

Escape Key

Tony Bove



The Golden Gate

The body was never found. Perhaps there never was a real body in the churning cataclysmic waters of the Golden Gate that day, underneath the bridge. It may have been another cyber-joke like the hackers do with their benevolent viruses, only played out in real life. And if it were a hoax, very few people would know, perhaps only the man who had supposedly occupied that body.

Rob Smolder popped into his wife Rachel's study, energized, like out of a scene of *Ozzie and Harriet*, checking himself in the mirror more than once, trying to paste down a stubborn shock of his wild curly brown hair. A Beatles album was playing.

Everybody had a hard year
Everybody had a good time
Everybody had a wet dream
Everybody saw the sun shine...
— Beatles, "I've Got a Feeling" (Lennon/McCartney)

"Hello goodbye," he announced to her, across the room.

"Don't you sound perky," answered Rachel unconvincingly. She was a beautiful woman with an angular, ruling-class face and sharp features, undermined by a plebian shock of red hair. She looked up from her crashed PC with a strained look of worry. The Aggregate Networks Recovery CD was stuck in some routine, repeating its sad message about reconstruction.

"For once, things are clicking," he said, checking his digital cell phone. "Even my worthless gadgets are starting to work again." He was announcing this, as if to hidden recorders in the room.

She put on a brave face. They were both acting now. "I was just reading about some worthless gadgets. The Internet Vegas show preview. But the computer crashed. Again."

"It's been a bad year," Rob chuckled, walking over to her and putting his arm around her shoulders, then massaging them, while his eyes darted around the room, perhaps searching for video cameras. "Stop worrying. Everything's going to work."

"Everything's going to work," Rachel repeated, also looking around, as if waiting for a director to yell *cut*. But nothing happened. She stiffened, and continued with her lines. "Are you all set? Everything's in place? You're wearing the right clothes? You're going to get rid of that gadget?" She was referring to his phone.

"All set." He turned off the phone and left it conspicuously on a table, then smiled that Ozzie smile.

"Don't forget to take that notebook with you. You know how you always forget these things." Rachel had lapsed back into the emotionless Harriet again.

"It's been so long since I wrote in a paper notebook..." He frowned at her, then grinned back, the timing as perfect as a TV sitcom. "Don't worry, I'll remember."

"Well, before you go, maybe you could help me with this PC. It's stuck in recovery."

"Just hit the Escape key."

She did, but nothing seemed to happen. He came up to her and kissed her on the cheek.

She frowned up at him. "Long live the Media Liberation Front," she announced ruefully to the room, to whoever was watching or listening.

He smiled, but this was his own smile, out of character. He whispered to her while pretending to kiss her ear. "Take care. Remember, 'You know my name, look up the number' and all that."

Then he was gone. She hit the Escape key again, and sighed. She resolved not to think about what was going to happen.

* * *

A few minutes later, Rob Smolder roared out of his Sausalito garage in a red convertible Ford Mustang. The day was bright, sunny, the kind of day that if you reached high enough into the clear blue sky, your fingers would come back blue. He popped the CD of the Beatles' *Abbey Road* and advanced to track 7, start of the "second side" of the original LP. The top was down; he turned up the volume. He raced up the hill to 101 and towards the tunnel, the tunnel to the Bridge, his only escape route by car out of Marin County and all that it meant to him.

Traffic congealed inside the tunnel. How fitting: an escape in slow motion. Drivers were beeping their car horns at each other to the rhythm of "Shave and a Haircut — Two Bits". Smolder's car blared out the voice of Paul McCartney singing "Golden slumbers fill your eyes". Rob was singing, and as he crept forward into the tunnel, he realized he wasn't the only one. The beeping had faded out and people were singing along with him, singing with wild abandon, like Greeks on a holiday. As they segued into "Carry That Weight" Rob could hear voices in and out of tune, in and out of rhythm, wavering and unwavering, falsetto and soprano, but enough in unison to recognize the song. As the Beatles slid into the guitar solos the horns started again, this time punctuating each guitar riff. "The End" was in many ways a much easier tune to play car horn with than "Shave and

a Haircut". *Blaaaah-Blahp! Blaaaah-Blahp!* Over and over... Then, without warning, the CD skipped back and repeated, and repeated, stuck in time... The song never reached its corny ending.

Smolder was laughing like a maniac, his eyes wide and his mouth wide open, as he exited the tunnel into sunlight. As he approached the Bridge, he chose the "death lane", the lane in the middle that was separated from oncoming traffic by flimsy plastic orange markers. He switched CDs as his car crept onto the Bridge, as if his traffic-mates were still listening.

*Everybody having a good time
Except you
You were talking about the end of the world*
— U2, "Until the End of the World"

At the other end, he got off at the first exit, and doubled-back to the east-side parking lot. Smolder then parked in slot number 26, farthest from the rest rooms, closed his convertible top, and left the car.

The FBI agent following him was momentarily distracted and got off on the wrong exit. By the time he reached the parking lot, Smolder's car was there but Smolder was gone. The agent thought he saw him going up the pedestrian ramp, but when he ran up to the Bridge, Smolder could not be found. As he searched, a Golden Gate Park Police car stopped in the middle of the Bridge, responding to call from a tourist who thought she saw someone jump. The agent returned to his car and left the scene.

The Park Police hit the red button to summon the rescue boat, which searched the waters underneath. About a half-hour later, the tourist called the Park Police again, saying that she got it all on videotape. The tourist, Rosemary DeSantis, a blonde woman about 35 with a striking figure, so befuddled the officers that they forgot to give her a receipt for the tape.

She had been panning her camera at that moment searching for a better shot of the Marin Headlands. She would eventually pan back to the Bridge, and catch someone looking like and dressed like Rob Smolder, walking to the midpoint of the Bridge on the City side, facing the City and the East Bay.

It seemed such an ordinary day, a man walking among tourists on the Bridge, then turning to face the side of civilization. San Francisco: every reason to live right in front of him. But he jumps. As dramatic as it seems, the jump looks like a practice run of a special effect or a scene from the dailies for a movie, because there is no sound track but wind noise on the microphone. There is no build-up, no climax. The body already looked lifeless, and seemed to be dragged over the Bridge's rail and then dropped into the raging sea.

Later that night thieves slashed the convertible top of Smolder's car and broke in. A man returning from the bathroom dialed 911. As the Park police arrived, less than a minute later, the first thief jumped out and took off, carrying a notebook and a CD. The second one zigzagged off on a different route than the first. The second one was caught. His name was Pico, lived in an apartment near 22nd and Valencia. They held him until the San Francisco police arrived.

The Park Police found a note on the passenger side front seat with a Web address: <http://www.smolder.com/death.html>. They estimated that the car had been there since early afternoon. The suicide experts from homicide arrived, took a look around, and said to forget it, the rescue boat hadn't found anything and had already returned to dock. They considered the whole affair either a prank or a lost cause. But they'd have to wait until morning to make sure, and search along the shores of the Pacific outside the Golden Gate, as a body would have floated out to sea with the outgoing tide. They collared Pico and took him to the precinct jail. The car was towed to a police impound lot.

* * *

Raymond Cheney, FBI special lieutenant in charge of high-tech operations in Northern California, heard about Rob Smolder from his agents in San Francisco by secure wireless phone as his unmarked black helicopter traced the hills north of Lake Sonoma. The pilot pointed to a column of smoke rising from a nearby slope, about five miles from the nearest pocket of civilization (a Native American casino), and the helicopter banked into a turn to pass over low. Men with DEA jackets were standing around a large pile of fresh-cut marijuana plants, and in the middle a fire was crackling. They were all leaning into the smoke, inhaling shamelessly.

“That’s an affirmative,” he barked into the phone. “Proceed to the Santa Rosa airport for repairs. Copy.” He waited to hear them repeat what he said. “Affirmative. Over and out.” He hung up and turned to look at the bureau chief sitting behind him in the helicopter. The bureau chief wore the traditional FBI uniform, white shirt, blue tie, dark blue suit, and black shiny wingtips. Cheney, in flannel shirt, blue jeans, and cowboy boots, scrambled into the back of the cabin where they could talk more easily.

“We lost another one,” Cheney said and shrugged. “Gyro’s out. What’s a helicopter cost these days?”

“Nothing to us. They’re on loan as part of the war on terrorism. And believe me,” the bureau chief leaned into Cheney to make his point, “these Pot Page anarchists are terrorists. They’re in cahoots with Earth First, and they’re responsible for the attack on Northwest Lumber’s Web site.”

“Just as I thought would happen,” said Cheney.

“This is incredible, unbelievable,” said the bureau chief, wiping his face with a handkerchief. “This year has been one disaster after another. We don’t have enough to worry about with terrorists from the Middle East, we have to now worry about our homegrown ones.”

"Not really. These people are harmless," said Cheney nonchalantly.

"You think selling pot from a Web site is harmless?" The bureau chief was livid.

Cheney cleared his throat and changed the subject. "The real problem is the encryption software they were using. If *real* terrorists get their hands on it..."

"Theory?" asked the bureau chief, softening up and reverting back to FBI training jargon.

"Fact," replied Cheney. He said this as if to prove that despite his appearance he was nevertheless an FBI lieutenant. "An underground encryption group engineered the site attack. These are hackers that worked on the Pot Page, but they had some help from an important encryption expert, Mort Gill, who has done work not only for the CIA, but even for *us*." He paused to let that sink in. "Not only that, this expert has a smart friend, a former computer industry entrepreneur by the name of Peter Moaning, who profited from the stock's downturn. A variation on the 'short and distort' operations the Mafia conducts. They short the stock, then hit the company. The stock takes a dive, and they profit from the difference."

"Hmmm," said the bureau chief, nodding. "Well at least that makes some sense. But what is the goal of this encryption group?"

"They are trying to set up an alternate Internet, one that is not penetrable by law enforcement. To make it secure, the encryption keys are changed randomly by special key operatives who can access, by fingerprint, a software key that updates the encryption algorithm instantaneously across the network, transparently."

"I don't understand, how do people use it? How does this thing spread?"

"The software is distributed in a number of different ways. It can arrive as an email attachment. It could be encoded into a song or video clip. Or you can visit a site to download it, just by clicking on something. Only you think you're getting something else."

"But wouldn't it be easy for your team to just get the software and follow the links to the source?"

Cheney gave him that piercing glare he was famous for. "It's a cultural virus, spread by the underground. Enforcement people are generally not hip enough to understand how to use it."

The bureau chief shook his head, letting the insult pass, and asked, "so who do we look for to be this key operative?"

