

The Conspiracy of the Ravens



Nelson Mckeeby

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by Nelson McKeeby

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The Enchanted Guitar

December 19th, 1964
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico

Robby Krieger sat on the beach holding his new guitar. It was an amazing instrument, a real Ramirez. Much better constructed than a ukulele or a practice guitar at school, the instrument held endless potential. His biggest worry was that he would never learn the nuances of playing it.

“You will.”

He nodded. If his inner voice said he would be a good guitarist, then it was like a type of destiny. He began to strum the strings with his fingers and was delighted at the sonorous output. He thought of a pick as he felt how even playing a short while rubbed the skin raw.

“The pick stands in the way of the magic.”

Robby agreed with himself. His inner voice was dark, deep, black. Not like some evil forbidding shadow cast to intimidate, but like the warm darkness of midnight that embraces you when you start to fall asleep in a safe bed where you can trust everything around you.

“Keep going Robby.” His internal voice, the soft darkness, folded in on him. he played intensely for five minutes, then looked up. Gone was the beach. Gone was the tourist town with its edgy slums. Instead, Robby was face-to-face with a bright woman in fiery red and crystalline blue. She clapped her hands and said, “Welcome to Oz.”

Incident at Bashful

August 7th, 1960
Bashful, Kansas

Right turn, tires squealing, and they were again in front of the motor lodge. A yellow Packard sedan was burning by the *Cheap Hotel's* nasty green pool. Four men were rolling on the ground from some wound to their legs, courtesy of his partner's preternatural skill with his ancient Smith and Wesson model 3 revolver. Ivy's head was on a swivel so that he did not miss him in the chaos of levitating men, swirling wind, and the strange music blasting from the tiny television set Dr. Kelle Brainerd was clutching onto.

The normally reluctant murmur of the car engine had developed into a lion's roar of gas-filled frenzy, as if some deep, personal desire to escape had filled the Chevy's body. Squishy brakes now reflected the press of Ivy's foot like those of the finest race car, and the wandering tachometer was pegged just under the red as if the engine had decided that nothing but the greatest effort must be given.

Almost too late, he saw Rains-a-Lot detach from a shadow and spring for where the car would be in a few seconds. Using both feet Ivy modulated the car speed and threw into a skidding slew at the last second to give the Indian the best purchase for entering the vehicle, but Rains-a-Lot hardly needed it. He performed a flawless frog hop into the front seat and Ivy slammed on the gas, punching it through one-forty kay-pee-ache as he hit the open road.

"He is still back there!" Kelle yelled. Her little, flat television was muted for a second.

More than one car was fanning out behind them, but it was an old LaSalle pickup with the Orange Wizard standing in it that Kelle was yelling about, and it was gaining on the Chevy with every block. The wind was picking up, and the night had gone from arid and cloudless to heavy and pregnant with rain. In the passenger's seat, Rains-a-Lot had begun to chant:

A'te he'ye e'yayo ! A'te he'ye e'yayo! A'te he'ye lo, A'te he'ye lo. Nitu'fikafishi'la wa'Tiyegala'ke — kta' e'yayo! NituTikafishi'la wa' fiyegala'ke — kta' e'yayo! A'te he'ye lo, A'te he'ye lo. Ni'takuye wanye'giJa'ke — kta e'yayo! Ni'takuye waflye'gala'ke (1)

“Arriver comme un cheveu sur la soupe!” Ivy yelled, so scared his brain was scrubbed of its English, leaving only his birth language.

The wind was growing each second as dust and debris began to slap the Chevy. Ivy closed the passenger window, then reached across Rains-a-Lot and awkwardly closed his window as the tip of his foot pressed the gas pedal down. The hurricane blast of air was slowing the Chevy, but was helping the two cars chasing them.

“Être mal baisé! This man makes my ass hot!” He forced his brain into English, trying to master his fear, while most of his attention kept the slewing car on the road. The Chevy was shaking now and rocks were being moved by the fierce wind. Ahead Ivy saw a vortex cloud blocking the road. “Merde, merde, merde, Avoir la tête dans le cul!”

“Drive right toward it.” Kelle yelled. A new song now played from her tiny haunted television.

*There's a killer on the road
His brain is squirmin' like a toad
Take a long holiday
Let your children play
If you give this man a ride
Sweet family will die
Killer on the road (2)*

“Pisser dans un violon, no, impossible!” Ivy felt bile in his mouth and thought the top of his skull might split.

A deep purple feeling expanded outward from the roaring heart of the Chevy, embracing each passenger in the warm clasp of motherly love. It was almost like each person was suddenly immersed in a deep lavender bath of comfortably warm oil, pressing down the fear each felt and effusing their beings with a strange, preternatural confidence. Ivy felt each other person as an extension of one massive embrace. Violaceous tendrils of hope penetrated deep into each of their squirrel-minds and said in a hushed, sultry voice, “Calm my child, your mother is here.” And each felt aware of a calm tide building and pushing out the rolling panic.

The Chevy grew silent and tomb-like while the swirl of dust seemed to move in slow motion before their eyes, the alien purple thoughts settling on each of their minds and allowing them to see each terrible second more clearly. Ivy heard Rains-s-Lot’s chanting change to English, calling on the Old Man, the Eagle, the Buffalo, and the Crow to take them to flight and show them bravery, each line matching the haunting beat of the music coming from the little television. He felt Kelle’s somatic

indignation boil over with anger that she was being crowded by this demonic orange wizard, his hatred and possessiveness a vile mental dagger stabbing at them all through space, but he was also feeling that purple calm, saying to him with purple footsteps like the silken tones of a woman speaking gentle accented French, "Take to the center of the storm and believe in the gateway."

The car bucked in slow motion, while the freight train of wind gently batted it around second by second. At the edge of his being Ivy felt a terrible clawing, a caterwauling of anger, the voice of the Wizard demanding that he stop his car and surrender Kelle to him. Then he felt a reply from Kelle, her middle finger forcefully pumped at the magician, though this was only a mental construct. Her defiance caused the Wizard's anger to explode across the entire landscape of Ivy's mind, and he was proud of the diminutive woman, who was like the lion's prey telling the lion to fuck himself seconds before he closed his jaws on her being. How can you not love that bravura defiance at the edge of a storm?

Then he saw a point in the maelstrom that glowed a beautiful yellow light. It was a place that transcended dimension and plane, a place whose existence was causing a rip in two worlds, feeding the awful power of the wind. Kelle said, "There is a convergence here and the Wizard cannot control his creation, not like he wants." A purple thought in the middle of his brain agreed, and urged Ivy forward into the maw of cataclysm.

They crashed through to the other side and were immediately traveling more than a hundred down a packed dirt road in a snow-covered landscape. Just as the car's wheels bit into the ground, they began to plow through a formation of people

dressed in steel armor, running over at least a hundred of the soldiers before Ivy could finally brake the Chevy to a barely controlled stop in front of huge warrior in a bear hat. This man immediately brought an iron flail down on the car's hood, which caused the Chevy to accelerate again, seemingly of its own volition, crushing the final knight down beneath its wheels and grinding his chest to pulp.

Kelle unbuckled her seat belt and looked around both at the fleeing soldiers, and at a smaller and more pathetic army of poorly dressed peasants who were armed with pitchforks and rusty glaives. "We are not in Kansas anymore."

Rains-a-Lot replied stiffly, "No shit, Dorothy."

Mind Games with Darts

November 24th, 2017
Peterborough, New Hampshire

I hit <COMMAND><S> on my computer right after I write the words, “No shit, Dorothy,” surprised that the normally taciturn Rains-a-Lot would make such a popular culture reference. Pinned on my corkboard is the letter from my neurologist, recapping that wonderful diagnosis meeting where five medical doctors told me I am screwed in scientific language, though they did so with kind hearts.

A bottle of valproate sits on my computer desk. For nearly twenty years it has been all that stood between me and senile dementia brought on by epileptic seizures. Three months ago, my insurance agency, concerned with ever-changing regulations coming out of Washington D.C. and the eventual demise of the Affordable Care Act, had required that I change my medication to a cheaper drug called Lamotrigine. The result was a near-fatal bout of Stevens Johnson Syndrome, which was controlled only at the last minute by an experimental and risky therapy.

When I returned to valproate, though, it did not have its original effectiveness. It was slowly letting the seizures happen again, almost like it was angry at me not being faithful to it. Worse, when the doctors had tested me compatibility with several other medications, each in turn caused allergic reactions. I was stuck with valproate.

“How long do I have?” I had asked.

The room had grown quiet. It stayed that way for a second while each medical practitioner considered, staring at the walls then glancing at their colleagues. Finally, the lead resident said, “The question is very hard to answer, there is no firm line

between your current mental state and the mental state where you will consider your quality of life to be severely effected. Each time you have an epileptic seizure, it will likely take something from you, some bit of intellect. It could be a year, though, before it takes enough that you can tell you are declining. Or it could take your vision, your hearing, or your motor functions tomorrow. We simply do not know. Think of your mentality as a dart board, and epilepsy like a drunken dart player. There is no telling where the dart will fall, but eventually the board will be full of darts.”

That night I had purchased two bottles of La Vieille Ferme Côtes du Ventoux red, the writer’s tonic, and a new Winmau dart board. I printed out a picture of the human brain, and held a lonely game of drunken darts. I would drink a glass of wine, then throw darts at the color print of the brain pinned to the board. As I got drunk, the darts started to hit all over the board with soft thunks, and I could smell the wafting odor of new dart board cork. Eventually the standard deviation of the throws grew to include the book shelves on either side of the board. Each time a dart went into the board, I would recover it, place a little orange target dot on the place where it hit, then return to throwing.

Two bottles in, plus seven glasses of Benedictine and nine cans of Boags’ Beer, (a leftover from this year’s author’s party), and the brain picture was a solid mass of orange. There was a last sip in a last wine bottle and two more darts. I sipped the wine, more of a gulp, then threw the first of the remaining missiles.

A bullseye. The Kenyan sisal that made the board caused the dart to vibrate madly as it hung in the middle of the board. Good stuff, Kenyan sisal.

And that's about it. I did not imagine God as the dart thrower. He or she was more likely the bartender. Heaven, I imagined, was a bar like the old *Jim Collins* I used to go to in Savannah, back when I was young enough to hitc hike across Mexico and not think it was a feat worth reporting to my friends. No, I imagined the dart thrower was the shade of Chekov. And here I meant Anton, not Pavel Andreievich, and his darts were fired from an impressive hand crossbow made of silver and heartwood. Only like me, he is drunk. But unlike me, God lets him drink on the house. The best I can do is happy hour if I bring a date and let her order.

One last dart. I really had to pee, so I threw it as hard as I could. So far the darts had only caused minor damage to a copy of *Understory's* by Timothy Horvath when they missed the target all together. Most of the other books were sufficiently agile to dodge poorly thrown missiles, likely having used various tricky ways to buff their armor class when they saw the arrival of a dart board and a metric shitload of alcohol.

I could hear the stricken book totter on the shelf, giving the whole death scene a real Hollywood finish. After a few seconds of creaking elegy, it fell to the floor in a swan-mush of flapping pages and cracking bindings. Holding my bladder with Herculean force - there should be medals for things like not peeing your pants after an epic drunk - I turned and grabbed the book. It was *the Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. It had to be that book. I had never read it.

Clutching the tome to my chest, I tacked like a sailing craft plying against the wind to my bathroom. The trick to drunk peeing is to catch the crafty porcelain bowl in a position of enfilade before you set your internal gyros to compensate for the swaying of the deck below your feet. If you do this then you have a nice, long target to pee into,

and a high chance that the entire salvo will at least bracket your target, if not score direct hits.

Lining myself up with great confidence, I decided that the issue of urination was well in hand and I could consider my long connection to the fable. In 1986 I had, through a series of misadventures, visited a communist intellectual debate camp in the deserts of Mexico above the town of Matamoros. The camp was for college students of distinctly left wing interests, taught by college professors of an equally slanted world view - and it even had communal showers. It was those showers that had drawn me to the place since I was a high school drop out, a Quaker, rather right wing in my economic views, and definitely a believer in the system of democratic republics. On the other hand, I was willing to listen to indoctrination if I got to shower with college-aged women.

In any case, during one of my few collisions with drugs, a professor had handed out doses of Mescaline and then lectured on the nature of Quetzalcoatl. It was a great lecture even though my hearing was troubled by a distinct copper smell, and as he described an alternate universe that existed I made a joke to a dark-haired, beautiful Mexican college student about this being more like a discussion of the land of Oz. The professor stopped the lecture and said, "You of all people Comrade Nelson, should not joke about Oz."

I finished peeing and reached out to flush, but the toilet had moved more than a meter to my left. That required a tricky extension to reach the handle, one that I proudly completed. Turning to leave I almost fell; a pipe must have had a small leak because the floor was wet and my house shoes were not all-terrain. Holding up the

book above my head like I saw marines do crossing Alligator Creek in the *Battle of Guadalcanal*, I waded to dry land and began the northern tack that would take me safely past Savo Island to my reading chair.

I aimed for my chair, but wound up on my bed. The doctors said it was impossible to tell when epilepsy had first struck me. I knew though when it was. It was in an Iowa field when a giant plane came crashing down near me in 1989. The bodies, the smells, the feeling of slipping into another world, and I was in a special place. A dream land where airliners did not fall from the heavens on sunny August days.

That dream land was a place of magic. I was only a bird, but I could fly anywhere, see anything, and understand a lot more than a bird should. I met the Spider Queen through her workers that spun her webs across Oz. I saw the Yellow King build a tyranny across the low lands while his brother, the Orange Wizard of the Great Obsidian Tower, connive for power in the Delta. I saw on her throne the Queen of Fire and Ice in the great city of Emeralds, and Pirate of the Batterseas on top of her great ships of wood.

There were thousands of stories in Oz. The story of the Mulberry Priestess, the song of the Vine Torn Warrior, the book of Silence, and the epic of the Four all would flash before me as I flew across the land. There were strange moments of clarity though. I saw a purple 1957 Chevy standing in front of the city gate to the Emerald City with a clear view of its license plate, black rimmed, white colored plate with the number 60-9866 stamped on it. A modern Iowa license.

I woke up the next morning with a headache and a lot of cleaning to do. I had written down the number Iowa 1960 60-9866 in Sharpie on the bottom of my work table along with the words “Get to Work.”

The yearly epileptic seizures became monthly, then weekly, and Oz became a part-time home as I my health declined. Then the doctors eventually found a way to beat them back, and I had forgotten Oz. Now the seizures were back and my own drunk self had just told the somber me to get to work.

It made perfect sense in a twisted way. The doctors said I could live twenty or thirty more years, but my intellectual self was sitting under the sword of Damocles. Next week, or next year, when the string snaps, I will become a rather interesting form of house plant. I have no desire to commit seppuku, that falls to someone with the theatrical talent of Masayuki Mori, not to the likes of me. Instead I have decided to work as fast and as hard as I can to tell the story of how a 1957 Chevy could end up in Oz.

Research has always been easy for me. Although I was epilepsy robbed of my chance at a earning a Ph.D., I had completed my dissertation and came damn close to defending it. I would forever be considered ABD, which means “All But Dissertation”, at South Carolina, but the rules said I could never complete the degree. Despite this great scholars like Lynn Zoch and Eric Collins had taught me to be a critical thinker and a strong researcher and nothing could take that away from me.

