Of Faulty Logic and Pointless Journeys: A Collection of Short Stories

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OF FAUTY LOGIC AND POINTLESS JOURNEYS

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

Jared Record

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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Preface

This thesis includes an explanatory work consisting of the author's thoughts concerning the stories as a collection and individually. This piece appears after the stories, and it is recommended that the stories be read first. However, you may prefer to consult each respective section of the explanation before continuing to the next story.
The journey pledged to be long;
The travelers burst into song.
Intrepid travelers, all three
As soon you will see.
A ponderous burden they procured to bear,
'Twas an arduous crossing, made with great care;
The payload was immense for sure,
One an ordinary trekker would truly abhor.
   Its purpose was threefold,
   And its package was gold.
   Its length and its girth,
   While smaller than Earth,
   Made threats to overwhelm
   The men at its helm.
   Its size made it awkward,
   Its shape more untoward;
   The two men and one woman
Toiled like heroes Greco-Roman,
   To bring the great load—
   Though it rained and it snowed—
   Across the great mountains,
   Replete with their fountains;
   Geysers rivaling any abroad.
Past these and other terrain they did trod.
The song they started to sing,
   One of valor and daring,
   Proved their mighty intent,
To carry the load with backs bent.
Lo, they knew naught of its inside,
   Just bore it with pride,
   But they knew of its import;
   Great tool of some sort.
They held it not as normal freight,
Gently supporting its great weight.
Through towns it was hauled;
By the mobs were they mauled.
The trip was so long,
   It outlasted their song;
When they finally arrived,
They were scarcely alive.
The tool then was unwrapped;
The crowds hooted and clapped.
They saw through the gleam,
   'Twas a flying machine.
It seems the great bearers,
   Those ragged wayfarers,
   Had carried these miles,
Through frowns and through smiles,
   This cumbersome load,
Though they could have just rode.
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I stepped off the 747 in Langley, having eaten a wonderful third-class airline breakfast and shaved my ruggedly handsome face en route, and picked through the swarm of travelers and reporters anticipating a good story. There seemed to be an overabundance of reporters that day, no doubt hoping to glimpse a high-profile government official with rumors on the Stratofist, surround him, and move in for the kill. Stratofist was a top-secret spy plane and its theft was the reason I was here, my vacation cut short.

Somehow, the press had caught wind of the Secret Marine, Archaeological, and Security Agency's latest product. Of course, they wouldn't know it was SMASA's product, since no one had even heard of the top-secret organization, but somehow they knew about the spy-plane, which featured vertical take-off, hundreds of cameras, Stealth-esque radar invisibility, and super silence. Luckily no one publicly known was involved in SMASA in the least – including the Pres. himself (five words: plausible deniability and loose-lipped idiots).

So I had no trouble bypassing the reporters. I also bypassed the luggage retrieval area, since my only baggage was a rumpled twenty-year-old briefcase, containing only my shaving kit, and my gun, of course. Not to worry; it wouldn't be detected by the stupid metal detectors in the airports. Those things only picked up on belt buckles and
pocket change – and only sometimes on those, though you have to be more careful now.

Back in those good old days of espionage, the idiot security guards forgot to turn the
detectors on half the time. Besides that, my sidearm was made almost entirely of
SuperHard™ plastic and was in thirteen unrecognizable pieces sewn into the briefcase
lining.

Anyhow, I headed straight for the bank of yellow taxis, got in line, and waited
exactly one minute, forty-three seconds before leaving the crowd and entering the
seventh taxi in the lineup. Without wasting words, the curly-haired, wide-girthed cabby
pulled out and proceeded through an intricate maze of streets. This procedure was
common for me, as well as the cabby, with whom I was not acquainted in the least,
despite having ridden with him for the past ten years.

The car slowed and entered an underground parking garage, following the
circuitous route down to the lowest level. The old yellow cab glided to a halt in the
shadows of the lowest corner of the garage. I stepped out without paying – the
trustworthy driver had received his cut well in advance, as always. I waited until the car
was out of sight before lifting what appeared to be – and was – a normal drainage grating
and descended into the darkness below. Even the cabby didn’t know where his
passengers went when he dropped them off here.

After climbing down thirty-five rungs, I stepped onto a narrow ledge to the right
and tapped my knee five times against a pipe leading past me into the unknown depths.
A heavy door slid soundlessly open and I stepped inside, the lights flicking back on
automatically the moment the door closed.
“You’d better put a wiggle on it, Harry – Dick’s gettin’ a bit antsy. He’s waitin’ in yer office,” greeted one of my colleagues.

“Nice to see you, too, Rita,” I answered sardonically. Rita Booke, a trim but big-boned woman with mid-length permed red hair, missed no opportunity to get on my case, and I had always questioned the level of her education, as well as the authenticity of her hair color. I did, however, “put a wiggle on it” – I reached my office at a full sprint through a dense line of defense. A few heads bounced off the walls and I hurdled a few desks and chairs en route, but nobody was killed – always a good sign. I reached my office a bit short of breath, threw open the door, and slammed my briefcase onto the desk.

Dick Milliken was there as advertised, with a pink folder in his hand. “We’re on code purple polka-dots. Here’s your brief on the situation – I want it read and a complete list of suspects on my desk by eight hundred – that’s one hour, thirty-five minutes and counting.”

“I’m on it, Dick,” I absently replied, already halfway through page one of the brief. Dick left quickly, and I skimmed through the remaining twenty-five pages in five minutes, memorizing all relevant details, ignoring the rest. I had flicked on my computer during page eighteen, allowing exactly the time needed for the machine to finish booting the second I set the brief aside.

Within forty-five minutes, the computer had run through the over eight-hundred million identities in its data banks and narrowed the list to fifty-three possibles, according to the specifications I had entered.

Sadly, the number one suspect on the list, due to his frequent travels to Russia and Japan, among dozens of other countries, and to his relations with known drug-runners,
etc., was Harold Leghz. The accompanying photo showed the suspect to be a man of medium height with a modestly muscular frame, hazel eyes, and brown hair, with a hard-to-control upturned forelock. I reached up to smooth down the curl, then remembered that I was not peering into a mirror. I crossed my name off the list and skimmed through the rest.

I had dealt with most of those honored with a place on the list, and those I didn't know personally I was familiar with. Problem was, to the best of my knowledge, at least three and a half dozen were supposed to be serving life sentences in QMS prisons. That's Quadruple Maximum Security, prisons few of even the biggest fries know about.

After placing several calls to old buddies working in these prisons, I had confirmation of the presence of forty-nine of the suspects in prison at that moment. That narrowed the list to three suspects.

The most likely was Yali Burundi, a Russian ex-convict/inventor/pilot and lover of everything edible and nothing else, a man thoroughly feared in the intelligence community. He had been a highly sought-after killer, terrorist, drug lord, and owner of intelligence moles for quite some time. The problem was no one could prove conclusively that he was guilty on any count. Of course, this hadn't stopped many people, myself included. Who would care if he suddenly "disappeared"? I would have loved to have gotten my hands on that slime — with rubber gloves and a gas mask on, of course. Actually, I had met him face to face a few times over the years, and we traded bullets once. His found my shoulder and mine found his despicable guts.

The other two were somewhat unlikely suspects, as neither had surfaced in over five years, though that could be grounds to name them co-conspirators. It was still a
possibility, no matter how slim, and it had to be looked into. However, I, personally, would be concentrating on Burundi.

My suspect list found the boss’ desk thirty-five minutes before the deadline, but this was not grounds for praise; if I had taken ten minutes more, my vacation days for the next ten years would have been immediately terminated.

Anyhow, my boss wasn’t surprised at my suspect list – and I didn’t tell him I was the prime suspect. He’s not the type to find such things amusing. So, I was sent out with three false identities to find Burundi. Each identity came complete with credit cards, bank accounts, a passport, and a history, which could by backed up by people who would have no reason to lie about it – besides being well-paid by SMASA, that is. People who had the cleanest records in all aspects, meaning some had been in a few minor scrapes – parking and speeding tickets, maybe a little shoplifting as a teenager – you know the types: normal people.

I bought a second-class ticket to Madrid posing as a typical middle-aged tourist – a case crammed with clothing, a compact video camera, a cheap but complicated 35mm camera, and a few allusions to a long-awaited first trip to Spain during ticket purchase. My sleep during the flight was jam-packed with images of myself lounging in my recliner, watching T.V., soaking in the pool... aaahhhhh...

CRACLUNK...please return your seatbacks and tray tables to their upright and locked positions. Fasten your seatbelts and remain seated until we have landed and stopped moving... CRACLUNK. My blissful dreams were cut short as the plane approached the airport in Madrid. I yawned and rubbed my eyes, finding myself staring into the sour face of a flight attendant.
“Yes?”

“Sir, you must return your seatback to its upright and locked position now; we’re preparing for landing.”

“Are you programmed to say that?” I grumbled, “I mean, you could just say, ‘quit lounging – we’re landing.’”

“Excuse me?” the woman said, not quite hearing the comment.

“I said, thank you, miss. I appreciate it – must’ve slept through the announcement.” I gave her a kind, disarming, jet-lagged tourist smile.

“Oh... you’re welcome,” she said, returning a not-so-kind, patently false smile as she headed toward the rear of the compartment.

I shuffled off the plane and toward the luggage retrieval area, feigning (well, okay, maybe it wasn’t completely an act) the beat tourist appearance. I picked up my suitcase slowly, allowing my shoulders to droop a bit and a strap to drag on the floor as I swiveled my head rapidly back and forth, as if struggling to orient myself with the layout of the building. I caught a taxi and told the driver to take me to La Hotel Residencia.

Upon entering the hotel lobby, I went straight for the reception desk and asked for a single room with bathroom on the fifth floor. The man at the desk did not bat an eye at the unusual specifications, and quickly handed me a key.

“Gracias.” I took the stairs to the fifth floor and followed the numbers to 543, near the middle of the hall. I inserted my key and entered, flipping on the light. I gave the room a quick perusal, and, no longer a tourist, did not bother to examine the various amenities of the room. I left my bulky suitcase on a chair next to the door and sat on the corner of the bed. I needed to find my old friend, Pedro, with whom I had arranged a
meeting. I had to reach La Puerta del Sol at three fifteen – a glance at my watch told me it was now two thirty.

I allowed myself a half-hour to examine the meeting grounds for utmost security. Pedro and I would appear as two old friends – which we were – crossing paths in the Plaza. I picked out the bench that was our meeting spot and positioned myself next to a tree twenty yards away. I snapped a few pictures with my cheap camera, soon noticing that another “tourist” had found a spot next to me to take pictures. Then I noticed that he had noticed me as well. Our sight lines connected and I found myself taking in the darkened, lined face of a somewhat short and quite wiry man. “Pedro! As I recall this happened last time we met, too.”

“Yes, the circumstances were quite similar, ... Juan is it?” He gave me a hesitant handshake and a quick grin.

“Ah, I see you still have that knack for detail.” My assumed name, Juan Coneja, was displayed on a tag clipped to my camera bag. “I believe you’re well aware of my needs and preferences.”

“Yes, of course. Enough chit-chat. The envelope I slipped into your sleeve contains the cash you’ll need until you retrieve your car. It’s in the usual spot in the hotel garage. Your weapon of choice is in a waterproof packet strapped to the undercarriage, and additional cash is beneath the dashboard.”

“As always, I thank you for your assistance, and I feel you deserve a clue as to the nature of my mission,” I flashed a grin and winked, as a schoolgirl revealing a secret crush.
Pedro returned the look, but immediately resumed a serious countenance. “That, as always, is not necessary; I have no wish to compromise you, and under certain conditions I would not be able to withhold any such ‘clues.’”

“Ah, but it’s not incriminating evidence – in fact it is but a single word.” I bent slightly, so that my mouth was only inches from his ear. “Burundi.”

My reliable contact immediately gasped and stepped back. “Los Dios; he nearly killed you last time – is this really such a crucial assignment?”

“You know as well as I that all assignments are crucial – but yes, this may be the most crucial I’ll ever have. And I can’t stand to fail again. I want him and I want him bad. I won’t stop ’til I find him and eliminate him.”

“You’re right of course. There are no insignificant assignments – all are of equal importance and are equally dangerous.” Pedro’s thin, dark facial features creased in deep thought. He finally broke his reverie by giving a nod, confirming that what he was about to say was appropriate. “A few days ago I received a tip from my contact in Marseilles which may be of use to you –”

“Is this a reliable source?” I interrupted.

“Yes, of course; you know I would not give you bad information.”

“Yes, of course – I’m sorry. I just need to eliminate all doubt. Continue, please.”

“This source visually confirmed the presence of the man you seek just outside Marseilles two days ago. He also heard from one of Burundi’s... disciples, shall we say... – and this is where my information cannot be completely trusted – that the man was on his way to Barcelona and is to arrive tomorrow afternoon.”
“Jesus! He’s right next-door! He must already know I’m after him.” A tingling shiver scurried up my spine at the thought.

“If he is guilty of whatever crime you are pursuing him for, he may suspect. However, it could merely be a coincidence. He is known to have a narcotics organization headquartered in the area.”

I felt my stomach twist as if huge hands had grabbed my midsection and squeezed, kneading dough. “No. This is no coincidence.” I knew as clearly as anything can be known that Burundi knew I was coming for him. He must have a mole in SMASA; a mole who had informed him of the Stratofist and the press of its theft. That jet was not just stolen to eliminate the United States’ latest and greatest tool in world domination. Burundi had a goal beyond that; one far more important to him and certainly to me as well. The whole theft was a ruse to draw me into his lair and exterminate me. Yali was known to hold a grudge, but this was insane. I had shot him in the guts and he was pissed. I was a bug on his back in a spot he couldn’t itch. He had to get all his goons together to squash me in a group effort.

“How can you be so sure?” Pedro’s question broke into my thoughts, but I processed it before he could repeat it.

“I just know.” I gave him the most serious and truthful look I possessed in my vast stores of expressions. He knew and understood the look; he had seen it a thousand times: the look of a man who is set in his way and cannot be swayed from it. And of a man who is right and knows it. My old friend gave a nod of acceptance and shook my hand in farewell.

* * * * *

9
I awoke the next morning at the crack of dawn to the sound of someone trying to walk silently through the hall. I left my bed silently and slipped my silenced Browning 45 caliber pistol, which I had retrieved from a contact named Raúl the night before, from beneath the pillow. The cold metal grip of my weapon of choice was comforting in my hand. I entered my minuscule bathroom and sat on the toilet to the left of the doorway, with the gun pressed against my right thigh, out of sight.

An intruder would never expect to find me in such a place. In the movies and books, operatives always stand right behind the door with a gun against their cheek. True operatives avoid that position like the plague. An intruder can easily shoot through the wall or slam the door open, crashing your gun into your cheek, knocking teeth loose or cracking bones. That spot is also often visible through the hotel room window. A person outside the door may be just a decoy, while the real threat is a sniper in a room across the street in view of your room. Everything must be considered, nothing overlooked. The bathroom is often the best place to be. The only real danger in it is the lack of a secondary exit.

The door crashed open with such force that anyone standing behind it would have been knocked out cold. I heard the muffled spit of a silenced gun as the intruder loosed a few rounds into the bed where I lay a moment before. Three additional spits followed, one in each side of the closet and another in the center. All of the hiding places were covered except the bathroom. I was dealing with a professional. A professional with three rounds left in his clip. Make that one; two more came through the bathroom door, one smashing the mirror, the other rattling around in the sink.
The man had to know none of his shots had found their target; all had been followed by the unmistakable sounds of bullets striking wood, glass, porcelain, and sheet rock. He knew I was in the bathroom uninjured and probably suspected I was on the john. His pause outside the door was obviously one of indecision. He knew he had only one shot and that his target was armed. His shot had to be very well placed.

The door opened with a crash; it had been kicked just below the knob. I could hear his ragged breath against the doorframe. He was attempting to quiet his breathing and pounding heart in order to detect any movement. I knew he would regain his breath in a few seconds; this was my chance. I rose from the toilet, tensed my legs, and steadied my hands for a clean shot. I reached the door in one leap and loosed two rounds into the man’s neck and forehead. He whirled and squeezed off his last round as my bullets found their marks. I had made it to the side of the door farthest from the toilet and the man under-compensated for my movement, unaware that I had been a long jump champion in high school. He fell to the floor in slow motion, a look of shock at his failure evident on his face.

* * * * *

I opened the window and dropped the man out. It was still quite dark and when he was found, the police would not realize the dead man’s true situation. There was an open dumpster in the alley below my window and the man landed inside. I had removed his gun, wallet, and expensive watch and shoes. The police would think he had been mugged, murdered, and left; the investigation would not be thorough.

I cleaned up the blood on the bathroom floor and bunched up the sheets on the bed so the bullet holes wouldn’t be seen. The maid would just pick up the bunch as it lay
and the holes would not be discovered until after the sheets had been washed. By then, they would no longer be able to be traced to my room. I filled the holes in the doors with pieces of dowel I always carried with me on such trips for similar situations. The slight discolorations would be far less noticeable than holes; they would not be discovered until I was long gone.