"They call them *conduits*." Cheney turned to look out the front window.

"Conduits?"

Cheney scanned the horizon out the helicopter's side window. "Affirmative. We expect them to be well connected with the hacker community." He stopped talking long enough to try the digital binoculars with night vision, but the device wasn't working, and he threw it back on the seat. "But they have probably dropped out of everyday life altogether. The conduits could be anywhere in the world, staying in touch by securely encrypted email. We have to find at least one of these conduits."

"You have someone in mind?"

"Yes," Cheney smiled. "Yes I do."

* * *

At about the same time Smolder drove across the Bridge, Andrew Tinker shuffled into the sparsely furnished conference room of Electric Onion, a software company specializing in enterprise-level network security. His unkempt look made him seem out of place even though he wore standard pressed chinos and dress sneakers. But the black t-shirt with “No More Slogans” in white across the front suggested that he came from the creative side of marketing. A vice president in a black suit stood in the corner, trying to make his cell phone work. Senior managers sat at the conference table staring at a set of color prints of a new logo for the company.

A designer from a Seattle firm explained each logo design, emphasizing its finer points. “This one has a sweep that suggests frivolty,” he said, sweeping his hands through the air at the bemused managers, “yet at the same time there is a solid base of support, suggesting firmness and longevity,” he concluded, forming a rectangle in the air with his hands. “While this one,” he quickly added, knowing well that most people will listen for only 17 seconds before thinking of something else, “suggests not only frivolty, firmness, and longevity, but also cleverness, as the round shape reminds one of a bulls-eye, a target, which has always been a symbol of success. It is important for a company to convey not only success, but also its own corporate culture, when promoting its brand. Especially when promoting its brand with a multimillion dollar ad campaign,” he smirked. “The name suggests something electric, dynamic, always changing, and charged with electricity, while also offering just a slight whiff of something... different.” The managers murmured to each other while associates took notes.

“Tinker, look at this one.” His boss, one of the direct reports, favored the second one, a design of concentric circles. The entire cost of design and production for the logo side of their new branding effort had now risen to about half of Andrew Tinker’s yearly salary. This flimsy designer in Seattle was milking this project for all it was worth.

“I think it looks like a hubcap,” Tinker said sheepishly. The room suddenly went quiet; everyone stared at Tinker. He avoided their stares and quickly left the room.

An hour later his friend Charlie O’Brien called on him at the office. Charlie was early for the reception that Electric Onion was putting on across the street at an art gallery. Tinker went outside rather than have Charlie come upstairs to see his miserable desk, wedged into a corner and surrounded by dead machines — PCs, printers, a scanner, several ancient disk drives, etc. His corner of the floor looked like a high-tech graveyard. It hadn’t changed in five years while the industry had accelerated around him.

They walked two blocks until Charlie looked up into the windows of an ancient brick warehouse in the south-of-Market section of San Francisco. The building had been revamped in the previous decade to hold the offices of a dot-com, its decoration consisting entirely of exposed pipes, gleaming chrome deskclamps, and gray swivel chairs. The building’s offices were now empty, with for-rent signs in the windows and the look of anxious poverty.

“They haven’t even rented this place yet. It’s been, what, eight months since I was laid off? Still nothing’s happening here.” Charlie always stood with his weight on his right leg advancing forward, headlong into the world. “The CEO used to say ‘failure is not an option.’” He seemed an unlikely sort to be spouting doom from street corners, wearing an alligator shirt (the alligator replaced by the logo of the Grateful Dead) with pressed chinos and dress sneakers. No rings or Rolex watches, but he sported a cultivated air about him, and his hair was long but neat and usually tied back. His piercing eyes suggested malevolence. “This place used to be a gunpowder factory. Imagine failure in *that* context. The entire South of Market goes up in smoke.”

Tinker hovered and bounced around Charlie like a balloon ready to pop. “I have a pretty long record of failure in this business,” he bragged. “I have a black cloud following me around.”

Charlie regarded Tinker with slight contempt. He metaphorically tugged at Tinker’s line, bringing the Tinker balloon back down to eye level. “You picked the wrong horses, that’s all.”

“Yeah, remember ‘interactive television’? Right after I join the Web was invented. Bye bye ITV. Then the imaging company, after only a year working there, the company goes out in a hailstorm of criticism about its porn customers. Then the game company, so far ahead of its time it makes the cover of *Fizz*. I join, and it disintegrates two months later.”

“Yeah, that was a quick one, wasn’t it?”

Tinker glared at him. “Just this year I thought I was making the right move, into enterprise security. With all the network attacks this year, the stock was destined to go up. Now, just one month before I get my first options, this deal with Aggregate goes through, and the stock takes a dive. I may even lose my job.” Electric Onion was about to become part of Aggregate Networks as a subsidiary, hence the need for a logo change.

Charlie smiled. “And here you are, about to attend your job’s funeral. While we’re at it, let’s celebrate the loss of the public domain, and the absence of any decent music from the record labels. This party,” he was referring to the cocktail reception just starting up, a few doors down, in one of the recently abandoned art studios, “is like Nero fiddling while Rome burns.”

“Our copyright-protection software is the best in the business,” responded Tinker quickly. Too quickly — he regretted saying “our”. He added, meekly, “It’s not the fault of the company if the technology is misused.”

"You mean it's not *your* fault. And you're right, 'cause you are about to get canned." Charlie laughed like he did everything else, hugely. "So Aggregate Networks locks up everything, just like record labels did with music. And uses your company's software to encrypt it. And the result of all this control? Nothing available but crap."

"Well I'm not one to defend Aggregate," said Tinker. "I just hope I still have a job tomorrow. I think I blundered today. I think upper management noticed me."

"Bad news. You don't want them to notice you, or they'll think you're a key part of the corporate culture, which they have to assimilate or eliminate with the acquisition. And they can't use someone who represents the old culture." Charlie smiled and stared off into the traffic lining itself up for the Bay Bridge. "And that's the problem right there. Competent people like you get in trouble if you're noticed. Anyway, they expect you would have moved on in a few years, so they make it happen faster. There's no heart and soul in this industry anymore."

Tinker deflated and stopped hovering. He tested the sidewalk for signs of softening. "Look, I don't need more negative thinking. I'm about to lose everything I worked for, the dream I worked so hard for. We were going to buy our first house next year with this stock. But it's not gonna happen, and I'm probably gonna lose my job as well. I know everybody's having a hard year, but I've had this black cloud following me around for years."

Charlie shrugged in disgust. Just what he needed right now, for this reception — a morose sidekick. "Don't tell me about no fucking 'black cloud'. It's all in your mind."

"Yeah, you can say that, you've gotten used to being unemployed."

Charlie just smiled that smile he borrowed from W.C. Fields, as if he had just thought of something. His eyebrows popped up and down and his eyes twinkled. "Don't worry, Tinker my boy. It's time to think big. You know what they say about changes, transitions. They kick you into high gear."

Tinker shook his head. "I'm too old for this." He instantly regretted saying it.

"I understand the feeling," said Charlie in mock sympathy. "You're in your late 40s, and you feel trapped, enmeshed in the grinding gears of everyday life." He lit a cigarette the ex-con way, hands encircling the match. "Well, I got plans. Big plans."

"I don't wanna hear your half-baked plans," Tinker fired back as they headed down the street to the reception. "You've been out of work, what, eight months? All you could think of doing is that Pot Page, and you almost got busted for it."

"Got away with some bodacious Mendo bud," Charlie grinned. "Imagine, you can sell just about anything, legal or not. I'm getting my best bootleg recordings out of the closet. If it was possible to sell pot from the Web —"

"And get caught," interrupted Tinker.

"But not for six months! And it will be much harder to find and shut down a music site."

"Not true," said Tinker. "The recording industry's hackers are better than the DEA's hackers. I mean, if you had a choice, music industry or drug enforcement..."

"Depends on the money and the fringe benefits," said Charlie. They both laughed. "Still, no one's shut down my radio stream yet. I must be below their radar."

“You won’t stay in business long enough to make a profit,” said Tinker.

“Bullshit. Music is recession-proof, like porn and drugs. There wouldn’t be such a big market if people didn’t want it.” Charlie poked Tinker in the shoulder. “And what *about* my porn site? We’re getting paid subscribers. It’s about to make a profit.”

“Yeah, but you make your *girlfriend* do it,” Tinker laughed.

“She *wants* to do it,” Charlie exhaled cigarette smoke. “It’s her *thing*, she gets off on that voyeur thing.”

“I don’t wanna go there.” Tinker arched one eyebrow, curiously, like Star Trek’s Mr. Spock. They went inside to a reception that was aglow with grace and style. Bright lights danced on tops of computer displays arranged around the edges. Shrimp, vegetables, cheeses and wines were arranged in the center, surrounded by people dressed in the latest high-tech clothing, with twinkling lights in their ears and scrolling messages across their chests, blinking sneakers, chirping cell phones, PDAs dangling from belts. Neo-punks in full regalia mingled with white-shirt finance guys with short, cropped hair and tiny earrings. Charlie and Tinker strode into this scene like conquering heroes.

*The last of the rock stars
When hip hop drove the big cars
In the time when new media
Was the big idea
That was the big idea
— U2, “Kite”*

The place was jumping with ambition and bluster, and everywhere Tinker looked, confident people were engaged in spirited

conversations or off in corners concocting deals. Tinker muttered to Charlie, "Who *are* these people?"

"*You* were once like that," Charlie retorted. "Don't you remember? Twenty years ago. They're your children. Don't you recognize them?"

It took a while for Tinker to focus on individual people. He eventually spotted Eric Mauer, a college buddy of Tinker and Charlie, from UC Berkeley. Tinker moved closer to Charlie and pointed out Eric, then asked him, "Where's Rob Smolder tonight?" Tinker always felt easier in the company of very powerful men and women when Rob was on hand. Rob, another UC Berkeley buddy, always graciously introduced Tinker as an important industry writer.

"I don't know, but there's Ted Anson," hissed Charlie at Tinker's ear, referring to another friend from UC Berkeley days, not really part of the O'Brien-Tinker-Mauer-Smolder axes, but located somewhere on a higher plane, where Smolder spent considerable time raising funds. Anson had evolved from a pseudo-socialist mindset of the early 1970s into a considerably influential venture capitalist. "I have to talk to him tonight." Charlie O'Brien sniffed the air nervously like a horse waiting to jump from the starting gate. "Ahhh, this place is alive with possibilities. Dreams are made here." Then he went off to try to position himself for a schmooze with Ted Anson.