I laughed. Something was about to take it away from me, but for now, I had it, so I would use it.

Research really boils down to finding someone who knows more than you do, and asking them the right questions to separate the subjective from objective. A license plate was easy. Bail Cannon, who had a weird hobby of automotive records, kept an amazing database of state and national vehicle records. He had actually helped solve cold cases, filled in holes in the national vehicle database, and was forever being used by rare automobile experts to answer tiny questions about vehicles. I shot him an e-mail.

To: CannonB
From: McKeebyN
RE: Iowa 1960 60-9866
Date: 12 November, 2017

Contents: Bail, tell me anything you can on the automobile assigned this plate. Bill me what I owe you.

In just an hour I had an answer.

To: McKeebyN
From: CannonB
RE: Iowa 1960 60-9866
Date: 12 November, 2017

Contents: Nelson, registered to Dustin-Rhodes Corporation of 406 6th Avenue, Des Moines, Iowa. 1957 Chevy. Vehicle acquired December, 1957, and amortized as total loss August, 1960. Cause listed, weather. Insurance form says its loss was at or near Bashful, Kansas.

The Internet is amazing, but so is the idea, proven here, that no matter how obscure, modern society will have an expert at anything you seek to know. I wrote an info card for the 1957 Chevy and put it on my cork board, then printed the e-mail and put it into my paper files.

Bashful, Kansas was harder to find. Here is a strange fact: There are *thousands* of ghost towns across the United States. Each year, hundreds of towns cease to exist in any record save historical as their last citizens die, the community goes bankrupt, global warming causes it to slide into the ocean or burn up in desert heat, or it simply slips from memory.

My parents were busy folks who did a lot of wonderful things, but near the end of their lives they took the last of their meager savings and bought a tiny house in

the wilderness of Northern Florida near a town called Two Egg. I am not sure why they chose this to be the place of their last stand, but within a year they had both died of cancer, (or perhaps they died together because they had no other idea of a happy life without the other). I drove through the place a couple of years later, and saw a community with a great deal of pride and love holding onto a name as hard as they could, but always knowing that it was a losing battle. Near the corner of Florida 69 and Florida 69A, someone had put up a sign that said, "Remember Us, Two Egg." I asked about the sign inside of a small insurance agency and no one knew who put it there. As I said goodbye to my parents, I thought of that sign. I had been the one who had paid for its construction, and then had slipped out of responsibility by pointing it out and asking who else had been the one who had built it.

Bashful was a town that weather destroyed, but unlike Two Egg, no one had ever bothered to put up a sign to mark its passing. It is a strange thing, but in the Internet of Everything, not everything exists. Instead you have to dig deeper into things that exist in strange corners of the human collective mind. For me, small libraries attached to colleges and universities are the perfect place for local research. Being a student at a place with 90,000 books and no Lexis Nexus is hard, but those libraries act as vacuum cleaners of knowledge, scooping up defunct meeting notes, police records, newspaper galleys and everything else that modern society has cut loose in its efforts to nationalize and modernize. I called Wabash and got a student worker.

"This is Nelson McKeeby, I am working on the Oz project." The fact that I had not named this project yet was beside the point. It was now the Oz project. The book would be named whatever it ended up being named.

“Bell Selshy sir.”

“You know how to use your database to find local records Ms. Selshy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you have time to get me whatever you have on Bashful?”

“My grandparents went to Bashful. I mean, before the thing you know.”

“What thing?”

“The inversion.”

“You are a treasure; can I interview you or your parents?”

“Yes, and I can copy the Bashful file for you. Do you have an account?”

I made a research account with the library, and ended up getting a box full of photocopies. Plus, I got three interviews with Selshy family members who remembered Bashful.

Cheap Motel

August 7th, 1960
Bashful, Kansas

The purple 1957 Chevy blasted across the sun-baked Kansas landscape, sometimes hitting one-hundred-twenty KPH on straights. Despite the reputation she had earned for reluctant obedience in the motor pool, today she was on her best behavior, hugging the road like a race car and paying close attention to each rise and fall of the pavement. Her engine purred with the low throttled roar of restrained power, wheel ready and responsive like the stick of the most modern Delta Dart fighter.

Ivy was in a mood. Maybe it was the stupid mission, picking up some girl in a tiny Kansas town and driving her to an even tinier Wyoming town. Maybe it was the haunting dreams of *La Rue Sans Joie* that twisted his brain most nights. He could almost taste the smell of rotting plants and hear the blistering, mind numbing heat crack the skin and drive men away from their minds. That terrible land had finally broken his mind and left him...nothing, except to contemplate the car he was driving and the town he was diving to.

The Company had gone all out on the balky Chevy. It had power steering, power breaks, A V8 with fuel injectors, three point harness belts, safety glass, an air conditioner, and a heater with three extra coils for arctic weather. The radio was equipped with a powerful A.M. receiver, but also had a crystal to listen in on local police chatter between radio equipped patrol cars and their dispatchers. In the case of Bashful, the dispatcher was a soft contralto of Betty-Jean Weyerhaeuser who called the towns three officers, Bud, Ted, and Charlie, by their first names. To make the

driving experience more relaxing, it had a Turboglide automatic transmission, and installed on the passenger-side dash was a highly disturbing electric clock.

Perhaps the most amazing thing attached to the Chevy was that damned clock. As far as Ivy could tell, it dropped less than a second a day. He had given up setting it to his Rolex Oyster Perpetual (with a face that read 50 m = 165 ft so science-ignorant Americans could time athletic events) and started to set the Rolex to the car. The clock brought a preternatural precision to the Chevy. Approximate left the realm of reality and retreated into the darkness of the night. With the Chevy, time was so accurate that the universe had to set its clocks to you.

In the capacious trunk of the Chevy the Company had provided two portable Snap On transit cases for all of the things agents carried to help them stay alive. “Leave the car and take the cases” was the rule when things got tight. The cases were pretty large and looked like they might not fit in the trunk, but when they were inside there was still room for Ivy and Rains-a-Lot to throw in their own steamer trunks, a couple of duffle bags, a spare tire, a rain tarp and a canvas tent, a box of spare parts, a tool kit, and several cases of army rations. When they had first been given the car last year, they had stacked all of their desired dunnage next to it. The stack had towered above the car, but somehow it had all fit in the truck, with room for a little more.

In some ways, there was no give in the purple Chevy. When dirt covered its sides or its tires grew caked in mud, she would be hard to start, would hesitate in acceleration, get squishy in braking, would idle like a pig, and would complain about the smallest use of power with a flurry of pings and sighs. But a few hours washing the

car, buffing the seats, shampooing the carpets, and giving the engine some care, and she would drive like a dream.

When the car drove well like today it was a good thing, because the Midwest was an endless canvas of sameness repeated to a horizon that came too quickly and dwarfed any structure than man in his hubris tried to make. “Big sky country” they called it. Ivy thought it was more like “Long Road Country,” with miles and miles for miles and miles. Kansas alone, one damn state in the endless middle of America, was one-third of the area of France.

Ivy had learned to keep the purple Chevy clean. He would wash the car with a shammy and soft soap, buff the windows until they were invisible, carefully degrease and buff the engine compartment and replace any hoses that looked even a little suspect. The Chevy had fuel injection, like fighter jets have, so most mechanics would not touch her. Instead Ivy had taken to a constant round of inspections and cleanings of the entire engine. Deep in some corner of his mind, he felt a purple satisfaction from his efforts, and that made him even more happy when the Chevy sparkled.

Tornadoes had passed through this area just a month ago. Unseasonable damn things that wandered across the landscape as if controlled by some maniacal intellect. It was the barns that scared Ivy in his soul. Every couple of kilometers, there was a destroyed barn with its roof sitting intact adjacent. Nature, in its terrible majesty, had somehow directed the tornadoes with a horrible precision that preserved the roof of a structure but destroyed everything the roof concealed. It was like a bad joke. Some farmer coming out of his basement would see the death of all he owned, but at least he had all of the slate shingles he needed in case he wanted to rebuild.

Ivy's partner did not appreciate all of the details of technology. He treated the Chevy, with all of its quirks, like a horse. He had never known the stern man to use a telephone, and Ivy doubted Rains-a-Lot processed the differences between the new Chevy and the old Packard in any qualitative sense. To him, the car was like a beloved steed that, sadly, he had never learned to ride.

Although Rains-a-Lot did not drive, he did not approve of Ivy's driving much of the time. Ivy knew he let silly things bother him, and through some Gallic genetic trait those irritations were transmitted to his feet and legs through muscle memory. When Ivy drove calmly, the Indian would roll down his window and put his head on a swivel, looking at each and every extraneous detail that passed them, as if the red-painted mail boxes or square bale hay could suddenly pose an existential threat to a car rocketing down the street. When Ivy was disturbed, he drove faster and more erratically, causing Rains-a-Lot to fix his head forward and grasp at the base of his seat, as if he was worried the forces of acceleration might tear him apart.

The day was hot. La-Rue-Sans-Joie hot, although without the sickeningly sweet smell of decay or the humidity that would kill an unprepared man not ready to tend the basic mechanics of living. Ivy blasted the Chevy over a bridge, nearly taking it airborne, the car acting as some turgid expression of his mental ill-ease. His passenger made a huffing sound as the vehicle came down with a slight skid on the big, black, all-weather tires. Ivy had earned staring disapproval.

He glanced at his passenger while he purposely crinkled his eyebrows in reply to the Indian's stare. Rains-A-Lot was not a fan of Ivy when he drove "méthode française". Of course, knowing the Cherokee's exact feelings on any subject was an

issue of delicacy. Calling the Indian taciturn did not begin to explain his ability to avoid the use of any language for weeks at a time. Still, after two years Ivy had learned that Rains-a-Lot talked with a language of stillness which was rich in its ability to communicate to those who listened. Right now his face tightened at the cheeks, which may have been meant to say, “Just do your job and leave the bullshit back in the hotel room with the bottles of gin.”

Rains-a-Lot was not that angry with Ivy, but he was concerned. It was the mission, and Ivy’s mood, and the dry hot air of the dusty plains, and that feeling like there were words to be said, even though none ever came. Rains-a-Lot’s anxiety fed Ivy’s disquiet, which fed back into the Indian’s mood, and sent the Chevy speeding nearly 120 kph down the road to a tiny town. “Shake it off and think on something else.” Ivy thought. But it was impossible for them not to imagine they were the villains in some cheap and sordid spy novel written by a college student in need of something to turn in for their English class. Ivy had done too much in his life to ever think of himself as a white hat. Besides he had a scar on his face and would never lose the edges of his French accent, so he often felt tailor-made for the role of villain.

He had met the James Bond author, Ian Fleming, in the war, before he was anything more than a reckless minder for the French resistance. The older man was somewhat of a pig to the younger Ivy, who was himself proud and traumatized from four years of fighting and the death of so many he cared for. Years later, he had read the man’s novel *Dr. No* while recovering from battle injuries in Saigon, and thought of how much of a scam the spook’s books were. Anyone who read the thing would not actually know Fleming, just some fantasy version of him wrapped in a thrilling alter ego.

Ivy knew the real Fleming. He remembered his goddamned bouncy jeep speeding across the countryside that Ivy used to sneak across with the greatest care; the textbook definition of a goddamned amateur. Fleming's ways had rubbed off on Ivy, though, from the gin the older man used to share with the teenaged resistance fighter, to his fatalistic way of seeing the world in black and white.

A turn in the road came up, suddenly jerking Ivy from his thoughts as he had to overcorrect to avoid bouncing into a ditch. Sometimes he lived more in the past than the now, his brain a broken instrument that was always split in time. There was a mental scar tissue that seemed to prevent him from ever being a whole person.

Ivy glanced at his partner. He was older than Ivy by about ten years, a nearly silent stoic who was scrutable and known to him. He wore his heart on his sleeve, exposed to the cruelties of the world, but was a person of such strength that he had long ago found ways of hiding this "weakness." It was not a weakness at all in Ivy's mind that Rains-a-Lot cared deeply.

Ivy's erratic driving had caused Rains-a-Lot to put one hand on his hat and the other on the door jam. He looked at Ivy and squinted his eyes, saying to Ivy, "Find a way to keep it together today."

Ivy nodded, acknowledging he was troubled, and slowed down. A deep purple thought in the back of his head seemed to thank him on behalf of the Chevy. Rains-a-Lot removed his death grip on the door and took his hat off his head. Out of the corner of his eye, Ivy saw the Indian carefully work out a few blemishes in the hat's cloth. He was an athletic man, looking much like Jay Silverheels with thick, black hair, beautiful sun-touched skin, and an angular, muscular face.

“Your hat is new,” Ivy said. It was a gambit. A distraction from memory, from the oppressive big sky, from demolished barns simmering in the summer heat, and from a road that threw too many sudden curves at a driver.

Rains-a-Lot regarded his new Stetson fedora, manipulating it in his hands. “Bing Crosby,” he replied. The hat was brown with a tan silk accent into which a single wisp of feather had been placed. It was dimpled left, right, and on top, and had been brushed with a light saddle brush until it gleamed. Ivy knew he had blocked the hat to keep it in perfect shape as often as he could, often when he was hand-loading ammunition in hotel rooms. New hats were his partner’s pride, and he took as good care of them as he did of his antique silver revolver that was the only firearm he ever carried.

Dustin-Rhodes Limited was big on conformity and performing a mission with precision, which is one thing that made Rains-a-Lot an odd partner. The manual for Troubleshooters clearly stated that each member of this branch was a public representative of The Company who should dress at all times according to standards, which the Indian never did. Instead he wore his brown stetson (or whatever fashionable hat he had chosen that month), a brown leather flyer’s jacket, a white cotton shirt with red and blue stripes, and green pleated pants covering subdued cavalry boots. He did not even own a charcoal grey suit or pretend uniformity mattered. He was so good, though, that Central never bitched about dress code with him. Rains-a-Lot was considered an old-timer in the Troubleshooter pool and had a certain flare that gave him a pass on such things.

Rain-a-Lot's outfit was far more sensible than The Company-mandated charcoal, double-breasted ring jackets with exaggerated Madison Avenue shoulders and the pleated, ankle-hugging slacks that made Ivy look like an absurd triangle. The shoes were the biggest pain in the ass - leather soled black brogues, which were impossible to run in unless you took a belt sander to them. The grey Pork Pie hats that were standard issue could have been nice, but they were a bit too small for Ivy's head and were immediately lost in any chase. That was nine dollars out of his paycheck every time he had to purchase a replacement. It was almost like The Company wanted Troubleshooters to stick out. He had always figured it was like a tiger being orange. Just throw on some stripes and tigers any plot of land they live in. No one else gets to be orange.

Of course if the tiger had to wear leather soled brogues he would spend all of his time tripping on his ass and starving while the little forest deer laughed their asses off from the next clearing.

Ivy nodded again at the Indian's hat. "Bet you look like Bing Crosby wearing it."

Rains-a-Lot chuffed. It was his version of laughter.