The smashed mirror was left in the trash, with a note of apology in its place on the wall. A middle-aged, laid-back tourist might not be likely to smash a mirror, even by accident, but the appearance of the pieces would draw far less attention than a completely missing mirror. Besides, the broken mirror would explain any sounds heard and reported by occupants of neighboring rooms.

I dressed tourist-like: cargo shorts, striped short-sleeved shirt, sneakers, colored socks pulled up as far as possible, and, of course, my camera. This outfit was actually quite convenient, discounting the camera; the shorts and short-sleeves were ideal for mobility, and the sneakers allowed for quick movements, traction, and silence when necessary, not to mention comfort.

I mentioned the possibility of a visit to the well-known Museo del Prado, as well as the Teatro Real on my way through the lobby as I left. My return to La Hotel Residencia was an unlikely event; my bill would be settled at a later date, possibly by Pedro.

My car in the hotel garage was no longer necessary; my quarry was already in Madrid. I would, however, retrieve my money from the vehicle. I entered the underground garage and headed directly for a compact gray sedan in good condition in the center of the building. I walked at a steady gait, reaching into my pocket to withdraw
the key as I approached. I suddenly felt eyes watching me, but could not determine from
where. I glanced from one side to the other, as people generally do upon reaching their
vehicles. I lowered my eyes to the door handle and lined up the key with the slot, my
eyes searching the car’s interior for any inconsistencies and the exterior for signs of
forced entry. There was a slight discoloration next to the door handle and when I touched
it with a fingertip, fresh paint came away.

Someone—a professional—had gotten inside, and had probably found the money
and the gun. Whoever it was had known ahead of time the color of the car and had
brought the paint along. And whoever it was remained in the garage and was watching
me. I couldn’t let them know I suspected. I turned the key and heard the click of the
lock. The sound of the door unlatching echoed through the concrete garage and the
vehicle’s interior light cast an eerie glow on the surrounding cars.

The faint click as I placed my knee on the driver’s seat was like a discharging
shotgun to my heightened senses. The seat contained a bomb rigged to go off when the
weight was released from it, like a land mine. I pretended not to notice the sound and
reached up under the dashboard to retrieve the packet of money. The package was still—
or had been replaced—there. I pulled it out slowly, feeling it all over for trip wires.
There were none. I stuffed the cash in my camera bag and reached beneath the seat.

I located the bomb and grasped the whole bundle of wires attached to it. If all the
wires were pulled out at the same instant, the explosive would be disengaged. I gave the
wires a yank and leapt backwards through the door, racing away from the automobile.
Although I had disengaged the bomb in the seat, I knew there was a backup bomb,
controlled by whoever had entered the car and was surveilling me.
The explosion did not cause the car’s doors to blow off or flames to shoot out in all directions. Nor did it knock me off my feet. This was a bomb placed inside the steering wheel in place of the airbag. It was a quiet, controlled explosion, but designed for certain death. The airbag cavity was packed with razor-sharp metal strips. Upon explosion, these strips would embed themselves deep in the flesh of the car’s driver, and only the driver. Any other occupants of the car would be unharmed. Anyone nearby would be oblivious to the crime taking place.

I removed my Browning from its reassuring position at the small of my back and began my survey of the garage. The bomber had to have been in view of my car, probably inside another vehicle. But now that I had escaped the ambush, the killer would be forced to leave his car and come after me.

The sound of a car door opening and then slamming shut echoed off the concrete walls, and hollow footsteps followed. The killer had not come completely prepared. He had relied too heavily on his explosives and now I had the advantage. The killer wore expensive shoes with hard, loud soles. My sneakers had soft rubber treads and were silent even on the concrete floor of the cavernous garage. I could pinpoint the other man’s exact location with ease, yet he would be oblivious to mine.

The killer was approaching my vehicle and I moved silently to the opposite side of the adjacent car. The man was large — very large. He was dressed in a dark brown suit and had a square head, with close-shaved hair. This man must have been at least six eight and probably approaching three hundred pounds, all of it muscle. And in that size and strength was the man’s downfall. The huge mass of muscle would severely limit his mobility and speed, as would his suit.
I noticed that the man was unarmed and decided it was best not to use my weapon. The sound of gunshots would bring police and others flocking to the building. I approached the giant and tapped him on the shoulder, breaking his nose with a quick jab as he whirled around. My advantage -- that of surprise -- would dissipate quickly; I had to immobilize the man immediately. I did so with another jab, this one smashing into his adam’s apple and causing him to fall against the open car door, clutching his throat rather than using his feet in defense. I body-slammed the door, smashing the man between it and the frame, and breaking one of his knees. As he fell inside the car, the large man’s elbow struck the horn, which had surprisingly not been destroyed by the explosion -- a testament to the bomb maker’s skill. I shoved his legs inside and shut the door.

I had to leave the garage, and quickly, before any curious bystanders arrived. I located the giant’s car -- a hulking silver Mercedes -- and hopped inside. The powerful engine came to life with a roar, and the beast growled smoothly out of the garage.

The expensive car purred smoothly along the streets, challenging the older, smaller, cheaper vehicles and dominating the roadway. Driving the monstrous car, I felt like the center of attention. Appreciative eyes were drawn away from their respective duties to peer at the majestic beast as it passed. Normally, this might have been a good thing -- to be looked up to. But at this time the last thing I wanted was to be noticed. Burundi’s hundreds of “disciples,” as Pedro called them, would be looking for me, and like anyone else, they would also notice the big car. They, however, would take it one step further. They would recognize the driver as the man in the photographs given them by their master. Some would also realize that the car was owned by the big man I had left to die in the garage.
Suddenly, I decided it might not be such a bad idea to be noticed. I could draw in Burundi himself; manipulate his trap to trap him. That would be the name of the game from that point on. Creating traps, manipulating traps, having traps manipulated, remanipulating traps. Traps would become double traps, and those triple traps, and so on until one of us made a mistake. Then, there would be the final confrontation. One would die; the other would come away with nothing but the satisfaction of eliminating a deadly enemy.

Anyway, I had to come up with the next trap. I had destroyed Burundi’s first two. Now it was my turn. I needed to find a place to sit down and think it over. I parked the car beside the road and approached an old café. I pushed through the springed door and heard it slap shut behind me like a horsewhip. Several diners looked up momentarily from their coffee and tapas. I ordered some chorizo and cacahuetes – sausage and peanuts – along with a Coke – they didn’t have Pepsi.

I found a seat at the rear and settled down, munching on peanuts and sipping the soda. The car I had borrowed would be a major player in my plan. As soon as someone recognized car and driver – and it may have already happened – they would report it to Burundi. His troops would immediately be sent to capture the car and its occupant. I needed to find a place I was familiar with and hope Burundi wasn’t as familiar with it. Then I would merely drive there and force him to follow.

It had to be a place Burundi couldn’t anticipate. He couldn’t be allowed to send someone there ahead of me. Therefore, I chose the Hotel Residencia. I would never be expected to return there – not after the two attempts on my life there and not with the dozens of other hotels nearby, where I could easily go instead.
When the car entered the garage and slipped into its previous space, I was watching for other cars to enter behind it. I had offered a man from the cafe two hundred dollars to drive the car into the garage while I watched from the street. The man was reluctant at first, pointing out that he was not a valet and that he wasn’t sure I would pay him even if he agreed. But when I pulled out my roll of bills and peeled off a fifty for a down payment, he snatched it away and bullied past me to get into the car. I also mentioned that if he did a good job, he could keep the car.

The man’s appearance was similar to mine, and the hunters were looking at the car more than the driver, so the dummy did not raise suspicion. The greedy man put on a good show. He was street-smart and knew he couldn’t hurry in his performance. He needed to appear completely natural. And he did; his entrance into the garage was as smooth as could be and he hauled three more silver Mercedes in behind him. These cars were obviously Burundi’s method of payment for his goons. All four were identical vehicles – and why not? He probably owned the entire Mercedes corporation anyway.

The appearance of the four sleek vehicles raised a bit of a raucous around the garage entrance. All to my advantage. The men in the cars would have to be careful not to attract any negative attention.

As I watched, eleven men swarmed out of the silver sedans and surrounded the followed vehicle. Several of the men flashed fake badges to ward off onlookers. My bait stepped from the car to the sound of eleven guns being raised and cocked.

“Hey, wad ees dis?” he demanded, “I no get paid por dis! I geet jeeped! I do nothin’ wrong. All I do ees git fifty small-uns to drive dis big cah in da garage. Wad ees
dis? I wan da resd oh my money!... Hey, where iss he? Where da man who pay me? He owe me – he owe me beeg!” The man shook his fist and looked around wildly, unable to catch sight of me. Eleven big, disappointed men lowered their guns at the sight of the screaming man. One of them pulled a small radio from his pocket and spoke into it. Disappointment was evident in his booming voice.

“We got tricked, Boss. This driver’s nothing but a dumb bribed bum! What should we do?” The radio crackled and the “boss” answered, but I was too far away to make out the response. By the man’s countenance, I figured he was most likely receiving a severe berating for screwing up.

Soon, an overgrown child’s mischievous grin replaced the pained expression as the boss issued new orders. Undoubtedly, he would know I had remained close by to witness the dupe, and was telling his head goon to have the garage and the surrounding area thoroughly searched. I would be on foot, since taxis were hard to come by during tourist season – which was twenty-four hours a day, three-hundred-sixty-five and a quarter days a year.

I was in luck. With all the raucous Yali-boy’s goons were making looking for me, I could easily take several down unnoticed using my well-honed personal skills, with the silenced Browning at my side for backup.

The first five goons didn’t know what hit them. All were removed from commission in the same manner: one hand clamped over the mouth to silence shouts, adan’s apple removed and placed in the breast pocket with the other.

All hell broke loose after that. The sixth guy wore some kind of pungent perfume, which wafted into my nostrils, tickled my nose hair, and caused the most
damaging sneeze I have ever experienced. Instantly, seven pair of sinister eyes (those of the six goons, plus my good buddy, the decoy) homed in on my position. As I was now side by side with Bad Guy Number Six, I hopped behind him and immobilized his arms, locking them together behind his back, in the crook of my arm. I snatched his gun with my free hand (why use my bullets when someone else’s are available?) and placed the barrel just below his belt, front and center.

His good buddies did not care. All five opened indiscriminate fire at once, all hoping a bullet would find its way through to me. Big mistake. As all five released their empty magazines and groped in their pockets for fresh ones, I raised my shield’s Graz-Burya, aimed, and fired six times. Now I had only two assailants, two bullets, and a new, high-quality Russian sidearm remaining. And my two assailants had finished reloading. I opted to quit the scene.

Ducking behind a row of vehicles, I sprinted to the silver Mercedes – engine running, driver’s door open – at the head of the line. I climbed in, slammed it in drive and stomped on the pedal. Oops. Wrong pedal. I shut the door and pressed the accelerator, roaring and screeching my way to the exit of the garage. Just as a police cruiser was entering.

Being a quick study, my immediate reaction was, “Uh-oh!” Then, the thought process took over, I pulled up beside the cruiser, rolled down the power window, and, with a very-frightened-tourist look, said, “They’re over there!””, motioning aft of the boat I was navigating. I sped off as the officer attempted to inform me that I was to be held for questioning as an eyewitness.
Once again, I was eyed with awe as I piloted the silver Merc. This time, however, it may have had something to do with the dozen or so bullet holes and the shattered rear window in addition to the formerly sleek auto. I needed to ditch the car. Quickly.

I did. I left it parked beside the road in front of a cafe. I exited the car wearing a grubby orange cap proclaiming, “Yo Tengo Moxie.” I pulled the brim low and looked at the ground so as not to be conspicuous. Then I remembered the Graz-Burya I held in my hand, in plain view. I’d been off the job too long (nearly a week!) and was becoming dangerously absent-minded; I needed to focus.

Meanwhile, I decided it was a good idea to shove the gun into my pocket. Especially since a pair of policemen, out walking a German Shepherd, had spotted me. I walked right past them as they approached. Before they could turn and take up chase, I had disappeared in the crowd. Lucky for them; they would not have been pleased at the result of capturing me. Not that they would have been able to dwell on it, if you catch my drift.

Anyhow, it was time for someone to set another trap. That someone would not be me. I needed to find a new outfit; too many people had seen me in my current one. I called another of my contacts from a payphone in a hotel lobby. I had memorized the ten-digit number and three four-digit extensions after years of use. The contact, Jorge, was an expert in making operatives seem like chameleons; a person’s appearance could be altered completely with a pair of glasses, hair coloring, contact lenses, or one of a multitude of other tools. Several moments after I had entered the numbers, I heard three faint clicks, then Jorge’s boisterous voice burst over the line.

“Bubba’s Pizza; how may I take your order?”
I recognized the code and pulled my required response from the back of my mind. If my answer was incorrect, the call would be traced and terminated; armed men with unpleasant intentions would arrive at the pay phone within two minutes. “Um, I’d like a large hamburg pizza with extra cheese, please.”

“That should be ready in twenty minutes.” Jorge disconnected the call.

I replaced the receiver and pressed the change lever a couple of times, just in case the phone would give me back my money. No luck.

I had twenty minutes to get to Jorge’s place, which was about a mile away, so I decided to walk. It would probably be quicker than taking a cab anyway. On my way, I had to decide what Burundi was likely to do next, and how I could foil his plan. I figured he was getting sick of the failures of his overpaid goons, so the longer I thwarted his efforts the better the chances of meeting up with Burundi in person, one on one.

I decided at this point all Burundi could do was to keep eyes on all the hotels and on the streets. I just had to watch for the guys standing around with bulges under their too-warm jackets, looking like idiots. I only needed enough of a disguise to allow me to see them before they could see me.

* * * * *

Jorge’s shop was hidden above a clothing store; a false wall in one of the dressing rooms hid the steep stairway to his hole. I entered the shop and browsed for a few minutes before taking a pair of gray and yellow plaid pants to the back of the store. I left them hanging in the changing stall without trying them on, then made my way upstairs.

Jorge was waiting for me, his paunch filling a red overstuffed chair that looked like it had been rescued from a burning seventeenth century castle. Jorge looked like a
dot-commer who had pulled out too late – fat from a few years of good living, but with a strained expression from his current struggle to stay in the black. Blame it on a downturn in the espionage business. With the end of the cold war and a new reliance on fancy electronics, most of the spooks in the world were going out of business, replaced by computer hackers who could break into government networks who were stupid enough to leave their systems connected to the internet.

Anyway, Jorge was glad to see me and always ready to make a sale. When I entered the room, his only reaction was to tilt his head a bit and let his eyes rove over me. After about twenty seconds, he said, “I’m thinking a shade up on the hair, skip the shave, and a little breast augment... The right clothes and you’ll be a whole new man.”

“Fine. What’s that come to? Three, three-fifty?”

After another quick appraisal, Jorge answered, “For you, three and a quarter. And if you kill Burundi, that’s twenty percent off your next visit.”

“Word travels fast.” I wasn’t really surprised, but had no reason not to compliment Jorge’s sources.

“Well, any time a half dozen overgrown idiots end up dead next to a pack of Mercedes, you know who’s in town. Then I get a call from you within a half hour, it’s pretty clear.”

“I guess you have a point. Let’s get to work so I can go earn that discount.”

* * * * *

An hour later and three thousand, two hundred fifty dollars lighter in the wallet, I was back on the street in khakis and a sweater. The combination of clothing, breast augmenter – basically a padded bra with the bonus of bulletproof vest technology – and
stubble made me look a good fifteen pounds heavier, and the slightly lighter hair made
me less recognizable from behind. A slight adjustment in stride also does volumes to
thwart recognition at a distance by even close relatives.

I began walking through the city pretty much randomly, keeping an eye out for
Burundi’s men and grabbing a few glimpses of good looking females. After two hours, I
decided that Burundi’s men were either extremely incompetent at finding me or very
good at hiding. Then, suddenly, I saw one standing on the corner, smoking, because what
else is there to do when you have to stand in one spot looking for someone? Then
another, and another; they were spaced about a hundred yards apart on alternate sides of
the street. Most were smoking, and all had one hand in the pocket of their dark jackets.
Idiots.

All I had to do was wait a few more hours, then follow the men when they quit for
the day. They would lead me straight to Burundi. Normal quitting time – or, more
commonly, guard change – for watchers was around 8 pm, but with these guys it would
probably be closer to 6:30 or 7:00; Burundi liked to hire guys who had something in
common with him, and he had never been late to a meal in his life.

I got into a car that had been parked a few minutes earlier, set my watch alarm for
6:15, and settled down for a nap. The car’s owner was a woman with a well-fed purse
who looked to have a good deal of shopping stamina. I would not be disturbed for as
long as I needed. Walking around for two hours with Kevlar under your sweater can take
a lot out of you; I fell asleep immediately.
I awoke at 6:14 and deactivated my watch alarm before it could go off. The woman had not yet returned, but Burundi's men were paying close attention to their watches. They seemed to be more vigilant in watching for replacements than for looking for me. I got out of the car and moved closer to one of the watchers. He was perhaps the thinnest of them, less than two hundred pounds and more high strung. He shifted his weight continuously from one foot to the other, and seemed to have a nervous tic. Every five seconds his right nostril flared as the corner of his mouth moved back in a demented smirk.