Charlie watched as Ted Anson, a fortyish executive in regulation blazer, white shirt and school tie, chinos, and oxfords, strode purposefully over to a crowd of journalists hovering over the shrimp. Charlie had connected in conversations with him over the years since college and actually considered him a friend, but now he just marveled at the way Anson walked, with the supreme confidence of the very wealthy and powerful, as if every step mattered. People turned to watch Anson stop to talk to a reporter from the Wall St. Journal. Charlie would read the quote the next day. Charlie's gaze followed him as he shook hands with people. It was not just luck. Ted

Anson was smart, had gone from UC Berkeley back to their mutual hometown, Philadelphia, to the Wharton School of Business. He knew angles that Charlie knew nothing about.

Charlie stood near the cluster of people at the end of the table, next to the cocktail napkins. Sooner or later, Anson would need a napkin for his shrimp-stuck fingers.

“Hey, Ted.”

Ted Anson took the napkin from Charlie, then looked him up and down, sizing him up in a rather obvious fashion. “Charlie O’Brien. How are you.” Anson didn’t really ask this as a question, just stated it as a fact. Anson spoke with the slight whine of an educated Easterner, drawing out his syllables and flattening his “r”s like a Bostoner, always with an ironic grin of self-deprecation, as if he didn’t deserve his good fortune.

“Fine,” rasped Charlie. “What’s the next step, do you think, with Mort Gill’s encryption software?”

“Have you talked to Peter Moaning yet?” Anson leaned in, speaking directly to Charlie’s face, and Charlie couldn’t help thinking that Anson was doing this to keep the conversation private — no zoom microphones could pick it up, and no one could read his lips.

“No, haven’t heard from him in a while,” Charlie lied. Actually, Moaning was a silent partner in his porn site.

“You will. Most likely tonight,” Anson said, and he glanced at his watch. “In fact, you should leave now. There’s going to be an incident of some kind here, with the authorities, in about fifteen minutes. Don’t tell anyone, just leave...” Anson looked over his shoulder, then back to Charlie. “And don’t tell anyone that I gave you this advance warning.”

Charlie was about to ask something, but Anson put a finger to his lips, motioning silence. Then Anson said, in parting, "We'll stay in touch." Again, it was not a question, it was a statement.

Charlie tried to amble back to the group around Tinker without showing any nervousness. He thought, could it be that I really need Tinker? Andrew Tinker... Charlie had known him since high school and they'd gone to UC together. No one called him Andrew or "Andy". It was just Tinker, and Tinker seemed to prefer it that way. As a sidekick, Tinker was more like a Gilligan than a Tonto. Should Charlie break his promise to Anson and tell Tinker to split? Charlie looked back in the direction Ted Anson had taken, but did not see him, and couldn't find him anywhere in the room. Feeling a bit guilty, Charlie snuck out a side entrance.

A lively conversation had grown around Tinker, who stood there looking perplexed. An acquaintance, Andy Ames, had a habit of popping up in conversation with just a word or company name, first thing out of his mouth, usually a trend or hot company, stopping conversation in its tracks. "The Aggregate judgement," he announced, and sure enough, conversation stopped.

Mal Contour, a journalist, addressed Ames. "Aggregate made a deal with the enforcement agencies to adopt the new encryption standard, so that all the other smaller companies, like our host, the one our friend here works for," he said, pointing at Tinker, "have to either adopt the same standard or go out of business. Which stifles innovation, no question about it."

"Innovation's no longer the issue," asserted Tinker. "Encryption should be free, for everyone, without government interference." But the moment after he said it, he regretted it. He didn't want to get into this discussion. What did he care about politics? What Contour said was true, and he was probably going to lose his job anyway.

“Yes, and there are ways to defeat that,” asserted Eric Mauer in his slightly affected German accent. “You can use the latest *open source* encryption software.” He said this like it was a call to arms. “You can make yourself a new personality, feed them bogus data. You can use ICE and protect yourself from anything.” Eric spoke with authority, but was greeted with a frosty silence with the mention of Mort Gill’s ICE, the free encryption software that was the lone wolf of the industry defying the government standards. No one wanted to think about how much privacy had been, and would forever be, invaded. No one wanted to challenge Eric’s opinion.

Andy Ames broke the silence. “That’s what I think that new site uses, y’know, have you seen it? *Escapewithyourlife.com*?” Someone giggled, but Ames pressed on. “That’s what I think it is, the ‘moment of truth’ the site talks about...”

“Hush,” said a shapely blonde in a long slinky outfit, grabbing Andy Ames’ arm and cuddling with him. “You’re not supposed to talk about it,” she said to everyone, grinning wickedly.

The group murmured approval and started to break up into little clumps, with people muttering to each other, “Have you been there yet?” and “Nah, I haven’t done it yet. What’s it like?” and “I’m a little bit afraid of going there, what will it do to my system?” and “It messes with your cookies, that much I know.”

Tinker listened attentively. He had not been to the site yet, and he started to feel a bit paranoid. Should he have? And then, as if conforming to a textbook description of a reverse paranoid reaction, reality shifted gears. Suddenly, heralded by subtle movements in the crowd, there were cops everywhere.

A woman screamed but was just as instantly muffled, and the crowd murmur turned to a roar that asked the question, what is going on? Tinker got stuck between a young woman with orange hair and a National Guardsman, a thirtysomething banker from the Peninsula

holding an M16 assault rifle. He thought, did this have anything to do with that Web site Ames was talking about? But it couldn't be; they were surrounded by soldiers.

The officer seemingly in charge spoke through a bullhorn. "Stay where you are, don't panic. Please do not leave the building. We are conducting a search, but there is no need to panic."

The party hushed, tensions eased slightly. Tinker was not particularly afraid for his life because the place was under control and was not likely to blow up. At the same time, there was a fatalistic stab to his gut that suggested that the world had just gone to hell. Fire engines were racing everywhere, and perhaps the entire City was turmoil.

Later Tinker learned that someone had attacked the Electric Onion Web site, and the FBI had been called in. Tinker had wandered around outside after each civilian was searched and let go, but couldn't find Charlie, or any of his other friends. They had all melted into the foggy night. Tinker remembered that night, the night Smolder did not show up, the night the Electric Onion reception was closed down, the night Charlie disappeared without warning... as the start of the meltdown of his life. Some kind of fog had crept into all their lives like a shared hallucination, or a bout of collective, selective amnesia. Yes, it had been a bad year, but the world seemed like it was not working at all; the agencies of comfort and security were out to lunch, and the replacement trainees were incompetent. The brakes had failed and Tinker's life was careening out of control.

Media Lib

The next morning, Rachel Smolder tapped the keys of her laptop, which she had finally restored. The morning sun had just peeped over the horizon near the bump of Mt. Diablo in the East Bay and cast a bright light on the desk in front of her, and a long shadow behind her.

The day would be filled with power calls to finance experts and lawyers, a meeting on the Smolder Foundation's charter, and the ritual stamping of approval on contribution checks bearing large sums. But at this hour of the morning the sunlight reflected off all the surfaces in her study, and in the dazzling sunshine, she loved to just sit on the couch facing the bay window, like Lauren Bacall in *Key Largo*, staring out to sea, waiting for her hero lover Humphrey Bogart to return. While husband Rob flitted in and out of her mind like a buzzing fly, she was thinking of someone much more fleeting...

She hadn't heard from Charlie O'Brien in weeks. The previous week had been hectic, with the Pot Page bust and then Rob's endless series of meetings. Her status as Queen of the upcoming Software Developer Conference in San Francisco had almost been in jeopardy due to too many missed appointments and too much intrigue. Now it had all come together, the switch had been turned.

*I've got fury in my soul
Fury's gonna take me to the glory goal*
— Laura Nyro, "Save the Country" (Nyro)

By mid-morning she was responding to questions in a live chat session set up for the public to talk to the Developer Queen. In public appearances, young nerdish guys surrounded her, and she loved to flirt. How many of these faceless audience members in the chat session had seen her up close? Did anyone stalk her? But she refused

to be unnerved by all the attention. She had a role to play, and for the public, she needed to be neutral on the copyright controversy and, whenever possible, diss the free encryption movement, of which she secretly was a part.

“Security break-ins are hoaxes perpetrated by companies selling encryption software,” she wrote in reply to a question. “There really isn’t any reason to think that your computer can be invaded through the telephone line. Besides, you can always unplug it.”

She sat back, smugly and diffidently teasing her flaming red hair, waiting for the heated response she knew would come. The chat window scrolled over and over with responses, each line punctuated with a finger pounding the Enter key, and it is only slightly exaggerating to say that the key was located in exactly the tingly spot of her conceptual delta. She just loved being controversial. It made her real; it gave her a purpose.

As usual, she answered only the first and last ones, and with dignity. Boris the calico, usually finicky about emotion, nevertheless had an instinct about when it was right to jump onto Rachel’s lap for a bit of stroking, and sure enough, this was a good moment. Boris purred in Rachel’s lap, stemming the tide of tingly sensations, and Rachel absent-mindedly stroked the cat while reading the screen.

Finally the response stream slowed to a trickle. “It’s zany for everyone to be so paranoid about hackers,” she wrote. “These vendors are just whipping up a frenzy for their own profit. Why would hackers want to get into *your* computer anyway?”

Another brief shower of response, but this time it slowed to a trickle much sooner. Then there was the cyberspace equivalent of smoking a cigarette in silence, which is faster in cyberspace than in real life, lasting only about ten seconds. It must be over, she thought, and in her head she started to compose her sign-off speech.

A solitary message appeared on the screen. "My dear Mrs. Smolder," it began, then skipped a line, "Is it true that your husband Rob is dead?"

At just that moment the phone rang, and she jumped. It was a San Francisco detective. She responded with just the right mix of astonishment and fright, the most natural first response a person has when first hearing that a loved one may have committed suicide. When the call was over, she sat down on the couch near the bay window, exhausted. Boris found her lap. Her gaze wandered over to her laptop. It had crashed, seemingly for no reason, displaying only an empty dialog box with a question mark.

She managed a half-smile. The day had only just begun.

* * *

That morning, Mal Contour, hangover in tow from the Electric Onion party, entered the South of Market precinct station just in time for the start of the press conference. Word of the hastily prepared conference had arrived by email that morning. It was an important affair. Even Jill Metrose, the editor-in-chief at *Fizz* magazine, had shown up with her assistants bowing and taking notes.

