of water and soggy cellulose. The ladies who had decorated the gym would not be amused at all. He knew that he would later have to beg them, especially Marge, for absolution. He also knew that she would ultimately grant it – but only grudgingly and only after making him look and feel like a twit in front of the rest of the ladies present.

The Reverend was just too fatigued to care at this moment, however. He would have to simply suffer through the ritual and accept their admonishment gracefully.

He looked around and surveyed his surroundings in sullen silence. As his gaze slowly circled the room, he could easily see that it was a very plain cinderblock building whose walls at either end of the court were clad only in a thick coat of gleaming off-white oil-based paint. The gym's gray metal fold-out type windows, with wire-mesh integrated into the glass, were arranged in two long rows, one on each side of the room, just beneath the ceiling.

The perimeter of the room was splashed in cold light by uniform rows of naked fluorescent tubes mounted vertically between the windows and high up on the walls above the wooden fold-in bleachers. The playing court itself was illuminated from directly above by eight rows of floodlights mounted on aluminum lattices that

dangled from between the heavy ceiling rafters. The basketball nets at either end of the court had been retracted and were tucked neatly out of the way.

The standard issue tables with their light gray heavy duty stain-proof melamine tops appeared to the Reverend to resemble spidery metal structures on plastic wheels. They were covered lengthwise with reams of coarse white paper drawn from huge rolls obtained from the local cash-and-carry mega.Marché and were flanked closely by lightweight fiberglass-and-aluminum folding chairs or, alternatively, by a few hardwood benches on either side. They were certainly nothing even remotely comfortable but they would nonetheless be sufficient for tonight's event.

He could see that stacks of paper plates, paper cups and paper napkins were parked in strategic locations alongside the area where a buffet would later be opened. Spaced at even intervals along each side of every single table were paper place mats adorned with a set of plastic knives, forks and spoons. Several large plastic pitchers also stood on each table, all provisionally turned upside down on paper plates for the time being. They would be filled with iced water or perhaps tea when the evening activities commenced.

The front end of the room was adorned with reams of crêpe paper draped over a small podium and the top end of an upright piano. A painter's easel was standing to one side of the piano, upon which hung a wooden cross with a pewter etching faithfully depicting the martyrdom of our Lord Jesus Christ among a mass of pine cones bearing INRI inscriptions.

Amen.

"Good evening, Reverend."

A startled Zabulon Kleistermaul opened his eyes and wheeled around in his chair to face the side door just behind the bleachers. He must have dozed away momentarily or been so steeped in his thoughts that he hadn't heard anyone come through the door. SpannerJak, the most senior of the Parish Elders whom he had known since he had first stepped before this congregation, approached him. Following him closely was a man in an impeccable dark suit whom the Reverend could vaguely remember having seen on a handful of recent occasions during services. The fellow looked like a classic G-Man out of a modern-day remastered version of an old Edward G. Robinson flick. He had great shoes, though, Zabulon Kleistermaul noticed with just a tinge of envy. Hand-made, no doubt. And so pointed that they oozed – no, screamed! – coolness.

The Reverend cast a swift glance at his watch. It was still far too early for anyone to be here. Even the preparations for bringing the food wouldn't begin for around another hour and a half or so.

"Well, hello!" he sputtered in reply. "I certainly wasn't expecting to see anyone here this early."

The smile on SpannerJak's face was not at all friendly. It was at the very most coolly cordial.

"Hello, Reverend," he said in a flat voice as the two men stepped before him, and then matter-of-factly: "The name of this gentleman whom I would like to introduce to you is Mr. AmalGam. Mr. AmalGam is a Special Prosecutor for the state of Libertyville@Esperantia."

The Reverend felt his bowels and the entire rest of his innards nearly careen out of control for a brief instant upon hearing this introduction. Nonetheless, much in the same manner as when he stood before his flock, his inner reaction was largely indiscernible to the outside observer.

His mental rebound was quick, however.

"Well, then, I'm very pleased to meet you," said the Reverend in a voice with just a vague hint of a strain that, he suspected, must have revealed his insecurity. He mustered his most professional grin and attempted to radiate some conviviality as he shook his visitor's hand. "...as I was just saying, I wasn't expecting the company of any hungry souls so soon. In fact, the food doesn't even arrive for another hour or so." He chuckled half-heartedly, not so much at his joke but at his own vain attempt at humor, and patted SpannerJak's shoulder clumsily with his free hand while they, too, also shook hands in greeting.

The Reverend sensed that neither SpannerJak nor AmalGam appeared to be the least bit amused by his remarks. Instead, they continued to sport fairly somber expressions as they proceeded wordlessly to a pushcart upon which a large number of folding chairs were stored. With no small amount of clang and clatter, they managed to remove one for each of them to sit upon, carrying them under their arms as they returned. The Reverend's palms began to sweat nervously as he asked himself what could possibly be amiss.