I placed myself about ten feet to his right and waited. Five minutes later, the replacements arrived. They parked their cars, but left them unlocked with the keys inside so that the other men could take them. Unfortunately, I didn’t get a chance to decide how to sneak into a car without getting caught. As the men exited their vehicles, they did not move into position along the street; they headed straight for me from all directions. There was no way to escape. Now I realized that the nervous tic of the watcher was really a symptom of the struggle to pretend I had not been seen. These men knew what they were doing; Yali must have outsourced on this job.

As the men – fifteen in all – surrounded me, I had to make yet another decision: put up a fight first, or simply let them take me. Actually escaping was an impossibility. It was obvious from the men’s demeanor that they had no intention of capturing me peacefully; I would be physically abused regardless of my own actions. I may as well do as much damage as possible before being apprehended.

The men would be hesitant to use weapons on the street, and they obviously were under orders to capture rather than kill; I had the advantage, what with my internationally
recognized license to kill. As the circle closed around me, I dropped into a crouch and began firing, pivoting slightly after each shot. I was able to get three shots off before the men started pulling their own weapons, and four more as they yelled at each other not to kill me. As I squeezed off my last shots, a white-hot pain slashed through my left calf, and then the men moved in and grabbed me as I fell. Three men held me down as three others loaded the nine dead bodies into their cars.

When they were done, sweating, bloody, and swearing, they threw me in a back seat next to the man with the tic and drove off. I had been careful to shoot that one in his twitching mouth, and pieces of teeth and jaw were on the back of his jacket. It was pretty disgusting, but at the moment, I was just looking for something to stem the bleeding in my leg. All the hot blood made it slippery, and it was a challenge to tie the man’s handkerchief around my leg. It wasn’t big enough for the job, and I had to clamp my hand on the wound to limit the flow. It quickly became sticky and began to cool.

Soon, I could feel my arm strength flagging as more blood pumped toward the wound, and I had to keep clenching my hand and flexing my arm to force more circulation to that area. Luckily, it was not a long trip to Burundi’s place, and three of the men pulled me out of the car and pretty much carried me to see their boss. The others headed straight for the kitchen for their overdue meal, leaving me a chance for an exit if the opportunity arose.

The men hauled me through thick double doors into Burundi’s office, a nice room with mahogany accents and soft burgundy carpet. It was at least five hundred square feet, with a giant flat panel TV on one wall. Burundi was working on a pepperoni pizza when the men sent me crashing through the door and into a heap on the floor.
Burundi’s sagging jowls indicated that he was not happy. He leapt to his feet faster than I would have thought possible, overturning his chair and spattering pizza sauce on his suit jacket. “What the fuck are you doing?” His voice rattled the framed picture of his daughter, hanging near the TV. “You’re getting blood all over my office! That’s brand new Saxony New Zealand wool carpet?”

“Sorry boss…” All three men dropped their gaze to the floor to avoid eye contact. One added, “It’s a nice carpet, sir… I’m sure it can be cleaned.” Another attempted an “It doesn’t really show up that much, anyway,” as the third guy tried changing the subject: “Hey, we, ah, brought you Mr. Leghz.”

It worked, but did nothing to calm his anger. “Harry Leghz. Never thought you’d get caught, did you? Fucking Americans, always so cocky…” Burundi would have looked pretty cocky himself if not for the pizza sauce speckling his doughy cheeks. I was still in a bit of pain from the gunshot wound, which affected my capacity for coming up with witty responses; I allowed Burundi his monologue.

“You’re an annoying one, Leghz; your refusal to die is wasting my time and my money, and you’re raising my blood pressure. All you’ve earned by escaping my traps is the privilege of getting the shit beat out of you by my size thirteens.” Yali’s thugs grabbed me by the elbows and gave me a shaking to amuse themselves as their boss slipped out of his cap-toed oxfords and pulled on giant steel-toed boots in their place. I must admit I became a bit worried at this point.

As Burundi began tying his boots, gasping for breath as he bent over beside his desk, he managed a glare and a grunted “get him warmed up, boys; don’t make me do all the fucking work.” I was thrown to the floor yet again, and I managed to curl into a ball
and cover my head before the first kick connected with my tailbone. I did my best to avoid exposing my groin as my hips thrust reflexively forward and the pain shot up my spine. Finally, I could almost ignore the burning of the bullet hole in my leg.

Burundi finished struggling with his boots. “Alright, I’m coming, you little bastard. You’re about to pay for all the shit you’ve put me through, the time and money, my carpet, and this pizza that’s gonna be cold by the time I — …”

His raging voice was cut off by a gagging, puking sound. The kicking stopped and I looked up. Burundi clutched his chest as his knees buckled and his massive arm swept his entire meal from his desk as he fell. The hulking body tumbled atop his leather swivel chair as pizza and soft drink flopped and fizzed down the back of the desk, tumbling over drawer pulls, leaving pepperoni circles and grape soda purple polkadotting the fat man’s face as he died.

My captors ran to their boss’s side, each telling the others to call for a doctor. As three hands grappled for the phone, and the arguing escalated, I rolled and crawled out the door, slid my way painfully down the stairs on my side, and managed to stumble out of the building. I stole a car from the driveway (the keys were conveniently left in it) and used the cell phone inside to call in a SMASA team as I struggled to drive to the airport. The blood loss made it difficult to remain alert, so my erratic driving blended well with the rest of the traffic.

The SMASA team was standing by in the city, and would raid Burundi’s place before the confusion died down. Meanwhile, I put a good bandage on my leg and caught the first plane home. Both the theft and the existence of Stratofist were explained away
as complete fabrication orchestrated by terrorists; the hype was replaced by a new headline the next day:

**SCARED TO DEATH**
Terrorist/Drug Lord Dies of Heart Attack

After reminiscing of Burundi’s greater acts of infamy, the article explained that an autopsy had revealed several clogged arteries from an unhealthy diet high in cholesterol. To this day, killing one of the world’s most feared men with stress remains one of my proudest accomplishments.
A Wander In Winter

The twin engines of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet combat plane screamed, then stalled as the German fighter rocketed toward the earth. Nick Schilling, on vacation from SMASA, shouted into the radio as the cockpit filled with smoke. “Mayday, mayday! This is Me262-12. Does anybody read me?” His only answer was the annoying static that incessantly emanated from the radio.

Schilling shattered one of the cockpit windows with a quick jab of his gloved fist to discharge some of the smoke. His vision cleared momentarily as the pressure equalized, forcing out the smoke, but was immediately re-obliterated by a new, denser cloud. He struggled just to breathe through the gagging stench of burning plastic. Finally, the plane began to slow as treetops cracked thunderously against the 35-foot fuselage. It was of little relief, as the breathtaking lurch of the plane’s dive was replaced by waves of pain vibrating through his body with every collision. There was nothing he could do besides struggle to adjust the slats and flaps to make his descent as gradual as possible. He had installed a large parachute to allow the use of smaller landing strips, but he could not use it now; it would just get caught in the trees, throw off the plane’s attitude, and be torn from its mount.

The aircraft bucked and yawed to a halt in the center of a small clearing surrounded by stunted firs. Nick was forced to remain immobile for a few minutes as the
pain in his clobbered joints subsided. The cease in forward motion allowed the smoke to spiral skyward; as the cockpit cleared, Schilling searched the radar screen for other aircraft, though he knew none could be detected while his plane was on the ground. The screen was blank, but for the annoyingly obsolete-seeming green glow typical of the dated electronics he had personally installed.

Fortunately, the fire was minor and burned itself out quickly; there was no danger of exploding the extra fuel cells Schilling had mounted in place of the plane’s artillery. As the icy cold replaced the heat from the engines—Nick had installed conductive fins, a small fan, and insulated ductwork to reroute some of the heat through forced convection to the cockpit—and the plane’s racket was drowned by silence, Nick squeezed his stinging eyes shut, massaged his throbbing temples, and assessed his situation. He suspected that the plane’s failure had begun with a compressor malfunction, followed by some sort of electrical fire in the nose, and the latter was what had sent smoke into the cockpit—the insulation on the wiring was the only possible source of the smell of burning plastic. His starboard engine had failed with the compressor, and the port engine had then automatically shut down. This was a fail-safe system Nick had built in to prevent engine failure due to rapid throttling, a problem that had plagued the operators of the original Messerschmitt fighters.

Schilling had also upgraded the plane’s original, temperamental, failure-prone engines using high-grade steel components, but even these new components had just proven inadequate to endure the abuse associated with the turbine design, which included rigidly mounted blades—a design that resulted in large stress concentrations at the base of each blade. If he ever got out of here, he would have to concede to his younger
brother’s assertion that using more modern General Electric turbojets was necessary to make the aircraft relatively efficient and reliable. Here was further proof that, despite their differences, collaboration between machinists and engineers was a mutually beneficial arrangement, not to mention that it might not be such a good idea for a man like Nick, with no engineering degree, to attempt to fix an obsolete airplane engine, let alone try to fly the plane alone. Regardless, he certainly was not going to be flying out of here – even if the plane worked, there was no room to take off.

His World War II era German fighter had completed its unplanned, uncomfortable landing about one hundred miles from the end of Nick’s flight from his home in Polson, Montana, to his brother’s hunting lodge near Elephant Point, on Eschscholtz Bay, Alaska. Unfortunately, Nick had not told anyone where he would be; he was one week into a month-long vacation, and he had made this trip a week earlier than originally planned, hoping to surprise his brother with his early arrival. He could not expect anyone to come looking for him any time soon, could not simply stay with the plane and wait for help.

The plane was now lying atop crumpled landing gear seventy miles north of the rim of the Arctic Circle and about sixty miles from the nearest town, Kobuk. By his best estimate, Schilling was in a valley of the Schwatka Mountains, between the Gates of the Arctic and Kobuk Valley National Parks. He hoped he was in one of the main valleys, which run nearly straight southward toward the Inupiat Eskimo village of Kobuk.

Now, as he took inventory of his emergency gear, Nick became vaguely aware of the cold prying relentlessly into the plane, whistling through the fractures in the fuselage. He dug out and donned cold-weather clothing, then stuffed a small survival kit, what little food he had – he had brought little, expecting to subsist mainly on fish caught near his
brother's cabin - and spare ammunition into a small, comfortable pack. He thrust his ever-present Glock 17 9mm pistol into his large coat pocket and slung his Winchester Model 70 Classic, Super Grade hunting rifle over his shoulder. "Some vacation," he grumbled.

Now that he was physically, though not mentally, ready - he was still too furious with the plane and himself to be completely resigned to the task of hiking the sixty miles south to Kobuk - Schilling opened the cockpit hatch and dropped to the ground. The moment he withdrew from the aircraft, a vigorous blast of wind nearly swept him from his feet. He resisted the urge to climb back into the plane to escape the wind, pulled his ski mask down over his face and drew his parka hood tight. He was forced to squint to keep the snow from blowing in his eyes as he took a compass bearing and set off toward the distant foothills. As he looked back at the plane, he was surprised to see that both engines remained mounted to the wings. The front landing gear, however, was nowhere to be seen, and had probably been torn off during the collisions with the treetops.

As he gazed at the trees and hills, he became aware of how little he knew of what they might hide. He was glad to have his rifle and pistol, in case of an encounter with a bear. Though many bears would be hibernating, those who were starving, still searching for food, were the most dangerous ones; they would be desperate and would eat anything they could find. Scanning the landscape, he realized that he was the easiest target, the most visible prey. The trees were not big enough for him to climb and he was well aware that there is no surefire way to kill a bear before it kills you.

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Schilling withdrew his compass once more as he stood on the crest of a small mount overlooking his crashed plane. He turned away, peering down at the compass, waiting for the red arrow to drift over the “N” to show when he was facing south. He gave the tool a vicious smack, to no avail; the needle had frozen in the liquid. Nick had not even thought about the fact that the compass had been made for warmer climates; in fact, he even owned a non-liquid-filled compass, but had not bothered to exchange the equipment in his survival pack. He snapped the compass in two and hurled it from the mountain in fury as the bitter wind stifled the string of curses that threatened to escape his constricted throat. He peered into the sky in search of the sun’s glowing pate, but failed; a dense blanket of cloud shrouded it. Even as he looked down in defeat, the clouds began to release a flourish of heavy powder.

* * * * *

Schilling awoke curled into a tight ball in a small cave. He blinked repeatedly, trying to see through the utter darkness that surrounded him. He remembered that it had been early afternoon when he went to sleep, and should still be light out now. He retrieved a compact LED flashlight from his pack, toggled the switch, and swiveled the narrow, vibrant beam about himself, searching for the cave’s opening. It had snowed so much as he slept that the opening was no longer distinguishable from the rest of the cave. In an uncharacteristic moment of claustrophobia, Nick pounded the walls desperately until he encountered less resistance.

After tunneling through nearly three feet to reach sunlight, he collapsed back into the cave for a moment’s rest. A few seconds later, the shivering began and rapidly increased until he struggled to control it. He suddenly wished he had a thick layer of fat
to keep himself warm. He laughed at the thought, clambered out of the cave, and set off, hoping he was heading south. His brother probably would have told him some useless fact about the thermal conductivity of fat compared to that of muscle, or some such foolishness.

Less than a hundred yards from the cave, Schilling collapsed in a drift of powder, utterly exhausted. He realized he had little chance of reaching civilization in snow so deep. His only hope was that if he made snowshoes from the scattered fir and alder trees, the powdery snow would support his more widely distributed weight. He spent half an hour securing two five-foot green fir saplings in loops and filling the voids with a mesh of smaller fir and alder branches, using the larger, stiffer branches where his feet would be tied to the shoes. He used a ball of twine from his survival kit to lash the sticks together when necessary, and to tie his feet to the shoes.

* * * * *

The snowshoes had been useless, only serving to trip him up and more rapidly sap his strength and he had promptly discarded them upon discovering this; the snow was simply too powdery in the sub-zero temperature. At least he could find comfort in the fact that the same cloudiness that prohibited the sun from melting the snow surface to form a more viscous, more supportive layer also removed the danger of snow blindness.

He had hurried along at as fast a pace as he dared while avoiding tiring too quickly. He scarcely made two miles in an hour, he estimated. But this thought did not discourage him enough to cause him to lose his head. Schilling had learned nearly fifteen years before, during his special training when he first joined SMASA, how to control his emotions as well as methods to survive in any climate on Earth. But over those years, he
had become slightly rusty on survival in the arctic, as most of his assignments had taken him to tropical regions. Still, he thought, he was lucky to have received the training at all. Because of his height (he stood at a mere five feet, four and a half inches tall), they had nearly turned him down when he applied to join SMASA.

After Nick had lain still for a few minutes, the cold had crept through his layers of clothing and he was forced to bring his rest to a close. He set an even swifter pace than before until he had warmed, then slowed to a more comfortable rate. It could have been an enjoyable experience, serene and beautiful, had his life not been at stake. He trudged on through nightfall and long into the darkness, glad that he had thought to dismantle the cumbersome rifle. He had stuffed it in his pack, realizing that if he remained in the arctic weather long enough to require more food than he had in his survival kit, he would doubtless die from exposure to the extreme cold. He still kept his pistol in his pocket for protection against bears.

Finally, shortly before midnight, Schilling reached a dense windfall and, after heaping the jagged leaves from a dense stand of alder trees over the branches, then adding a layer of snow above that, settled into the snug shelter for the remainder of the night. He wrapped himself in a space blanket – a thin plastic film with a metallic coating designed to reflect most of the body’s radiated heat back to the body – to help keep warm.

As Nick slept, dreams of his brother’s cozy hunting lodge seeped through his mind. He saw and felt the flickering warm light from the gas lamps, tongues of yellow lapping at the walls, the furniture, his resting form beneath layers of flannel, fleece, and bear fur. Flames, leaping with vibrant energy within the stone fireplace, sent shadows of
rough-hewn beams charging along the ceiling, then receding just as rapidly, only to be recast at another angle an instant later, waves of warmth, chaotic yet serene, soothing.

* * * * *

When he awoke to the darkness of predawn, he was glad only that the licking flames of his dreams had not transformed into the tongue of a hungry bear at his face. He planned to travel at least thirty miles with only a break at noon for lunch and no more than a half-dozen shorter breaks throughout the rest of the day. During the previous day, Schilling had trekked approximately twenty miles. Since it had already been ten o'clock in the morning when he struck out that day, he had decided to begin this day at four o’clock. It was now noon and he had accomplished slightly over fifteen miles already, having traveled nonstop with the exception of one short break — a call of nature — since the beginning of the day’s journey. He was now almost used to the constant blinking to keep his watering eyes from feeling as if they would freeze over, and the mucus freezing in his nostrils, making his breath a soggy wheeze.

Now, as he ate a small portion of his rations — homemade beef jerky and dehydrated banana slices (the only form in which he could stand the fruit), Nick noticed that his joints were becoming progressively stiffer and the feeling in his hands was rapidly diminishing despite his thick mittens. He passed a naked hand over the stubble that had sprouted on his cheek, but felt only a resistance to his arm’s motion, rather than the expected prickle of the individual hairs against his knuckles. His toes had long since gone numb and that numbness was now creeping along his feet and up into his legs. The sting of the frozen air against his face had also vanished, though the wind had not waned. Even his thighs prickled from the cold that had eventually seeped through layers of Gore-
tex, wool, and polypropylene. He realized that he would now be forced to take longer, more frequent breaks and build fires to chase away the numbness. His chances of meeting his goal of thirty miles was now a quickly fading hope in the back of his mind, despite the additional hours available that day.