Contour knew the other press people. There was Howard Marker from *Fizz* with Metrose. There was the guy from the *SF Examiner* and the other guy from the *SF Chronicle* (might as well have been the same guy). There was, of course, the crazy middle-aged hippie in the gray flannel three-piece suit with the shopping cart filled with video gear, Brendan Barcode, who showed up at press conferences the way ambulance chasers showed up at accidents. He claimed to be a video journalist, but all anyone knew about him was that he showed up all the time at these events, his shopping cart parked outside the ballroom entrance; and he worked the crowd, shoving his video camera in everyone's face, always in front, and always on the edge of a temper tantrum. Contour had never seen any of the video footage,

and he suspected that Barcode never committed anything to disc or tape.

Barcode brushed by him, "s'cuze me, gotta get up front," elbowing him with a tripod. Then Barcode turned back to Howard Marker as he stepped on the toes of someone in front. "Hey Marker. Have you looked into the Smolder Foundation?" Barcode was shouting, embarrassing Marker, the four-star journalist. "Where they got their money, a-and what they're using it for?" Barcode's eyes spoke of conspiracies. He glared around at the crowd. Then he barged through to the front row, muttering all the way.

This was more like a wake than a press conference. Contour recognized other denizens of the newsroom-dot-com world. Smolder's jump had already become the hot topic of the Internet. The bored-looking police brass had assembled with their mouthpiece at the podium, a short gray-haired smiling man from the giant public relations firm Skill & Scrotum, dressed in a herringbone jacket, wool slacks, and penny loafers; a dinosaur of the media industry. He never stopped smiling. The press conference speech was quick and to the point: Smolder had left the car and a note with a Web site address, the Web site contained a farewell message, and a tourist had caught the act on video, but there were no eyewitnesses, no body, etc. The investigation was continuing. Smolder's "farewell message" was not confirmed as actually having been written by Smolder, and it had been removed from his Web site at the request of his wife.

The first question was from the *Examiner* reporter, something about a connection to the Pot Page that had been shut down by the FBI. The police had no comment, and an awkward silence fell on everyone. Then, as if on cue, Mal Contour cleared his throat, and everyone turned to see the muckraker from the *Bay Radical* in the long trench coat. Smiles flickered around as those who knew him, or knew of him, expected a controversial question, and fingers were poised above laptop keyboards.

“So what about the Whole Planet Multi-user Domain? Have you, uh, investigated” — he slurred the word like a drunk — “the virtual suicide of Smolder’s avatar?” An audible sense of wonder rippled through the crowd of reporters. It seems that none of them had actually visited this particular port in cyberspace, where Smolder’s avatar, a Gumby-shaped male with a bright orange head feather, gave speeches from a redwood stump in an enchanted virtual forest.

The typical multi-user domain, a.k.a. MUD, was a minor blip on the radar of high technology. So minor it hadn’t been reported on in years. But the typical MUD had evolved a bit since the introduction of The Sims Online a few years back, with three-dimensional settings spanning the Net that were not yet photo-realistic but nevertheless interesting. Even more interesting were the easy-to-assemble “avatars” that act as puppets in these settings, communicating instantly with each other across vast distances and impenetrable borders.

With no answer forthcoming, Contour cleared his throat again. “Apparently he showed up in the MUD, gave a speech, something about overreaching capitalists and the commercialization of history...” He paused for effect. “And then his avatar disintegrated.”

The murmurs approached a dull roar before one of the police brass took the podium. “We have no information to offer at this time,” he said calmly, then joined the other cops. The roar dissipated, and everyone started to pack up laptops.

“Hello, Howard,” Mal Contour said to Marker, extending his hand. Marker didn’t smile at him, but gave him a perfunctory handshake. “I’ve been reading up about faked suicides,” Mal Contour continued, although Marker seemed indifferent. “More than half a million people succeeded at faking their deaths in the last decade. I checked that, because it didn’t seem right. That’s more than twice the estimated number of hippies that dropped out in the late Sixties. Think about it. They disappeared forever. Their bodies were never

found, and the disposition of their cases were closed, as it is *not against the law to disappear.*"

"You covering this case for the *Radical*?" Marker snapped at him, recalling the competition all journalists faced.

"You bet. I'm thinking of a lead story, five thousand words. A photo of the Bridge, from the perspective of Alcatraz — it's a metaphor for the tenuous grip on reality the high tech industry has, it suspends disbelief." Contour was revved up, gesticulated wildly, his face turning red, his bad breath in Marker's face. "There it is, stretched across a narrow strait, supporting traffic through a raging wind. One strong gust could blow you off. Y'know, if he really didn't fake it, then he's just dead, and that's it. He wouldn't have survived the fall, and even if he did, he would have drowned or died of hypothermia. No one saw him, and no one heard his body hit the water. The walkway is about 270 feet above the waves. A body falling from that height reaches about 75 miles per hour before hitting the water." Contour paused and calmed down. "I've done quite a bit of research I could share with you."

"Thanks, that's OK," said Marker, averting his eyes. "See you later." There would be no sharing of research. But Contour waited until after the conference adjourned, then approached the police captain, who eyed Contour sternly. "Hello," Mal Contour introduced himself, showing his *Bay Radical* credentials. "I can be useful in helping you investigate Rob Smolder's background."

"Really?" The top cop kept up his stern look. "And why would we need your help? Wasn't it your paper that published that trash about the Police Chief?"

Contour grinned. He was used to this kind of treatment. "I didn't write that. Besides, I do a lot of research. The rumors I've read on the Internet are almost as plausible as anything said here."

The cop gave him a look that suggested that he leave right away.

* * *

The warehouse front belied the cool, ultra-hip interior of *Fizz* magazine in the SoMa district, where game machines were just as prolific as PCs. The devil-may-care attitude at *Fizz* could be traced back more than two decades to the years before Sonic the Hedgehog and the Mario Brothers, when adventure games like Spacewar were played on the ARPANET (the U.S. Dept. of Defense network). An autographed copy of Stewart Brand's book *Two Cybernetic Frontiers*, in which Spacewar first became known to the public, was placed prominently next to Ted Nelson's classics, *Computer Lib* and the eerily semi-interactive *Dream Machines* on Jill's desk. Jill Metrose, editor-in-chief, still used an old roll-top, into which she installed the latest iMac with a sliding keyboard tray, etc. Hooked continuously to LibertyNet, the net service provider for most of the interesting neighborhoods of San Francisco, her iMac, nicknamed Fleetwood, was revealing (at T1 speed) Smolder's suicide note.

Standing in the florescent light around Metrose's desk in the factory space of the magazine's production area, gazing at Smolder's suicide note Web site for the first time, was *Fizz* writer Howard Marker, and behind him the entire magazine production crew. Marker stood in front, leaning in to manipulate the mouse while snickering about Mal Contour's theories. Jill Metrose startled Marker's reverie with a bark, just a bit on edge, but smart and decisive. "Howard, you realize that this Web page could have been tampered with. Or it could be a practical joke."

Marker smiled his all-knowing smile. "Not a practical joke," he said, quietly. "The cops were the first to get the URL, and they pulled it off the net before anyone could hack it."

A photographer voiced his doubts, as a grainy photo appeared on Jill's screen, askew in an avant-garde way, becoming un-pixelated,

slowly, as the Web page unfolded — the image becoming sharper and clearer. The image of a smiling, perhaps even smirking, Rob Smolder, cyberculture hero and media entrepreneur, with his Gumby-like avatar sitting on his shoulder.

“But tampered with. That’s not only possible, it’s highly probable,” barked Metrose, crossing her arms over her breasts as if for protection, and staring hard at the screen. And just then, as if on cue, the photo of Smolder suddenly took on a purple shade, and a Groucho Marx mustache started sprouting on the image’s upper lip, growing until it had reached comic proportions. The work of Smolder, or a practical joker-hacker?

“Ah-ha!” laughed someone in the back row. “You know, he could have done this himself. He could be trying to make you *think* it’s a practical joke.”

Jill Metrose didn’t share their sense of humor. She had been in touch with Rob Smolder just three weeks earlier. He had proposed a story about Aggregate Networks and accounting irregularities. So, the man had committed suicide, put up a note on the Web, or so it seemed... and *Fizz* magazine was determined to publish the note. The family might sue. Wonderful.

As she angled for a better look at the screen and the suicide note page, the animation stopped, and Howard Marker scrolled down the page until he found the text.

Dear Friends,

Over 1,200 people have jumped from the Golden Gate Bridge since it was built, so I’m not doing anything unique. This notoriously liberal city known as a playground for the depraved and a mecca for the homeless somehow did not fulfill the fantasies of these troubled souls, or perhaps over-fulfilled them. Such a lively, vibrant city, a city of rock stars, nightclubs, dot-com dreams, artist lofts, community coffeeshouses, and cheap heroin — it simply wasn’t enough.

Smolder's note rambled on in this hopeless vein. Metrose didn't think it really was Smolder's writing, or it was something done tongue-in-cheek. Marker scrolled down to where the text mentioned the information age. *A sense of urgency vibrates in everyone, in everything,* it said. *The recent technology gold rush propelled a few thousand entrepreneurs into billionaire status and the rest of the hard-working population into a state of heightened anxiety aimed at really no other purpose but to survive.*

"Survive, indeed," said Marker, looking annoyed, but he continued scrolling down.

But the technology has also accelerated the pace of revolution. Terrorist organizations are coming out of the closet, armed with encryption and viruses, the weapons of the new millennium. Governments are increasingly hostile to free speech and control the export of high-tech products. The arms trade has shifted to trading information, software, and documentation.

The note went on, but Marker took his mouse and highlighted a section for everyone to read, and he read it out loud. *Encryption is the key piece of technology that enables both terrorist and enforcement organizations alike. It also enables free speech without retribution.*

The Fizz staff quietly listened to Marker's solemn reading, weighing Smolder's supposed last thoughts. This was a man with everything in life going for him — fame and fortune that he had earned, not inherited. But for some reason, Smolder was incensed by what had happened to his peers. *There are many pioneers in the technology industry who've been ripped off, passed over, or just left holding awards and a few million dollars while the suits took over and made billions before wrecking the economy. Some of these disgruntled pioneers know enough about encryption to be dangerous.*

Marker stopped reading aloud, to let that sink in. He scrolled down some more, to the end of the text, which included a symbol of a fist

and the words *MEDIA LIB!* emblazoned in 3D underneath. Under that was his sign-off:

*Rob Smolder
No longer at rob@smolder.com, sorry!
Try my widow, rachel@smolder.com*

P.S. God bless you, Rachel. Good luck with the foundation. No, I don't think that having kids would have been the answer. Try number nine, in reverse.