What had happened? Had someone died? Had the church been burgled? Had the Parish been robbed?

Had there perhaps been a fire? Had he forgotten to turn off the electric fan or the air-conditioning before he left his office? The boiler plate for coffee?

The two men placed their chairs directly adjacent to the one on which the Reverend had been sitting, one on each side of him, thereby forming a kind of intimate grouping around the head of one of the tables. Despite the close proximity of the seating arrangement, the Reverend correctly sensed that his visitors were doing their utmost to avoid any direct eye contact with him as they took their seats.

After a series of coughs to clear his throat, it was SpannerJak who spoke first.

"I'm going to be very frank with you, Zee. Mr. AmalGam paid a visit to the Parish Council this afternoon to inform us that there is probable cause to assume certain acts of – how shall I best put this? – impropriety. It's difficult for me to say this, but let's just, for now, refer to them loosely as acts of unseemly behavior on your part..."

The Reverend's head and senses instantly reeled as he registered these words, behind which he knew some kind of indictment was now sure to follow.

"...and that some, if not all, of the acts in question may have also been committed while deliberately and wrongly using the financial and material resources placed at your disposal to serve the better interests of our faithful community."

He paused momentarily, quite obviously carefully weighing his words as he went, before continuing again with his explanation. "That's the reason why we came here to see you this afternoon. I need to know whether you have anything to say to exonerate yourself. Something which might assist us in clarifying these allegations?"

"Christ, this is... it's preposterous!" sputtered the Reverend in an injured tone of voice.

"What the Hell are you gentlemen talking about?"

He ran his hand across his face nervously and scratched the back of his neck.

SpannerJak responded irritably: "Dammit, Zee! Don't use the Lord's name when you say things like..."

"Cybersex. Elecsexity." G-Man AmalGam answered coolly, interrupting SpannerJak as he proceeded to activate his MindøSet, this being a particularly small model, really trendy and not much larger than the palm of a hand, which he had produced from an inside pocket of his custom-tailored suit jacket. He was seated to the Reverend's right.

"I'm going to be blunt with you about this: we have some very compelling evidence that you DoubleClicked one certain Marie.Celéste of StickItIn.4aFee on numerous occasions. In fact, very numerous occasions."

The Reverend stared at him incredulously.

"Very numerous occasions, actually," he added again. "I guess I probably don't need to repeat myself, but I will to ensure we're on the same page: we're talking about numerous counts of class one cybersex here."

AmalGam said this to make certain that the Reverend had clearly understood him and the accusations with which he was being confronted.

"Reverend," asked SpannerJak, "...are these allegations true? Under any other circumstances, I guess it shouldn't be any of my business, I suppose. But I need to ask now: have you ever DoubleClicked Marie.Celéste or committed any other lewd or immoral acts with her or anyone else at StickItIn.4aFee?"

"This is bullshit!" exclaimed the Reverend, banging his open hand loudly on the waterlogged tabletop. "I can't believe this is happening. I mean, this is literally coming out of nowhere. This is worse than an inquisition. It's almost like blackmail! I can't believe that you're actually..."

The Reverend's empty soda can literally leaped off the tabletop at the force of the impact as his hand came crashing down again. It tipped and rolled over the edge, making a loud metallic clang as it struck the wooden floor and rolled to a stop. No one made any effort to pick it up.

"Calm down, Reverend! This is not quote unquote bullshit," interjected Special Agent AmalGam. "It's facts as they have thus far been independently established. I'm downloading the data here for your inspection, right now. I'll be done in just a moment and you can take a look for yourself. It would doubtlessly be more to your advantage if you were to simply cooperate and allow this investigation to progress smoothly."

AmalGam and his MindøSet were the invincible embodiment of modern information efficiency, all air tags and augmented reality, thought the Reverend grudgingly as he fixed his gaze upon him and waited for the gadget to spit out his virtual Judas kiss.

"Reverend," growled SpannerJak from askance, "...you still haven't answered my question yet!"

"Listen!" the Reverend spat his anger at AmalGam and avoided looking at SpannerJak as he spoke. "This whole thing is a visitation, coming straight out of the blue for me. So I'm not going to say at this stage that I did or didn't do anything that you're alleging here. But let's nonetheless first establish something in all clarity. Can this behaviour that you're claiming to be investigating – my allegedly visiting StickItIn.4aFee – even rightfully be considered the basis of any serious criminal inquiry? I mean, is it illegal or what?"