Schilling finished his meal and inexplicably, capriciously elected to move on immediately rather than build a fire. He set out, and as he walked, his mind began to slowly detach from reality, as if turning the opposite way from his body at a fork in a road. He had lost control of his thoughts and emotions and he began to worry. He needed to get to Kobuk, to get to his brother’s cabin in Elephant Point. He did not know what would happen to Steve if Nick died out here today. His brother was smart, an expert in everything technical, but he had no understanding of and no interest in people. It was why he lived alone in Alaska, communicating only through technical journals and consultation via satellite email for engineering firms.

Nick Schilling was the only person with whom Steve could interact directly. Steve seemed content alone, but Nick knew he lived for those occasional visits, had seen the physical change his brother went through each time he saw Nick, the haze lifting from his eyes, his thin shoulders rising from their slump, the slack jaws suddenly hardening as merry crinkles were resurrected from the doughy flesh at the corners of his mouth and eyes. Nick was Steve’s only reprieve from intellectual endeavors; he would be devastated when Nick stopped visiting, and he knew no one else to even begin to take over Nick’s small but crucial role in his life.

Nick could not allow himself to fail today; his brother’s survival was at stake as surely as was his own. Yet he could no longer rein in his mind. He could not focus on
the physical struggle; his mind skipped from thought to thought at random, with no apparent connection from one moment to the next. He lost track of both his thoughts and the passage of time, had no perception of the physical; the world was nothing more than a white blanket swimming, weaving before his eyes as he stumbled onward in whichever direction he needed to step to avoid plunging face-first into the powdery drifts.

He thought of polar bears, brown bears, black bears, his job, his high school girlfriend, eating greasy, salty popcorn in a crusty seat while the rubber soles of his shoes made a kissing sound as they shifted on the sticky floor of a movie theater. He thought of building elaborate snow forts with his brother when they were kids. He thought of the many people who lost their way and wandered in circles for hours and sometimes days, came upon their own tracks, and noticed their freshness. How they would follow the tracks at a rapid pace, hoping to meet the person not far ahead. How they would stumble on for hours until finally collapsing in complete exhaustion, or even death. He should not have been thinking about this, worrying about this. Nick had been trained to adjust his stride to evade the natural tendency to travel in an arc; for years, he had consciously increased the length of his step with his right foot, the increase dependent on the terrain, the amount of gear he carried, and the distribution of the load on his body. On the other hand, it was still an educated guess at best, and he had very little practice covering long distances in deep snow.

As these wisps of thought flitted through Nick’s mind, the hallucinations began. Images of his crashed plane and his footprints marched before his eyes, though he knew well that the snowstorm and wind would have long since obliterated the tracks. Steve’s face appeared, gleeful at the sight of Nick, then suddenly sad, then, finally, tragically
devoid of any expression; emotionless, uncaring, closed off finally and irreversibly from
the world. Nick soon lost grasp of even rambling thought, and the number thirty flashed
repeatedly through his mind, a solitary neon sign in a deserted city in darkness.

He stumbled and fell, striking his head on some solid surface. He struggled to
rise, but his efforts were futile. Instead, he floundered in search of whatever he had
landed on. His knuckles found the rubber of a discarded car tire and he knew he’d made
it; he had reached the outskirts of Kobuk. He went limp with relief and allowed himself a
last moment’s rest before moving on. As he curled into a snug ball in the snow, a sudden
warmth surged in his shoulder and a horrifying grating crunch assaulted his ears. Nick’s
eyes exploded open and he stared into the elastic wetness of flared black nostrils.

The continuous crunch of bones and the snuffling breath of the bear, this new,
superbly tangible life threat ironically forced life to wash back through Nick’s mind and
body. Adrenaline powered through his veins, superseding all thought and feeling, even
the implosive force that had momentarily clutched his stomach and chest. The severed
blood vessels to his arm automatically pinched themselves closed, nearly stopping the
blood flow and completely shutting down the nerves in the area.

What began as a feeble flailing at the attacking bear became a powerful
clobbering at the animal’s snout. The bear seemed not to notice, and soon Nick gave in
and diverted his full concentration into forcing his body into limpness. Almost
immediately, the bear released him, retreated a short distance, and lay down to watch for
signs of life. Nick kept his breathing as shallow as he could manage and stared at the
malnourished but still huge animal five yards away, focusing on the puffs of moist air
erupting from the bear’s snout. The only way to keep the bear from attacking again was
to remain immobile, but if he did so he would still die from exposure, expedited by blood
loss. The only option that had even the slightest chance of keeping him alive was to try
to reach his pistol and shoot the bear before it could maul him again.

He tried to convince himself that this was not, could not be happening, not now,
when he had defeated nature’s wrath. This half-dead, starving, stupid bear could not
conquer him. He had the strength, the intelligence, and the tools to defeat this brute.

Even as Nick’s good hand jerked toward his pocket, the bear’s nose twitched and
the slow, regular rhythm of the breath drifting hotly from the nostrils was interrupted.
Nick rolled away and clawed for the weapon as the bear leapt effortlessly from his resting
position. The click of the hammer drawing back and the thunder of the explosion
propelling the 9mm bullet from the barrel were nearly drowned out by the roar of the
giant brown bear as its head met Nick’s, the gaping jaws surrounding the fragile skull and
snapping shut, grinding the cranium and tearing flesh. Nick fired again and again,
driving the pistol barrel against the brute’s head as his finger jerked repeatedly at the
trigger.

He felt blood and bone shards flying against his hand, and only the tufts of fur
that joined them told him that they were the bear’s rather than his own. The bear had lost
large portions of its right jaw and skull, and the bullets had torn through much muscle
tissue, but still the jaws clamped Nick’s skull, the bear’s breath and saliva flowing over
Nick’s face in gradually slowing pulses as the beast died. Nick could not free himself,
the bear’s dying strength still dwarfing the man’s desperate throes in his last struggle for
life.
The wet, hot darkness of the bear’s mouth seemed interminable and in stark contrast to the cold wind assaulting the rest of Nick’s body. His head seemed to be boiling into a mush even as his legs were freezing solid. He wished now, as he awaited the bear’s death and his own, that he had shot himself instead of draining all his bullets into this great hulk that was now slowly killing him.

New waves of panic swept through him as he struggled to release his head. It was the panic, multiplied by a thousand, of a child who has stuck his head between the balusters, the squirming in his stomach and flutter in his chest incongruous with the immobility of his upper body.

Only the eventual drop in the temperature within the oral cavity signaled the bear’s death; there was no apparent decrease in the force compressing Nick’s skull. Every blow to the bear’s head, every attempt to loosen the jaws sent jarring pain through Nick’s body as bones ground together and flesh continued to tear.

Nick’s left arm had been rendered completely useless by the mauling, leaving no way to lever the jaws open; he could only thrust upward as the weight of his head and body held the bear’s lower jaw down. The pain gradually fell off as either the nerves shut down or his awareness of them melted away, and Nick thrust repeatedly with all his strength, his body flopping like a rag doll’s as the bear’s massive head just nodded up and down, refusing to surrender. Finally, Nick’s thrusting hand impaled itself on the bear’s teeth and he could only gasp as his strength was sapped and the adrenaline that had fueled him disappeared.

He let his hand flap to his side, seeping blood into the snow as his anger melted and hope finally deserted him. Sweat, saliva, and a mixture of blood from the bear’s
head and his own coursed down his face, plugging his nose to provoke quick huffs of exhalation, then dribbling into his mouth and forcing into his throat. He was slowly drowning in blood, even as he bled and his limbs froze in the cold. It was a slow race in which the winner would finally kill him, and he could do nothing but sputter blood from his throat as he waited. It would not be long now; he would perhaps be found in weeks or months or years, maybe never; his brother would retreat forever into his own mind, and Nick’s place in the world would soon fade and be forgotten.

Nick Schilling’s final breath gurgled from his throat and his body became limp in the bloody snow. As the body cooled, fresh snow burst from the lumpy clouds above and steadily buried the last traces, leaving the landscape to seem once again barren and serene from above.
Jason: The Duck Bill Tells Only Truth

Jason was a cripple, and sometimes he hated it, wished he had died in the car crash. When he was lying in the hospital bed all he could think about was the accident, reliving it over and over again. It never got less frightening to remember the experience, how his whole body had just frozen the moment the car got out of his father’s control. His chest had felt like it would explode from the pressure of the air in his lungs, and every second seemed interminable as he saw and felt every bit of the car’s motion, the world whirling about him as the car spun off the road, the sudden shock of impact as the car passed through a wooden fence, the snap of his neck and sudden cold wave that passed down through his body, stiff pain so intense his ears buzzed and he couldn’t blink as the wheels dug into the lawn and the car flipped and white resin deck chairs scattered as the car scraped across concrete blocks toward the swimming pool. Then the almost insignificant tingle of glass shards in his face as he passed through the windshield and silently slumped into the water. He remembered that sudden feeling of peace as his body soared the length of the pool, his complete lack of concern as all he noticed was the pattern of blue squares on the pool wall, gliding silently past. He remembered his total confusion and near disappointment as he was pulled from the pool by some stranger and he coughed chlorinated water and couldn’t see through the blood and water filling his eyes.
Two weeks later, the doctors had told Jason he might have brain damage as a result of brain asphyxia, and that there might be lasting physical effects. They were not specific about it, but Jason did not believe there was any truth to it; he felt fine and was confident he would be out of the wheelchair by the end of the month.

In the meantime, he found that the wheelchair could be a convenience in certain situations – nobody wanted to tell some kid in a wheelchair that he couldn’t do something or couldn’t be somewhere. Most days he managed to sneak out of the hospital while the nurses were busy elsewhere and go wherever he liked for a few hours before they found him and brought him back. He didn’t understand that part – that one nurse must really like him, to go out looking for him every day and bring him back, yet never do anything to prevent him from leaving the next day.

Maybe she understood that he just liked to watch people, to learn every detail he could of their lives. He didn’t really care – let the nurses think what they would as long as he got his way.

Today, he had slipped out and wheeled himself right up to the junior high school playground a few blocks from the hospital, and through the gate, the crushed stone along the fence scrambling to send the big rubber wheels weaving haphazardly and making the small front wheels click rapidly side to side on their swivels. His breathing was heavy from the struggle to stay on course, but it felt good to experience that physical exertion again, to feel the burning in the new muscle developing in his chest and arms. He wished he could feel it in his legs as well, missed most of all that strangely gratifying pain he had felt while stretching after a long run.
Jason came here at least twice a week, one of his several regular observing posts, so the kids were used to his presence and no longer really noticed him. But he noticed them. He knew each one’s name, had learned so much from watching and listening he sometimes thought if he tried he could become friends with any one of them he wanted to. He mounted the ridge of the pavement’s edge and wheeled smoothly past three not terribly athletic boys as they scuffed about playing their usual, apparently rule-less basketball game, and moved onto the grassy, gently-sloping hill, where he had a good view of a group of girls gathered in a tight ring as they shared insights on some secret topic.

Jason felt an urge to join the girls, to find out what amused them so, but was afraid they would be bold enough to reject him if he approached the whole group. Besides, he did not really have anything to say to anyone anyway. Nonetheless, he wanted a friend; he was no longer satisfied just watching everyone else, living vicariously through these laughing, yelling, playing, fighting beings. He knew which ones would make good friends, the ones who had never given him a second glance. He did not want to be friends with someone who felt sorry for him, those who snuck glances the first few times he showed up, the ones who stared when they thought he couldn’t see them, then whispered to their friends, cupping a hand over the mouth as if that somehow hid the fact they were talking about the strange man with wheels on his chair.

No, he wanted someone different, someone who might not want to be friends with him – he felt he could learn more from someone he did not understand yet, maybe even someone who bothered him, like that chubby blond girl with the spray of freckles on her cheeks, Elisabeth, who was part of the group of girls he was watching, and, in fact,
seemed to be their leader at the moment. She was probably the one who had instigated this covert banter by disclosing some rumor about someone’s secret crush. He averted his eyes quickly as one of the other girls glanced in his direction and a small wave of unease surged from his chest up through his face. He thought he caught a glimpse of the nurse a way down the street, heading his way; he moved forward until the kids climbing on the jungle gym hid the nurse from him, so he could ignore her.

Elisabeth had always annoyed him. She seemed nice enough, smart, not bad-looking. It was the way she walked that bothered him. She stomped, just drove her feet straight down until the earth stopped them. It seemed to Jason that this incessant stomping might burn a fair number of extra calories, and certainly develop either strong knees and ankles or a stress fracture. She almost seemed angry, especially seen from behind, her placid expression hidden by a curtain of soft, light hair; and, naturally, that solid, thoroughly opaque skull. The expression would still be hidden if she were bald. In fact, he realized, it might be even more hidden, that baldness manifesting an unpleasant, angry appearance contrary to the lively sheen of her hair as the sunlight radiated through it.

He cleared the image of the bald girl from his mind, preferring the soft blond hair, its ends just brushing the shoulders of that powder-blue fleece jacket. That one jacket somehow made her infinitely more attractive. He thought it must bring out her eyes, but realized he did not even know what color they were, though he imagined them as blue. Or brown, maybe. Definitely not green or hazel. Well, not “definitely,” but he felt fairly sure. He stopped himself as he discovered he had been unconsciously rolling closer to the group of girls, not even noticing his wheels tearing the grass of the slope, still damp
from the morning’s light rain. The treads of his tires had seized small chunks of damp clay and sent them around and onto his palms. He had not thought to bring gloves, and was forced to brush the filth off on the thighs of his jeans, leaving his hands with a gritty feeling as they dried. His legs quickly developed an annoying itch from the wetness warming in the sun.

At any rate, Elizabeth would not be his type even if he were still her age; she was not athletic enough. Though she did seem like the type who would make a good mother; very caring, and experienced, with several younger siblings who she had no small part in taking care of. She reminded him of a girl who had been in elementary school with him. He had liked her, secretly and inexplicably, and she had liked him overtly. She had chased him for years, sometimes quite literally, though she did not run fast enough to catch him on the playground.

He had hated that — being chased, running away from a girl. He had not run because he disliked girls or because he was afraid. He ran because he disliked being chased. It did not really make sense, but he had figured that they would stop trying if they were discouraged enough. He didn’t have to worry about that now, stuck in this metal contraption, hardly able to wiggle his toes, let alone sprint around a playground.

As he watched the girls huddled together, momentarily indivisible, he remembered the one time he had been caught, when a group of girls had surrounded him and he had felt painfully trapped, and then it was over, with almost disappointing brevity — some girl had kissed him and he had squirmed free and it was done. That was the strange thing about girls — they could fight with each other and cry and all that, but when it came to boys, they all worked together.
Not so with the guys. He shifted his gaze back to the boys at their basketball game, now hurling rude, meaningless comments back and forth as swiftly as the ball moved amongst them. When females showed up, it was every man for himself. Still, he had definitely preferred being one of the guys; there never seemed to be any truly hurt feelings. They all made fun of each other equally, calling each other gay and bragging impractically about penis size, though none of them ever meant it, and everyone knew nobody meant it. Nobody ever got teased for being too dumb or too smart or not good at sports; nobody was teased about the real things. It had been a nice arrangement. Plus, he would have hated having to sit down to pee.

Jason swore under his breath as he saw that the nurse had caught sight of him while he was watching the girls. He rolled away from her as she moved quickly toward him, looking concerned, but nevertheless only serving to ruin his day. The hazy peal of the electronic recess bell burst through the soggy noon air as Jason tried to hold on to hope that the nurse would let him stay a little longer. He wanted to just watch the kids, think about them instead of lying in a hospital bed with nothing to do and nothing to occupy his mind. Now the kids made their way toward the school entrance, some running, some moping, most doing their best to ignore the barks of the exasperated teachers who could only gain consolation if the recess ended with no injuries.

As the nurse reached his side, Jason caught a glimpse of Elisabeth’s stomping form disappearing through the glass double doors, then the woman gripped his arm and he pivoted his chair and coasted off the grass and across the pavement, plunging off onto the crushed stone to clatter through the gate and back onto the sidewalk.
Before he knew it, he was back in the hospital bed wondering why he never resisted the nurse’s demands, tried to escape her grasp. It seemed like every time he started enjoying himself, she showed up, grabbing his arm and taking him away, forcing him to lie in bed and stare at the ceiling until he found an opportunity to sneak off again. She always just appeared suddenly, always able to find him, and somehow this pretty little brunette had the power to pull him, a fit eighteen-year-old in a fast-moving wheelchair, away from what he wanted most, though she gave him nothing in return besides a headache and a dull pain in his bruised arm, where she always grabbed him.