Satisfied he had done his job to make conversation, Ivy turned away. Rains-a-Lot was prideful about the hat, which was just another dimension of the man's character that a stranger would never fathom. Ivy loved the movies and dragged his partner to them as often as he could. Rains-a-Lot mostly ignored the story lines, but he would marvel at the hats he saw in them. If an actor in a movie showed up sporting a new style of hat, Rains-a-Lot would notice. Soon the Indian would own one of the

same hats. It was one of the reasons Ivy had skipped Ben Hur - from fear that Rains-a-Lot would channel Hugh Griffith and wind up with a keffiyeh as his next hat.

Bashful came up suddenly, the speed limit dropping to twenty-five miles per hour, causing the Chevy to let out a purple groan as Ivy tested its impressive braking power. The presence of a police officer in a clunky Ford radio car showed the inconvenient placement of the sign was a strategy. Despite slowing with every impressive ounce of braking power the Chevy had, it still tore past the police car and was rewarded with flashing lights. He heard a small snick next to him. His partner was brass-checking his Smith and Wesson Model Three and placing it on his lap under his hat.

Ivy tugged the wheel of the car and abruptly pulled it to the side, then slammed the transmission into park. He rubbed his face with the palms of his hands, then rolled down the window and was rewarded with a blast of sticky Midwestern superheated air. The smell of gasoline, road tar, cow shit, and some sort of greasy cooking assaulted his sense of smell, while dust that had been trailing the car for hundreds of kilometers caught up to them in a roiling cloud. He reached down and turned off the scanner as the officer walked up.

The cop was a younger man, but he already had the second stripe of a senior officer. By some cosmic coincidence the name on his plate said, "Weyerhaeuser, C." Ivy placed both of his hands on the steering wheel and said, "Officer Weyerhaeuser, may I help you?"

"Fancy car. You know how fast you were going?"

Ivy nodded. "Yes, Officer Weyerhaeuser, this car has a speedometer."

“Well, you were going over the speed limit. I need your license and paperwork. And make sure Tonto shows me his BIA registration. He will need to tell us if he spends the night, we have rules about Indians in town past dark.”

Ivy felt a growl building in his brain, that growl that said his self-control was limited. Go ahead son, he thought, flick that scar tissue some. Even as the thought crossed his mind, a purple thought tamped it down. Instead of pulling the man-child down by his tie and beating his face against the door, Ivy said, “I am reaching in my jacket for my credentials.”

“Sure thing, bub.” The officer was way out of position for a traffic stop. His knees were vulnerable to a door smash, he was bending over trying to get a look at Rains-a-Lot, leaving his tie actually inches from Ivy’s left hand, and his pistol, riding low on his right hip, was nicely positioned if Ivy decided to snatch it out and use it against its owner. He was screaming amateur on so many levels.

Ivy’s own Browning hung upside down in a wire spring and canvas shoulder holster, made by an old man at the Boyt Harness Company just for him. As he reached his hand under his jacket, his fingers brushed the automatic and the small knife that hung next to it. There was a second of existential danger for the officer that he would never know he went through. Instead of the pistol though, Ivy’s fingers pulled the black leather credentials wallet he carried in his jacket pocket and presented it to the officer in a single, fluid motion.

“John Jones Jr., Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

The officer’s voice rose an octave. “No kidding, I never would have figured that with your accent. Where are you from?”

“New Jersey, You can never outgrow that accent.” Idiot.

The officer swiveled his head around as if he was suddenly on a spy movie.

“Yeah, I hear yah. What are you doing around here?”

“ I am picking up a witness. You understand that I cannot reveal operational details.”

“No, no, never.” The officer’s voice got really low, “What about the Indian though.” He seemed to be under the impression that Ivy’s passenger could not hear what was being said. Of course, the child had not bothered to note the passenger had a hat in his lap. Ivy imagined the revolver filled with shells, hand-loaded with black powder, the lead bullets for each round inserted backwards with the base hollowed out. Despite all that power in his hand\, Rains-a-Lot would never act unprofessionally. Not to the extent of airing out some poor kid. In fact, he could imagine his partner risking his life to save the little prick.

Ivy looked intently at the officer and said, “What Indian?”

“The one sitting next to you.”

Ivy turned and made a small finger gesture, drawing the officer in close.

Matching his quiet tone of voice, he said, “Shhh, he is clandestine, you want to blow his cover?”

“Geez, sir, sorry, he’s not really an Indian?”

“He is as American as I am,” Ivy replied.

“Why is he not talking?”

Ivy turned his gaze to Rains-a-Lot. His partner had a slight tightening of his lower jaw, what he used for a smile. “My partner’s accent is a giveaway.” The

tightening grew more pronounced, and a crease dimpled in between his eyes. That was Rains-a-Lot laughing hysterically.

“He from Jersey, also?”

“As far as you know.” Rains-a-Lot chuffed, then turned it into a slight cough.

The officer stood up and said, “I have to tell my father about this.”

“Only official contacts, I am sorry.”

“My father is the police chief.

Ivy nodded fatalistically, “Of course he is. We will be picking up the daughter of a witness, and leaving your jurisdiction. Should be a cake walk.”

“Nice to have met you, Agent Jones.”

Ivy waved at the officer as he walked back to his radio car. He flipped on the Chevy’s scanner and heard the officer report to his sister, Ms. Betty Jean Weyerhaeuser, about the arrival of strangers, asking her to tell their father, Big Jed, that he had something very exciting to tell him. Next to him Rains-a-Lot listened and watched with stern, staring eyes. When the patrol car carried the young officer away he took his hat from his lap, revealing the revolver that had been sitting there, and screwed it on his head about a centimeter past where fashion dictated.

Ivy regarded the weapon in the Indian’s lap. It was an ancient Smith and Wesson Model 3 that fired black powder cartridges. Rains-a-Lot cared for the pistol like it was a family heirloom, constantly fitting, refitting, and replacing parts on the pistol. He even handmade his own ammunition, spending a few evenings a month pulling apart commercial 45 Colt rounds, filing and clipping the cases, re-swaging the

lead bullets, tossing away the smokeless gunpowder and replacing it with blackpowder he made in hotel sinks.

Rains-a-Lot must have felt Ivy staring at him. He stared back as if to say, “Nothing wrong with being cautious.” Ivy let his eyebrows raise a little, implying that shooting the cop would be a bit over the top. The Indian shook his head and turned away, pocketing his revolver, saying it was more likely Ivy would have done violence to the idiot kid than Rains-a-Lot.

Bashful was a whistle stop if you did not blow the whistle too long. The town was a cluster of buildings huddled together around a town square, trailing off into four dozen private homes. At no point were you out of sight of the corn fields that was probably the thriving business of the town. They passed two large silos sitting by a railroad and a big butcher’s factory, each of which must have employed fifty or more locals. So what was Kelle Brainerd, target of The Company, doing in this place?

He had read her file that morning. Ms. Brainerd had sent a letter to the FBI making certain assertions and claims that had immediately seen the correspondence sent to file thirteen. File thirteen at The Bureau was outsourced to Dustin-Rhodes, the official name for what its employees simply called The Company, never omitting a capital C. Somewhere in the endless maze of bureaucracy, (which rumor said mostly consisted of accountants and mathematicians in tiny rooms all linked together by sixteen huge computers) a faceless drone had connected Ms. Brainerd’s letter with some other bits of data and decided to invite her in for an all-expense-paid trip to the metropolis of Hulett, Wyoming (population 333), on the steep banks of the Belle Fourche River for a debrief. The information was important, or there was an element of

danger, otherwise Troubleshooters would not have been the ones called on to collect her. The young Ms. Brainerd was not expected to object to her vacation, or else Central would have called it a snatch.

The Chevy was unhappy moving through town, its engine more designed to roar across the countryside than idle through streets. Despite this, it was tuned almost silent in low idle, a mechanical panther prowling herds of Midwestern wildebeests.

The town square was busy, mostly filled with running children and the elderly who were either lawn bowling or playing shoddy games of chess on cement tables with the chess boards permanently etched in the stone. Ivy pulled the car in by a brass 12-pound Napoleon being cared for by an “at-large” inmate dressed in prison garb. Probably a hobo who was arrested as an excuse to give him odd jobs and feed him a few meals. And in the middle of the park, sitting on a tartan blanket, was their target. It was the first time Ivy had seen Kelle Brainerd in person.

She was petite, maybe 150 centimeters tall and probably not even 50-kilograms mass. She had dark, black hair, cut boyish short and held in place by metal hair clips. She was wearing a pink poodle skirt with a black appliqué poodle prominent on the front, black and white saddle shoes in shiny patent leather, and a grey sweatshirt that said, “College” on it. It was odd that it did not say what college was being referred to. The girl appeared to be fifteen, but was reading a huge university-level text book of some sort, labeled as a library checkout. Beside her was an Aladdin Industries vacuum flask and lunchbox with the image of Hopalong Cassidy fixed to the metal. She also had a huge blue backpack with a brushed metal frame she leaned

against, an impossibly huge thing for a girl her size, made of some space age blue fabric. It looked like a satellite dish.

Rains-a-Lot stepped from the car and went off around the park. He was the spotter while Ivy made contact. The park itself had too many moving pieces to keep track of them all, even though Ivy tried. He imagined for a second that the old chess players were concealing Bren guns, or that the children had been equipped with bombs, but quickly shook it off. He needed a drink, but it would be several days before he could have one. His bottles of Benedictine and Gordon's Gin were waiting for him in his personal chest in the wagon, but he could not open it because Rains-a-Lot had the key.

Ivy walked up to the girl as she read. She looked like someone's rebellious daughter rather than a target of interest for The Company. At thirty-two, Ivy was already seeing himself as ancient, a person who had seen too much. But that also made him see children as people he should protect. He was not sure how he would have reacted if this was a snatch. There was always that internal turmoil of what to do if The Company ordered you to take a bridge too far.

The girl glanced up at him and said, "What are you supposed to be, Men in Charcoal?"

Ivy goggled for a second. What did she say? The girl was already throwing stuff into her pack, thermos, lunch box, and book. "Sorry, wrong snappy reference." She switched to an awful James Cagney voice, "Look it here G-Man, badge me and get it over with, see?"

The ground cloth went into the backpack last. Ivy saw it was packed with canvas sacks filled tightly with smaller objects like notebooks packaged in elastic, and bundles of clothing. A slick compression sack held a bulging arctic sleeping bag, while a puffy coat was slung on the top. She lifted the huge pack up like she was a weight lifter and then stared at him.

Ivy loved movies, and loved how actors in the movies could snap off dialogue, knowing what to say at just the right time, but his own attempts always fell a little flat. “Did you know we would be picking you up?”

“Nope, I always read in the park with an expedition pack.” Some of the old men had stopped their chess game and were listening. A couple was pushing a stroller by the canon and had stopped to chat with the trustee. In the far distance, music from an ice cream truck rang out across Bashful. A siren sounded as Officer Weyerhaeuser made a new stop at his traffic blind, while in a nearby shop a record player drilled out *Chantilly Lace*.

Rains-a-Lot walked up. He made a sign by tapping his inside wrist. Someone was watching. The girl started humming the song playing in the distance as she fidgeted with her pack. Ivy covertly snuck a glance. There was a man in a watch cap staring at them. He put his finger on his cheek and Rains-a-Lot stiffened slightly.

“If you guys are going Brokeback on me, wait until I charge my iPhone, I want to shoot video of it. Ten thousand hits on YouTube at least.”

Ivy tried to break into the stream of gibberish but failed. It was like Ms. Brainerd was speaking a foreign language. “You sent a letter. Will you come with us?”

“Actually I was planning to visit Storm Lake and put flowers on the Big Bopper’s grave.”

“Ms. Brainerd, do you wish to come with us?”

She looked at Ivy like he was an idiot. “Of course.”

Across the park, heat waves from the blazing summer caused the sky to shimmer. The man in the knit cap began to walk forward through a group of children playing under the watchful eyes of their caretakers. He was dressed head to toe in soft leather buckskins and had a broom in his hand. The girl noticed Ivy staring past her and turned around as gracefully as a hippo, “Crap, you led him here!”

Rains-a-Lot reached into his jacket for his pistol. The wind was picking up in the park, blowing leaves around and causing a few of the people to retreat into the surrounding stores, fearing a sudden summer storm.

The man walked straight to them. Ivy stepped forward and said, “You should stop.”

“The girl is my property.” The man said. His voice had a timbre with a strange reverb to it, like it was made of up hundreds of violin strings being plucked. Little crackles of electricity were flowing around him.

One of the old men at the table must have heard that. He stood up, cane in hand, and hobbled over. “Did you just say that cute little girl belonged to you?”

“Yeah, Fuck that,” Kelle said.

The man in the cap said, “Shut up old man.”

The old man clenched his fists on a stick, seething at being insulted. He took the ersatz weapon, nothing more than a walking cane, and brought it down on the

head of the man with the cap. The cap fell off and revealed pointed ears, a bald and heavily tattooed skull, and two immense and painful-looking earrings. The strange man screamed and brought up his staff. Lighting began to flicker around his body and a wind started to whip around them like he was calling a tornado. The old man said, “Martians!” and turned tail while Ivy braced himself against the wind.

“I will suck your soul, weak one!” The creature yelled at Ivy, any sense of the humane was gone from his figure. He seemed to darken and grow in the flashes of light, while a low rumble could be heard, perhaps a preternatural thunder. Rains-a-Lot stepped up and fired five rapid shots from his Schofield, knocking the malevolent man back.

The girl screamed, “That won’t do any good.”

‘Fuck this’ was right, Ivy thought. He grabbed Kelle and manhandled her back to the car, throwing her and pack into the back. When she tried to get out he looked at her as sternly as he could. She stared back, angry but also a bit scared. Ivy knew exactly what she was thinking. He slammed the back door and jumped into the driver’s seat. The Chevy roared to life in the darkening eave of the storm, Ivy hardly noting that he had not put the key in the ignition. The dark man was standing again, facing down Rains-a-Lot, who had returned his pistol to its holster and had drawn a huge Bowie knife.

Ivy slammed on the gas and bounced over the curb into the park, causing the trustee to leap over his canon and old men to abandon lawn bowling to flee behind trees. The Chevy’s big tires bit into the park’s green, grass slewing the car’s back in a series of fishtails. He used the last fishtail to sweep the strange creature while giving

Rains-a-Lot a chance to dive into the open passenger's window. The creature leapt twenty meters into the air, broom outstretched and hand wrapped around a bolt of crackling energy, but Rains-a-Lot was able to make it into the car in a single Olympic quality-dive. Hearing his partner buckle in, Ivy gave the Chevy gas, laying a line of rubber out of the square and down main street.

“Who is that guy?” He yelled.

The girl said, “David Lo Pan? How the hell should I know his name?”

The threatening storm roiled in the sky as they tore away from the town proper and down a backroad. Coming up on a diner attached to a motel called “Cheap Hotel,” Ivy pulled the Chevy into a spot hidden from the road. Kelle said, “We should really get out of here.”

“Ten blocks or ten miles, that guy won't find us soon, and about now he is meeting the Weyerhauser family.”

Kelle seemed about to argue, but gave up and pulled a purse from her backpack. “Kelle finally has a Kelly Bag.”