"It's even worse than that," interjected SpannerJak. "It's immoral. It's sinful. And especially so for you. It's awful. I'm absolutely devastated that..."

"Hey! Let me take a short moment to refresh your memory with some basic theology 101 then. Nothing new to any of us..." answered the Reverend haughtily as he turned to address SpannerJak.

"As you are probably aware, throughout the whole of history, the boundaries of human behavior to which we continue to attribute our morality can rightfully be described as having always been in a state of flux. The rules are simply not rigid. And they never were. In fact, they're as fluid as anything else you're apt to find in modern life. And I tell you, it's exactly this flexibility which gives our faith the resiliency it needs to survive, its inherent capacity to grow and evolve. The way..."

"Look, this stuff about evolution in the course of this particular conversation sure impresses me as much as it surprises me," AmalGam tossed in nonchalantly as he glanced up from his MindφSet. "...but while I don't intend to get bogged down in the niceties of theological teaching, I've nevertheless always harbored the distinct impression that I could justly consider it your job to defend them there boundaries you're lecturing us about."

SpannerJak leaned forward and looked the Reverend squarely in the eyes. His bulbous nose, adorned with zillions of tiny blue arteries, hovered directly before his face as though it would sniff him to death. The Reverend had never noticed how many tiny bushels of white hairs sat astride the Parish Elder's nose.

SpannerJak leaned even closer yet and his index finger was pointed somewhat threateningly at the Reverend's chest.

"Even if you and I assumed for just a fraction of a second that DoubleClicking virtual prostitutes..."

He seemed to be spitting out these words as though he was afraid that they might soil his tongue, "...was technically unassailable from a strictly moral perspective, that would still leave you stuck with another pretty sizeable dilemma: namely that of selling the bit about misappropriating the funds placed at your disposal by the congregation."

"This is absurd. As far as I know, Marie.Celéste isn't even real," protested the Reverend. "How can any form of testimony provided by her ever be considered legally binding then?"

"Since I have so far refrained from harboring any ambitions of sticking any kind of anatomical protuberances into her, I don't consider myself eminently qualified to argue about how real she is or isn't," replied AmalGam icily. "...but the irrefutable fact is that proof exists that accounts were debited to pay her for the provision of whatever services she provides. This naturally begs for an explanation. Let's start from square one: why would you bother to do this if she wasn't real, Reverend?"

Reverend Zabulon squirmed in his seat while he tried to judge how conciliatory SpannerJak might be and whether he might show some willingness to help him out of his plight.

"Look, I mean... if the funds are the issue, I could arrange for all of that to be reimbursed," answered the Reverend hopefully as he looked to SpannerJak. He was sitting on his hands now, rocking slightly back and forth on his chair.

SpannerJak said nothing in reply but simply shook his head.

AmalGam began cracking his knuckles as he sat and stared straight ahead, avoiding any direct eye contact with Reverend Zabulon for the moment.

"From my viewpoint, that last remark would almost surely constitute an admission of guilt before a court of law," he said matter-of-factly in the direction of the scoreboard as he then sat up straight on his chair. "As a matter of fact, in light of the facts as they have thus far been ascertained, I believe that I have no real option but inform you that, at this point, I'm actually obligated to recommend the prosecution seeks an indictment."

He looked over to SpannerJak, who appeared to be staring right through the Reverend as though steeped in deep thought. In reality, however, he was simply taking a quick time-out to scratch his crotch.

AmalGam began reading some text from the screen of his MindφSet.

"Reverend, it says here that she clearly testified that you always DoubleClicked when it quote unquote came time to pay the piper."

Without waiting for the Reverend to reply, SpannerJak spoke, addressing him once more.

"Do you know what it would mean for you and this church if someone caught on that you reimbursed me or the church for expenses that you incurred while DoubleClicking women, virtual or not, of, shall we call it, questionable repute?" SpannerJak was indignant.

"... Or if it eventually went public on something like SneakyPeeks or PeekyLeaks or WikiPeeks – or whatever they call all that bullshit – that I assented to such a deal? No way that I'm going to set myself up for something like that! I'm pretty close to retirement and, as far as I can determine on the basis of this conversation, it looks to me like you're the one with the more pressing problem. Not me! It's you who's on a fast train to Hell right now, Reverend..."

"Come on! Stop panicking about SneakyLeaks and stuff like that. And just cool the rhetoric a bit," advised AmalGam, reaching around the Reverend to put his hand on SpannerJak's forearm. "Just relax, my friend. This is bad enough for him as it is. Don't make it any worse than it is. There's certainly no need to psyche yourself up or, on the other hand, to scare the crap.scheiss out of him."

The Reverend said nothing but kept his eyes focused on some fictive point far beyond the room in which they sat.