Now, she was changing his awful blue hospital pajamas, and suddenly the smell from the rain and mud on them assaulted him, and he could not understand why it would smell so bad, and the dampness and itchy feeling had seeped most of the way down his legs, and even up around his waist. He tried to block it out of his mind and looked off out the window, surprised to see the sun setting and lights shutting off in the office building next door. He looked back at the wheelchair in the corner, folded and unsoiled. Tears pooled inexplicably in his eyes as the nurse breathed heavily with the effort of cleaning his unresponsive body and changing the clammy sheets as he lay on them. Daffy Duck laughed at him from his Band-Aid abode concealing the hole in Jason’s arm where the nurse had stuck her needle.
Impervious Enthusiasm For Maniacal Malfeasance

“I’m unarmed!” He shouted it, his strained, high, cracking voice slapping against the concrete pillars of the darkened garage. There was a sudden squeak of soft rubber on the floor as his hunter located him. Andrew raised his arms above his head and faced the man as he approached.

The man took his time, circling slightly and sweeping the area with his eyes, but keeping his weapon trained on Andrew until they stood face to face in the shadow of a pillar, a ray of sunlight roiling dust from the man’s right sneaker. The pursuer allowed himself the tight smile of a man who has caught his quarry after months of searching.

“Turn around and place your hands on your head, feet spread.” As he was searched thoroughly for weapons, Andrew finally felt a bit of relief that he would be arrested rather than killed. His breathing became less heavy, and his heartbeat quieted but did not slow. In his chest remained a flutter that would not disappear until he was allowed to tell his story. He hoped it would be soon.

The thin, cold steel of the handcuffs bit his wrists as the clicking of the tightened cuffs echoed in the empty garage. Then a wave of white pain enveloped him as the pistol struck swiftly and solidly at his neck and his cheek glanced off the pillar in front of him. He heard only the clatter of his glasses and a soft chuckle as he hit the floor and everything disappeared.
Andrew awoke gagging and soggy and could not see where he was. He struggled to rub his eyes, but his hands were bound and his legs would not respond. He sat and stewed for perhaps an hour, slowly becoming more aware of his surroundings. It was a memory, an image, a moment, straight from his past, his training fifteen years ago. Fetter. Fetter had been his trainer, had taught him everything, prepared him for everything. Except this; this was unforeseeable, something you could not prepare for. He examined every detail of his situation as well as his eyes would allow, and every bit of it was straight from what Fetter had told him, what he must tell every agent he trained.

Those years ago, Fetter had told him about the smoky haze, the sweat, the almost-numb ache in the arm from the needle with sodium pentothal, and here he was, seated across from an older, grimmer Fetter on this September afternoon marked by an elevated temperature paired with lofty humidity that worked undeniably in the Questioner’s favor. Andrew Mann stewed soggily within a film of his own salty, smoky, bloody sweat, blood struggling soddenly to clot in the thin split in the coarse hide of his unshaven cheek. Giving more the impression of a sloppily corpulent sea-creature than the hardened criminal the Questioner had apprehended just hours hence, Andy Mann, better known as “The Handyman,” fixer of any situation, legal or otherwise, exuded a sad enough appearance to please the Questioner immensely.

Staring at an open can of ginger ale before Fetter, Andrew struggled to focus, to remind himself that this was what he wanted – to be questioned, to give his explanation. He could not force out the memories of all that Fetter had taught him, the guidelines he had lain out; how to fool the Questioner. Make it real, he remembered; blow it and they
relieve you of your toenails, fingernails, singe your short-and-curlies, clamp your mouth and dump 7-Up down your nostrils – works every time, Fetter had said.

Fetter smiled, moved his hand to the can. “It was on sale; works even better than 7-Up, I’ve found. Care to try a bit?” He slid the can a few inches across the table.

Andrew ignored the can, stared right into the face, the small hard eyes watching him from deep in the eye sockets, the long, thin, straight line of a mouth twitching slightly at one corner in time with the twitch of the nose as cigarette smoke wafted. It was a face that stared blankly while the body slouched in false comfort. “I do not intend to lie to you, Fetter. I have nothing to lie about; I want the truth to be known.” He tried to say it straight and strong, but he heard a quaver there, a catch as his dry throat worked to form the sounds.

“Very good; nice tact. I didn’t even teach you that one. Carry on, then. Let’s have it. As an old friend, I’ll let you know which parts I believe when you’re done.” Fetter’s slow, patient smile told Andrew that he was willing to spend as long as it took to hear what he wanted to hear. He could only hope that once he began his story, telling it from the beginning, from his first thoughts about his duty in life, the story would not, could not be denied.

So he told his story, for the first time revealed the truth of his reason for killing. He explained it as he had thought it: since his teenage years, Andy had felt that overpopulation was the world’s biggest problem; that most other problems stemmed from this single big one. He saw the epidemics of such diseases as AIDS and cancer as natural developments designed to lower population, yet he disagreed with their targets. These diseases killed mostly the innocent – people with families and good intentions in life. He
felt it was the real criminals – murderers, rapists, those who ran big corporations but refused to reduce pollution, people who impeded development of efficient transportation – these were the people who should be removed from the planet.

Andrew saw with some small measure of satisfaction that Fetter was listening, understanding so far, without objection, that this was the truth. His eyes dropped to catch a gleam from Fetter’s lap, where a pair of pliers lay ready, their jaws open and soiled with blood, or perhaps it was only dirt and rust. They were a reminder of the thin wire Andy was traversing; he had to keep Fetter interested and say nothing that would cause doubt.

“The dilemma as I saw it was implementation – someone had to kill these people, but I did not feel that I or any other individual or group had the right or power to do it. I suppose really it was some fear I had of getting killed myself. I had to find a way to kill these people without getting caught, yet at the same time I needed the respect that comes only with someone knowing that I was the one with the skill to pull it off.”

Fetter stopped him with a wry grin. “Just a common criminal. You wanted simultaneously to be caught and to never be caught.” He lifted the pliers and hefted them, clicking the jaws together as he waved them thoughtfully. “You didn’t have the balls to go through with it unless you got some respect and recognition for it.” The rising eyebrows and flicker in the eyes told Andrew he had some leeway; Fetter was interested, at least for the moment.

“No. Not a criminal. I didn’t do it for me; I did it for the good of all of us. Of course I wanted respect, but the only reason I didn’t dare to do anything at first is that I did not think I could accomplish much before someone caught me.”
“You needed the perfect plan that every criminal somehow thinks exists.”

“Something like that.” Andrew grudgingly let it go. He was not about to argue; Fetter had become suddenly bored with the inaction of the pliers.

“So you decided to kill people who had no connection to you. How convenient that you would not be directly affected by your crimes.”

“You know it’s not like that. I would have killed my own father if I thought I could get away with it. If he was a criminal. So I left the country, became a Canadian, then came back illegally without anyone knowing. I traveled only by my own car and never used a credit card. I stole cash from their wallets after I killed them, just enough to sustain myself.”

“I know this, Mann. You’re boring me. Tell me something new; tell me... What makes you think your actions are righteous – what makes you think this is what God, or fate, or whatever perverse great being you believe in, wants you to do?”

“I asked myself that every day, and sometimes the only answers I got were exactly what I did not want to hear. I tried telling myself that all human action is meant to be, and therefore there could be no fault in my actions. But I knew it wasn’t true. I know that would be a very dangerous belief to harbor. It would... destroy the fabric of moral deliberation that, I think, is essential to human existence. Now, I know that that is the answer I was searching for – that my reasons were moral; I was doing it to help the world, and I was working directly against the immoral in the world.”

“So you had to be right. What a load of shit you bastards rehearse, telling yourselves it’s all right, convincing yourselves that you don’t have to cry yourselves to sleep because you’re morally right. God told you to do it, eh?” He threw the pliers on
the tabletop, so that they glanced off the can and thumped atop the fleck of cigarette ash
Andrew had been staring at, struggling to focus his blurry eyes.

The man's persistent lack of understanding pissed him off. "No. I am not a
terrorist, some mindless monster who straps a bomb to himself to send himself to Allah
by destroying whatever people or buildings happen to be standing near me. God does not
speak to me; logic, reason tells me what I am doing needs to be done."

"Whatever. I've heard enough. Let's have some fun before we finish up here."
Fetter fished in his pocket for a metal flip-top lighter. He lit a new cigarette to replace
the one smoldering out in the ashtray. He leaned forward, staring through the flicker at
Andy. As the face quivered beyond the flame, Fetter's eyes flashed and he smiled.
Settling back, he stretched his legs onto the table corner. "Let me tell you a story. I told
you, didn't I, that I grew up on a farm? Yes? Well, you're killing reminds me of that,
actually. I miss those days; it was fun. See, when I was eight – I remember because it
was third grade; the new girl in school arrived then. Anyway, that was when I first saw
my father slaughter a pig. I was watching from behind the barn door, and the pig
squealed while he stabbed it, twice, then slashed its throat, and the pig bled out over the
hay. I couldn't help it; I just laughed. The sound was so comical, and I wanted to hear it
again."

"Why the hell are you telling me this? What ..."

"Don't interrupt me. I'm trying to tell you a heartwarming story. I can skip the
details if you like... Like I said, I wanted to hear that squealing again, but I couldn't lift
a damn pig when I was eight, so I tried it on all the dogs and cats I could find. I tried to
reproduce it exactly, to get the right response – I hog-tied them, I stabbed them, I slit their
throats, but I could never get it right. Eventually, I realized I had to try a different animal. I tried cows and sheep, and so on, and finally I found out when I was sixteen, the only animal, besides a pig, that screams when you stab it – can you guess? You must know; come on.”

“I don’t know what animal.” Now Andrew was becoming the exasperated one. He did not think he wanted to hear the rest. It could not possibly take a turn for the better.

“That’s right; you never stabbed any of them like that, did you? Always did it quick, so they didn’t suffer. Didn’t you ever want to draw it out, enjoy it? Wasn’t it disappointing, over too soon?”

Andrew was repulsed. He could not believe Fetter was telling him this. Was it true? Was he really so deranged, or was he just trying to illicit a response? “It was never like that, Fetter. Killing is always hard; it doesn’t get easier each time, not like in the movies.” It was the truth; it had always been hard, especially when he had to look them in the eyes as he pulled the trigger or thrust the knife, seeing the sheer terror, seeing their pleas for mercy in their eyes. Seeing them as human beings, and every time realizing that, if he had gone a different way in life, it might be him on the other end of the barrel, looking at the face of some stranger who gives no reason for his action and shows no emotion, no uncertainty.

Yet he could always remind himself why he was doing it, why they needed to die. “Sometimes, when I killed really awful criminals, they would look at me and laugh, like they didn’t think I could do it. That always helped, knowing they were the real assholes, the ones who didn’t even feel sorry for what they’d done to the rest of the world.
Sometimes, before their brains completely shut down, a look of shock would replace the laughter. But I got no pleasure from seeing it; I only hoped that in that moment, that dying man’s life was passing before his eyes, that he was being forced to see what he had done wrong. No, I never regretted pulling that trigger, or thrusting an eight-inch blade into some bastard’s brain through the eye socket and twisting, but I never, never enjoyed it.”

“How touching,” Fetter scoffed. “I don’t believe it for a second. I know what it’s like, I know the power you feel when you do it, the sense of accomplishment when you pull it off. You lying bastard – you do it because you like it, you feel the same rush of adrenaline I felt the first time I killed someone.” He grinned as Andrew looked up, met his eyes, and knew now that he was telling the truth, that Fetter was exactly the kind of person he was dedicated to removing from the earth. He saw now what he had to do, somehow – he had to kill this man who had killed for his own enjoyment, killed the harmless, the innocent, and laughed as he did it, and saw no wrong in it.

“You...you... How can you sit there and look at me as a criminal, when I kill for a purpose, and you’ve – you’ve killed for fun. How can you, of all people, look down at me from your righteous, law-enforcing position –”

Fetter cut him off, bounding from his seat, swept the pliers up from the table, and thrust them at Andrew, hooking them under his chin, scraping the jaws against the bone to tear the skin. Andrew’s head was driven back and sideways until the tool slipped off the corner of his jaw and Fetter cuffed him over his right ear with his other hand as he stepped away. The dull whump left his left ear ringing while his right felt muffled, and a
dull throb began at the top left of his skull as his neck stiffened. It somehow
simultaneously distracted him and seized his attention.

Fetter was shouting now: “That’s exactly you’re problem, Andy – always so
quick to judge. You haven’t even heard the best parts. And don’t you believe in
redemption? I was sixteen when I killed her; it was forty years ago. I haven’t killed like
that since, and I’ve put plenty of the criminals you so despise in prison – some of them
even got the death penalty. I’m ridding the world of evil, just as you are, and I’m doing it
legally. It’s my job to do it. Not yours.”

Fetter leaned in close to Andy’s face, his voice dropping to a whisper, yet still
carrying the force of his shouts. “Now do you want to hear the rest, or would you prefer I
show you how I did it? It’s not beyond me – not with you. I could kill you now,
Andrew, and yes, I would enjoy it. I want to hear your screams. I want to hear you cry
like a little girl. I want you to suffer. But I’m leaving it up to you. What’s it going to
be?”

“You will never get away with it, Fetter. You said it yourself – your actions are
bound by law. If you kill me, you’ll be prosecuted.” Andrew did not quite believe it
himself, but he had nothing else to say.

Fetter returned to his seat, placing his forearms on the table. “How little you
know, Mann. Why do you think I’m not in jail right now? How do you think I am here
after killing a girl? Do I look like I’ve been rotting in prison under a life sentence? Why
not? Because I got away with it, just as I will get away with killing you. In fact, you will
be easier; nobody will even miss you, everyone will just look the other way, pretend it
never happened, and they won’t even try to hide their relief.” He plucked the cigarette
from the ashtray and turned the glowing end toward himself, staring into it for a moment before shifting his eyes to meet Andrew’s. “You had nice parents, didn’t you, Andy? Never abused you, never hurt you?” He shoved up his sleeve and moved the cigarette over one of many small round blotches there, almost touching the skin. “You know what it’s like to be burned by a cigarette?” He paused, the glowing butt still only millimeters from his flesh. “You don’t even feel it, other than the pressure, for the first second or so. And then, then it just… well, I’m not sure how to describe it.” Swiftly, Fetter rounded the table, gripped Andrew’s arm and plunged the cigarette into his wrist. A second later, his entire arm shriveled, shrank from the heat, and a frozen wave flared through his body. His legs and stomach stiffened and the arm jerked, the fist closing as sweat burst from his forehead and a smell like frying ham struck his nostrils. Tears burst forth, but he could make no sound as Fetter withdrew the butt.

“It looks like you’ve made your decision. You don’t seem to like either option I gave you, so you will get both – I will tell you, and then I will show you.” He bent over Andrew and began untying his bonds. “Let’s go.”

“Where – where are we going?” He croaked out the question, almost meaningless, unimportant as he gasped at the spreading heat in his trembling forearm.

“Outside. I’ll explain on the way.” He gripped Andrew’s arm and jerked him to his feet before retying his hands behind his back. “Remember the new girl I mentioned? The one in third grade? Well, she was the one; she lived on the other side of a stretch of woods behind my house, about a mile deep, and she liked to walk there, most days after school, with her dog. One day I was out there, and – her dog would always run off on its own sniffing around and whatnot – the dog came my way, so I grabbed him, carefully, so
he wouldn't make too much noise. Eventually, she came looking for him, and she found me holding him, and I told her... I told her what a nice dog she had.”

They were coming to the door, Fetter half carrying him with one grasping hand. Fetter shoved Andrew ahead of him, propelling him through the door and into the sweltering sun. They turned for the woods, crossing the rutted, soft dirt of the yard and Fetter grabbed an axe that was leaning against the corrugated siding of a small outbuilding at the edge of the trees. “Did I tell you I had one of these with me?” He poked Andrew in the hip with the head.

“Anyway, when the girl – her name was Lisa – came up and tried to take the dog back – she was smiling, you know; I was being nice and all – I punched her in the throat, just a quick jab, like this…” He mocked a thrust to Andrew’s adam’s apple, laughing as his victim reeled and almost fell. “Don’t worry, I won’t knock you unconscious like I did her; I want you to have the whole experience. After I knocked her out, I carried her up a ladder – someone’s old tree stand, just boards nailed to a trunk, so they could sit on a branch – and I tied her there. I wrapped a rope all around her body, lashing her to the trunk, but I left her hands free, so she could struggle – I wanted to see what she would do to herself.” Andrew was struggling to walk on his own, and could find no useful comment, or even a useless one. He only half listened to things he wanted not to hear.

They reached a pine tree less than a foot in diameter, and Andrew saw that there was a ladder – an aluminum one, something Fetter had brought already, put there just for this purpose. And a coil of rope, thick twine looped over a low branch. “What do you think, Mann? Want to try it – want to see how she felt? I want you to tell me how it is, Mann, how it feels to hang there waiting for death. You know how I did it? Have you
guessed why I brought the axe? I’m not into dismemberment, you know; it’s too messy.
Too quick, too easy, too.”

Now Andrew knew, and he could not hear the rest. He could not bear the thought of the girl, tied there, helpless, innocent, shaking with the trunk as a teenage Fetter chopped down her tree. “How could you do it? Why would you do it? Crushing an innocent girl with a tree? You’re insane, Fetter. No, not insane, you’re evil. No insanity could make a person do that to anyone, not even someone who deserved death. Death should be quick, painless.”