Like much of what came out of the girl's mouth, this was barely explicable. Ivy waited for Rains-a-Lot to enter the diner, then followed Kelle into it. There was a hatrack near the entrance and Ivy flung his Pork Pie on it. His partner kept his hat.

Never sit in a booth. It was rule nineteen in the Handbook of Basically Correct and Commonsense Practices for Troubleshooters. The diner had a few tables near the back with steel and black vinyl chairs. They forced Kelle into a chair between them with her front to the entrance by wordlessly taking the two chairs they wanted and pushing away the forth chair they did not want her sitting in. She did not seem to

notice. Rains-a-Lot held up two fingers and brushed his cheek. There were two more exits. Fist with thumb in and then two fingers pressing thumb. The exits were in the bathroom and the kitchen.

A thin, beady-eyed waitress in a green polyester uniform affixed with her name in script, Flo, came out and crinkled her nose. “Were not supposed to serve Indians.”

Before Ivy could use one of his badges on the woman Kelle said, “My dear, this is my Uncle Don Pablo de Luna, and he happens to be Spanish!”

The waitress squeaked. “Oh, I am so sorry! He’s not Mexican?”

“Spanish. Totally different.”

“Well, I am so sorry, we have to run a clean establishment, you know. What can I get you?”

Kelle pointed at the menu, “Bacon, Lettuce, and Tomato.” The waitress nodded and said, “And you, Don Pablo?”

Ivy answered for Rains-a-Lot, “He wants a grill-steak with grits and I will have the white bean soup and oven fries.”

“Great, anything to drink?”

“Two coffees and two waters.” He glanced at Kelle.

“Budwine if you have it.” She was smiling, glancing around the restaurant like it was a museum filled with treasures rather than a greasy spoon in armpit Kansas.

The waitress nodded and said, “Out in a second.”

When she was out of earshot, Ivy said, “We are tasked with taking you to a safe location. Anything we need to know?”

Kelle smiled slightly. "That guy is bad news."

"I understand that." The best interrogation technique is often staring. Especially when you cannot use copper wire and a blow torch.

Kelle stared back at him, then looked over at Rains-a-Lot. Their food came to their table steaming in the air conditioning. Kelle nervously grabbed her sandwich off the plate. She regarded it for a few seconds and said, "In all the times of the world you have to be in the right space to get a B-L-T." She bit down on her food with a crunch of lettuce and bacon, the sound filling the silence left by the lack of conversation. "Anyway, that guy is a wizard."

Ivy felt a weight on him. There was something about lunatics that Dustin-Rhodes seemed to favor. More than once, he and Rains-a-Lot had been forced to help some skunk guy in Newberry, South Carolina gather up a load of skunks and deliver them to a ballet school in Rhode Island. Troubleshooters called them bugs, and it was sad that this woman was infected with crazy.

He has about shut down his listening circuits when he caught Rains-a-Lot out of the corner of his eye. The Indian was looking like he had been beaten by a mullet, a sandbagged look of someone who forgot their own age and was shocked to find out they were five years older than they had suspected. He reached his hand across the table and touched the Indian's wrist. "Rains, what do you know?"

"The Ghost Dance," he said from between bites of food.

The girl pulled a thick, black-covered, engineer's field notebook and a sleek, stubby pen from her bag. "1890, not too far from here. It was an attempt at Gate Magic. You have been through a gate?"

The Indian nodded. In their team, it was usually Rains-a-Lot who acted as the silent skeptic, and Ivy took the role of credulity in an interrogation. Strictly speaking, he only needed enough information to deliver their charge to whatever weird science lab she belonged to, and no more. Right now though, they were out of contact and without backup.

Ivy pondered the man who, shot five times, gets back up and rides a lightning bolt into the air. It was his own partner's fatalistic look, though, that made him believe that this was not a scam being run against him. The waitress stalled the conversation by delivering their drinks. Kelle looked at the Budwine and said in something like a reverie, "Hard to get, this stuff." Then she took out from her purse a ten-dollar bill and said, "Florence, do you have a spare roll of quarters?"

Florence said, "Why sure, dear, I am going to the bank this afternoon, so you can have one of my spare rolls."

"How about two?" Another ten dollar bill appeared from Kelle's purse.

The waitress took the bills as Kelle started sipping on her bottle of Budwine. She stared at Rains-a-Lot and said, "If you remember the Ghost Dance, then you are over seventy, assuming you were a child when it happened. What year were you born?"

Rains-a-Lot fixed the girl with a spear-like gaze, a lance of intense concentration that Ivy had only seen twice before. "I was born in the year of the White Buffalo."

Ivy said, "Which was?"

"1864."

Florence returned with the coins and the food. Kelle put the coins in her purse while Ivy, struck dumb by his partner's comment, started to eat from his bowl. He could not remember what he ordered, some type of soup . Kelle seemed to want the conversation to continue. "You could have known Custer!"

Rains-a-Lot looked away.

Ivy nodded fatalistically. Kelle probably could not decode Rains-a-Lot's quiet conversation style, but he just said he was a lot closer related to Custer than just knowing him. Something more was there, and Ivy knew what it was.

The Boy Who Ate Thomas Custer's Heart

July 26th, 1876

Fresh Well, Indian Territory

Blue Flower gazed down at the youth. He was maybe fifteen, dirty, malnourished with whipcord muscles and a fading bruise on his face. The boy was a vision of the grasslands washed up on Blue Flower's doorstep like a stick carried on a rain swollen stream, damaged by the currents which had forced him forward and back, but not yet destroyed, and stamped with the defiance of his people. On the dusty horizon the Quakers who had left him were rapidly disappearing into the stormy, red sunset.

"Marlow!" She yelled for her husband.

Marlow Smith had shed his tribal name and worked as a bookkeeper for the agency. His coworkers said if only the naphtha soap would wash his skin just a little better he would be as good as white. He dealt with the insult because they were not starving, nor were the blue soldiers gunning them down as they were to the North in revenge for the murder of the Morning Star. Some of her neighbors mourned this blond warrior, but not Blue Flower. She remembered the government soldiers in way her husband never could with his education and letters.

Marlow came out and paused as he took in the sight of the boy and the rapidly retreating Quakers. "Did they not want to have tea?"

"No, they just dropped off this." Her nod at the boy was curt at best.

Marlow focused on the man-child, a creature with a hunted, fox-like demeanor and a visage sketched on his face that could kill worlds. Despite the hate in

his eyes, he had started crying under the intense gaze of the couple. It was also obvious he was not Cherokee.

“He is not of the band!” Marlow exclaimed.

Blue Flower knew what Marlow was thinking. There was very little labor to be had from a child of the grasslands. He would eat their food, run wild in the town, and bring ruin on them unless they could tame his wild impulses and help him survive in the white world. Marlow continued to talk, “Why would they bring a Lakota to us?”

Blue Flower replied, “We look the same to the whites, do we not?”

Marlow frowned at her. He had business with the Quakers, relied on them to ease business with the blue coats.

“Do you speak the language?” Marlow asked in Cherokee. The youth continued to cry, showing no signs of understanding. “English?” he asked, and the child nodded.

“We will call you a-tlo-yi-hv a-yo-li, it means crybaby. At least until you learn to speak up for yourself.”

The youth nodded, tears dripping dirty water down his face. You would think the Quakers might have bathed him or dressed him in better clothing before throwing the foundling onto their hearth’s stoop. Blue Flower did not have the same feelings for the missionaries as Marlow did.

“So, did they let you keep anything?” She hoped he would have some money to purchase respectable clothing. Missionaries were strange that way. They would watch silently as soldiers robbed you blind, killed your children, and burned your

homes, but would then gather money and food for the person they had just seen ruined.

From deep in the folds of his ragged garments, the youth pulled a large, shiny silver revolver of the newest make. Blue Flower grabbed her husband and drew him back as he let out a convulsive oath. "Give that damn thing to me," he yelled.

The youth seemed to grow two feet in stature even as tears continued to fall from his eyes. "I took this from the brother of the Morning Star after counting coup on him in battle. I will die before I will let you or anyone else take it from me. "

Blue Flower stepped in front of her husband. "Fool boy, keep the gun, but never show it to anyone. They are killing Indians who even talk like that."

The youth seemed to deflate. "I am a man! I counted coup in battle."

Blue Flower reached out and slapped the youth. "And now you are a child again. Learn to keep your mouth shut and your eyes open, and you may live to the next winter. Otherwise, I will have to bury you with the rest of my sons, and the sky knows I do not want another grave."

The youth hid the gun back in his rags and said nothing else. Behind him, Blue Flower noted a storm brewing up and hoped it was not an omen about the child's life.

It was fourteen years later, and the wild orphan named first Rains-a-Lot, and then Cry-baby, had grown into a man under the tutelage of his gentle parents, the Quakers, and schools where Native Americans could learn to be almost as good as whites. Marlow Smith had died the year before, and his foster mother had looked at

her foster son, the only child she could claim living in this world, as her pride. And now her pride was out in the world, fulfilling a promise he had made to himself years ago.

Jim Smith, attorney-at-law, sat in the rocking train car as it sped across the landscape at thirty-miles an hour or more. He was a lawyer thanks to his passing two years of rigorous schooling at Drake University, gaining an acceptable score on the Iowa Bar, which permitted Indians and women “of good character” to take the test (but failed to designate that status for white men), and several years of work at a Chicago law firm.

He checked his watch. It was a gold-colored brass pocket model manufactured in 1889 by the American Watch Company, and sold at an Indian Territory agency store to Blue Flower, his adopted mother. It was a good watch, and Jim was proud of it. Its presence in his pocket said that Indians could learn. Some of his Cherokee friends, despite a hundred years of contact with whites, saw a simple pocket watch as a magical being who could take charge of a person’s life. For Jim, it was just tool that aided him in catching a train on time.

In keeping with the weather and Jim’s social class, he wore full-length tweed trousers, a Norfolk jacket in tasteful green, and, in keeping with his role as a lawyer, a carefully tied crepe four-in-hand and a full-sized velvet topper, all of which he had purchased from Arleigh Phelps Gentleman’s Outfitters. His steamer, of course, held a very modern tuxedo that young lawyers were making popular in the best restaurants, while he kept a Levée coat for court. His fellow law students said Jim could almost pass as white, and all of them agreed that if Grant was willing to put up with Ely S.

Parker, then the fashionable man on the make needed at least one Indian in their circle. Hell, they exclaimed, rumor was Parker married a white woman.

The sound of the train was hypnotic. Its precision was astounding. According to his watch, in seventeen minutes the train would pull into Yankton, and deliver him with four hours to spare for his court appointment with the Federal District Court of South Dakota, said state having just celebrated its first birthday a few weeks back. It was no wonder that the simple pocket watch was seen as magical by some Indians. With one, the world could be yours. Without one, you were at best late.

As predicted, the train pulled into the station on time. The court meeting, though, was postponed. Jim stood in the judge's office while the portly man tried to explain.

"This whole Ghost Dance thing has people scared. The thinking is, if there is any court interference, it should wait for the courts to finish their move to Sioux Falls. Shoot fire son, how old were you when Custer got himself bushwhacked?"

"Fifteen, Your Honor."

"Then you remember how scared folk were. Getting scalped is no Sunday lark."

Jim's memory of it was distinct. His name then was Rains-a-Lot, and he was fifteen summers old. With a reckless desire for glory, he had ridden down the blue coats and leapt from his horse onto a dismounted officer who held the name Thomas Custer. The man shoved his pistol into Jim's chest, but it had no ammunition. Jim swept it away with his coup stick, then struck the man on the head. He then pulled his knife and carved away the soldier's scalp as he screamed and tried to claw it back into

place. His yell raised to an ulation as Jim / Rains-a-Lot / Cry Baby buried his knife into the man's chest and cut the man's heart. He held up the beating organ for his friends and brothers to see, then bit a big chunk of it out and spit it onto the dead man's chest. As the judge so ignorantly said, getting scalped was no Sunday lark."

"Boy, give this one a rest. Those Indians will shout it out, and then they will be back to the reservation."

Jim said, "They do not have enough to eat."

"Then they should plant crops."

"Have you seen the land they have been given?" Jim almost said "my people". He was tolerated because he was a Cherokee who was rumored to be half-white. If they ever discovered he was born on the far side of this new state in a leather hut to a warrior and his wife, or that he had killed the brother of the yellow hair and eaten his heart, then his role in the court system would be decidedly different.

The judge dismissed him from the chambers. Outside of the courthouse Jim stood and wondered what to do. He was still considering this when a man, an Indian with the vision of the plains radiating from his being appeared. "You talk, and they not listen."

"You could say that."

"Your mouth not made for talk."

"Then what in the father's name is it made for?" Jim was angry and taking it out on this poor wretch, standing on the steps of a courthouse that was not long for this world, in a city whose meaning was ending.

“It was meant to bite power, to turn the soul power of the white man against them. It was you who ate the Custer heart, who stole all that power, only to disappear into the plains.”

Jim pulled the man aside. He was frail and old, looking more like a person who caged drinks from bar patrons by telling their fortune than a truth-seer of the Lakota. Yet how could he know what no one living did? The cold metal of Custer’s revolver throbbed under his heavy coat.

“The whites, they find the brother of Custer. They see he is scalped, his chest torn open, his heart removed, and they hear the stories. Your name in English is not Rainmaker, no?”

“Rains-a-Lot.”

The old Indian said, “So the whites, they ask which Indian did this to the brother of the yellow hair. And people whose mouths should not speak say it was Rains-a-Lot. Only whites, when do they ever hear what is said? It is Ité Omáğažu they say, Rains-in-the-Face, he is who did these things, and Rains-a-Lot, the true author, disappears into the grass and memory.”

Jim Smith, who was Rains-a-Lot to the Lakota, or a-tlo-yi-hv a-yo-li, “the Crying Child” to the Cherokee, has many names, but this old man knows the one in which his crimes were committed. The preachers at his mother’s home said killing was wrong, an unforgivable sin. He preferred they not be said out loud so the god of the Christians would not hear he was responsible. “This was long ago.”

“This was not long ago. This was yesterday and tomorrow. I was sent to find the man for whom time does not exist, the person who could mold the power of

the ghost dance into a weapon, which would send the white man fleeing on their iron beasts to behind the sunset and would open the graves of those who have died these many years for a new time of plenty. Is it coincidence that the place I was told to find the man, at the time it was said he would be present, you who ate the heart of Thomas Custer should appear before me showing the aura of both Eagle and Bear just days before the dance brings forth its milk to feed the lands?”

Jim fell into the face of the old man, the thousands of crags that covered it like a topographic map of his soul, each one telling of a day of wind, of rain, of sun, or of freezing snow. He saw the pocks of disease that struck young and the shrunken cheeks that told of limited food. He saw the three ritual scars that a tribal elder placed on his cheeks seeking wisdom, and the scar of his forehead that said he had fought as a younger man for the heart of a woman. He saw that in his hair was woven an eagle’s feather, and around his neck hung eleven bear claws. He saw a dab of red paint that proclaimed purpose and the slight yellow that spoke of a life quest.