"It's OK," AmalGam continued as he turned back, addressing the Reverend, "It's certainly not going to be the most pleasant experience for you but, on the other hand, it's not like you're going to have to play to beat the odds on *MeaMaxi.Culpa* either. You are going to have to bear a lot of public scrutiny, though, even ridicule, once this thing goes public, which..."

Then he glanced at his MindøSet before continuing his statement.

"... which, incidentally, I happen to know will be the case as of tomorrow afternoon." He stretched briefly on his chair before leaning forward and adding: "And let me warn you of something here and now: as you are no doubt very well aware, Marie.Celéste is very, very telegenic. Much more so than you."

SpannerJak was stroking his chin and nodding thoughtfully. "This is going to have some very unpleasant and very public repercussions. The press is going to whack the living daylights out of you. You're going to be the topic of discussion on every late-night talk show, on every telly.tube in the entire nation. I can just imagine the headlines already: HORNY PASTOR DOUBLECLICKS CYBERSLUT!"

The blood nearly froze in Reverend Kleistermaul's veins as SpannerJak said this.

"Oh, come on! Don't exaggerate things," AmalGam addressed the Parish Elder with a bit of annoyance now discernable in his voice. "They're not going to stoop that low. It'll be more like HOLY MAN WOWS CYBERTART! or something like that."

"Cyber what?" SpannerJak interjected with a look of incomprehension on his face as he leaned forward and turned to face AmalGam.

"Tart. Cybertart. You've never heard the expression?"

"Well, no. But regardless," SpannerJak muttered as he leaned back in his chair again. "It still sounds awful. Utterly devastating. I am appalled that we even need to be discussing this kind of stuff at all."

AmalGam spoke: "Well, I'm afraid he's just going to have to put up with that. There's no feasible alternative. This is, after all, a democratic society where we are deeply committed to the idea of information flowing freely most of the time, right?"

He looked at the Reverend as he addressed him yet again.

"Listen, Reverend, I think that it's important that you get this straight. No illusions now. While the male half of the population may even secretly envy you for being just like them, for DoubleClicking her at the moment the opportunity presented itself, and especially someone as gorgeous as Marie.Celéste, a heck of a lot of folks are going to work real hard to bring you down from your pulpit. The furtive admiration of legions of men, no matter how many of them, isn't going to be substantial enough to make them side with you publicly once the politicians or the bishops start playing hardball. I mean, it says here that your profile shows a preference for options like snake dildos. And, I might add, we ain't talking about zoology here. I think we need a quick reality check here and now. This is going to be rough for you. Very unpleasant." He redirected his attention to his MindøSet.

This brief but nightmarish encounter had left Reverend Zabulon stunned. This was simply beyond his comprehension. He said nothing any more.

SpannerJak appeared to be acting as though he hadn't heard AmalGam's last remarks. He was bent forward with his elbows supporting his weight on the table, his head resting on his tightly folded hands. He squinted his eyes as he spoke to the Reverend in a warm, almost conspirative voice.

"There is an alternative, Zee. You could, you know, seek solace in God. You could stand before the Lord like the real man you are and ask Him to forgive your transgressions..."

He paused before he finished: "Face to face."

Reverend Zabulon Kleistermaul said nothing. His head was buzzing, his mouth seemed completely numb as he sat and registered the meaning of SpannerJak's words. He felt like he would puke at any moment. He rightly sensed that he was going under fast in some horrendous maelstrom of his own making, completely defenseless as a fierce wind of revelation blew away the covers that concealed his furtive failings. He knew that he would soon be subjected to a degree of public humiliation and ridicule which he could not even begin to fathom. His entire life was about to be destroyed piecemeal, his weaknesses, and much more, laid bare each day on the web, on every MindøSet, on every telly.tube screen in the country. And this would be happening as of tomorrow afternoon. There was no one on the face of this earth who could save him from this terrible fate.

"Think about it, Zee. As painful as it may be now, you could also view this as is your only real stab at immortality."

Reverend Zabulon looked up, his eyes reddened and filling up with water.

SpannerJak continued in a quiet voice.

"There could be streets named after you. Libraries and schools, sports arenas and even charity foundations. Don't be discouraged now. This is a real chance for you, a shaft of bold light that shines out brightly in the darkness, sent as a gift by our Lord. He is reaching out to you today. This is your chance at eternal redemption."

A quiet pause filled the room.

"The church's whole reputation is at stake. Sometimes a man needs to go so that those who stay behind can continue to believe. We're counting on you,"

SpannerJak resumed his exhortations. "Come on, Reverend. Don't blow it."

"Unfortunately, it appears that last piece of advice comes way too late," interrupted AmalGam in an amused tone of voice. "It looks like someone else handled that for him already. Look at this itemized invoice!"