Second, I would like to thank all of the members of the Whole Planet MUD, for making it so easy for me to become part of your cyberlives, however fleeting they may be now that MUDs are on the way out.

*At first, I was iridescent
Then, I became transparent
Finally, I was absent*

Everyone was silent for a moment, taking in those last words. Then Marker clicked on the Whole Planet MUD link, which opened another window on his screen, showing the MUD's enchanted forest, where the orange-feathered Gumby that served as Smolder's avatar was standing in front of a burnt-out redwood stump serving as a podium, quoting Yeats:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
— William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming"*

Just as the avatar finished, there was a perceptible jump in the animation, as if a tape was rewinding very fast, and the avatar

repeated its motions of talking. But this time, the speech had obviously been changed by a hacker in real time:

I saw the best minds of my occupation destroyed by venture capital, burned-out, paranoid, postal,

dragging themselves through the Cappuccino streets of Palo Alto at Dawn looking for an equity-sharing, stock option fix,

HTML-headed Web-sters coding for the infinite broadband connection to that undiscovered e-commerce mother lode in the airy reaches of IP namespace...

At this point some other hacker must have gained control of the orange-feathered Gumby avatar, and as the *Fizz* group watched in slack-jawed silence, the avatar faded in a reverse of interlacing, degenerating into blobs of large pixels, just like the patches that cover up the pubic regions of naked bodies on Japanese TV.

Woodside Dreams

Paul McCartney guided John Lennon away from the naked edge of the rooftop of Abbey Road Studios. With no railing separating him from a killing fall, John had been staring out into space wondering what was wrong. He'd taken some pills he had thought were speed, but now that familiar grinding feeling in his stomach impaled his thoughts to the night sky. It spread to his throat and then buzzed his entire body. LSD, of course. He'd picked the wrong color pill. And now, "Getting Better" was taking on an entirely new meaning. Paul had cautiously followed John up to the roof, and pulled him away from the edge, whispering in his ear. "Let's go over to my place," his place on Cavendish, just a block away. "Maybe it's time I tried it, too." A fear of death passed between them in that moment, a fear that found its way into their music, especially the White Album.

* * *

Andrew Tinker awoke from this dream, the Beatles book he'd been reading the night before still open, facedown, on his chest. He savored this moment of grace upon awakening. He could see the history of his life, the history of his rock music heroes, the guitar feedback, the groovy light shows and sound gear, the wall of sound years, the emergence of glam rock, of punk, of new wave, of synthesizer music, giving way to funk and groove, to the poetry in motion of rap, to hip-hop, to ambient and techno, and up to the present day. It was all connected, he thought. All spurred on by the rage produced by having to live one's life in poverty, in war, in the repressive dullness of commercialism. Then transformed into spiritual energy, invoking the ancient fertility rites, embracing magick. Then increasing as a spiral of energy, erupting in the 1960s and continuing to this day, ever-widening, embracing all art forms, embracing even technology and industry, changing two decade's politics with sound,

changing our everyday lives. In every culture there was, *had to be*, a counterculture. And in today's culture-of-the-counterculture, in which the mores and styles were evenly distributed over the political left and right without the slightest convictions, more of a collage of styles than any particularly identifiable style, there must be something brewing underneath that will one day bubble to the surface. Something irreverent, provocative, full of conviction and idealism; and ultimately liberating. *A new counter-counterculture!* It was one of those massive thoughts that hang in there for a few minutes in the early morning and then dissipate, to be remembered only as some kind of flashback. Then he got up to pee.

Early mornings were for wasting time. Tinker would put on his Thinking Jacket, an old denim jacket with a red and white polka-dot mushroom sewn into the lapel by his wife, Charlotte, before they had even decided to go steady, way back in his UC Berkeley days. In a field of ordinary blue denim the mushroom popped out like a logo for a head shop, but tinged with danger; its polka dots foretold of a bright, vivid horror, like having a bad trip, or being stranded in a Peter Max landscape. Tinker would stare at his own lapel in a fetal position on the beanbag. Focusing on the music of the Beatles around the *Sgt. Pepper* period, he tried to retrieve this morning's dream.

A month had passed since he was laid off from Electric Onion, now part of Aggregate. He never did find out if he'd been singled out due to his candor at the logo meeting. All they told him was that his position had been eliminated, and that it had nothing to do with his performance on the job. The knowledge he had in his head about Electric Onion's products no longer mattered. Companies all over the Valley and in the City were dropping human assets like hot potatoes. Companies were outsourcing now; Tinker had picked up a contract to write a tech manual for a small encryption software company.

"You think you'll know today?" Charlotte called out plaintively from the kitchen, and in the process she knocked over a frying pan that set in motion a wild clattering of pots and pans falling. The noise woke

him from his daydream. He glanced at the wall clock. Late again. Tinker was born late. His mother had explained that the reason she nearly died in the hospital during his birth was because he'd been a day and a half late. She frowned as she said it, as if it had been his fault. And so it was that Tinker always felt some unconscious twinge of guilt around women.

"Don't worry. I have some ideas, some contacts to make. Jobs are plentiful," he lied, and left before she could finish picking up the mess. An advice column Charlotte had read recently provided a list of tips to look out for to determine if your spouse might be cheating, and Charlotte made a mental note: Andrew seemed vague about his plans and had a propensity to tell little white lies and repeat that everything's alright. That's tip number four on the list. She frowned as she picked everything up, and tried to stop thinking about keeping such an absurd scorecard. Her own mother used to tell little white lies and repeat that everything's alright.

* * *

Tinker pulled out of his short dirt driveway in the hills above Woodside, the northwestern edge of Silicon Valley. It was a crisp blue-sky morning filled with limitless opportunity for everyone but Tinker. The sky mocked him in its glory, suggesting that there were other things in life besides worrying about paychecks, and that survival planning simply postponed the inevitable. He gunned his retooled VW bug up the extremely narrow dirt road threaded through various ancient redwood trees, swerving and squealing all the way to the top of the ridge, the dividing line between worlds suburban and forest, Skyline Drive.

South on Skyline, on his right, fog coming in from the ocean crept up the forested slopes of the coastal range and dissipated in the dazzling sunlight at the ridge, as if the heat of civilization was too much for it. On his left, vast, sprawling Silicon Valley was laid out before him like a giant circuit board, the central processor powering the global

economy. He saw it as a dysfunctional circuit board, suffering from intermittent weirdness — weeks of prosperity and then, suddenly, days of dementia and destruction that stretched into months of despair. This morning, brown smog as inevitable as poverty covered the giant circuit board, and the background looked felt-green like a pool table, with brown and black streets and dull, lifeless-yellow buildings.

Tinker turned left and clutched-and-gear down a twisty, curvy road, heading to a tentative job in this ruthless arena. He tried to recall the days when the Bay Area seemed so much more exciting, the radicals in Berkeley coffee houses, the Haight-Ashbury scene, the Pranksters in the redwoods, and hippies working for computer companies. That's how he got started in this business. He never actually chose computers; he'd studied the works of the counterculture writers and had contemplated for decades the meaning of acid-rock lyrics. His buddy Charlie O'Brien had been the opportunist, suggesting first the S.F. Post Office, a known refuge for hippies, and then one of the first computer companies in Berkeley. Tinker considered himself a saboteur-in-waiting; the only way to sabotage the Machine was to first understand how it worked. But in the intervening decades they had matured, and had been easily assimilated into the thriving culture of the personal computer industry. The industry peaked during that period, and when the subsequent dot-com wave crashed, Tinker and Charlie were beached.

Tinker was a technical writer; technical writers were the dreamers of the computer industry —not the practical visionaries who invented things, but the lazy dreamers who could see the interface between fantasies and real life. Technical writers could grok the raw inventions and make sense of them, interpreting technospeak into the languages understood by ordinary people, punctuated of course with acronyms. There were strict deadlines and lots of pressure; every year seemed to be The Year that Everyone had to Work Harder. He had to describe technology that opened up to him like a deranged Swiss army knife, changing its function every time you closed a blade.

Tinker's career as a tech writer, producing important documents for engineering teams, had eventually petered out. This was a bad year, and he needed any kind of work he could find, which is why he augmented his recent contract with a part-time job ghostwriting and editing the blubbing musings of a famous Silicon Valley millionaire and latest has-been, Peter Moaning.

Tinker let up on the accelerator and glided through the Lower Woodside estates, the richest sector of the Peninsula foothills, obsessively charmed with token redwood groves that mingled uncomfortably with the foreign-bred highly competitive eucalyptus. This tension between ancient native trees and modern conquering trees went unnoticed, though it affected the fabric of everyday life. The neighborhood drew in the conspicuously wealthy with their maids, butlers, lawyers and other parasites. He turned a corner and glided down a perfectly straight road lined with peeling eucalyptus and manzanita trees.

By now Moaning would have already jogged in his designer sweatsuit around his Lower Woodside estate for an hour. The finish line was a trestle of rhododendrons over his driveway, bookended by statues of gargoyles that had been caught and preserved in the act of screaming.

Tinker was not ready to face him. Moaning had chewed him a new asshole the day before, ranting on and on about giving 110 percent. Tinker had wanted to point out that since the job only paid about 10 percent of his income, he should only have to put out 10 percent; but instead he kept his mouth shut. They had been working at friendship for years, giving each other high-fives, "hey dudes" and hippie handshakes, swapping tales of sexual exploits. But Tinker sensed that real friendship eluded them, and that it was largely Moaning's fault.

Fortunately, Moaning seemed to be busy that morning with some men in blue suits who'd arrived in black Ford Escorts. "Such a quaint

concept,” Moaning was telling one of them. “You can’t really kill Bill Gittelson,” he went on, seated at his fancy leather couch in the living room. Gittelson was the billionaire CEO of Aggregate Networks. “He’s not really human, he’s a force of nature. Even if someone killed the physical being, a clone would pop up somewhere else.” The agent was, unbelievably, writing this down.

Tinker quietly crept through Moaning’s living room to the den, waving at him an old-fashioned floppy disk with the finished assignment. He could have emailed it but Moaning insisted on face-to-face meetings every day, “to see what you’re doing and where you’re at,” Moaning had lectured. This was a form of intimidation; while Tinker could be strong and confident on the phone or in email messages, he could be easily intimidated in face-to-face encounters.

After dropping off the disk, Tinker turned to leave but Moaning yelled from the living room. “Wait a minute, Tink — I need you to come back later today, I need to put out a special bulletin about the attempted Gittelson assassination.”

Tinker stopped, leaned backwards from the doorway into the living room, and adopted a concerned, serious attitude. “I could write something first, email it, and then you’d have some time to think about it before we get together,” he replied with some trepidation.