“Oh, come on, Mann. I thought you would be impressed. Don’t you take pride in the effort you put into your killing? Can’t you see how much work I did? Carrying her up there, chopping through the tree? I’ll admit I didn’t do it all myself; I got too tired to do the whole tree, so I had to wait for the wind to take it.” He laughed, remembering it, remembering the girl’s screamed appeals, her huge eyes as she clawed at the ropes, her fingernails breaking, her legs kicking as the tree swayed.

“When it finally fell – I had cut it right so it would fall on top of her – it was funny; at that moment, she suddenly stopped. I couldn’t understand it. She didn’t scream, she didn’t even move or close her eyes, just hung there until she hit the ground.”

Andrew was finished listening. He did not care about his own life so much now; he wanted, needed to kill this man, to somehow, maybe, at least on some level, make up for the girl’s death. Lisa – he would remember her name now, though he’d never met her. “You’re a monster, Fetter. I’ve heard enough.” He worked the ropes behind him as he spoke. “Let’s get it over with.” The strands loosened and parted. “You’ve told me; now show me.”
“That’s the first good thing you’ve said today, Mann.” Fetter dropped the axe at the base of the tree and reached for Andrew’s shoulders. Andrew for once took pleasure at seeing the shock; the widened eyes as he caught Fetter’s hand, spun him and dropped him to the ground. He fell heavily, knees first, onto the monster’s chest, felt the cracking of ribs and heard the wet thumps as his fists pounded the face, trying to crush it, make it break, blot it from existence.

His fists flew and he did not think, did not see, feel, or hear any response, and finally he stopped and saw that the face was gone, but the man was not dead. He cast his eyes around, searching for instructions, what to do next. His gaze fell on the axe and he moved to it, stretching, reaching on hands and knees while his feet stayed on Fetter; he would know if he moved.

The weight of the axe was unfamiliar but satisfyingly powerful in his aching arms. His singed forearm flared as the skin stretched and he swung the axe and stumbled, missing Fetter’s throat and hacking into his shoulder. Fetter’s screams fueled him, and he swung now with new fury to kill the monster as it struggled now, writhing to escape. The axe thumped again and again into Fetter’s side and chest, then his back and finally the handle slipped and spun in his wet, bloody hands and the hammer pounded Fetter’s skull. The squirming stopped, the breathing stopped, the bleeding ebbed, and Andrew dropped exhausted to his knees over the body.

And suddenly he was sorry. He saw the man beneath him, dead and disfigured, felt the blood and filth on his hands, the warm wet spray on his face and he knew now the irony of his life; the unimaginable, unforeseeable solution to counteract Andrew’s moral
mission was his own inescapable humanity, discovered now after years of *knowing* the simple logic of the world and his duty to do his best to correct its biggest problem.

He wept as he recalled his own early thoughts that everyone is hypocritical; it’s whether you admit it that counts. He reveled in his clarity as he saw the simple truth that people hate most in others that which they are most ashamed of – those thoughts they keep best hidden – within their fallible, human selves. Andrew Mann hated himself for taking people’s lives, for causing pain in those who loved the ones he killed. He saw now that he was one of them, one of those criminals he wanted to kill, all at least as deserving as himself of having a place in the world, a chance to do right by themselves and their fellow man, to help others in their troubles rather than punish them for their mistakes.

It was what he wanted now; to help people, to teach them what he had learned, to prevent them from doing as he had done. Yet now, as he knew it, knew his place in life, the sirens were coming. The lights were flashing in the branches above him and he was caught again, and he would be killed. This was his end, and his only hope remained that he would be able to tell his story before it ended.
Diversify Your Emotional Investments

Susan could not believe her advisor had called her to his office over the P.A. system, in the middle of class, no less. What the hell could be so important that she had to leave her Economics class when they were watching Wall Street? It wasn’t like she was in danger of failing a class or anything; she practically had straight A’s this year. She scowled at the grungy green tiles ten feet ahead of her in the hallway, and scuffed her feet, her sandals slapping along past classrooms full of bored students looking for just such a distraction, the only form of rebellion she could muster at the moment. She wanted to heave her backpack at her guidance counselor when she stalked into his office – it would be a formidable weapon, with all its binders and textbooks. She decided it would just cause more trouble and would bring only fleeting relief. Besides, she did not want to damage her hundred-dollar graphing calculator.

Susan reached Mr. Pardy’s office and put on a slightly less perturbed expression before brushing her knuckles against the already open but somehow unwelcoming door, awkwardly sliding her backpack from her shoulders, and slumping into the lopsided yellow plastic chair next to the desk. Lardy Pardy, as the students secretly referred to him, twisted around in his chair, let his handful of folders hang loosely from the hand on his knee, and smiled as if he was pleasantly surprised to see Susan. He didn’t notice the several sheets of paper that escaped from a folder and dove beneath his desk. She
suppressed a grin as she noticed the papers had joined several others that looked like they had been there collecting filth for years.

“Hey, Susie. How you doing?” She cringed as he called her “Susie”. She hated that. She thought his slow, snivelly voice was typical of some prissy pseudo-academic whose only way of getting a job near true academics was this bullshit job of “academic advising”.

“Fine.”

“Good, good. I just wanted to talk to you a minute about your schedule next year.”

“Okay... what about it?” She still had no idea why she was here; course sign-up day wasn’t until next week. She would have thought he was concerned that she was planning to take on too heavy a load, but he would not even know yet what she planned to take.

“Well, I just wanted to make sure you didn’t forget about the language requirement. I know a lot of students put it off until their senior year, as you have, but I want you to understand that it is an important requirement. You probably don’t realize it now, but knowing another language can be very useful for anyone, no matter what your job is. Have you thought any about this? I know it can be hard, but you need to decide which language you think might be most useful to you, okay?”

“Uh-huh, okay. I’ll think about it.” Susan reached for her pack as she prepared to escape her advisor’s annoying sermon. She was not quick enough.

“Hey, I know you’re probably kind of afraid of the whole thing; I know a lot of kids avoid the language requirement as long as possible because they’re not comfortable
with things that seem so unfamiliar,” he blurted. He looked almost panicked when she tried to go. His hand even left his knee and moved slightly in her direction before he stopped it and leaned back into his chair. “But really, other languages are not that foreign, despite how we refer to them.”

She could see the sweat beginning to bead his forehead, and his breathing seemed to be getting heavier. She didn’t know if she should be worried about his health, or whether she was right to feel suddenly very uncomfortable about being here. She was glad she had not closed the door when she came in. She glanced briefly out at the secretary sitting at her computer, talking to another student just outside the office, and felt slightly better.

He was still spouting hot air toward her half-listening ears, seemingly desperate for her attention. “It’s exactly the same with the people who speak those foreign languages; they are just like us, and learning their language and some of their culture can help you to understand that, okay? So I want you to think about that for a minute and then tell me which language you want to learn. Class sign-up is next week, so you’d better know right away what you want to take.”

“Okay, but it’s not like that. I’m not ‘afraid’ to learn about other people.” She tried not to sound too callous, but she couldn’t believe this idiot was so desperate to talk down to someone that he would accuse her, someone who was never afraid to learn knew things, of being frightened of foreigners. Xenophobia was one thing Susan had never had a problem with. That is to say she had never experienced it, not that she didn’t mind when others did. Of course, she understood it; she could understand how someone could be insecure in the presence of the unfamiliar.
But what language should she learn? It seemed awfully important to her advisor, that chubby, sweaty, frumpy-looking fifty-five-year-old seated across from her. He seemed like the kind of guy who would be a pervert. She realized that was probably only because that was the way they were portrayed on television — good-looking, well-dressed people weren’t believable as perverts. Regardless, she’d never seen any real evidence of perversion in the man, so she ignored her foolish impressions.

She glanced up at Pardy as she reached this conclusion, saw him watching her, and quickly shifted her eyes to gaze out the window behind him, seeing the cars winding too swiftly up the hill past the smoking students standing on the sidewalk, skipping class as they did every day. Well, Americans seemed to think the French to be awfully haughty, and France wasn’t exactly a superpower. Not that Spain was. Actually, nobody seemed to ever even think about Spain. On the other hand, did they not claim that no news is good news? At least nobody was saying bad things about Spain. Besides, most of South and Central America are Spanish-speaking nations. That makes a pretty big portion of the world. Maybe she could learn about chocolate, Easter Island, and migrating monarch butterflies rather than, well, whatever she might learn about French culture.

She looked back at Pardy, still staring at her. If she didn’t like Spanish, it probably wasn’t any worse than her other options anyway. She just hoped the homework wouldn’t be too time-consuming. She would be pretty busy with Advanced Placement Government, Calculus, and Chemistry as it was.

“Umm, I’ll take Spanish, I guess,” she said as her eyes involuntarily dropped to the floor, unable to hold Pardy’s uncomfortable stare.
“You guess? You’re going to be spending a year in this course; don’t just pick at random.” He gazed at her through the top of his glasses, as if trying to peer into her head and pry out whatever he thought of as the right choice.

“Okay, then, I will take Spanish. Period,” Susan corrected.

“Fine. You’d better get back to class.” His sudden nonchalance did little to hide some apparent disappointment. She wondered for a moment whether it was to do with her choice or the fact that she was leaving. She didn’t care enough to give it any more thought.

“Right. Bye. Thanks,” Susan mumbled as she gathered her backpack from the floor, between her feet, and moved toward the door as quickly as she could while putting on the pack, as always getting the flap of her un-tucked flannel shirt caught awkwardly in the shoulder strap, the fabric twisting uncomfortably along her side and across her back.

Just as she was sliding through the door into the outer office, a moment before disappearing from her guidance counselor’s sight, she heard his voice again behind her. “Hey, Susan, can I... Can I talk to you about one more thing?”

She turned and paused before reluctantly moving back into the office. At least he had called her Susan this time. “Okay, what is it?”

“Umm, come on in,” he said, as he glanced toward the busy secretary and closed the door as Susan moved further inside. He was still sweating – even more than before, if that was possible. He leaned back against the door and looked at her nervously, his mouth quivering as he seemed to search for words.

“Are you all right, Mr. Pardy?” Susan thought he was having a heart attack or something, but her question brought him out of it.
He straightened with new resolve, but still had to avert his gaze as he asked the question that had been plaguing him. “Susan, do you...like me? I mean, I’ve been...afraid to bring it up. I know it’s not...normal, but, well, you’re – I like you and I was wondering if...”

“I – I’m not sure what you mean, Mr. Pardy. You’ve always been nice to me, if that’s what you mean.” But even as she said it, she knew it was not what he meant, knew she was not going to like what he said next. Still, she could not just leave, not without hearing it, knowing it absolutely for sure.

“I’m, well, attracted to you, Susan. I have been for...a while. I – I know, umm, you’re – I’m a lot older than you, but, I thought, well, maybe that doesn’t matter to you?”

Now she knew, she’d heard it, and could say what she would. “...Ah, I...” She couldn’t; now that she had heard it, knew she should tell him, she couldn’t do it, could not form the words to reject this pitiful man who should never be called a man. Her mouth opened and closed, as a fish out of water, drowning in air. “You seem like a...nice ... person, but I’m – I am not ... interested in that way. Please...” Even as the words finally came, they seemed too considerate and predictable yet still necessary.

The words were what he needed to hear and had the same effect no matter how they were delivered, because deep down he had known the answer long before he even thought of the question. He slid along the wall and slumped into his chair, his head in his hands. “I’m so sorry, Susan. I didn’t want to scare you. I just, I had to ask. I had to know.”

She almost moved to him, a reflex of seeing someone crying. He flapped his hand toward the door. “It’s okay – just...just go. I’m sorry.” Her jaw worked as she
tried to tell him something reassuring, but there was nothing. She pulled open the door and hurried out into the hall, ignoring the secretary as she looked up from stapling papers. She was shocked, couldn’t react yet, as she looked at her watch, read the numbers but did not register them. She walked back to class, slowly pushing the experience from her mind, forcing it out by focusing on every movement she made, counting, measuring her steps, and watching the old green lockers as they swarmed quickly past. She finally reached her class, smiled at her professor, and took her seat. She was just in time to catch the end of the movie.
Lying in the hammock, the cotton criss-crossed cords squeezing him gently, firmly in a cozy embrace, Mark imagined this the happiest moment of his life. He thrust the end of a pine branch against a rock to set his cradle swinging, then relaxed completely and tried to clear his mind of thought.

The night was perfect, with almost no moon but a clear view of the stars. The midnight chill kissed his naked arms; the soft breeze just whispered through the trees, hinting of creatures stirring as the day’s human noise ebbed. Mark tried to tune out the dying chatter of a dozen other drowsy boys in their tents, but continued to hear the throbbing murmur blended with the hiss of the gas lantern ten yards away. He could still smell the smoke wafting as the last pops and crackles soughed from the dying embers of the fire.

His belly grumbled a bit from the roasted hot dogs that had not gone down quite right. He always ate too many when they were roasted over the fire, though he didn’t know why; they were usually burnt and didn’t taste like anything special.

A billow of wind tickled his skin as a loon call flared through the night air. The breeze stiffened and raised the hairs on his neck, and he was suddenly not alone. A rustling approached through the underbrush, and his back felt suddenly exposed through the open mesh of the hammock. His body tensed and his stomach clenched to pull him
into a sitting position as both hands gripped his pine branch. His eyes flicked back and forth, up and down, straining to scan the woods before him, but he could see nothing beyond ten feet. The sound disappeared for a moment and his muscles began to relax.

Suddenly, a twig snapped just behind him to the right, and his head whipped around, his body following until his heel caught in the hammock and he flipped out and landed hard on his stomach. His wrist felt stiff from striking a rock, and his face felt petrified as it always did when something struck his nose with force. Small woody fibers stuck on his moist lips as he began to rise and found two orbs glowing three feet away at the base of a poplar tree.

The eyes were absolutely motionless and unblinking as he stared, unable to move. They were spaced about four inches and the size of nickels, yellow with a hint of red. He was about to laugh at his fright at what was probably a raccoon or skunk when the chill of the breeze disappeared from his back, replaced by the warmth of proximity. As he looked behind him, a large hand firmly covered his mouth and he was roughly lifted from the ground.

He was too frightened to make a sound or to struggle as his body was pressed firmly against that of his captor. As he was carried away from the campsite, he tried to kick his legs and flail his arms, but he was too tightly squeezed to move much; he was helpless.

The hand was cool, its flesh almost stiff and just crinkled enough to allow breath. Mark’s body felt effortlessly supported, and his captor’s snuffling breath seemed not strained but sniffing, sensing.
Mark could see nothing, and he shut his eyes as if it would ward off the slashing of branches that never came. The footsteps were soundless yet swift, thigh movements pressing his immobile form in steady rhythm.

As his sight and hearing failed to bring him explanations, Mark became aware of the hairiness of the arms clutching him. The kidnapper’s torso was solid, unyielding under what felt like either a fuzzy sweater or a thick layer of matted hair. The smell; the smell was of something familiar yet unidentifiable.

As they moved on and on through the woods, Mark’s body became stiff from being held awkwardly across his captor’s chest. His legs were becoming numb from being held so tightly and his neck ached from being held immobile. His nose began to run and he felt his kidnapper’s hand tremble at the wetness. He began to think the race through the woods would never end and wished the kidnapper would do something with him, even if it meant getting hurt.

His stomach heaved as they came to a sudden stop and the kidnapper dropped to a crouch. The snuffling disappeared and Mark could hear nothing but his own throbbing pulse. After a moment, they rose again and moved into a place where there was no breeze. He was lowered onto smooth gritless stone and the hands left him. He suddenly had no perception of his captor’s location, but assumed he was still there. He instinctively pulled in his knees and tensed his fists under his chin, waiting for something to happen.

* * * * *

It had been dangerous bringing the boy here through the woods; its scent was so strong it had been difficult to navigate through the bushes. A few branches he had been
unable to smell had scratched Sunucild’s arms and the boy’s weight had left a large bruise across his upper body. His chest felt compressed and he feared that some ribs had been permanently bent.

It would be worth it if the boy could help. His mother was dying — she would not admit it, but her scent was of a dead poplar tree, though not yet as strong. The others had smelled it and their hunger had swelled daily. They had not yet shown themselves, knowing he was there, but he could smell them getting nearer, multiplying and circling in the surrounding trees.

He had risked leaving this once, hoping their own scent would mask his leaving — he needed the boy’s stink to cover that of his mother, and to scare them off. They would not approach while the boy’s stench remained.

Now, as he moved away from the boy, Sunucild was able to smell his own bruises, like the leaves of a yellow birch, crinkled and dying on the ground. The scratches on his arms smelled of oxidized stone, the bland but powerful stink of drying blood.

As he moved toward his mother at the back of the cave, her smells replaced his own, but it was not only her dying foulness; he could feel her anger repelling him and his chest throbbed with the force of it.

He touched her hand and there was a question in her grip — “Why did you bring it here?” But the question needed no answer, and beneath her rage lay a hint of appreciation. She knew he’d done it for love of her and she was glad though she could not admit it.
Mark did not know what to do. He did not feel watched, but he had not heard his captor leave. He shifted slowly and quietly into a sitting position and hugged his knees to his chest. The rock beneath him was smooth but too hard for him to remain immobile for long. He strained to sense the kidnapper, but could see, hear, and smell nothing.