"Shut up, you idiot!" SpannerJak barked at him and brushed away AmalGam's hand and the MindøSet that was he offering. "Don't you have enough damn sense to see that we're getting spiritual here?"

The Reverend collapsed back into his chair in tired resignation. This was going to be a visitation of such dimensions that he could not yet even begin to grasp what life might be like for him after tomorrow afternoon. Unless, that is, he elected to be repentant and to seek solace directly with God, submitting to the advice SpannerJak had proffered.

"And," SpannerJak then added in a near whisper, "...you can be assured that this Church will never, ever break with its tradition of holding men with true humility in anything but the greatest of esteem. You have my word as I sit here, a gentleman before God."

The three men sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, wringing their hands or clearing their throats occasionally.

They sat, peering up at the ceiling. Or they stared into their folded hands and laps. Or, at other times, they watched the large clock on the wall.

After a few minutes which seemed as long as eternity, it was SpannerJak who finally broke the fragile silence.

"Do you want us to leave you alone now, Zee?" he asked in an almost fatherly tone, his voice suddenly intimate and nearly tender in inflection.

Zee had huge tears welling in his eyes as he swallowed hard twice and nodded in affirmation.

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

Her mind was made up and it was, from the very first moment onward, an intriguing idea: she was going to be something that might best be described as the human incarnation of a neutrino. She closed her eyes when she recalled her fascination upon first reading an article about physics in which the concept of so-called "ghost particles" was pondered upon. She was immediately enchanted by the idea of light, near zero-mass particles that were present but did not interact with matter in their surroundings.

If only she could do the same...

The very same day that Chase packed his things and set off for his new career behind the walls and coils of razor wire that surrounded Irrgarten, Jacqueline headed directly to bed, doing absolutely nothing except to sleep for the next three straight days. Then, on the afternoon of the third day, she rose and, still wearing a pair of royal blue loose-fitting pyjamas with satin shadow stitching, pulled up a chair on the patio behind the house. There she sat down to think. She sat for a long while, drinking and savoring several glasses of cool water in succession and letting her thoughts wander, pondering what exactly was going to happen next. When she had successfully emptied the large pitcher of ice water that she had placed upon the table positioned directly next to the deck chair upon which she had been sitting, she rose swiftly out of her seat without any further delay. She returned into the house through the glass patio door, quickly and cheerfully donning a fashionable and very airy dress sporting colorful, almost psychedelic swirling patterns. Passing through the hall, she then speedily rummaged through a few drawers until she had found her favorite sunglasses.

Jacqueline opened the plastic case with a soft snap and donned them as she regarded herself in the mirror, turning this way and that. Satisfied with what she saw during this impromptu fashion show, she pushed the glasses up until the lenses rested just a tad above her hairline. Looking around quickly one final time to ensure that nothing overly personal of her belongings lay carelessly about, she then walked out of the house in an oddly serene but very cheerful mood. It was a gorgeous day outdoors, not too hot and with a comfortable breeze blowing. Not long after she

had walked out of the door, she entered a nearby coffee shop and purchased a tall latte – with two percent milk and a sprinkle of cinnamon – and took a seat. She pondered her situation in life once more as she sat and sipped at her coffee. She had come here on account of Niklas' search for God and had, with time, come to the conclusion that this interest had not really been reciprocated in any fashion by Divinity, neither toward Niklas nor toward her. And thus, as she considered her own situation, she realized that she was completely free. She was needed by no one – neither by Nik.Vee nor his almighty God. Not by her son, either, who had now unceremoniously gone off to da.Maze to defend everyone's liberty by ensuring that all the alledgedly crooked or crazy people that posed a threat to the general welfare of the population were adequately administrated during the duration of their state-sponsored stay behind bars. While many people may have perceived such a thought to be completely unsettling, Jacqueline in fact interpreted it as being somehow liberating. It ultimately meant that she was free from the many constraints that went hand-in-hand in coping with a rigorously institutionalized life in its various forms and was thus finally free to find and follow her own set of beliefs or ideals. She eyed the smattering of clouds that dotted the sky pass peacefully overhead, wearing a perfectly content and relaxed expression on her face as she did so. The clouds she was admiring were nothing more than random accumulations of condensed water droplets, she mused, a nebula that moved visibly about but in themselves lacked any inherent sense of direction or purpose. They were like ghosts being driven along by the hand of the wind. She shut her eyes and tried hard to imagine what it would be like to be a ghost herself, but not passive like the water vapor passing above her. Not locked in the past.time like the chain-rattling spirits that populated the flicks and the fears of those superstitious individuals plagued by a selection of varying anxieties. She pondered what it would feel like to be a ghost, one that was self-determined, passing not only through walls at will but through the minds and bodies of those around her as well. She ate a chocolate-almond cookie and stirred her coffee slowly, watching the cinnamon sprinkle form an intricate spiral in the milk foam as she did so. Soon thereafter, she emptied the cup, paid her bill and took her leave from the café. Before long, she strolled into one of the numerous public work stations located downtown, a netbook.rental.Café located just a stone's throw from the intersection of Purgatory and Allegiance Avenues in the center of the city. It was from this netbook.rental.Café that she soon logged into a virtual chatroom and, during this very first session, presumably found someone capable of assisting her as she commenced the process of her own defragmentation. This process was also otherwise often referred to as a bio-cyber osmotic transposition into the web. It was actually a pretty trendy affair, being especially popular among those who were knowledgeable on how to do it using portable handheld devices like MindøSets and nextGen SpeakEZs. Its most avid practitioners were mostly youngsters with a very hip attitude who possessed a profound sense of curiosity as well as a certain entrepreneurial streak. It was often rumored that there was even a group of particularly astute college students who allowed themselves to be beheaded weekly by religious lunatics on the web and a few of the more gruesome telly.tube channels, doing this for the sole purpose of earning a fairly substantial amount of income which they could then apply toward the grossly exorbitant school tuitions with which they were burdened with in their daily parallel lives at the better schools. Although bio-cyber osmosis sounded a bit complicated, even horrid, to the uninitiated, it was not such a big deal in actuality. Essentially, it was accomplished largely by mastering a sequence of steps collectively known as quantum