Sure enough, Moaning pounced. “No! I need you here!” He put up his hand to indicate a pause in the interview with the blue suits. “You have to know what I’m thinking. We have to sit down together and brainstorm this.” Which meant, really, that Tinker would have to sit down and take notes while Moaning pontificated, pacing back and forth.

“Sure thing, boss,” replied Tinker quickly, and exited, cursing under his breath. About a mile down the road was a small, upscale market in the center of Woodside, and next to it the breakfast café, the Lucky Saddle. Obscured from the rest of Silicon Valley by redwood-studded

foothills, this café was an otherworldly place, a seat of power, a popular spot for a few well-known CEOs and their financial partners from Sand Hill Road. Featuring stuffed sharks, giant jukeboxes, and memorabilia from dozens of ancient technology companies, the Luck was a great place to hear rumor and innuendo. The owner would come out from the kitchen to greet regular patrons, who would put aside their swords of business to share eggs and pastries in an almost convivial atmosphere, a minor escape from the formalities of a wealthy lifestyle. Tinker went there regularly, to find any kind of tributary that would lead to the money river.

The people at the closest table were discussing encryption software. Tinker hadn't selected a table yet when out of the bathroom came Mort Gill, the inventor of the Halfway Decent Encryption (HDE) package based on open source software, and the founder of HADES, the company that developed it. Gill wore similar khaki shorts all year long, rain or shine, as if on a safari hacking through the industry underbrush. His kaftan and silk blouse clashed with this outfit, as if he were part great white hunter and part ashram guru. This combination of African jungle and Indian spiritual regeneration was wrapped up in a mock law enforcement jacket that read Key Escrow Agent on the back, and supported by a pair of New Balance tennis sneakers. Flamboyant, yes, and so over the top, but in this business crowd he shined like a hip messiah. Tinker knew Gill fairly well from his UC Berkeley days and had even recently accompanied Gill and Tina, his latest flame, to the nude parties at the hot springs near Stinson Beach.

"Tinker! Great to see you." Gill was very enthusiastic about something this morning. He introduced Tinker as "one of the best technical writers in this industry" to the folks at the table.

The talk grew more animated with Gill back at the table, about export controls on encryption software, and the requirement for a "back door" to every encryption system for use by government enforcement agencies. "People take all this stuff for granted.

Network security is something that is either *on* or *off*." Gill was warming up. "But what lies between the on and the off? What if the 'security' is total fabrication?"

"It is a total fabrication," replied an arrogant older man, casually dressed, who Gill had introduced as the world's greatest expert on transaction networks. "Financial institutions won't even say how much they lose to electronic thieves each year. They hire the best hackers to test their systems, but still the money still flows like bootleg wine at a mob wedding."

The arriving waitress broke everyone's concentration. This particular waitress was there every morning, always leaning over, exposing a marvelous cleavage, and making a fuss over the men while remaining aloof to the women. She poured coffee, and gave Tinker a warm smile — just enough of a perky curl of her upper lip to suggest something — as she took his order. He emphasized "over-medium, not raw" eggs, and no butter on the toast.

"What's your standing with the government, now that the Encryption Act passed?" The question came from a querulous middle-aged man that Gill had introduced as the world's most astute analyst in the enterprise software market.

"Ah yes, encryption with a twist: a back door for law enforcement, a paradox," Gill replied, smiling. "How can anyone be secure knowing that law enforcement could invade at any moment? What political group in its right mind would use encryption software that allows the FBI, one of the most incompetent law enforcement agencies in our time, to walk in the back door? Real, uncorrupted, and *uncorruptable* encryption will always be available to meet demand."

"To meet the demand of terrorist groups? Electronic thieves? Hackers who disregard copyright law?" The arrogant expert was peeved.

“Yes, and to meet the demand for truly secure financial networks, for truly secure methods of communication for *your* hackers in your efforts to thwart *their* hackers. Encryption is the grease for all these projects,” Gill flashed his trademark grin at everyone and folded his hands, reminding Tinker of the Maharaji holding a press conference with the Beatles in India. “Without it you are all quite vulnerable to the whims of incompetent agencies.”

When Tinker’s dish eventually arrived, he was disappointed to see that the eggs were sunnyside up and the toast slathered with butter, but he tipped her anyway.

* * *

Tinker drove out to the freeway, which was already in progress, starting up Jethro Tull’s *Benefit*, Ian Anderson’s flute an excellent accompaniment to the freeway rippling majestically through the misty green foothills of Woodside, Portola Valley, and Los Altos Hills.

Why am I crying I want to know?

How can I smile and make it right?

— Jethro Tull, “With You There To Help Me” (Ian Anderson)

The flute solo hit its peak as he drove over the Stanford Linear Accelerator, a thin building several miles long — once the longest building in the world. The first quark was discovered there, along with the “charmed” quark. One end of the building is buried in the northern range of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the other in the bedrock of Sand Hill, a physical reminder of the linkage of science and finance. Thousands of people pass this point on the freeway every hour and do what Tinker did, which is look sideways, and in a second that stretches to eternity, gaze at this building that stretches to infinity, disappearing into the misty green foothills, which, with Jethro Tull music as soundtrack, were now populated with leprechauns and druids, trolls and beautiful virgins... Those virgins were now turning into nymphs. No, it couldn’t have anything to do

with that miles-long linear accelerator violently penetrating the wild Santa Cruz Mountains, shattering atoms and shooting out quarks...

A puff of dark cloud hovered over the area where the building burrowed deep into the mountain. That black cloud seemed to be following him. So was the military plane from Moffett Field, which roared overhead and reminded him that it was war, or the threat of war, that had funded his high-tech career.

Tinker was now floating on freelance contracts, playing Silicon Valley Roulette. Again. Fortunately the company was near Interstate 280. Two major freeways served the Valley from the north. Highway 101 ran straight down the peninsula from San Francisco and was nearly always gorged with traffic. It shot straight through mostly poor residential areas and industrial zones. There were few BMWs or Mercedes on 101 — mostly decade-old wrecks and belching trucks. The other, snaky foothill route — I-280 — was a freeway for engineers and entrepreneurs, linking startups in the Valley with the venture capital firms of Sand Hill Road. In California, the best homes and lifestyles were found in the foothills that bracketed the vast valley wasteland of industry and misery.

Tinker had stayed out on the edge and had lucked out. Private Key Systems was in Cupertino, in an area of modern office buildings on the western edge of the Valley, with views of the Santa Cruz Mountains. And yet, there was a macho work ethic about the place. The imposing rule was the CEO's in-by-8 a.m. and out by 8 p.m. Tinker could never fit in, commuting as he did from the hills. He got around the 8 a.m. sign-up sheet by coming in through the back entrance, the loading dock. The CEO had once escaped from persecution in Hungary, or was it Czechoslovakia? During the last Great War. But what did 8 a.m. have to do with it? The man had built himself a worker's palace of cold steel and glass, stucco roof and cinderblock, brisk carpets and networks, modular cubicles and corner offices with views of the mountains.

Inside, away from the relentless sun, ensconced in a womb of non-static carpeted cubicles and safely tucked into his headphones, Tinker worked on the reference manual for a new system for encrypted networks. The system was based on previous work, and Tinker was reverse-engineering the documents from that work. This was not considered unethical in the software industry. It's more like Hollywood directors working to a formula. The unspoken thing about it: he wasn't sure whether he was putting himself, and some programmers, slowly out of work simply by doing his job. Like painting himself into a corner, only to jump out the window... There's that black cloud again.

The knock on the cubicle post didn't alert Tinker, so Ted Anson entered the cubicle and poked his shoulder. Tinker looked up sheepishly and took off his headphones.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Tinker knew Anson from his UC Berkeley days but had never connected with him on any other level than acquaintance, and besides, wealthy people unnerved him.

Anson ignored the question and looked around inside Tinker's cubicle, in which posters of various counterculture heroes, from Timothy Leary and Dr. Hunter S. Thompson to John Lennon and Firesign Theater, crowded out the calendars and work notes to fill up every inch of inner cubicle wall space. Anson's gaze stopped on a Firesign Theater poster, shaped as a triangle, advertising a performance of "Everything You Know is Wrong."

"We need to talk, somewhere in private," Anson announced, turning back to Tinker. He was dressed in khakis and blazer, a Jerry Garcia tie, a beeper, a cell phone, and the latest miniature email device attached to his hip.

"The cafeteria," said Tinker.

“Fine. So how’s the wife and kids.” Anson’s question was more a statement than a question, as he walked fast to the cafeteria, and Tinker tried to keep up. Before Tinker could really reply, Anson continued. “Did you hear that the Other Ones are playing Shoreline?” They reached the cafeteria, but didn’t go for coffee. Anson pressed on in his usual fashion. “I want you to get in touch with your friend up north, you know what I mean.” Tinker nodded and they sat down. “I need it by next Monday. We’ve got backstage passes. The CEO of Sports International will be with me.”

“Sure,” said Tinker, smiling, wanting to be helpful.

“You can bring it by my office anytime this week,” said Anson. “But be discreet. I have some important meetings going on. Wear something a bit more formal than what you’re wearing now.” He said all this with a straight face, not a touch of irony.

“OK. But I could use an advance,” mumbled Tinker.

“No problem.” He handed Tinker an envelope with \$400 in crisp, new twenties. “So how’s the new job?”

“It’s a contract. I’m not sure. If layoffs happen like the rumors say, I’ll probably be one of the first to go. I’m not sure what I want to do next.” Tinker looked up, realized he was being too morose for a guy like Anson.

“You should know that by now,” said Anson, abruptly and to the point, looking at him with penetrating eyes. “Let’s talk sometime soon. I’ve got to go now. Take care, and say hello to the wife and kids.” And he was gone, just like that.

Tinker just sat there. It was still morning and he felt like he was on a roller coaster with a half-digested hot dog in his gut. He grabbed some coffee to chase away the nausea, which he knew would only

aggravate it but there was nothing else to choose, and then walked back through the maze of identical cubicles to his cubicle.

An envelope containing a pink document sat on top of a larger manila envelope on his chair. He already knew what it was. Companies always hand-delivered these envelopes; they were always placed on chairs rather than in the boxes in the mailroom; they always contained pink documents. The color of cowardice is yellow; Tinker thought pink must stand for flamboyant indifference, saying, "You're no longer part of this family, and the show must go on, tra la la."

"What?" The tech writer in the next cubicle stood up. Tinker winced; had he been thinking out loud?

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Where have you been?"