After several minutes of nothing, he convinced himself that he was alone. His body trembled as he rolled onto hands and knees and moved forward, keeping his head tucked to his chest and sweeping alternate arms around in search of the cave’s walls. His pulse and breathing became quick and heavy as he stared into the darkness in search of anything that might be seen.

* * * * *

Sunucild sensed a shift in the boy’s stink; his fear had waned and the over-sweet smell of adrenaline replaced it – the boy was trying to escape. He released his mother’s hand and rose, but she brushed his knee with her fingers and found his hand again. She gripped it with more strength than her muscles possessed and her strength commanded him: “Let him go. Take him home. Let me go. He is also a sunucild, a son child. It is my time.”

He could not disobey his mother’s dying orders. He dropped her hand and moved to the boy, again clasping his hand over the mouth to hold in the stink of rotting meat and plants. He pulled the boy to his feet and guided him out of the cave, his grip on the child’s shoulder telling him he was returning home, though Sunucild did not know if the boy understood.
His departure need not be secret now; the others could take his mother and feast on her dying breath. He was glad he did not need to carry the child again; he might not survive it.

* * * * *

Mark had been frightened at first when the hand returned without warning to his mouth, but now the grip felt strangely comforting. He did not know the way home but felt they were taking it. He had no notion of why he had been kidnapped and doubted the new comfort he felt, but his captor's grip seemed to communicate gratitude, as well as a deep sadness. Mark abruptly felt sorrow for the creature and his fear steadily subsided.

* * * * *

Sunucild felt the boy relax under his grip as they moved through the bushes. As he felt the boy’s trust in him swell, he moved faster through the trees. He had now become able to ignore the boy’s scent and concentrate on the safest path through the branches. Finally, they reached the boy’s campsite and he lifted the boy into the hammock. Sunucild retrieved a pine branch from the ground and placed it in the boy’s hands, then rushed back through the woods to his mother’s empty cave.

* * * * *

Mark’s eyes burst open and his breath caught in his throat as he woke to find himself lying face-down in the hammock, his feet and left arm dangling through the holes and the pine branch pressing uncomfortably into the bridge of his nose. He extracted himself from the hammock and spat, trying to expel the salty taste of the cotton rope.

Tiny bark shards pricked his skin as he wiped the sweat from his brow. He sat forward on the edge of the hammock waiting for his head to clear. His dream that night
had been his strangest ever, if it was a dream. It had seemed more real than what he was feeling now as he awoke to the sounds and smells of breakfast cooking and his stomach began growling. On his clothes was a smell of something familiar yet unidentifiable. Why did it make him feel sad to smell it?

He sighed and pushed it from his mind as he stood. His triceps trembled as he stretched his arms toward the sky and he swayed for a moment as blood rushed from his head. His pine branch whistled as he sent it spinning off into the woods.
China White in a 1973 Ford

With an armful of groceries, Kathryn bustled through the doorway connecting the living room and kitchen to find Stanley charging batteries for his mp3 player. “What’s up?”

“Well, I’d say it generally refers to the direction associated with a ray whose origin is at the center of the largest local mass, and which passes through the point at which one is located during reference to ‘up.’”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m glad you agree.” Stanley’s eyes glowed with the enjoyment he gleans from annoying everyone around him just the right amount to be unavoidably endearing. Everyone loves him as he annoys the hell out of them.

Kathryn grimaced until she could no longer control the corners of her mouth as they fought to lift into a smile. It made her look almost as if she were trying to squeeze out a silent fart. “Stan, I can’t decide whether to kill you or love you. Either way, I can’t imagine this trip being enjoyable.”

“It’s all in your head, Kitten; I’m so damn handsome, you imagine I must be a good person, too.” He flexed his arms to show off the muscle that might have been there if he had ever bothered to lift weights. It finished the joking and brought them back to business.
Kathryn dropped her armful of groceries on a low rectangular wooden dining table and began unpacking them. "Got all your stuff ready?"

"Just about."

"Good. You can help me pack the cooler. Is Jake here yet?"

"Are you kidding? The man's a machine; gets up at three and doesn't take a break 'til midnight. He got here three hours ago, checked out the cargo about ten times. I wouldn't be surprised if he was out there changing the spark plugs or polishing the battery terminals right now."

"You would think that damn truck of his would run like a top with all the time he spends on it."

"What - you want it spinning in circles? You won't get anywhere but the tenth level of hell with that."

"The tenth level?" She asked it with a sigh, not really needing an answer, but wanting it over with.

"Land of Nausea and Noggin-ache, Kate."

"Right. Anyway...let's get this cooler packed."

I know this is what they said because I am outside the window wiping my hands on a rag to get rid of the grime from the spark plugs of my truck. It is a 1973 Ford and I like it because I know how it works and it is the only car I have ever owned. I know that Kathryn likes Stan because she doesn't look at him when he looks at her and I know that Stan likes Kathryn because he looks at her chest instead of her face. And I know that this means they like each other because that is how John and Trisha looked at each other before they got married.
But they don’t like each other anymore, because they don’t look at each other at all unless they make wrinkles in their foreheads and stiffen their legs. This means they are angry because that is what I do when I am angry, like when Trisha says the same thing more than twice to John and I want to yell at her to shut up, but then I get the pressure in my chest and I feel sick and I can’t say anything and then I just get mad at myself for not saying anything even though sometimes I should.

I don’t know why Stan likes to look at Kathryn’s chest, because it is just a chest, but I like to look at it, too, even though it makes me feel funny if someone else sees me looking at it. And I like to look at her bottom, too, but I try not to stare, because John told me when I was eleven that that is rude. Now I am 26 and I don’t know why I like looking at her bottom because it is just muscles and some fat – but not much in her case; I think it might be all muscle – and it is for sitting on and for gross things like using the toilet and that makes me not want to look at her bottom and helps keep me from staring.

My hands don’t have any more dirt on them, so now I can check the cargo again. I have to keep checking it because of the Uncertainty Principle, which makes me want to look inside the cargo to make sure it is okay, but then I also remember that I might change it by looking at it and I’m pretty sure it is still there, because I would have heard if someone tried to steal it because it is bigger than my truck and very heavy. But I can still check the outside and then I am pretty sure it is okay if nothing has changed.

The cargo is still tied down with seven yellow straps with metal clamps that don’t have any smudges because I cleaned the fingerprints off so if anyone touches them I will know. The big canvas over the cargo is green, but almost brown and it is coarse, but not really like a cat’s tongue or like my denim pants. It is still held down by bungee cords –
three black rubber ones and eight that look like they are striped red and white, but they are really braided nylon with white rubber strips underneath. Fifteen of the hooks on the ends have little beige rubber caps on them. The other ones are still missing.

I am happy that the cargo is still okay because it is important and we have to take it to someone called The General and he is important because people stand straight up when someone says his name, and they don’t smile and I think he might be scary, but I have never met him and I hope I won’t be too afraid when I see him.

Kathryn and Stan are coming out in a minute, because I just heard the cooler close; it is like a sound between a wet twig snapping and a full soda bottle hitting a counter. The cooler makes a dull rubbing sound instead of a higher scrape when they pick it up, so I know it is heavy, and I go and open the door for them. It is a gray screen door, and it is easy to open, but Kathryn smiles like she does when she says “Thank you”, but she says, “There you are,” and I don’t say anything because she is right and it is obvious.

The cooler is red with a white top and says COOLBOY near the bottom and Kathryn’s shirt has a tag sticking out and it says

M

cotton/coton/algodon

but I can’t read the rest because she’s too far away now and I close the door and follow them, but I don’t need to do anything because I already left the tailgate down and they slide the cooler inside and Stan uses the front of the cargo trailer to step into the back of the truck and push the cooler to the front. The trailer has four tires that say FINEDAY
and each one has a gage pressure of approximately 30 pounds per square inch because I checked them one hour and twenty-eight minutes ago.

Now, we are ready to go as soon as Stan gets his bag and batteries and Kathryn locks the door to the house and tucks the tag in on her shirt after she slides into the middle of the seat. She is sitting next to me and it makes me feel good and even though I am sweating because it is a hot day I wish she would move closer and I think I would like it if her knee hit mine by accident because I remember on July 3 in 1998 she tripped and grabbed my arm to keep from falling and it felt like when I put a small knife in the electrical socket when I was seven, only without the taste in my mouth.

I turn the key in the ignition and tap the accelerator for one second and then turn the key twice more, holding it for three seconds each time. Then I turn the key a fourth time and the engine starts, and I knew it would because it has worked every time for the last six months and two weeks. Before that, it started on the third try.

Everyone puts their seatbelts on, but Kathryn is careful not to touch me when she finds her belt. Some people do not like to be touched, but I don’t mind if it is not violent or sexual. Well, if it is a girl I like, it is okay if it is sexual, too.

I know where I am going because I looked at the map and memorized what the roads are shaped like and where they intersect. It is a long drive, and we will have to stop to rest and to eat and to use a toilet, but I like long drives because I can think about anything I want to.

* * * * *

We are passing a field and Stan is listening to music in his headphones because the radio in my truck doesn’t work and Kathryn is looking out the windshield and not
blinking, so she is almost asleep. The field is a rhombus with wire at two heights between wooden poles that are leaning north and east. The field has five cows that I can see and two are laying down and they are all facing north. Oreo Cookie Cows; Belted Galloways.

I am thinking that if I tried to sell the hair from my dog and I could produce fifteen bags of hair in a year but could only sell eight of the bags, I would not expect the government to pay me for the other seven bags, but John told me three years ago that dairy farmers want the government to pay them for the extra milk they make that nobody wants to buy. He said it is about a Natural Lifestyle but I don't know what money has to do with nature. I don't really have a dog, but John has a Terrier named Sal.

* * * * *

It has been one day and two hours and seventeen minutes and Kathryn is looking at me. She says, “Do you need a break? I'd offer to drive, but I've never driven your truck.” She is looking at Stan, then at me again. He is making his eyebrows go up and it means he does not want to drive. I want to put my arms around her and just sit with her and not think about anything, but the pressure in my chest doesn't let me.

“I’m fine,” I say, because I am fine. She flattens her mouth slightly and makes a small wrinkle in her forehead, and it means she is concerned. I say, “I like to drive,” and she smiles but the wrinkle is still in her forehead until she lifts her shoulders and says “OK” with a long “o” and now I am only watching the road again.

* * * * *

3,516 little yellow line segments have gone by on the center of the road and almost as many cars have gone by in three lanes in the opposite direction. Approximately
15 percent of them were pickup trucks. We have now passed half of the intersections we need to pass on our trip, which means we are less than halfway done, because there are fewer intersections in the second half of the trip.

It is getting colder because we are going north, but the road is getting blacker and the trees are getting greener because there are more evergreen and fewer deciduous trees near the road. The cars are also changing colors and getting dirtier. There are not as many white cars and there is more rust. The houses are getting taller and more colorful.

I don't like it here because there are too many new things and it is hard to remember to follow the yellow lines and not hit other cars. But it is okay because I am in my truck and Kathryn is here and Stan is here and we are on an Important Mission for The General.

Stan is turning off his music and that means he will take off his headphones and stretch his arms out so he hits the window with a hand and Kathryn's shoulder with an elbow and she will make her neck stiff and pull her head back and make the same face she made before she said in the kitchen, "I can't decide whether to kill you or love you."

I lift the lever on the side of the steering column and follow the exit ramp, which leads to a parking lot with a gray building at the end of it that has a ramp for people with wheelchairs and little plastic pipes coming from the roof to let out the stinky air from under the toilets that don't flush.

The sign says Restrooms but I would not like to rest there because it is smelly and hot and sweaty and dark and someone might come in the door when you are using the toilet, because the door does not latch because Sam broke it and used the pointy end of the hook to write
on the northwest wall and I do not know who Sam is.

We are eating from the cooler and I am having water and an apple because I like Pepsi and candy but my mouth is dry and water and fruit are good for you. Kathryn is having a granola bar with an orange and silver wrapper and Stan is drinking a Pepsi he bought from a machine next to the Restrooms and I wonder why they don’t have any lights or running water inside but they have a machine that keeps drinks cold and a bright light near the roof of the building that is on even though it is 12:43 and the sun is out.

* * * * *

Now we have gone through 1,438 intersections and we have 305 left before we get to The General and we have finished our Important Mission. We have passed four churches in the last twenty-nine minutes – two Baptist, one Episcopal, and one that I couldn’t see the sign – but they were all empty because it is not Sunday. I am thinking that I don’t know why people believe a God wants them to meet in a building every week in order to be good people, and I don’t see the point because I don’t think there is a god, but then I remember what John told me in 1994 on Thanksgiving and that is that it would take an infinite number of experiments to prove that a god does not exist and only one to prove that it does exist.

I am happy that Kathryn and Stan are quiet and sleepy and I can just think and drive my 1973 Ford and pretend that I am alone. But sometimes I pretend it is only Stan who is not here and I want to put my arm around Kathryn because people like to do that, but then my hand would not be on the steering wheel and you are supposed to pretend the steering wheel is an analog clock and put your hands where the 10 and the 2 would be.
John said it is implied that the clock is oriented with the 6 at the bottom and that you do not cross your arms to hold the wheel. It is impossible to follow a crooked road without rotating the clock, so you are allowed to do that.

*Kathryn is asleep and Stan is smiling intermittently because she is snoring and that means he thinks it is funny. I don’t understand what is funny because I think the sound is made by air going through a small cylinder with rough walls with mucus on them and everyone snores sometimes.

Stan’s smiles are only intermittent because he is nodding and now he is asleep. I turn the clock to go back into the right lane because I just passed a silver Volkswagen Jetta with a license plate that says 3CJ469 and now Kathryn is leaning against me and her head is on my shoulder and her hair smells like the Scratch-n-sniff sticker that John gave me in 1987 that was a picture of a strawberry. Now I am smiling, but I don’t know why because John says that a smile is a signal to show other people that you are happy, but there is no one awake to see my smile.

Now there are five more intersections to pass to get to The General and now suddenly Kathryn and Stan are wide awake and I feel what is called Butterflies, which is like a shiver that varies in intensity and is on the inside. I think I am feeling this because I will meet The General soon and because Kathryn smiled when she woke up with her head on my shoulder and I don’t know what that means but it made me breathe faster like a few seconds after someone tries to hit you in the chest when you are not expecting it.
but your arm moves and almost blocks them and they open their mouth part way and make their eyes big and it means they are impressed.

The tank of my 1973 Ford is almost empty, because the needle in the fuel gage is pointing at the ¼ label. I take the next exit from the highway and my tires make a sound like the heavy cooler on the floor when I stop at the end of the exit ramp, because it has been snowing for the last 35 minutes and the road has not been plowed yet. At this station, it costs 1.579 dollars for a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline, so twenty dollars will buy approximately 12.666 gallons.

Stan is going inside to use the toilet and then he will pay for the gas. Kathryn is getting out to stretch because it has been four hours and eighteen minutes since we last stopped. She is wearing a blue sweatshirt with a hood and black fleece pants that make me want to look at her bottom and sneakers that are blue and white and red and she looks like she is getting ready to go for a run, except more tired and a little cold. Her nose makes me think of a button although it is bigger and not round or flat and has only two holes instead of four.

The smell of fuel and the exhaust from a scooter that is the same red as Kathryn has on her shoes reminds me of the snowmobile I rode with John in 1984. It was blue and white, but not like Kathryn’s shoes.

The pump has counted 12.666 gallons but I do not need to tell Stan because he knows that I always pump twenty dollars worth. He is buying another Pepsi for himself and Kathryn is stretching her arms above her head like a figure skater, except she does not cross her legs or bend her knees or thrust her bottom out behind her. I am thinking that her pants may be the only type I like that do not have back pockets, because
sweatpants are too loose and spandex is too tight and jeans with no pockets make a bottom what I think is called unflattering although I do not know why. John would say, it just looks wrong, like a car with no windows or a gorilla without nostrils.

She has caught me staring at her, but she is smiling as she stuffs her hands in the pocket of her sweatshirt and makes a shrug that is for comfort rather than body language. I am feeling a chill rushing from my chest up and back to the nape of my neck, and it is not from the weather, and it means I am embarrassed to be caught although I want her to know that I like her. Her eyes are green, but it seems like they should be purple like mulberry, and I don’t know why I think this. I don’t even know what color mulberry is.

Stan is coming back and we climb in the truck. I like even Kathryn’s shoeprints in the snow, and when I look at them I feel the same as when a team I like scores a goal. It is not nearly as good as I feel when she slides across the seat and sits so close that she can’t avoid touching me when she digs for the seatbelt. I don’t even care that she has only sat so close because Stan has thrown his mp3 player and Pepsi on the seat between himself and Kathryn.

The little girl in the car on the other side of the pump has what John calls a mullette. Mullette is the female version of a mullet and the car is a brown Caravan with only three hubcaps and rust around the wheel wells.

Kathryn is voluntarily shivering as Stan tries awkwardly to cram himself into the truck without crushing his music. “Brrrr, it’s chilly out there.”

“Ah, it’s not that bad. You really know it’s cold when you get brainfreeze and your forehead starts to twitch.” Stan is putting on what is called false bravado. He is trying to hide his own shivering, and it makes his neck and jaw stiff and his voice shaky.
Kathryn just laughs and pokes him in the side, near the kidney. Now I am jealous, though I do not know why being poked could be a desirable experience.