superpositioning, in which one's BuckyBalls attained the capability of existing in more than one place at any given time.

In fact, for those who mastered the technology and the technique, it was originally devised as an unbeatable way to cover an incredible amount of ground during an evening of SpeedϕDating.

Jacqueline had always been excited and intrigued by reports that humans had gained the capability to scan their intelligence and experience into a computer in order to achieve immortality or to endow them with the ability to be absorbed into whatever matter of the universe appeals to them. While she firmly rejected the notion that human consciousness was capable of permeating all matter, she was an avid believer that the energy present in all forms of life simply had to be transferrable in some manner or other to another realm upon death or passage into a different dimension.

She went one very decisive step further this time, however. What happened in her particular case is that she entered into what was effectively an inverse relationship with her avatar. Once her defragmentation was completed, she painstakingly recreated herself in countless bits and terabytes online and, when she was finally satisfied with the results, simply checked the option relegating control to her own alter-ego. The relationship between her biological self and the cyberspace version thus existed in a similar fashion to that of a conventional avatar with the notable exception that her biological self was now tucked away somewhere in a place known only to her avatar, hovering in a deep state of suspended animation while she freely roamed cyberspace.

She had done it. She had loosed the bonds that tied her to a simple worldly biological being. She had managed to become transhuman.

Of course it was only natural that Ch.ase would miss his mother dearly after her disappearance from his life and even his dimension of reality. For a while, he tried his best to follow her progress through cyberspace but the last time he had attempted to make contact with her, he determined that she had webmorphed into yet another dimension. She was no longer accessible to him directly. She had transposed herself, replicating the strings of code that she originally consisted of at the beginning of this process into a series of cyberspace beings that then engaged in a continual process of reinventing herself. It was deeply ironic to Cha.ase that Jacqueline was not only gone forever but, at the same time, suddenly omnipresent in a wide variety of electronic media that he, just like everyone else in Libertyville@Esperantia, was exposed to continually and on a daily basis.

He was initially fascinated, and even a tiny bit proud, that she had managed to accomplish this feat but it also unnerved him increasingly that he had not the slightest inkling of where or when she would turn up or in which form he might find suddenly find her intruding briefly into the human dimension in which he was forced to dwell.

Ultimately, Ch.ase was baffled by all of this. There were, to his knowledge, still only two plausible ways to enter this worldmonde.Planet – caesarian or non-caesarian. But it both amazed and perplexed him to realize that the list of ways in which one could exit it continued to grow longer on an almost daily basis, despite or perhaps due to the high degree of civilization that reigned around him.