The old man braced him. “Last night I had a dream, and it was of you. I saw you riding a steed of iron through a great magical tornado. I saw you then walk among strangers, yet know you were one of them. I saw you step forward to proclaim your mastery, leading a thousand dancers in a dance that heals a great rift. I see you holding the worthy dead and your touch brings them to life. I see you an old man with many children, and they all call you the Rainmaker. They will say you saved your people, though they did not know you as theirs.”

Jim stared into the man’s eyes. They were black pools of understanding, tinged with memory and pain and fear and all of the other emotions that being born on

the plains brought. The man step back from his embrace and held out his hand.

“Come with me to the Ghost Dance, help me rescue our kith and bring forth a new world.”

Shaking Man

January 12th, 2018
Peterborough, New Hampshire

I stared blankly at the picture of Rains-a-Lot I had found in the archives of Dustin-Rhodes Corporation. In my hand, I played with two big pink pills. I knew I was having light seizures again, that feeling of flying over the world of Oz, dumb but free, with amazing hearing and the eyesight of the gods. Then finding myself in my seizure nest where I had retreated, back hurting, tongue bit, dehydrated, and confused.

So far, I was coming back from the seizures, but basically being a cowardly person, I was scared every night that some piece of me was breaking off, never to return. There was no one I could ever talk to about this. I could only keep my eye on my goal. I switched on the music on my computer, which for some reason choose a Lady Gaga album to play.

The pills were still in my hand. I swallowed them and chased them with a caffeine-free Coke. The picture of Rains-a-Lot was in the middle of a crazy spiral of documents that defined an amazing life, and one of the best pieces of historical detective work I had ever put together. I was not even sure if I cared that it was all madness. Fuck it. I made sure my phone was set to “up yours,” then went into the work room.

You see, Dustin-Rhodes lost a purple 1957 Chevy in Bashful, Kansas in August, 1960, the same day a Thermal Inversion destroyed the town. Bashful was remembered, to this day, by a fanatic group of local Kansas historians who celebrated the myths and memories of the community, especially the paranormal aspects of the towns demise and its connections to the land of Oz.

All well and good.

Dustin-Rhodes had stopped operations in the late 1980s, and abandoned its tax and employee records in a building in Des Moines, Iowa, where I found out that the 1957 Chevy was issued to Ivy d' Seille, and Rains-a-Lot. The d' Seille file was fairly mundane, but the Rains-a-Lot file had an odd quirk. It used a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) tax number to identify Rains-a-Lot instead of a Social Security Number. This was not unheard of in the 1930s and 1940s when social security cards were less common, but by 1960 nearly all American Indians had in some form abandoned the old BIA identifications, which was originally created to track ration issue during the Civil War. One advantage of that number, though, was that the obsolete records were easy to claim through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and those records confirmed my growing realization that this was far from a normal investigation.

I opened the brown envelope that contained my FOIA request documents, discarding the receipt for photocopy payments and eagerly pulled out the first piece of paper. It was a beautiful photocopy of a ration document dated 1866 from the Fifth Infantry Regiment. The purpose of the document was to account for the dispersement of rations to a band of Lakota, listing the individual members of the band receiving meals of hard tack, salted pork, desiccated vegetable cubes, and cans of "sweet milk." In a neat hand, some infantry sergeant had recorded first a BIA identification number, then a name, then an estimated age, for each person receiving the ration.

I marveled at the name halfway down the list. Rain-Often-Child, son of Laughing Bear, BIA# 66-1120, age four. I imagined the poor sergeant, assaulted by lines of unusual names, often poorly translated by civilian employees who did not know

the language they claimed expertise in, at least not well enough to follow small nuances. For the sergeant, names were fixed things placing him into time, space, and ancestry. For the Lakota, at least until they won fame, names described events of pride, inside jokes, or spiritual concepts, and could change over time as the person who own it evolved. A Lakota could tell someone the names they had held and in that way tell their own life story. Sergeant McGann, who was trying to fix down the person in front of him drawing rations, wanted that name to be frozen in time. BIA numbers did just that. It tried to take the Child-born-in-the-Rain, who as a teenage warrior would be called the Rains-a-Lot, and then be named Jim Smith, and turn him into the easy to record, track, control, and dismiss 66-1120.

The second document in the bundle showed this. It was a certificate of adoption with the names of both parents blank for One (1) Child, Indian, 14-15 years of age, Orphan, Number 66-1120. Dated 1877 and witnessed by two Quaker missionaries, it declares that the child "Unnamed" would become the child, as if by natural birth, of Marlow Smith and his wife Blue Flower. In the place where the adopting parents were to sign, a mysterious signature appeared, "Lt.Col. McGriffin Bailey, 3rd U.S. Cavalry", as if there was no need to have Marlow or his wife's name on the document. I pinned the paper onto my wall and added the rationing document above it, then stuck the more modern picture of Rains-a-Lot between them.

The next document was a BIA form for entry into the Quaker School at Fresh Wells in 1878. Gone was Rains-a-Lot, the Lakota. Now there appeared Jim Smith, a Cherokee of "mixed breed." It was an interesting switch in the young man's life. The earlier Rains-a-Lot was full-blooded Lakota, although of what particular band no one

had ever recorded. In the thinking of racialists in that era, even if Rains-a-Lot had been born of a Lakota parent and a Cherokee parent, he would still be an Indian. A single white parent and a single Indian parent was all that could result in the designation of 'mixed breed.'" Somehow, through mistake or subterfuge, Rains-a-Lot had added notional white ancestry to his makeup.

Rains-a-Lot must have been a good student. The Quaker School at Fresh Wells was not so much a grammar school as a school where the Quakers, a fairly open minded sect, taught Native Americans how to live in white society. The student would learn how to tend a forty acre farm, how to do sums and keep farm accounts, how to dress in proper Sunday attire, how to say and spell out 180 essential words in English, and were discouraged from drinking, sex, and smoking by watching scientific demonstrations where a baby pig was killed with a pint of bourbon. Despite the limitations of this school the next document was a letter from the headmaster.

July 2nd, 1882

To whom it may concern,

This letter is in support of my best pupil, Jim Smith. When Master Smith first arrived at my class he was an ill-dressed, silent, angry savage who had never learned even the most rudimentary skills to feed, bathe, or clothe himself. In just three years he has blossomed to an amazing member of our community, and is a credit to his race and to God. He has learned to read rapidly, knows each of the presidents by heart in the order of their service, has acquired his letters and sums, and has actually started on the difficult road of mastering Greek.

It is my belief that Master Smith has been completely civilized in his short years with us, learning to turn the other cheek, smile at adversity, and walk with his head held high as a man of peace. For this reason, I have drafted this letter to your university for consideration with the hopes that you will see fit to include Master Smith in your class for 1882.

Thank you for your consideration.

Baily Mission, Headmaster, Fresh Wells School.

The final document was simply a photocopy of a file card listing the activation of BIA Number 66-1120 in 1943 with the name change of Rains-a-Lot, 82-years old. The music coming out of my computer was upbeat, so I sang along with it, looking at the picture of Rains-a-Lot at, what was chronologically, 92-years-old.

*My mama told me when I was young
We are all born superstars...*

The picture was of a man in his late thirties.

I pinned the copy of the 1943 BIA card to the wall with a flourish, doing a small dance step to the time of the music. *So many oddities* I think as I channel pop singers. A photocopy of the Drake Times-Delphic, volume 3, number 3 of December, 1886 with an article on page 15 by a J. R. Smith discussing the rights of the Plains Indians. An article by Jimmy Smith of Drake University in the October, 1887 edition of *Challenge Magazine* recounting the Battle of the Four Lakes as the true ending of the ability of “Native Americans” to fight their way to any reasonable outcome. And, most haunting, on page 149 of the 1902 Drake University yearbook *The Quax*, oddly enough published in 1901, a poem from Law School alumni Jimmy J.R. Smith called the “Boy that Ate Custer’s Heart.”

The song changes as I dance about in front of the board, pinning the photocopies one at a time to the wall.

*I bow down to pray
I try to make the worst seem better ...*

The boy that ate Custer's Heart, that says so much. I break into a Lady gaga inspired "sandwich slap" while the Court documents come out. J. Smith files for relief from the BIA on behalf of the Lakota, and the ultimate irony, being denied standing as a "white attorney not under contract by any Lakota tribe." An old photograph of soldiers posing in front of dead bodies at Wounded Knee, and intensely angry Rains-a-Lot standing behind them. An account of an officer found scalped several days later with a report of the freak tornado that hit near Pine Ridge. It was through that freak tornado and act of violence that Rains-a-Lot came to the modern era, and the first time he touched Oz.

The Lady Gaga songs were running down and I was out of breath. Plus if I sang any more of the lyrics to myself, I would exceed fair use restrictions and have to start paying royalties. It was then that I noticed my vision dimming at the edges, and I could feel the mass of my fore-brain start to twist about. One of my earliest experiences of epilepsy, before I knew I had seizures, was a terrible four-part experience that I, like many people with my medical condition, call an aura. It starts with a fading of the peripheral vision.

If you discount a single experience with a communist professor in Mexico, and one time when I had to take a small dose of narcotics to get out of a court ordered rehabilitation scheme, I had largely lived my life drug free. Well, I used to drink cough syrup in high school but you try and deal with that place sober. Largely lacking addictive traits, and with a mind that was in some ways always in an altered state, drugs were not appealing.

The thing with my brain had been called idiopathic epilepsy. Idiopathic just means the poor doctors feel like idiots because they have no idea why I have bouts of falling over and becoming a human martini mixer. After the edges of my vision go, the feeling I have a twisted knot in my head starts to get bigger. By now I have pulled over my car, abandoned by grocery cart in the hands of a startled teenage stock clerk, and begun looking for a safe place to hide.

People are idiots. Paramedics are well-meaning. The combination of the two is deadly. People think they know how to treat epilepsy because they have watched it on *Marcus Welby, M.D.* They stick things in my mouth (which breaks my teeth), hold my tongue to keep me from swallowing it (depriving me of air and causing me to bite both it and them), or they try to restrain my flailing. At times they have checked to see if I am faking by cutting me with a pocket knife, putting a cigarette out on my skin, pulling out clumps of hair, and hyperextending my fingers.

Paramedics know each minute I suffer from seizures is a minute I might have permanent brain damage. So they will ask for and get permission to inject me with one of a range of drugs that they may (or may not) have in their medical kits. Of all of them, Vallium has been the only one that works without allergic reactions. If they know about the allergic reactions and are ready, they can then treat me. At least until I get to the hospital, where I have to hope the medical team in admitting both recognizes the severity of my case, reads the multitude of medical alert devices hanging from my body like *Shadowrun* fetishes, and watch me like a hawk when I start to do any one of a number of crazy things.

By the time the second part of my aura is cranking along I have done my ritual. I pee. I drink as much water as i can. I may be out for days, and dehydration has been a problem in the past. I swallow some more Valproate because what the hell, maybe it will work. I write on my chest in Sharpie EPILEPSY_NOT_DRUGS. At happier times in my life I would also write TESLA_WAS_ROBBED. At sadder times in my life I wrote DO_NOT_REVIVE. Once I wrote PLACE_FRONT_TO_ENEMY. Not sure where I got the last one.

I take off restrictive clothes. I hide documents in my seizure backpack, which has photocopies of the ones I will need. I make myself a nest. Then I wait.

Then I rapidly experience what I think of as a brain dump. Dead people will talk to me. I will go back to the field with at the burning plane in it. I will see again all the horrible things I do not want to see. Gradually, though, this is replaced with the feeling of soaring over a green land filled with amazing things. My eyesight will grow sharp. I hear wonderful sounds. My sense of taste falls away, as does my sense of smell. I feel the warmth of pin feathers, and sense the amazing ability to move naturally through another dimension by bending my wings.

I never have any memory of the next of the four horseman of epilepsy. This is the actual seizure. I do remember the dreaming.

The Fourth Person

4th Day of the Bear, 3684

Lark Field, Great Meadows, Oz

Writers have a problem. When they create a story, they need to create a consistent narrative point of view that allows the reader a place to enter the story. Early in the secret world of writer's school, they learn which person they should be in. It makes it sound like they are taking over a creature in preparation for some confusing episode of *Magicians*, but in reality they are just adopting a point of view.

First person is a common point of view. I pick up a sword. I swing the sword. It is a cosy way to write, but has three limitations. The first is that eventually your word processor runs out of the letter "I". This letter in English is really a tricky bastard because it looks so much like an "L," or sometimes a "J," that you get bugged quickly when you have paragraphs littered with it.

The second problem with first person is to deal with the issue of omnipotence. The author of this book is Nelson McKeeby, a forty-eight year old man who we last left preparing for an epileptic seizure. His life revolves around his disability, which happens to be killing him, his past, which he sometimes remembers fitfully, and whatever story he is telling at that second. His literary agent likes to point out he has a rather wandering way of telling stories, to quote, "Like a caffeinated monkey got a hold of a hash pipe." He also is not omnipotent. If he had been, he would have, instead of trying to lock down the life story of a Native American time traveler, been observing in first person the sexual escapades of the five people living in the apartment next to him, which would have made him a best-selling author when he published it under the title *The Fifty-First Shade*.

Which brings us to the third problem. What do you do when your narrator is not there to tell the audience what they are seeing? Take this instance at the edge of Lark Field by the murmuring waters of the Bristlebrook. Blocking the path northward across the Yellow King Road, which at this point of its thousand-mile journey is a cowpath climbing into the Great Meadows, is an “Army.” The careful reader will note the use of quotation marks around the word. If an army consists of hundreds of men and women, mostly trained as farmers and holding farm instruments, stiffened by a single regiment of the Meadow Rangers, then you have one right here. If instead when you think of an army you think of five-hundred-eighty men armored in cocoons of steel and armed with forged swords capable of hacking a human arm from its accustomed moorings, then perhaps you are thinking of the military unit that is marching out into the middle of the field to face the farmers.

Now, the author has some choices here to help the reader out. Creative writing classes across the planet have warned against the second person, which is talking in the “you” form to the reader. Right about the time you first read this chapter, in Covington, Oregon, a gentleman named Bayle Prestley is desperately searching for rolling papers to wrap up his newly grown organic marijuana. His sister, for his recent birthday, has given him a copy of this book, which she bought at a used book store. Desperate, he rips a page out of the first edition copy that was signed by Nelson McKeeby, rolls himself a fatty, and smokes up. Bayle, who will read this same book one-hundred and sixty-four days later, will not realize what he has done until he reads the next sentence. Bayle, you just lost a pile of cash by destroying a first edition that your sister had signed directly to you. Plus, your weed is trash.

Second person is a bit brain twisty if you think, “What if he had read that same paragraph the day before he ripped the page out?”

Which brings us to third person. If you were to sit up in a tree and watch the approaching armies, noting the precision of the gleaming metal columns, the palpable fear of the green-dressed farmers holding glaives that were hammered from useful bits of metals in a farrier’s forge and are not even properly heat treated, you would be in the realm of distant third. There is not a whole lot of emotion here, just an establishing shot of actions and acts. A mass of ravens and crows have gathered in the trees. The wind is blowing the green grass of the field. Trees creak under their foliage, some of which has begun to turn spectacular colors in preparation for fall.