I like that Kathryn has no lipstick or makeup and the cold gives her face the same flush that comes from exercise. The 1973 Ford is a two-wheel-drive, but it does not fishtail when I accelerate back onto the road, because of the weight of our cargo on the trailer we are hauling.

This will be the last bit of driving before we reach The General and for once both Kathryn and Stan are both silent and wide awake. They are looking straight ahead but not seeing where we are going, and occasionally their mouths open slightly and then close to make a little chin dimple, and it means they can’t find anything to say but want a distraction to fill the silence. They often have nothing useful to say, but that has not been a deterrent in the past. I have nothing to say either, but I don’t mind the silence.

* * * * *

I am thinking about how people sometimes use Jesus and God interchangeably, which is strange although they are supposed to both be part of the Holy Trinity. The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost. I don’t remember Christians being supposed to believe in ghosts, but I’ve never read the whole Bible either.

Anyway, I don’t know why people believe what the Bible says because it was written by a bunch of people and is not consistent and I think anyone could write a more believable book, but John said on Boxing Day in 1995, which was a Tuesday, that people believe it now because other people have believed it for hundreds of years, but that does not make sense to me. John said it might be all a big joke, but I don’t think it is because I understand jokes and people do not laugh at the Bible.
We have arrived at the General’s house and now we must get ready to unload the cargo. The house is two stories, plus the basement, with grayish blue clapboard siding. There are four concrete steps to the door at the center of the front of the house and the living room is to the right, because a large window is there.

A man and a woman are coming out of the house. The man has short gray hair and a gray moustache and he is almost a foot long — from chest and stomach to back. He is wearing jeans and a yellow chamois shirt, and a smile, and he is not at all scary. The woman is tall and thin and has gray streaks in black hair. She has reading glasses hanging from her neck and is carrying a tray with eleven paper cups, sixteen oatmeal cookies, and a 64-ounce glass pitcher full of pink lemonade.

The man is saying, “You got here quick,” as he puts his right hand out ahead and to the side and his left hand guides the woman beside him without touching her. “I’m General John Morris and this is my wife, Lorrie.”

Stan puts out his hand to shake the General’s and introduces us. “I’m Stan Hartman, this is Kathryn Roberts, and the quiet one is Jack Preble. He did all the driving.”

The General looks sideways at the trailer and my truck, then looks right at me and says, “Nice truck you got there. What’s that, a ’74?”

“1973.”

“Nice. Well, have some cookies and a drink,” and he motions toward the open overhead door to the garage. He doesn’t act surprised by anything, but seems nice enough.
We grab a few cookies on the way and sit down at the picnic table in the garage. A small kerosene heater keeps it above freezing when the General closes the door behind us. The cookies have a few raisins, but they are pretty good.

It only takes a minute to finish the snack and the General points out the shelves where he wants the cargo. "The other half of the garage is going to be converted into a shop – kind of a showroom – to sell the finished product. My wife does all the handiwork herself."

"Nice," Kathryn says. "Sounds like you should have a good little business here."

"I hope so." Lorrie sounds pretty confident, and I think she's probably right to be. She had pretty steady hands carrying the tray across the icy driveway.

"Well, we better get the stuff unloaded, then," Stan says. The General hauls the door up and Lorrie heads for the house with the tray.

We unhook all the bungee cords and yellow straps and Stan throws the canvas in a heap in the back of my truck. I'll have to fold it later. The cargo is in cubic boxes eighteen inches on each side – four high, five wide, and ten long. 200 boxes all marked in dark blue:

Fragile!

**Loza Blanca y Inacabada**

Do Not Stack Over 8 High

It is Spanish for fragile white plates with no designs or glazing on them. Literally, china white and unfinished. At the front of the trailer are also some boxes of paint and brushes so Lorrie can put her own designs on the plates.
When we are finished unloading the cargo, the general says, "Twenty-five dollars per box, plus five hundred for each of you... That's sixty-five hundred, right? How much for the gas?"

"About 200 dollars," I say. "One way."

"Yeah? That's what - two thousand miles, buck-sixty a gallon... shit, need a calculator for that..."

"About sixteen miles per gallon," I say. It was actually about fourteen, but I used the numbers he gave.

"Not bad for an old '73, especially hauling that load." The general actually looks surprised at this. "I would have thought about half that... All right then, let's make it an even seven thousand for the whole trip." He finishes his signature with a swoosh sound and tears off a check. It has balloons on it and Stan is quick to claim it. I fold up the canvas and tuck it behind the seat, along with the straps and bungees.

Lorrie calls from the house, "Leaving already? Stay for a while. Sit down, relax."

Stan looks tempted, looking crosswise at me and raising his eyebrows slightly, but Kathryn calls back, "No thanks. We should be heading back."

The general says, "All right. Well, thanks for doing this. You really saved us some money bringing it up direct." They both wave and we all wave back as Stan shuts his door and the engine starts on the fourth try. It will be a long drive, and we will have to stop to rest and to eat and to use a toilet, but I like long drives because I can think about anything I want to. Kathryn's knee hits mine as she reaches down to adjust a sock. I am thinking that I am happy that I am not driving alone.
Author’s Notes

I believe that stories should speak for themselves and that a story’s meaning depends more on the reader than on the author. This explanatory piece appears after the stories themselves both to reduce influence on the reader’s interpretation of the stories and to allow inclusion of specific examples from the stories. This piece seeks to explain a few points the author finds important or interesting in the stories, first as a collection and then as individual pieces.

The main goal of this collection is simply to be stories that anyone might enjoy reading. They are not meant to tell people what to think, but sometimes suggest things to think about – for example, religion and the way we interpret what we sense. As the title hopefully suggests, this collection of stories also tells of logic and journeys that may or may not be faulty and pointless – the decision is left to the reader.

What is meant by “Point?ess Journeys” should be clear; it generally refers to journeys – whether physical or internal – that end with unexpected or unfortunate results, that do not accomplish a tangible goal yet may produce personal growth or change, or that accomplish a goal in an unexpected, unsatisfying, or indirect manner. I think one of the more interesting examples of this is in Impervious Enthusiasm For Maniacal Malfeasance. In this story, Andrew’s only wish at both the beginning and the end is to be allowed to tell his story, yet through killing Fetter, with whom he had such a traumatic
and personal ordeal, he has finally admitted to himself that his killing is wrong; his reason for wanting to tell his story changes from wanting to convince others of the aptness of his cause to wanting to prevent others from making such mistakes as his.

The meaning of "Faulty Logic" is somewhat more complicated. It refers not only to logic that is simply wrong or based on false assumptions, but also to perfectly correct logic's failure to explain a character's thoughts, feelings, or experiences. Probably the best examples of faulty logic appear in China White in a 1973 Ford. The narrator is very focused on visual and aural details, and searches to explain most of what happens through comparison of these cues to past experiences and to what John has told him. Yet his logic fails to answer his questions concerning other people, such as popular religious beliefs and his own feelings for Kathryn.

Stratofist

In Stratofist, the surprisingly un-jaded narrator travels to Spain, goes through several encounters with his enemy's men, and then when he finally comes face to face with Burundi, the fat villain dies of a heart attack, making the journey seem pointless, yet it is not clear whether Burundi would have died without the stress of the situation.

Stratofist is to some extent a parody of espionage novels; it includes an illogically intense rivalry between the bad guy and the hero, a final confrontation including the villain's monologue, and the against-the-odds defeat of the villain and triumph of the hero. At the same time, it contains events that are simply foolish, such as using bare hands to tear out adams' apples and place them in breast pockets. This story appears first in the collection as a signal to readers that it is okay to laugh at all the stories.
A Wander In Winter

In *A Wander In Winter*, Nick Schilling treks through snow and frigid winds for sixty miles to save himself so that he can see his brother. He manages through his considerable skills to reach the outskirts of a town only to be killed by a bear. Of course he learns that his training and his weapons cannot defeat nature, but does this mean the journey is not pointless if he is dead?

In this story, we see a major transition in Nick. In the beginning, he is a confident, highly trained professional who sees his plane crash in the middle of nowhere as an inconvenience. Here he thinks mainly about the plane and what caused the crash. As he trudges through deepening snow, he just concentrates on the journey for a long while, but the cold has an increasing effect, and he begins to think more about his brother, until he eventually loses control of his thoughts, fails to start a fire, and begins hallucinating.

When Nick finally reaches the outskirts of Kobuk, his confidence returns briefly, but immediately a bear attacks and he cannot accept the possibility that a dying animal could defeat him after all he has overcome. As the snow begins again to fall, all trace of Nick disappears, suggesting that his existence was inconsequential. On the other hand, we know of Nick’s importance to his brother; perhaps nature is retaliating for the trees Nick destroyed with his poorly designed plane.

Jason: The Duck Bill Tells Only Truth

In *Jason*, the main character suffers from some level of delusion. He imagines most of what happens in the story, yet much of what he sees, feels, and hears has some grounding in reality, suggesting more of a dream state than insanity. He is paralyzed and
not well enough to be out of bed, yet the wheelchair he imagines himself using is in the room. The dampness and mud on his pants from the dirty tires is consistent with his soiling himself. The sounds and activity in the playground may mirror the activity in the hospital. The nurse’s gripping his arm to take him back coincides with the injection.

His delusion only goes so far as to put him in jeans and a wheelchair; even in his imagination he is conscious of his injury and partially of his paralysis. Much of what he thinks about on the playground is his own childhood, and the appearance of some classmate who he may not have seen in years is consistent with a dream. The fact that he cannot decide on the color of an imaginary girl’s eyes suggests some reliance on reality for the formation of his imagination.

Jason is also to some extent aware that something is unusual in his situation; he wonders why the nurse always comes to find him and how she is able to pull him back to the hospital/reality. In the end, he sees the Band-Aid and unanswered is the question of whether he associates the injection with his return to reality. The clues are there for him in the inconsistencies between his dream state and his reality in the hospital bed, and this gives some hope that he will soon understand and separate dream from reality.

**Impervious Enthusiasm For Maniacal Malfeasance**

In *Impervious Enthusiasm*, the two characters may both be insane by some definition, yet they are not criminally insane; they are completely aware of the consequences of their actions, and Andrew even has thought extensively to logically convince himself that his actions are necessary. Andrew takes no pleasure in suffering, killing people quickly and seeing it as a duty. Fetter, however, enjoys inflicting pain, yet
his job is an honorable one, taking criminals off the street, and his human side is evident as he suggests an abusive childhood, showing cigarette burns on his forearm.

Andrew Mann’s logic in naming overpopulation as the world’s biggest problem is not unreasonable, but we see that he is using this logic to convince himself that his moral qualms are only a manifestation of his fear of being caught before succeeding in making a difference in the world. In Andrew is a man with good intentions and compassion for others, willing to dedicate his life to a cause he truly believes will help society. Ironically it is one of his many murders that suddenly reverses his beliefs – the only murder of a man who had directly inflicted pain on him.

An interesting aspect of this story is the question of what circumstances make killing acceptable. Andrew kills with good intentions and only kills those who he believes do great harm to the world. He does not enjoy it, does not get paid for it, and kills swiftly with no suffering. Fetter is paid to stop criminals, sometimes by killing them. He enjoys it, is paid to do it, and kills slowly through torture. The line between right and wrong is blurred and inconsistent, and shows an extreme example of the real difficulties in creating a fair judicial system.

Diversify Your Emotional Investments

In this story, Susan is uncomfortable even entering Mr. Pardy’s office and even imagines him as a pervert before dismissing her thoughts as stereotype. It is a reminder that stereotypes are by definition based on reality and should not necessarily be ignored simply because they are not always true. Though this story is viewed mainly through Susan’s eyes, as we get a look at Mr. Pardy and laugh at his incompetence as he loses
papers under his desk, while we don’t even know what Susan looks like, the impact of the situation has a much deeper effect on Mr. Pardy.

He has clearly been looking at Susan for a long time and it has taken a few years for him to work up the courage to proposition her. He knows on some level that she would not be interested in him, yet his obsession is so powerful that the only way for him to end it is to ask the question and hear the answer, the rejection.

At the end, it is unclear what the impact will be on Susan; she is shocked and does her best to force it from her mind. It is not revealed what comes next for either character, and it is up to the reader to determine the rest. Ultimately, there can be no happy ending to the story – Susan is young and intelligent and will probably move on quickly and understand what the man went through. Mr. Pardy, on the other hand, made the mistake of investing too much emotion in his infatuation and will have to carry the guilt of whatever effect he might imagine his actions had on Susan.

**Scents Of Sunucild**

In this story are two main characters, and we see from both points of view. The action is swift and brief, yet emotionally charged, as both characters are easy to relate to – Mark because of his fear and confusion, and, of course, because he is a human; and Sunucild because of his concern for his mother, his own fear, his willingness to physically suffer to help his mother, and his compassion for the boy as he returns him home.

Sunucild’s name is derived from the Old English “sunu” and “cild”, for “son” and “child”, making a universal and intentionally ambiguous character not associated with a
specific species. This is amplified by the fact that Mark is never able to see his captor. Though his race and features are never explained, it may be noted that neither are Mark’s.

Both Mark’s and Sunucild’s experiences during the story are told as each feels in his own manner what is happening. It is plain that Sunucild senses mainly through smell and also through some deeper communication that is so strong as to allow Mark to feel what Sunucild wants to tell him. We see that Sunucild’s sense of smell is comparable to a combination of human sight and hearing – he relies on it to navigate swiftly through the woods and to monitor what is happening around him. It may be interesting to note that Sunucild covers Mark’s mouth not to keep him quiet but to “hold in the stink of rotting meat and plants” – really to facilitate swift, safe travel rather than to harm the boy.

Sunucild’s kind is apparently primitive in that they live in caves and associate new smells with such things as leaves, trees, and rocks, yet their emotions and love for family are human. Sunucild and Mark are different species with different senses, yet they are fundamentally equal when thrown together in adversity.

In the end of the story, Mark’s waking position explains much of what he felt during the night – pain in the wrist, covering of the mouth, immobility – Mark is unsure it was not all a dream, yet the reader knows Sunucild’s perspective, things Mark did not see, smell, or feel, could not know.

**China White in a 1973 Ford**

*China White* is easily my favorite of the stories, though I had no inkling of where it was going until I finished the final sentence. I put more of myself in this than in any of the other stories. The narrator, Jake, is an unusual character who exhibits some signs of autism, though I do not see him as autistic; I think many “normal” people exhibit some of
the symptoms. Jake has a knack for numbers and sees the world from a unique perspective; his narration compels the reader to think about ordinary things in a different way – or simply to think about things usually ignored.

The narrator must think about every action logically or by referencing rules or definitions he sees as absolutes, even noting how he operates a steering wheel. Yet, simultaneously, he monitors the facial movements of Kathryn and Stanley, notices random details of what he passes, tracks the ratio of trucks to cars, notes general changes as they move north, thinks about many subjects triggered by what he sees, and counts both intersections and the lines in the road.

This demonstrates his peculiar intelligence, yet he is unable to understand his own feelings and must rely on prior experience to predict what will happen and interpret what his passengers are thinking. Really, this is the same as anyone; Jake just happens to have a different set of past experiences and focuses on different details than others might. Much of his experience is tied to John, in particular his absolute rules and definitions. It is interesting that John plays such a significant role in Jake’s character and the story, yet we know nothing about him and it does not matter.

A point of the narration that I find striking is the pattern of thought; I find it realistic that the impetus for subjects explored and memories mentioned is always something seen, heard, felt, or smelled; they do not come from nowhere. Also present are the strange and unexplainable notions such as Jake’s thought that Kathryn’s eyes “should be purple like mulberry, and I don’t know why I think this. I don’t even know what color mulberry is.”
China White is also the happiest of the stories. The journey seems rather pointless as two of the three people sleep much of the way and the narrator occupies his time by thinking and counting lines on the pavement, and in the end they only deliver plates to a stranger and immediately turn around and go home. However, during the course of the trip, the narrator grows immeasurably. We see through his eyes signals that Kathryn might like him, and though in the beginning he likes long drives because he can think about anything he wants, he doesn’t fit in with other people and he says very little, making him basically a loner, in the end, directly following a direct quote of his thought at the beginning of the trip, a symbol of enduring status quo, is an entirely new sentiment, “I am thinking that I am happy that I am not driving alone.” This is a symbol in a way of a happy ending, but more it is an indication of the beginning of a new journey that is far from pointless.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout the writing of this collection of stories, I have attempted to create a variety of types of stories while allowing themes to develop naturally and without including any pieces that do not fit in the thesis. This has resulted in a few stories and many ideas excluded from this collection. I hope to use these in the future; this is not the end of a project – rather, it is the beginning of a journey that I am confident will not be pointless – at the very least, I will have fun, as I have enjoyed creating this collection of short stories.
Author's Biography

Jared C. Record was born in Augusta, Maine, on September 23, 1981. He was raised in Windsor, Maine, and graduated from Cony High School in 2000. Majoring in mechanical engineering, Jared is a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and has received a UMaine Tuition Scholarship.

Upon graduating in May 2004, Jared plans to pursue a career in mechanical engineering and to continue writing.