In time, he would cease his attempts to find or contact her directly but he would still, at odd intervals, suddenly recognize his mother or who he thought she might be popping up somewhere unexpectedly. She was apt to be just about anything: one day, she might just pop up as an androgyne anchorwoman, with closely cropped silvery hair and luminescent lizard-green pupils, on the telly.tube or on the web, then she was a wicked sci-fi cyberfiend from beyond the runaway star Alpha Orionis,

brandishing enough supercelestial firepower to level the entire universe, a kind of anti-Barbarella of Betelgeuse. Other times he thought he recognized her image as that of a series of super-seductive advertising icons, touting everything from cosmetics to chill.Factor to killer apps. With the passage of time, she blazed across every screen in the nation in roles as varied as that of a doctor of paleontology, as a missionary nurse, as a tropical depression or a virtual statue. For a time, she even on occasion as a nocturnal party bus driver in a popular daytime drama serial. Recently, Ch.ase thought that he could even discern a very telling resemblance to an extremely talented and very sexy telly.tube cook known as nikita.Lukullum who, in part perhaps because of her irregular but unique skin pigmentation pattern which lent her an asymmetrically spotted animalistic wildcat look, enjoyed phenomenal ratings despite the overall inaccessibility of her creations, distinguishable by their wholly inimitable and minimalistic molecular cooking style. With the passage of time, it eventually dawned on him that Jacqueline was busily multiplying herself and, in the process, slipping continually into and out of a variety of identities as quickly as though she were riding some sort of supersonic rollercoaster of Karma. But to Ch.ase, she was, even if this was invisible to the entire rest of the worldmonde.Planet, both a victim and, at the same time, a sort of exemplary incarnation of cyberconscience. Despite the dejection and helplessness that he felt in light of her brilliant escape to another dimension, he would suddenly miss her most, and perhaps understand her, in the final moments of his own life.

OPENING THE CAGE

Very early the next morning, it was still dark outside as AmalGam rose from his slumbers after an uneasy night. He stood under the soft glow of a single light mounted above the bathroom mirror and shaved the stubble from his chin with his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He switched off the light as he left the bathroom before preparing himself two slices of buttered toast with a smattering of apple jelly. He ate these in silence in the semi darkness, sitting alone atop a high stool, at the counter in his barely lit kitchenette.

The screen of his MindpSet, which he customarily checked first thing in the morning, was dark.

Not long after he had finished his rudimentary breakfast, he sat on a chair in the entrance to his home and slipped into a pair of his most comfortable shoes. He began walking, slowly at first, navigating solely by the sounds and smells of the city that was awakening around him and the constellations of stars on the firmament that seemed to guide him faithfully around each and every corner and obstacle on his way to the State Assembly Building. He found it only mildly remarkable that the sun didn't appear to have come up on this particular morning, despite the fact that it must have been a fairly advanced hour by the time he had finally managed to reach his destination.

Without stopping for even a short pause, he walked up the wide stairs leading to the building's main entrance and weaved his way skillfully through a number of busloads of schoolchildren that were milling noisily about while the accompanying escorts and teachers did their best at attempting to keep them at least nominally organized for their upcoming tour. Not one of the countless people standing about outside the State Assembly seemed to take any real notice of him as he entered the venerable building, passing resolutely through two heavy sets of tall wooden doors that opened with a distinguished creaking sound. He then descended another wide set of stairs that opened at the bottom directly into the rotunda beneath the magnificent dome.

With the exception of the constellations marking the heavens either in or over his head – he wasn't really sure anymore where they really were – it was still completely dark and silent around him. Having made it this far, he finally stopped and paused, standing mutely for a moment with his eyes finally wide open, and simply took in the sea of stars that dotted the firmament above and around him. Everything within the building around and beyond him was cloaked in an all-encompassing velvety darkness with the exception of one single object meticulously centered, occupying a spot directly in the midst of the rotunda, within an area directly beneath a constellation with two lines of stars that crossed each other in a noticeable perpendicular manner. The rows of stars were juxtaposed at a 90 degree angle to one another, forming a corner which, he reasoned, only a blind person would be sensitized enough to perceive as a corner. Barnz had not failed him.

A lone star shone like a spotlight intensely and from directly overhead. To an uninitiated observer, it might well have been very reminiscent of what the star of Bethlehem must have looked like, casting its beam upon a crib in a scrawny manger in the middle of nowhere.

AmalGam knew immediately that Barnz had not deceived him, that he had finally reached his objective. He had finally found the blasphemy.Box. But as the realization sank into his consciousness, it also dawned upon him that he felt not even a trace of the triumph, not an iota of the satisfaction which he had, until yesterday, felt certain would seize possession of him at the instant his search would finally reach its dramatic climax, coming to a wildly successful conclusion with him basking gleefully in the warm glow of his achievement.

Instead, he stood there all alone under the rotunda, looking at the contraption in utter silence. He knew it was the very last thing he would see before his eyesight would leave him for good.