"I had some things to do. Anyway, I'm addressable," Tinker replied, smart-alecky, pointing to his cell phone.

"A security guard delivered that," the writer said, pointing at the envelopes.

Sigh. Double-sigh. If sighs were espressos, perhaps this was a double-double latte, with chocolate on top. Tinker opened the first envelope. Folded inside the pink document was a letter from the CEO, who Tinker had never met. "The company is going through a transition, and it must downsize expenses," Tinker read out loud, with yet another royal sigh.

Tinker tried to let the thought sink in, but there seemed to be nowhere for it to sink into. He felt, instead, that detachment of self one feels when suddenly sliding down a roller coaster. He had been "let go" as they say, as if he had been a wild man held in captivity. It's

not that he did anything *wrong*, it's just that this black cloud kept following him...

"So what are you going to do now?" The tech writer asked.

Tinker just looked at him. It is the typical question people ask when someone's suddenly laid off. And someone suddenly laid off typically has no answer. The question dug into him, revealing a naked soul lacking in aspirations. He whirled around to see if anyone else was looking at him over the rims of their cubicles. Co-workers who had always laughed at his jokes were now taking great pains not to look at him. Unemployment settled over him like leprosy. Perhaps they thought they could catch it, not by touching him but just by looking at him. They hung their heads like scared rabbits awaiting the abattoir, and burrowed into their work.

The florescent lights bathed everything in a false white. Tinker became aware of a hum emanating from the lights, mixed in with the low whine and methodical clicks of machinery, and the occasional nose-sniffing, throat-clearing, and key-clicking sounds of the other information workers. Sometimes their hands moved so fast, the clicking noises sounded like mice scampering around behind a wall.

He looked inside the manila envelope. It contained a check, a ten-page non-disclosure and non-compete agreement, and various other documents. He flashed on the coincidence of receiving two envelopes at once, and that each one would change his life. The first held crisp bills headed for an illegal pot farm in Northern California. The second held his severance check, and freedom, whether he wanted it or not.

"You know, it's not your fault," the tech writer whispered, soothingly. "It's the fault of management."

"Right," Tinker snorted. "But I pay the price."

The tech writer looked bleakly at him. Tinker thought he had better keep his mouth shut. In a mild state of shock, he stood motionless in his cubicle, until he noticed the two security guards that had taken up positions at the entrance to his department. He took down his posters, boxed up his personal stuff, and checked all the drawers while his computer started up. Then he checked his email, scanning the subject lines:

Weight loss is just a click away!
Seized and unclaimed property
Warning: Anyone has access!
Make Big Money Exchanging Foreign Currency
The Ultimate Revenge Guide
Get Paid Everyday Guaranteed!
Want a larger penis?
Fire your boss; triple your income!
Giant facial site, very nasty!
How to cheat at online gaming
Married but lonely women 4 U
REQUEST FOR URGENT BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP
Smolder gone but not forgotten
Why be normal?
Rudy wants to buy youse a drink
Is it all fall down? Is it all go under?
Everywhere you go everybody's doin' that rag

Tinker almost clicked on the spam that would take him to an urgent business relationship with a member of the Nigeria Export Promotion Council, who needed to transfer millions of dollars to a U.S. bank account — a typical scam that involved spending and losing \$5,000 to some con artist. But he saw the message about Smolder and clicked on that instead.

This is how it will happen, said the message, when you go. Your friends will find out by email. They will be sitting at a desk somewhere, read the news, and not know what to make of it. You will occupy their thoughts for a

little while until something else, something even more tragic or more comic, occurs to them. Then... will you not quickly fade from their memories?

Rob Smolder left this world without looking back. It is obvious that the many different versions of the so-called suicide note are hacks. His widow, Rachel, spends most of her days staring out to sea from her window. Is she awaiting his return? Will she entertain visitors?

We must honor Rob Smolder's memory. We must divine his intentions. Remember what he said in this "first" suicide note — that some of the disgruntled pioneers of his generation know enough about encryption to be dangerous.

Get involved in the unmasking of Rob Smolder's true intentions. Join the Search for Smolder MUD (multi-user domain -- join by clicking [here](#)). It's free, and highly entertaining. Join now!

You were only waiting for this moment to arrive....

The Blackbird

P.S. To be removed from this list and receive no future mailings, click [here](#).

It had been a month since Smolder's jump off the Bridge. Tinker had attended the funeral. There had been no casket, no urn; just flowers, as the body had never been found. Rob Smolder had been the most successful multimedia artist and producer of the previous decade, and the most skillful fundraiser for humanitarian-related projects. Tinker knew him from their shared UC Berkeley days, when Smolder ran the concert board. His wife Rachel was a beauty queen and also the lead programmer on the team that had created an open-source version of the leading operating system. Everyone was in love with Rachel, but Rob was the kind of guy that could pull her heart.

Dirk dropped by Tinker's cubicle to offer condolences. A white bearded man in a plaid shirt, khakis and sneakers, Dirk was one of those skeletons in the closet of the high-tech industry. He had

worked at Lockheed, at Boeing, at Control Data; had written military-spec docs, had done all you could do in technical writing, and Tinker was in awe of him, of his dedication to working the back rooms of engineering without credit.

“Is that Smolder’s obituary?” asked Dirk, in his excitable, excruciatingly naive voice.

“No, it looks like spam from someone trying to take advantage of him,” murmured Tinker.

“Well go ahead, click on it, see what happens,” Dirk winked at him. Dirk was an amateur sci-fi writer, peddling in his spare time a draft of a story centered on a theory that email was some kind of alien plot to denature the human race with electronic impulses, to better prepare humans for their eventual assimilation into a robot race. Mort Gill’s friend Drew Anatole knew Dirk and once told Tinker that he had hung out with Dirk out near Area 51, in Nevada, at a radio station, on an evening when a mysterious object had occupied the dark heavens and the imaginations of the local residents. Nudge nudge, wink wink.

So he clicked, why not, and up popped a window with the idiotically smiling cartoon face of Bob (of the Church of Bob the SubGenius) inside the text of the suicide note on the Web.

“It’s a hack,” said Tinker, resignedly.

“I dunno,” Dirk replied, “I knew the official Smolder site would get hacked, we all expected *that*. Rob Smolder had a lot of hacker friends.”

Tinker thought, was all this a prank? He waited a moment, his heart beating, nearly expecting that Smolder himself would appear from behind with a crowd of cackling dwarfs like some Monty Python movie, and everyone would dissolve into hysterical laughter. He

waited... But nothing happened, except that his laptop disk drive kept whirring, doing something.

Perhaps it had been Rob Smolder himself, sending out one more Beatles quip from the Other Side. *You were only waiting for this moment to arrive.*

He said goodbye to Dirk, and absent-mindedly began copying files of a personal nature from the company desktop to his laptop. He copied all the documentation he'd written the past month, including the reference manual for a new encryption system that would no longer be marketed. A vague notion of including the documents in his samples portfolio crossed his mind. It was clearly useless to anyone, anyway, especially now that the company was moving back to supporting the government-sanctioned encryption standard. He thought nothing more of it as he packed everything up.

* * *

A few minutes later, after restrained farewells, Andrew Tinker walked out of the building for the last time. He wasn't really tired; in fact, he was quite restless, aware of the mounting traffic jam in the Valley that peaks in the morning and all afternoon, and never really goes away. At first his retooled VW wouldn't start. What gives? This is the most reliable car on the planet. After a few tries, it sputtered to life. He was far too restless to sit bumper-to-bumper on the major highways, so he took the surface roads straight from Cupertino into the middle of the Valley, and slowly drove up the El Camino Real, the main drag all the way up the Peninsula.

He drove past the used car lots of Sunnyvale and the rundown shopping centers from older times, with their dingy convenience stores, beauty parlors, Indian restaurants and fast-Chinese-food joints squeezed between cheap apartment buildings. He maneuvered past slowly moving cars loaded with families from India, Pakistan, Korea, and others that migrated here with husbands, fathers, brothers, or

sons on work visas in the high-tech industry. Billboards advertised enterprise software companies, dot-coms, and brokerages to people who barely spoke English.

Riding on that New Delhi freight train

And I left my life behind.

— Little Feat, “New Delhi Freight Train”

A panorama of misery unfolded as Hondas and Toyotas and four-wheel drive vans zipped by his ancient VW, skirting the Middle Eastern drivers and cabbies in turbans, trying to beat the rush hour traffic and *get there* a few seconds or even a whole minute faster. He drove slowly in the middle lane through the middle class neighborhoods of Mountain View and on into the tony suburb of Palo Alto, the engineer’s haven, home of Hewletts and Packards, and finally to Menlo Park, a yuppie-intense coffeehouse he used to hang in. All the way, he was followed by a black sedan, which was itself followed by a white van.

Tinker belonged to a lost, confused generation. Arriving at the tail end of the 1960s, idolizing rock stars and liberal politicians, Tinker’s class was caught between world annihilation and the white light of illumination, and confronted with the assassination or commercialization of its heroes. The Beatles’ *White Album* could appropriately be recalled as the most representative work of art of that period. It also marked the beginning of the end of the Beatles. Tinker’s class at that prestigious school back East did not produce a president, a member of Congress, a literary heavyweight, a powerful CEO, or a popular entertainer, as other generations of classes did. Tinker’s classmates became failed painters, actors, and writers, or semi-successful accountants, businessmen and computer scientists with eye for uncertainty. Personal ambition became “do your own thing.” For those short on ambition, like Tinker, there would always be a bit of insecurity about what that “thing” should be.

The park across the street from the coffeehouse was a revered spot, a place where Tinker used to play music on Saturdays with a shaggy, long-haired homeless duo who called themselves the Graceful Duck. They weren't exactly homeless — Bert lived in his van in the driveway of a friend, and Bart lived with his girlfriend, a Stanford junior. They weren't there, but Dan Rose, one of the original park dwellers from that time, who used to play bongos, was sitting in the coffeeshop.

"Yo Dan," Tinker tapped on his shoulder. He was a wild haired, scraggly bearded forty-something bear of a man. His laptop was plugged directly into a power socket underneath the counter, allowed because the part-time coffee jerks were mostly sympathetic Stanford students.

"Tinker you ole stinker!" Dan laughed that hearty, we-were-there when-they-dropped-acid-in-the-stew belly laugh, a lean, middle-aged Santa Claus.

"I'm the prophet of doom," replied Tinker, taking a seat next to him. Dan eyed him suspiciously. "I got laid off today."