The main issue with distant third is that it fails at getting the reader inside the characters’ heads. For that, we use close third. We place our camera just past the shoulder of one of the subjects, tie it off there, wire its sensorium into the mind of the person being followed. For example, let’s enter Jarweed, a scout for the Second Host of the Yellow King’s Vasting.

Jarweed had circled the farmers. The fucking amateurs were in array out in the damn field and it was not a trap. They had no fucking reserves. Gaining confidence, he spurred his horse around and tore out into the field, riding hard to impress his commanders. He would rush down the line of hicks, taunting them with the fact their wives would be moaning under him before nightfall. As he started his run he felt an incredible pain in his shoulder, and then another in his neck. He tried to reign up and feel what had happened, but he fell dead from two arrows shot by Hamilvar, the champion archer of the Meadowland Rangers.

Well shit. You see some issues with close third. First, Jarweed is not perfect narrator. He did not say his job was to scout not impress people. He inaccurately assessed the tactical danger he faced even as he accurately noted the peasants lacked reserves, and then to make things worse he gets killed before he is done giving us a good narrative. Change close third viewpoints too often, and the audience gets confused like they are trying to understand an episode of *Lost* in its last season.

Two other issues. Close third is supposed to let the reader gain some empathy for the character being followed, and Jarweed was a little prick at best times plus his language has totally fucked up any chance McKeeby had of pawning this thing off to the YA trade. So now he might as well throw in some gratuitous sex at some point. The final issue is that while we were paying attention to Jarweed, other things were happening in the field. And since we lost that overarching point of view we will have to look around to find it.

Could it be Severn daily's erection? Severn is a sixteen-year old boy holding one of those poorly made glaives next to Landy, the woman he has loved since he was eight. She has recently told him she would give herself to him if they lived through the battle, and that was exciting, until he saw the soldiers of the Yellow King march onto the field of battle. At that point he had screamed to the gods of how unfair life was. Then the hero, Hamilvar, shot the horseman as he taunted the doomed peasants, and Severn felt the frisson in Landy's hand as she touched his elbow, causing the sudden arrival of an ironic and mistimed boner.

It is not that though.

Could it be that the raven Thndry sitting in a brush Sycamore looking distastefully at the battlefield has begun to question the sanity of humans? Ravens only eat human meat when they are starving, because it does not “finish well,” the raven term for quality of defecation. Crows love human meat. Ravens considered crows as stupid simian relatives whose occupation was mostly to eat and shit. There was some envy, because crows could eat all sorts of things that ravens would find hard to finish well, but there was also a degree of snobbish superiority. Thndry danced a small step and emoted to his flock mate Rndrl. “Hopeful crows.”

The crows were yelling, “Meat, meat.”

Rndrl scratched with his beak and replied, “Microcephalic idiots.”

Thndry had the curiosity of all ravens, and thus would stay and watch the horrible contest below, but he was not happy about it. The forest peasants of the Great Meadows were kind to ravens, setting out gifts of food and preserving their nests. There had been talk about how they could help the poor people, but it was just talk. It had been beyond memory since a conspiracy of ravens had formed.

As interesting as close third is for following ravens, they also were missing many clues. It sometimes falls upon an omnipotent narrator, equipped with a tool kit that allows him/her to move nimbly about in time and space, and thus point out the obvious. And the obvious is that at this very second in Oz (as elusive as the concept of linear time is in this land) and at this very place (in a land where maps are rare and cherished as the greatest art of humankind), two amazing events were occurring that were presaged by two seemingly mundane happenings. The first happening was a slight increase in wind and the beginning of a notable circular pattern in its motion.

The second was that Thndry, the most respected of ravens, squawked and fell from the tree.

Disturbed by both events, the rest of the ravens went to investigate Thndry. They found him on the ground shaking. It was what they called God Mount. For a decade, a dark intelligence had occasionally taken over the mind of one of the ravens, and amazing things would result. It had chosen Thndry this time, whose mind was expanding in an attempt to encompass the being with intellect five to nine times the size of the physical capacity of the organic thinking unit the raven possessed. And what only an omnipotent narrator could know was that in 2018 the author Nelson McKeeby was having a seizure because his own mind could not fit entirely within a raven's brain. It was true irony that Nelson would only discover in conversation with a disembodied being, that he was gifted with the ability to travel to Oz. An ability many would sacrifice much for, but which would eventually destroy him.

It was also ironic that at this very second, a gate between Oz and Bashful, Kansas, in 1960 was forming as a result of a miscalculation of a powerful wizard chasing his ex-girlfriend across time and space time, and the changing wind pattern had caused an old branch to fall in the forest at the edge of Lark Field.

Thndry, who was now Nelson, regained his feet. Rndrl said, "Weather sense brother, we must regain the tree."

Ravens have a much finer sense of time than humans. For them, the world is over-cranked. Humans seeing through the eyes of a raven see events as slow motion, a beautiful and dreadful feeling. Ravens seem very smart to humans because they

have a lot of time to use the intelligence they have. Nelson knew all of this from his previous visits, and thus was able to take wing immediately and find a safe perch.

Now that Nelson has shown up, I can turn the story over to his close third, because he really is a good narrator. He has a strong sense of visualization, an understanding of the moving pieces, and a way with describing complex scenes like he is making a cheap movie. Also, with all of the dialogue that will soon happen my own omnipotent fourth person viewpoint will soon start to confuse the narrative; it may even create a time rift where no one can be safe, like what happens when you read Salman Rushdie while drinking too much Benedictine. There is always that thing with having Cat Stevens on his ass unless a British court clears him of using the omnipotent fourth person, which is of course my fault, not that of Mr. McKeeby.

Fight at Lark Field

4th Day of the Bear, 3684

Lark Field, Great Meadows, Oz

I/Nelson huddled in the tree as the wind began to grow. I feared for my own safety, that of my brothers and sisters clutched to the sycamore, and all of the humans I saw, heard, and sensed. Sensed was the term I used for the pressure detection matrix ravens have that provides a powerful form of perception. It came from air pressure being applied to a series of sensitive glands along the ventral and dorsal side of his body. The result was a three dimensional picture of the world that allowed a raven to track beings accurately, giving them literal “eyes behind their head.” It was like having preternatural situational awareness.

Down below, the armies began to show the effects of the wind. At the outer edge of the cyclone, the peasant army was forced to drop their weapons, wrap their faces in their cloaks, and to take a knee or be swept from their feet. In the center of the cyclone, the wind was picking up faster and faster, pushing armored soldiers down and breaking their formation. I could hear the Yellow King yelling angry words while officers used knouts to attempt to knock superhuman stability into the very human legs of their soldiers. Most of the soldiers regained their feet by locking their legs but the columns were ragged with so many files kneeling.

Then a flash. Raven vision showed it like a wipe splice in a film chain, a purple 1957 Chevy appearing as if from behind a big sheet like a hurtling steel bowling ball with pins flying in all directions. Only the pins were men in armor, who just minutes before were prepared to massacre a field full of farmers for a purpose only an omnipotent mind could conceive. The car was traveling around a hundred kilometers

per, fishtailing in the mud and bumping over the corduroy of warriors standing before them. The passengers of the car were yelling a purple scream of terror and exhilaration, as haunting tinny music floated from a slightly cracked window in the rear of the vehicle.

The wind left so fast that objects being carried in it started to rain down into the ground, robbed of the means of mechanical flight, while the Chevy skidded to a stop just feet from the Yellow King. Inside the car were three goggled-eyed humans. The human driving turned on window wipers and caused a spray of liquid to splash the glass pane in an effort to clean off the patina of blood that was coating it.

“We are not in Kansas anymore.”

“No shit, Dorothy.”

The Yellow King was good at emoting. He was a huge man with no empathy and no feeling. Half of his soldiers lay broken like toys, torn in a storm of a temper tantrum, and the feeling that he pushed out to the universe was a wave of hatred and the yellow thought, “HOW DARE YOU.” He raised his mace to bring it down on the Chevy, but it did not connect. Instead, the car accelerated rapidly then dropped into gear, squashing the most powerful monarch of the city states of the western plains into a shape similar to that of a can of spaghetti dropped onto a sidewalk from a space station.

Two men stepped out of the Chevy, one in a worn leather jacket, and the second in an absurd charcoal suit that made him look like a bunch of triangles. A short-haired woman in a poodle skirt and a sweatshirt that said “College” got out of the

back seat. “Nice work, Baby Driver, you fucking squashed the guy we probably had to talk to next.”

The man in the charcoal suit said, “Va te faire foutre,” as he stepped gingerly around twitching, metal encased forms. The man in the leather coat went to the trunk of the car and opened it, revealing a transit case conveniently positioned for access. From the case, he took a rifle and a bandolier of ammunition, threw it to the man in charcoal, then grabbed a soft bag and a pair of medical kits.

The woman said, “Did you just tell me to fart on myself?”

Catching the rifle, the man, who was Ivy d’ Sielle, born in 1928, caught it out of the air followed by a bandolier of ammunition. “Sure.”

Around them, men in iron were regaining their feet. The ordinary soldier had suddenly lost interest in participating in a massacre that was looking to go the opposite direction as anticipated, at least their body language said as much. Not sure if the Yellow King was truly dead, the officers began to swing their knouts and try to beat some fighting spirit back into the men. The idea that their liege might self-repair and be pissed that the soldiers were not ready to fight was a horrible possibility in Oz.

I watched the dance of the armored men with fascination, using my superior raven vision to take in the image like some super high-definition television picture. Their leaders wanted them to close in on the idling Chevy. It made sense, because the odds were like a hundred-to-one still and the purple monstrosity was no longer positioned to make a horrific charge. Still, they held back. The result was something like an aquarium where everyone wants to see the great white shark from close up, but the glass holds everyone back.

Ivy said, "You think this lot is going to sit down and parley?" He was trying to get a helmet off one of the men who seemed to be twitching.

Kelle replied, "Not now, we just pulped King Rat." She took a femoral pulse from where the armor did not cover, and then shook her head "no."

The soldiers closed in a little bit. Rains-a-Lot broke open his revolver, caught the empty shells in his hand, and loaded it with fresh ammunition. From the soft bag, he took two canvas belts of ammunition in loops and wrapped them bandito style across his chest.

The next man was alive, but in shock. Ivy said, "Concussion, compound fracture of the ulna."

Kelle checked it. "Leave the armor on, he needs that set. Do you have Ringers?"

"Besides you?"

"It is probably called Hartmann's solution."

"Two bottles, more in the back, probably."

"Give him one."

Ivy made the poke inexpertly and then used the cruciform hilt of a sword jammed into the ground to hang the bottle from, allowing the liquid to drip into the man's veins. Rains-a-Lot kicked him and he looked up.

It was as if a dam was being pressed by more water than it was designed to hold. The soldiers at the back of the presser were being beaten, and wanted to get away from that, so they moved forward in the crowd, only to reach a point where fear held them back. The result was a slow motion, turgid pedesis that the eyes of a raven

were perfectly designed to detect. Ivy could detect it, also, but only because he had been on the other side.

“Get in the trunk,” he said to Kelle.

“Fuck that, no one puts Kelle in a trunk.” She ducked into the Chevy and started to rifle her backpack. Rains-a-Lot was shoving dead away from the car, creating a path of stable footing.

Ivy held up his rifle. “This is a model 49 rifle. It has ten rounds in the magazine. I have five magazines, plus ten boxes of clipped rounds. Even if they all line up and walk up to the counter one by one for personal head shots, Rains-a-Lot and I cannot get them all.”

Kelle pulled unusual things from her pack. A fire extinguisher painted orange. A plastic yellow and black stripped pistol. A strange little black handle. Then she shimmied into a strange cloth over-suit. Ivy brass checked his rifle. “Stay between us then.” Kelle waived his comment away.

Rains-a-Lot pulled his hat down hard onto his head and grabbed Kelle by the shoulders. He looked deep into her eyes with a crease in his forehead. Kelle said, “Stay between you, got it John Creasy.” He nodded and drew his pistol. She yelled as loud as she could into the air, “Oculariatu s'ellu ùn vole esse sparatu!” Then switching languages, “Skrij, če ne želiš biti ustreljen!”

I opened my wings and said, “I wish I knew what she said.”

“She said, in the tongues of the meadows, then of the plains, to hide or face death.” Rndrl speared Nelson with his eyes. “Who now rides the wings of Thndry?”

“I am Nelson, the human.”

“Nlsn, we honor your presence.”

The crows in the trees were yelling, “Meat, meat,” trying to egg the humans into fighting.

Rndrl squawked in anger and danced the red dance of anger. “The crows are a disgrace.”

“What happens here?” I watched as Rains-a-Lot gently pushed Kelle between him and Ivy, as the two braced for their last stand. The green peasants took heed of the warning they were given and had retreated to the safety of the woods. The steel warriors were slowly gaining courage again to attack the newcomers, and then destroy the children of the meadows.

Rndrl turned from the crows. “The green people, the farmers of the meadows, gather to fight the warriors of the plains to see who can have the produce and bounty of this land. With the Yellow King dead, I would think they would wait for a new King, but they are like crows themselves. Once the thought enters there is no room for a new thought.”

A purple thought intruded into my head. “These are my children. Help them please.” I was a lot of things, but not schizophrenic. I barely had room in this raven brain for my own thoughts. An outsider was also present.

I could feel the sense of sadness for my own reasons though. This was my story to tell just like it was their story to live. The story they shared seemed incomplete though. This was not the end in Bolivia when Harry Longabaugh and Robert Parker shot each other in the head to avoid capture. This was not the last chapter in my last

book. I was screaming in my own mind that the story would cease with the heroes dead on a pile of bodies in a magical land, dinner for impetuous crows.

“You speak their language?” Ivy asked of Kelle.

“Yep, been here, learned that, the t-shirt sucked.”

“Tell them to surrender and we will release them back home.”

She shrugged. In the language of the plains she yelled, “You should run away, these guys are my sworn protectors and my ex-boyfriend is a fucking wizard with a bad attitude.”

“What did you tell them?”

“To give up because you were a bad ass.”

Rains-a-Lot chuffed. “I like Dorothy,” He said.

The wind blew through my feathers as I watched with dread and said to no one a quote from the *Darkfather*, “To be human with hands, to be able to affect history.”

Rndrl twisted his body. “Who said one must be human to do a thing in history?”

I considered this. There was, to his knowledge, no book of the acts of Ravens. The purple thinking on the edge of his mind said, “History is only written by humans Shaking Man, the rest of us can make it.”

Kelle put her hands on each of her protectors backs. “Guys, I think this is going to get pretty dry. Sorry we did not get to know each other better. Last question to ask is which one of you is going to be my Left Shark?”

Ivy laughed. “If I could ever figure out what you mean, I would have lived a great life. Rains, you ate Custer’s heart, any suggestions here?”

“Ignore the taste.”

I turned my attention from the three doomed travellers and said, “Tell me Rndrl, how do ravens help create history?”

A score-of-a-score of ravens, the stock of the uplands, the great flight masters and mistresses, the long seers and the far speakers, the untrained corbies and the ancient lictors, stooped to listen to the ridden one that the purple thought had named the Shaking Man be declared the leader of the last conspiracy by the one who would become the greatest leader in all memory of raven-kind Rndrl-Greatkind.

“I state that the Conspiracy of Ravens has been declared this the 4th Day of the Bear, 3684, and that our people shall see to the protection of the travellers as they tell their story in the land of Oz.”