Despite his failing eyesight, AmalGam could see it clearly under the spotlight in the darkness of the State Assembly Hall. It was an intricately handcarved wooden confessional booth, its latticework reinforcing the decidedly traditional exterior appearance that was accented by the contrast provided through several distinctly trendy-looking lighting installations on the exterior. He stopped to examine the brass plate mounted on a minimalistic aluminum stand, lit by two cobalt blue fluorescent tubes, positioned just short of the entry to the booth. The entrance to the blasphemy.Box was decorated with baroque retro-Gianni-Versace-style bulletproof red velvet drapes.

PERMANENT EXHIBIT COURTESY OF THE JOAN K. KLOPPENDALE FOUNDATION was engraved in a cursive script on the plate. Both the engraving as well as the accompanying Braille translation appeared very dignified to him.

He quickly stepped forward and, after looking around and determining that he could see next to nothing, he entered the booth without any further hesitation, drawing the red and gold curtain closed as he settled comfortably onto the low crimson-colored velvet bench. To his immediate left, he registered that the interior wall of the booth had been replaced by a glass pane that went from seat level all the way to the ceiling of the cubicle-like space, behind which a number of objects were displayed in an odd arrangement. It was very gloomy, but not in the sinister sense of the word, as he sat within the blasphemy.Box and tried to comprehend that his mission was now finally over. And that he needed a new mission if the future.time was still to be his. He paid no further notice to the objects behind the glass pane to his left, turning his attention instead to the tiny aperture near his right shoulder.

He had just settled onto his seat when the diminutive sliding door opened with a slight rasping noise.

"Absolution?" a friendly-sounding voice inquired.

"No, thank you," AmalGam responded. "More like enlightenment. Please."

"Oh, that'll be two coins then," came the prompt reply. "...instead of only one. Got any change?"

"No, sorry," AmalGam muttered softly.

"It's okay. Take these or we'll never get anywhere."

AmalGam saw two coins being offered, balancing delicately on the tips of a few fingers belonging to a hand that poked through the opening toward him. Despite the gloom, he could see that the pale hand was stained with bright smatterings of various colors, likely acrylic or oil paint.

"Thanks," he said and gingerly took the change and watched as the sliding door shut again with a click. All was silent in the booth as he leaned forward slightly and carefully inserted the coins in quick succession into the slot to the immediate left of the sliding door.

The change disappeared with a loud clatter as the two coins dropped into the machine. An instant later, the gaudy lighting behind the glass pane to his left illuminated, flashing red, blue and green in quick succession, revealing, among other things, an apparatus resembling a one-armed bandit without the handle. Bells began chiming as two lemons and a red heart appeared. A Barbie doll wagged her hips while seductively waving a crucifix and throwing kisses. Elsewhere, a flickering red LED ticker proclaimed PAY PLAY PRAY PLAY PAY over and over again. In one of the lower corners, cog wheels rotated and dice were rattled. On tiny screens, crash-test dummies smoked incense and made the sign of the cross before heading for collective obliteration in bingo halls.

The tiny sliding door to his right opened again, this time with a pleasant ring that might well have been stolen from the carriage of an antiquated typewriter or cash register. An intense blue light shone through the opening.

"Welcome, friend!" the friendly voice greeted him again. "So what's on your mind?"

"I've learned something. Today, I'm sure it was gullibility, not sin," AmalGam declared.

There was no response for a moment. He continued:

"And there's no way to opt out. Everyone's in the same cage but sometimes you just don't manage to see the locks and bars. You don't even know where they are so you just act as though they aren't there. But they're there. The whole city, on the street, in your church and on the job. It's all a huge cage. And they're in your head, too. It's like the river: I was actually out there. It took me a while to figure it out but, really, just about anyone could cross it. It'd be so damned easy but no one ever tries."

"So what do you want to do?"

"I want to learn to swim. It's about time that someone in this place did," was AmalGam's curt reply. "And then, if it works out, I think it'd be worth it to teach someone else as well."

The lights suddenly went out again in the blasphemy.Box. AmalGam remained seated in silence, listening as he heard someone shuffling on the other side of the partition. He was disappointed; he wanted to continue but, before he could summon the courage to ask for two more coins, the curtain was pulled open from the outside.

Before him stood some sort of pastor or priest, white collar and all, with his right hand extended to him in friendship. In the very subdued light of the rotunda, his headful of

white hair seemed almost like a fluorescent blur of light in AmalGam's sea of darkness that was the last remnant of his fading eyesight. And although AmalGam couldn't be sure whether it was his imagination or whether he was really able to see them, he thought that the preacher's eyes seemed to glow with some iridescent form of empathy directly behind the lenses of his leopard spot spectacles. "You know, I have a congregation to attend to," said LuniXX. He dropped a number of coins onto AmalGam's opened palm. As he turned to take his leave, he added: "It's all yours now. And the coins might prove really useful if someone in need of swimming lessons ever comes around to see you."