The mass of ravens screamed in a terrible resonate, “Agree!”

The noisy crows yelling, “Meat! Meat!” fell silent, jittering in fear over an event no avian had witnessed since the days of legend.

“I say we will aid the Shaking Man who rides Thndry-Godtouched. We will fly wing by wing, brother protecting sister, family joining family, clan to clan, and nation to nation in the black wind, the single claw of thousands stretching out.”

Ravens hopped rhythmically in their own red angers, screaming as one being, “Agreed.”

Kelle, Ivy, and Rains-a-Lot joined every living warrior, ranger, and peasant in the Lark Fields to stare in amazement as trees filled with huge black birds began to scream like worshipers in response to a chanter's calls. Ivy said, "Is that good?"

Kelle reached out to hold his hand. Kelle connected Ivy and Rains-a-Lot in a chain of touch, the lost sharing a minute of hope before they stepped off into the darkness of the unknown. She watched the yelling ravens shaking the trees and said, "I have no idea what that means; this is Oz after all." She then dropped Ivy's hand and pointed at the soldiers. "They are scared as shit, think they will run?"

Ivy shook his head. "Some people attack when they are scared."

In the trees, Rndrl pointed his beak to the heavens and said, "Take wing, Conspiracy, and show the gods we are their children also!"

The dam of armored soldiers broke out in fear as ravens took wing by the hundreds and maybe thousands. They ran into a coordinated wall of invisible hell that washed over them like a tsunami, killing and wounding dozens even as they stepped out to the charge. I was not the best of the flyers but the trick was in my brain and I figured it out after a few missed wing beats. Falling into the formation, I figured out that it mattered when I beat my wings and where I positioned myself. My brothers and sisters were ready to help as they gently made sure I sculled at the right time and stayed in proper echelon with my wing mates. Below it was a maelstrom of gunfire as the traveller's faced the armored wave.

The Conspiracy flew in a great arcing circle, then dove down, letting our claws dangle low and barely brush the soldiers' helms. There was no way our sharp claws could penetrate man steel, nor were they heavy enough to crash into a soldier as

they might a marauding eagle. Instead, each helm was lightly brushed with a ping, but hundreds of ravens were hitting each helmet, with a cumulative effect of a fearful distraction on the already spooked soldiers. I caught the trick of throwing out my tail feathers for tight control, using the slip streams of my brethren to sustain lift and speed, then at the last minute using a slight loss of altitude to sling shot me back into the air.

Ivy was reloading his rifle from little strips of bullets as Kelle stepped forward with her extinguisher. She triggered the device and it turned out to contain an orange liquid that sprayed across scores of the soldiers, making them scream and claw at their helmets. Each helmet that came off drew the attention of dozens of ravens pecking and clawing.

Kelle was pushed back as Rains-a-Lot and Ivy stepped forward to meet the first wave of soldiers. Here was the truth about guns - eventually someone willing to pile bodies on the problem will win, and even trained, armored warriors were grist for the mills of ambition. Ivy was visibly counting down the shots in his rifle, while Rains-a-Lot had his Bowie knife out in his left hand, expecting to show the shades of his ancestors that he also could face his last seconds like a man of the plains.

A wave of arrows came flying into the first fascine of soldiers, staggering them and blunting the next wave. The Rangers had appeared from the forest and battalioned themselves into shooting groups, each group following the directions of a sergeant to create target zones around the travellers with both volley and targeted fire.

I saw the short reprieve this created and winged up to patrol the edges of the raven flights, keeping them out of the flight path of the archers, helping Rndrl form

attack sticks and arranging for a rotation of ravens to rest in the trees. In my head I heard the purple thought, “You are dying Shaking Man.”

No shit, I thought.

“No, it is Oz that kills you.”

I ported to catch a group that was about to fly into an arrow fall, then let my tail feathers throw myself into a yaw, exchanging altitude for speed. *So, who are you, purple thought?*

“I am Mama LeDeoux, hongoun macumba of the sacred order of petro, wife of Jose Gaspar, invested by the Lady Chaneli in the Christian year of 1811.”

That is a lot for a bird to remember. I ported then starboarded and caught a breeze for some altitude. *May I call you Violèt?*

“Yes.”

A flight of corbie burst from the woods, screeching that rest of the scouts were about to ambush the Rangers. I folded wing and dropped to stand by the commander of the Rangers. He looked down at me, so I opened my wings and did the dance of surprise. In his tongue he said, “Trouble, friend?”

I screeched, ‘Yesss!’

“Something coming for us?”

“Trees!” I yelled.

He yelled, “Bronk, get ready with the gadget. Terl, on my command blow to receive horsemen!”

I took to the wing. Violèt said, “Time does not flow here the way it does in reality. That is how magic works; the dimensions do not connect, not really.”

Below me, dozens of horsemen burst from the woods charging on the rangers in an attempted coup d' main, lead by a brilliant warrior in cerulean cloth and gleaming chain. I tilted my wings up, loosing speed and gaining a little altitude, then screeched, "Dive my brothers and sisters." I did not know if any were going to follow, but my raven sense said many who were hovering formed up on my tail and followed me in.

"Stay on target, Little Monsters!"

We dove as one harrying the men and pushing them from their seats. As we regained our wing a burst of arrows emptied a few saddles. Then the Rangers, seemingly doomed, dropped bows and lifted up long wooden poles sharpened on the end, while forest peasants rushed out of concealment with more of the primitive pikes. The horsemen reigned up and were felled and swamped by foresters, who tied them up in jute wraps.

The purple in my mind said, "No matter how smart, a raven is not a human, and your mind cannot survive spread across two brains. The part of you left behind is thrashing apart your body."

I came to light back in the sycamore. A young corbie screamed, "This is no longer Lark field, the ravens have shown the world a new Conspiracy!"

Down below the three travellers had stopped shooting as a surge of foresters broke upon them, pushing huddled survivors into wan clusters, dis-arming and disarming them, tying them into tight coiffes of dejected ejecta. Kelle and Ivy again started to pull out and triage the wounded.

"You should leave, Shaking Man."

A Central Footnote
January 13th, 2018
Peterborough, New Hampshire

I should take this time for a short note. At times, I have noted a sense of distraction in my research. This has included documents being moved to make them more likely to be noticed by myself, mysterious packages delivered to my door with books contained inside, and now, the wholesale hijacking of my writing by a person who has been calling himself the “omnipotent fourth person”. The sole power of this person seems to be interfering with the narrative to insert random tidbits s/he feels is important, and controlling the story’s point of view when I am not around to stop it.

How can I stop this? I am not sure, although it will be something I consider. In an age of alternate truth, perhaps it is fitting that my document is not immune from random redaction by supernatural forces.

Case Orange
August 9th, 1960
Des Moines, Iowa

Dustin-Rhodes was a giant company. The CEO, Richard Todd Hamblin, a fan of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, had required his seven assistants to legally change their names to Adam, Benjamin, Caleb, Daniel, Ephraim, Frank, and Gideon. The seven white men had complied because the benefits of the position were so damn good, and at least the big man had not taken a liking to *One Thousand Nights*. When the big man was angry, he would threaten to start hiring new assistants, starting with Milly. So far the threat had been hollow.

The one thing that each of the Senior Executive Vice Presidents noted was their boss's complete inability to consider any subject brought to his attention as frivolous, and his total willingness to forgive anything but a complete fabrication. At the Executive Vice President's (EVP) Club on the thirty-ninth floor of the Grand Building, located inconveniently in the city of Des Moines, Iowa, each of the men would wonder what would happen if a giant lizard attacked the city of Gulfport, Florida (where the big man kept his summer house). The common agreement was that he would order the person informing him of the potential destruction of Webb City, his favorite store, and the possible movement of the lizard toward his favorite restaurant, a small Greek joint on the Tarpon Springs sponge docks, to have a couple of Troubleshooters borrow a Thunderchief fresh from the production lines and "take care of it." This would be followed directly by an order to short Republic stock and announce a plan for Fairchild to take the company over. Of course, that did not mean the big man had no vanity. At some point, he would jot out a small note to send to his arch enemy Alexander P. de

Seversky, with a burnt half-copy of the book *Victory Through Air Power* that said simply, “FUCK YOU ALEX, I JUST FUCKED YOUR COMPANY AGAIN”.

There was no doubt the big man was a genius. The oldest surviving EVP remembered leaving a note from a Troubleshooter written on the back of a page from the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*. Ignoring the note, the big man had instead made corrections to a math problem on the reverse side and handed it back, saying, “Send this over to that guy at Convair, you know, the guy that did my taxes last year.” There turned out to be endless talk over the corrected problem.

So when Benjamin Day, whose name had ironically been Caleb before the great name change in 1954, brought a single note in to the big man, it was no surprise that their great leader did not need to look into his great filing cabinets for information on its meaning. What was surprising was the resulting emotional outburst. Richard Todd Hamblin, who had only been known to show emotions outwardly twice (when Franklin Delano Roosevelt died and when John Fitzgerald Kennedy was nominated, each time proclaiming that the human species needed to develop some form of immortality for “special people”) began to scream at the top of his lungs and curse in a language that the secretaries were later able to determine was Portuguese.

Standing in the withering fire of romance-language cursing, Benjamin Day thought of his own work that year with the three colored retirement system. Green retirements offered the loyal and hard working employees of Dustin-Rhodes health care, a monthly stipend, access to the Hot Springs, North Carolina spa, along with attractive discounts to certain restaurants in Mars Hill, and low cost season tickets to games played by the new American Football League (who had received a sweetheart

deal with Dustin-Rhodes in exchange for expanding the league to Florida in the next eight years).

The blue retirement was not as nice. Basically, a blue retirement meant that you were given a name change, a straw hat, and a hut in the bustling metropolis of Komuvaha, along with a retirement income tending the small shrine to the big man's departed son, Lester, a few miles north of town. There were other variants of this theme, but they all consisted of living on an island in a hut in the southern hemisphere, cutting away crab grass from some small piece of earth.

The red retirement was the one that Benjamin Day had been most excited about. The retiree would be honored by a bagpipe procession, a donation of several thousand dollars in their honor to one of a number of private colleges in the southern United States, and the naming of an asteroid after them. The retiree also would get an exciting retirement home in a beautiful community in Spencer, Iowa that consisted of an eight by four plot of ground, a wooden "Grand Caesar" six-pole internment box with satin interior work and brass fittings, and the choice of a Baptist or Catholic Service performed by a trained liturgist.

Suddenly, Benjamin Day saw that all of his hard work could backfire completely. And the only way his life would be saved was to immediately determine, or better, anticipate, the big man's needs and wishes, and see that they were met very quickly.

Sustaining the verbal abuse, Benjamin Day stepped to the door and wrote a short note to the secretary. It said:

ITEM ONE: Translator,

ITEM TWO: File for action Able 70,

ITEM THREE: Activate War room

ITEM FOUR: Deliver (1) case TastyKake Butterscotch Krimpet

ITEM FIVE: Deliver (1) case Budwine

ITEM SIX: Activate employee Devine, Delbert

The first translator that arrived was for Catalanian, but was quickly replaced by a person fluent in Brazilian Portuguese, although it turned out most of the translation was cursing. Able was amazed and that the Portuguese language consisted mostly of different ways of saying “vagina,” and sent the translator away.

By the time the big man had slowed his cursing the file from the war room was in Day’s hands. *Troubleshooter TEAM GULF (d’ Seille / Smith) to collect asset A70 (Brainerd94) and deliver to secure facility Wyoming03 Condition Bravo.* Thinking ahead, Benjamin Day wrote on an action item slip, “86 employee d’Seille, 86 employee Smith,” and handed it to a courier.

“Who was the person responsible for picking up Brainerd?” the big man finally asked.

Day was, by default, the only person who would funnel data to the big man. It was how things worked. “Agent d’Seille and Agent Smith, Troubleshooter team Gulf.”

Richard Todd Hamblin waived his hand. “Reliable men, perfectly able to handle things.”

Benjamin Day wrote two more slips, "Cancel 86 employee d'Seille, Cancel 86 employee Smith" and handed them to the courier. The big man walked back and forth for a minute before two slips returned, "86 cancel confirmed employee Smith, 86 carried out d'Seille." The door to the room swung open, and Benjamin Day saw a crowd of people around one of the steno girls who was bleeding out on the floor from a head wound. Taking another slip he wrote, "Request 05 on recent action, 86 d'Seille." The reply came back very quickly, "05: 86 carried out on d'Seille, Doris, Grade STENO 2, Des Moines Offices, floor 13."

He shrugged and jotted off a note to complement Human Resources on its rapid response to his requests. Then he heard the big man say, "This is Case ORANGE."

Everything changed forever at that moment.

The Girl in the Closet

June 9th, 2012
New York City, New York

The place that she considered her room was about seven feet by three feet and lined with cedar. In her mind, she knew she could claim the bedroom outside of the closet as hers, or the entire floor of the tower she lived in far above the bustle of the ant heap that was New York. Since her mother went away, though, she had made a conscious choice to narrow the dimensions of what was hers.

Mom existed, somewhere. For ten years she had not heard where. Security arranged no visits. There were no letters or cards. No presents came at Christmas, and no one offered to carry her presents.

It was only in the last year that she started to feel it may have been her own fault. Ten years ago, she had left in the night after a terrible row with her father. Then, the next month, her father had come to her in the night. And never again. They communicated only through notes now, although she understood that he had a daily report on her activities.

Kelle had an endless expense account. If she had wanted, Aloïs would have taken her shopping each day. No one would care. She could eat herself into obesity, never wear the same clothing twice, and let herself go stark. Aloïs was not provided to protect her from herself. He was there to prevent her from being harmed or bringing shame on her father or his company.

She had been eight when she asked Aloïs if he would purchase her drugs. “I am not instructed to *not* do this.” Aloïs was brilliant. He spoke eight languages and

used to protect the children of middle eastern dictators. Kelle was in love with him because he was the only person who talked to her, rather than at her, or about her.

“So you would get me drugs?”

Alois had the driver pull over the rig that she called Monster and said, “Does the Miss want drugs?”

“Maybe.”

“Perhaps the Miss would listen to advice.”

“Maybe.”

“The Miss read her first book when she was two-years old.”

“How do you know this?”

Alois rolled his eyes. It was their private code for the secret things that floated about her life like clouds. It meant Alois felt she was smart enough to do sums without the handholding she needed when she was younger, like four-years old. Eight-year-olds should know the ways of the world.

“I am good at reading.”

“Why not read some books on drugs, and then next year, if you still want some, we will arrange a supply for you.”

Alois was very wise. After a few weeks of reading, she no longer wanted them.

She had instead purchased a Jansport D2 pack and said, “This is home.” When the maids made it a habit to put her big, beautiful, blue frame pack into the cedar closet in her bedroom, she moved in with it. Alois had come in to talk about it.

“Young Miss, you are sleeping in your cedar closet?”

“You do not miss much Aloïs.”

“I am quite observant.”

“A regular Doctor House.”

“Who?”

“Sherlock Holmes.”

“British? No young Miss, consider me more like C. Auguste Dupin. I am not homophobic, but Master Holmes is a little closer to Watson than would be my comfort.”

“Then Dupin. And yes, I am sleeping in a cedar closet.”

“Interesting.” They sat in silence for a minute.

“No one cares if I sleep in a closet.”

“As you say.”

Silence for another minute.

“Do they?”

Aloïs shifted. “You generated a thirty-one page report from this.”

“In an hour?”

“Several people contributed to the report.”

“Did you?”

“I confirmed you were sitting in the closet.”

Silence.

“You are doing it again.”

“What is that young Miss?”

“Interrogating me.”

“Yes, young Miss.”

More silence.

“I want to know what is mine.”

Alois nodded. “Of course Miss.”

“Is this closet mine?”

Alois rolled his eyes.

“This backpack?”

“Does that huge thing fit on your back?”

She looked at her security guard with contempt.

“Then it is yours, you can leave with it on your back.”

“What if I did leave?”

“If you did it of your own will and in a way that prevented you from becoming an issue for your father and the corporation, it would provide work for a lot of report writers, and my security detail would have to find a way to protect you in the field.”

She was seventeen now thinking of the that talk so long ago with Alois. In her cedar closet she had her magical pack. She rolled up her transcripts and stuffed them in her document folder, then combined it with her laptop. She already had clothing, food, and water. There was a knock at the door.

Brighten Norbert was a stupid name, but he was one of the Bayside Norberts and worth a lot, which she could care less about because technically she was worth two hundred times more. They had been having a tryst and he had asked her to run away with him, which was fucking dandy. She had the only thing she had ever owned, a Jansport D2 pack. Alois was retired, she saw him feeding birds in Central Park

occasionally, looking quiet and grey, but she still loved him. She liked feeding birds with him when she could.

Her current guard was Winston Faulk, who was a rolling barrel of contempt for her. He spent most of his time telling war stories about his days in the SEALs to the Brazilian maids, and making an insufferable ass of himself to the lesser security drones, the three-ring binder types that populated so many positions in her father's company. Where Alois carried a single little pistol, Faulk carried a Desert Eagle, which he was forever drawing, field stripping, fondling, or otherwise making obierotic noises about its silver form or the size of the bullets it fired. If she had to hear, "Fucking big as pumpkins," again, she might just dose his coffee with something from her home reality physics lab.

No worries, she was leaving. Brighten had bribed two maids to sneak her out, and they couldn't give a shit where she went.

Maria, the first maid from Bahia, had a big laundry cart with a bottom shelf, which Kelle shoved her pack in and then crawled into herself. The second maid, also named Maria but from Sao Paulo, was at this moment performing fellatio on Faulk. Kelle was curious about this, because she had promised to do the same with Brighten when she got away and wanted some tips from someone who was an expert, but there was no time.

The ride was uncomfortable. Kelle had dressed in vertical-stripe corduroy flare pants that were chapping her thighs, a delicately slutty peasant's top, and a stage crew jacket from Wheatus that was not really warm enough under this cart. She had

compromised on boots and worn her Doctor Martins, which was the only thing that was working in the setup.

She could tell Maria was taking her down the service elevator that security sometimes used to avoid the press. Then it was out into the echoing garage and a quiet exchange. Hushed nervous tones and an argument in Portuguese. Her tutors had never bothered with the language on the theory only servants spoke it, anyway, although she had to learn fucking Slovenian so she could talk to this disgusting developer's shy girlfriend when they came over to schmooze the family over financing some boondoggle. Of course, those were official dinners and she would get a plastic covered talking point sheet from Dad's social secretary describing her duties, and that was less common now that they had hired the lookalike to stand in for her.

Maria ducked under the sheet that covered her hiding place. "Get out, and into truck."

She got out. There were two nervous men standing like sacks of winter wheat, flatfooted, slack-jawed, and with a slight squint that made Kelle think they were pressing down to hard on some really large butt plugs. One with a handlebar mustache said, "No fucking backpack."

"You, Angel Eyes, no fucking backpack, no princess of the fifty-fourth floor."

"Look here," the Angel Eyes stand in tried to say, but the second one Kelle immediately thought of as Don Logan caught his arm. "No worries, miss. Please step inside this truck. It is not comfortable, but we have to consider camouflage."

I bet you do, she thought, but she got into the truck and watched as the door slid closed. When it locked she got out her panic button and triggered.

The truck was filled with clothing, probably dirty stuff from the entire building. That was not so bad, nor was the bumpy ride. What was bad was that the truck's cab had a stereo system with its speakers installed by the back wall, and thus she was given a blast of idiotic Britney Spears ballideering. *Note to self*, she thought, *If ever assigned to break a terrorists will, play Britney Spears.*

As for the panic button, she had to hide it. It was supposed to be kept near her body, and its signal would penetrate even from a big building. She cataloged places to hide it, then nodded grimly. "Not how I thought this day would go," she said to no one as she sat down and gave it the Riker's Island Snitch. Grimly satisfied that this was successful, she opened her pack.

Water. She drank a shit load. Then she had to pee. Then she had to put the panic button back.

A knife. It was a little lock blade she used in the laboratory to open up shipping boxes. It went in her waist band.

Valium. Ok, she did not take drugs, but she had thought there was a case for loosing her virginity tonight, and maybe a couple of these in her would make that easier. Of course, if she decided against sex, then a couple in him was an option. She took two because she was a little nervous.

Her engineer's notebook. She wrote a quick note to Aloïs and then hid it in the corner of the truck.

Business cards. She laughed as she stuck one in each pocket of each suit coat in the truck. These fucks have no idea the shit they are in. Not because they took her; Dad would pull a J. Paul Getty with her. In some weird corner of her mind she

remembered he had a tattoo, and thought it must be of Getty's face. What would cause thirty of the most powerful men in the world to go completely ape shit was to have a load of their ten-thousand dollar tuxedos hijacked by potential panty sniffers. She yelled, "Should have chosen a better truck assholes," but no one heard her.

Condoms, acquired at great expense and in secret. She looked wistfully at them and put them into jacket pockets as well.

Books. She had taken only light reading. An inter-dimensional power matrix equation book, two books on weak force dynamics, and a really hot book on new trends in Italian fashion.

Not much else.

She put her headphones on and stared at a new song list on her iPod. It was right at an hour when they stopped. The door was unlocked and opened. Behind the truck was a scared looking Brighton and three more men. The two from the cab joined them. Kelle stood up and said, "Brighton you ignorant fucking Lorax, what the fuck have you done."

Two of the men grabbed her out of the truck. Brighton yells, "I had no choice, Kelle."

"You had no choice."

One of the men said, "Shut up."

She tried to struggle, but their grips tightened. *God*, she thought, *fucking Valium rocks. I would be scared shitless without the stuff.* Her ear buds slip out and she can hear the folk music playing like a tinny concert at a half-rate renaissance festival. The men throw her onto a bed and start fumbling with a video camera.

“Brighten, you are a great, big, giant cock!” She yells.

Brighten says, “Honey, I had to.” Then there is an inexplicably loud sound, a gunshot. Kelle sits up and sees that Brighten’s eyes are bulging. One of the men has fired a nine-millimeter pistol into the side of his head. The round, traveling at just short of three-hundred meters per second, penetrates through the left parietal bone, losing twenty-five or so meters per second of speed in the process. Traveling at more than the speed of sound, the bullet destroys white matter, causing immediate anopia in part of the victim’s visual spectrum, while a surging wave of liquid causes massive damage throughout the lobe, resulting in immediate deafness and a loss of semantic memory building. Because the bullet is spinning in a dense, but liquid, matter it starts to take a veering path, cutting into the parietal lobe causing agnosia, but also anosognosia. It ends up coming to rest between the victim’s eyes, lodged in the grey matter of the frontal lobe.

The headshot triggers an immediate response, though the opposite what might be anticipated. Brighten’s head jerks toward the gun, at least until the first spray of blood leaving the wound causes it to return to its original position. The path of the bullet has essentially blinded and deafened him, but his mind is functioning, only damage to the part of his brain that can catalog and assess wounds has created a sense of euphoria in him. Muscle memory keeps him standing for the first second or two, and he seems to lift his hands in recognition of Kelle and to fix eyes on her, but this is merely a reflexive response caused by the various circuits continuing to do what they intended to do before the brain suffered a traumatic injury. Kelle knows all of this

because she has just started studying for her second Ph.D, and the brain is part of her study.

In the seconds Brighten remains standing, Kelle notes the mouth twitches that come with trauma to Broca's area, and the rigidity of the neck muscles that show a general shutdown of the brain. No matter how bad all this is, Kelle sees the blood loss and knows this is what will kill poor Brighten. Right when he is wounded, his heart is beating about one-hundred times per minute. The blood volume being lost from the wound is about 50-milliliters per beat. For the three seconds he remains standing upright he loses nearly half-a-liter of blood. Then it is an increasing loss as the heart pumps faster with less blood. After twenty-three seconds, he goes into Cheyne–Stokes breathing and then cardiac arrest.

“Why did you do that?” She is quiet as she can be as she says that.

The man setting up the video camera says, “Shut up.”

Kelle stares at the dead man on the floor. The valium is not enough. What did Alois tell her? Be a little girl. Make them empathize. She started to tear up and said, “You are going to kill me, right?”

One of the kidnappers, a younger man, said, “You forget that. Be nice, and we will get you home.”

“He was my boyfriend.”

“Sorry.”

Inside Kelle seethed. Sorry, you simple fuck. Brighten was an idiot. She knew he was an idiot. Idiots do not deserve death sentences. She thought of how close corporate security was by now. They knew she was gone, and they had her

tracker, which had been picked up by cell towers all the way through the city and probably here in the country. Alois had told her that rescues now were four and in. No hostage situations with tense rows of trigger happy cops. When four security agents arrived at the scene and were ready, they charged the bad guys who, just like these simple fucks, would probably still be standing around arguing about what to do next.

What is she thinking? Faulk was getting his knob polished, and there was no guarantee any of the three-ring-binder people had noticed her alarm. If Maria reported her missing, it would be around midnight, and how forthcoming would she be?

They had her hold up a newspaper and say a few lines into the camera. Then they stripped her, took her knife and iPod, and threw her into a closet.

The dark closet was always friendly to her, but now there was an edge of fear in it. She wished she had her backpack.

She fell into a fitful sleep where a big man pinned her, and Alois had walked into the bathroom and beaten him until blood flowed from his face and the rest of the security dragged him away. It was a strange dream, from the edge of her memory, from this time when she was little, before she had grown up and become a master of her own space. So like age seven. She woke to the sound of a phone book hitting a metal pole.

The door slid open. It was dark in the main room, but the person who slid in must have had magical vision. She could smell it was Alois. Kelle started to say something, but he put his hand on her mouth. In her ear he said, "How many?"

"Five." She whispered back. "How many of you?"

"Just me."

“Dad would not allow a rescue?”

Alois rolled his eyes. He started undressing. It was then that she noticed he was wearing a kevlar jumpsuit. It fit him like a glove. He started putting it on her. “No Alois.”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up.”

“You see, Kelle, this is the problem. You have a brain the size of a planet, but no one has equipped you for the iconic American pop-culture come back. Not really. Look, until I was 13, I thought my name was ‘shut up.’”

Kelle laughed. “Clever.”

“Not me, Joe Namath.” He was strapping Kelle into his armored suit, taping it where he could, doubling the armor where it would fold. “When we make a break for it, grab my belt buckle and keep on me. I have a distraction planned in a few moments.”

“Alois, how did you learn to interrogate people?”

“I took some advice from Errol Morris. Shut up and listen.”

The crackling sound of speakers came to life out on the warehouse floor as Alois left the closet and starting following the near wall.

Just walk away Renee

You won't see me follow you back home

The music was deafening. Alois held his pistol in front of him as he dragged Kelle forward. He turned a corner and Kelle could hear his gun spit quietly three times.

One of the bad guys was down; they stepped over his body. There was screaming in the distance. The music made it surreal, and it became worse as they passed a fire box and Aloïs pulled the white lever. Strobe lights now flashed, although thankfully no “wah wah” of a siren.

Aloïs stepped out from the cover of a crate stack, stepped back, then came out and his pistol barked three more times. Kelle’s hyper-focus was coming back. She noted that Aloïs was firing twice for center of mass and once for a head shot. He had told her this was the Mozambique Drill. Pretty racist she said. He agreed, really, but what could you do? “Call it something else” had been Kelle’s reply.

Snap, snap, snap! Then a tornado of bullets pinging around them. Aloïs grunted and pulled her under cover. He was bleeding from his abdomen. “Sohn einer Hündin!” He said in some foreign tongue.

“Aloïs!”

He dropped a magazine from his pistol and replaced it. “Arschgeige!” He yelled, as if to the shooters. “Damn, We are about ten meters from the door. Get ready to run.”

“Right behind you.”

“Nope, I need to convince flachwichser and his buddy fickfehler to give up this shit.”

More bullets struck around them.

“Look young Miss.”

Kelle had started crying, “Don’t you fucking call me that.”

“Dr. Brainerd.”

Literally, it was the first time anyone had called her that. She had a doctorate just this year, but who calls a seventeen-year-old “doctor” unless they are Doogie Hauser?

“I love you, Alois.”

“Shut up.”

Kelle was speechless as another barrage of bullets splashed around them and the song started over at the beginning. “Nice soundtrack, Cameron Crowe.”

Alois said, “There you go. Quote something stupid when you are scared. It is better than some sappy dialogue that only makes creative writing professors happy.” he coughed hard then said, “Doesn’t even have to make sense, everyone will assume you are smarter than them.”

Alois got to his knees. “You need to find my Korpsbruder, Markus, and tell him this.” He stopped and then said, “Du hattest recht, ich bin gestorben und habe ein Mädchen beschützt.”

“What does it mean, where is this Markus?”

“Never mind what it means. And Markus is not where, he is when. 2017 in Lowell, Massachusetts. Look for a sculpture show with a big pod and little legs. He will be the smug bastard next to the stuff.”

“You can do that yourself.”

“Sure, but lets call it insurance. Run now!”

Eleven days later, Kelle saw the view from the kidnapper’s camera, which had been accidentally switched on a minute before. She digitized the footage and then played it back on her computer. In it, she could see herself break from cover in the

flashing strobe lights of the fire warning system, dressed in a huge kevlar body suit. Bullets caused sparks around her, but the fire changed direction as Aloïs burst from cover. The music was haunting, telling Renee to walk away, so she cut the sound and set the video to slow motion. Aloïs had a wild smile on his face, his long, grey and black hair floating in the air, his hands holding the pistol in front of his face as he advanced on the men firing Kalashnikov rifles. "Hakkaa päälle!" He yelled as he advanced. She saw he was hit, and hit again, and then another time, but he kept running forward screaming in a tongue she had never heard him use before, she had thought he was German. "Jumala nähdä minut! Tuo minun teräs!" Both men were hit, but Aloïs fell as well. The camera toppled as her first love collapsed into it, and she saw one of the gunman had taken aim at her own back. Then the heaped form of Aloïs rolled with great effort and started firing rapidly into the man with the rifle. The man with the rifle turned and fired at Aloïs and the camera, and when the exchange was over, nothing moved but the falling of small bits of cloth, dancing in the strobing flash of firelights.