Some heads turned. Nearby conversations died out. A young, energetic-looking mother of three paused for a moment in her search for the perfect coffee mug. A banker in shirtsleeves and tie, waiting in line for coffee, looked pointedly at them. Dan lost his grin and reached around to pat Tinker on the back. "That sucks."

"This industry sucks," replied Tinker, a little too quickly. He couldn't quite put his finger on what actually sucked about it. Perhaps everything. He stared out at the afternoon Menlo Park traffic as a bag lady walked by. She wasn't so old that they couldn't see that she looked real good at some point in her life, long ago. She was certainly having a hard year.

He turned back to the counter to order a soy latte. As he finished paying, a thirtysomething woman in scarf and cape leaned into his space, perfuming his atmosphere, to complain to the management about the bag lady cackling outside and bothering the customers at the outdoor tables.

“So you hear anything new about Rob Smolder?” Tinker asked Dan, taking a sip of his latte.

Dan nodded, said nothing for a full minute, staring out the window. Then he cleared his throat, took a sip of hot coffee, and spoke what seemed like a prophecy. “He’s not dead.”

“What?”

“He’s not dead. It was staged. He wanted to disappear.” Dan was certain of it.

“How?”

“Funny, you don’t ask *why*,” replied Dan, looking at Tinker disapprovingly.

“Well then, why?” Tinker asked impatiently.

“Anything can be *done*. Eventually you can answer the question of *how* with certainty, it just takes time.” Dan looked into his cup.

“OK, OK. *Why*?”

“To get away, obviously,” said Dan, looking around him nervously for the first time. “Look. In the Sixties, the government went after the counterculture, and Black Panthers, the underground media. Subversives were killed, jailed, or discredited in some way. Some escaped. These days, hackers are feeling the heat.”

“Wow, such paranoia.”

“Or maybe he just owed money.”

“Ahh, the man was golden,” said Tinker. “And he had the golden touch.” And at that moment, Tinker realized that the latte was not soy, but half-and-half. As he was lactose-intolerant, this small bit of incompetency on the part of the counterperson left him doubling over with a gas explosion in his stomach.

“Well... you’ll find out soon enough.” Dan stood up to leave.

“Wait a minute...”

“Gotta go,” Dan chuckled.

“No wait,” pleaded Tinker, holding in his gut. “What did you mean, Smolder’s not dead?”

“Look,” said Dan, reaching behind the mahogany counter to unplug his laptop. “I’m just not surprised that they didn’t find the body. Not surprised at all. You knew Smolder — hell, he’s capable of it, of staging the whole thing.” He paused. “It’s just that he had no reason to commit suicide, he had everything going for him... except that maybe he wanted out.” Dan paused in thought. “But he was too classy to bail out,” Dan continued. “Too much of an agent provocateur to leave it be. Besides...” he paused again. “It’s the simplest explanation, and the simplest is usually the correct one. I think he just... escaped.”

“Escaped? You mean, escaped from his life?” Tinker could barely stammer it out, trying to hold back the contents of his intestines.

“Escaped from his life, *with* his life.” Dan gathered his stuff. The place grew quiet. They both looked over their shoulders. “Everybody’s having a bad year,” said Dan as he gathered up his laptop and cord.

“Even Aggregate’s laying off people, which is a first as far as I know. But those people get million-dollar parachutes.”

Outside, on the sidewalk, Dan turned to Tinker. “You know, if you’re serious about checking out what happened to Smolder, you might want to ‘follow the money’ as they say. Smolder had something going with this cult of crazies, they call themselves the Media Liberation Front.”

“I’ve heard of that,” said Tinker, and they approached the intersection where the traffic was nearly loud enough to drown out any talk, Tinker nearly limping with the gas in his stomach.

“Aggregate has been trying to put this cult out of business, because they have been hosting these huge *warez* parties, distributing music and software for free.”

“*Warez* parties?”

“You know. They crack the copy protection, then locate a bunch of idle servers in the corporate world, link them together as one virtual server, and put all the unprotected content on the virtual server, then send out notices for a ‘privacy party’ to download the stuff. The most recent one took over some of Aggregate’s own servers at its headquarters in Seattle. What balls!”

“But I thought Smolder had a contract with Aggregate. Why would he help the Media Liberation Front?”

“Yeah, why indeed. Maybe our friend was working both sides of the street. Maybe he infiltrated the MLF for Aggregate.”

“Or maybe he infiltrated Aggregate for the MLF!”

“Either way, he could have been in big trouble. Maybe that’s why he disappeared. Y’know, Aggregate is not a company to mess with.”

They parted at the intersection. Dan flashed a peace sign with his fingers as he walked to the driver's side of his van, on which a bumper sticker proclaimed: "Give in... to the grin!"

The humor of the situation slowly evaporated as Tinker found a place to relieve himself. Maybe Charlie was right, it was time to liberate the content, and make some money in the process. Tinker needed to do something to break out of his rut, which was, it seemed to him now, shaped like a grin when viewed in cross-section. Just one mighty grin had held him trapped for years, promising a respectable life if only he worked hard. No, he would no longer give in to it, he thought as he drove out of snug, settled Menlo Park, a town of people who might complain a lot but would never, ever challenge a company like Aggregate Networks.

* * *

Stopped at a light at the corner of one of the walled communities outside Stanford University at the beginning of Sand Hill Road, Tinker saw the Buckskin Madman on the island stoplight, just like every other day, standing there grinning into the traffic, cigarette in one hand. Just grinning away.

The Buckskin Madman, a blond-haired burnout in a buckskin jacket. Someone told Tinker that the guy was a relic from the Sixties that had burned out on acid, or had been shell-shocked in Vietnam, or both shell-shocked and acid-burnt in Vietnam, or something like that. He was now an outpatient at the nearby Veterans' Hospital. Every day he would stand on that island, all day it seemed, smoking cigarettes (where did he get them?) and wearing his buckskin jacket, growing his dirty blond hair and beard longer and longer. Tinker would see him at that spot every time he drove by, standing there dressed like an extra from an after-the-war movie, the imaginary sequel to *Apocalypse Now*. Then one day he showed up shaven and shorn... and the process repeated, the hair grew out again. Was it really years?

Had Tinker really seen this guy over and over, almost every day, for years, without once talking to him?

He pulled his car over, someone honked at him, bad place to stop, but still, he had to stop and talk to this guy. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to get some perspective. On what? Let's just see... He left his car, crossed the street, and walked up to the zombie in the buckskin jacket, who stopped his grinning and looked at him with a half-smile.

"What's up?" Tinker stood there feeling foolish, asking such a foolish question. We're standing in the middle of traffic! What the hell could be up?

But the Buckskin Madman just smiled. Then he took a drag of his cigarette.

"Why are you out here?" Tinker was trying a dose of reality on him. Nothing. Just the smile. Perhaps he was deaf and dumb, but he made no attempt to communicate. Probably autistic... but friendly, oddly enough. Tinker fished a twenty out of his wallet and handed it to him. He looked down at it, smiled again, and looked up and grinned as hard as Tinker had ever seen him grin. That was it, the extent of the communication.

Just then a raggedy old woman, the same bag lady from the coffeeshop, appeared on the sidewalk across from the traffic island, cackling about something he couldn't hear. The Buckskin Madman just kept on grinning. The thought suddenly occurred to Tinker that more homeless people would be coming, drawn like a magnet to his aura of generosity. He fled the traffic island to the relative sanctity of his car.

From inside his car, he turned to look back at Buckskin Madman, who was still grinning at the traffic. But now the old cackling woman was with him and had already appropriated the twenty dollars. So be

it, thought Tinker. Then he saw a black sedan stop near the intersection. Two blue-suited men got out and grabbed Buckskin Madman and the woman and dragged them both into the sedan. Tinker watched it happen in his rear-view mirror, unable to move, unable to think about what to do. Why would anyone want to kidnap homeless people? Would the homeless people welcome kidnapping as, perhaps, a way to get shelter and food? Was this some new form of aggressive charity?

But the sedan stayed where it was, and nothing happened for about 20 seconds. Tinker drove off into the greenish brown hills of Woodside, a town as unreal for Tinker as next month's rent.

* * *

Andrew and Charlotte Tinker and their two children lived in a reconverted garage on a ranch in the hills above Woodside. The landlord was a retired venture capitalist, once a lion of the Sand Hill Road elite, now just another nattily dressed dandy with a bimbo on his arm at the Woodside School charity auctions. Across the gravel parking lot from Tinker's home was a guest cottage usually inhabited by various Stanford students that changed every semester. From his car Tinker watched an incredibly well built, over six-foot tall young man with sandy hair lifting weights in the small lawn next to the cottage. An attractive young brown-haired teenage girl, in halter-top and short shorts, came outside and offered the muscle giant a sparkling glass of lemonade. The giant took a long cool drink, smacked his lips, and offered the rest to her. Then a thin, black curly-haired, pimply, nerdy-looking teenage boy joined them on the lawn, carrying a pogo stick. Sure enough, they were each going to give the pogo stick a try, clasping the pogo stick between their legs and riding it like a horse. Halter-top girl bounced on the stick like a rabbit, and her breasts jiggled like jello. After a while even this surrealistic tableau grew tiresome.

Charlotte was nursing a cut on her finger, the result of an encounter with a jagged bread knife. Her mournful look suggested that the entire day had gone that way.

"Well..." she looked at him. "You have no idea."

"You're right, I don't."

"You have no idea how badly these kids behaved today." While she said this, the kids ignored them, playing games on their computers.

"I don't," repeated Tinker. "Why don't you tell me." He tried not to sound patronizing.

"At least you have people, adults, you can talk to," she replied.

No argument there. Tinker's response, when levelheaded and optimistic, was usually to take her in his arms and comfort her. Tonight, it seemed like such a false gesture, that she would see through it. Still, he hugged her and she responded by chilling out. She smelled the same as usual, of hard work and cooking, of cleanser, not at all glamorous, but wholesome and healthy.

When he talked to Charlotte again, it was about the spam about Rob Smolder, and how Dan Rose thought that he'd faked his death.

"Ohh god, poor Rachel."

Tinker shot her a look. "Why poor Rachel? Why not poor Rob? What if he was trying to get away from her?" Tinker instantly regretted saying that.

Charlotte hissed back at him. "That's what *you* want to do."

"Right," Tinker hissed back. "Typical."

“Men are so self-absorbed,” Charlotte shot back. “They set up such high expectations for life. And when they fall, they bring their loved ones down with them.”

Tinker sighed, and brought the topic back to Smolder. “The question is, did he actually die. Or did he take off, go find a new life?”

Charlotte shot him a look, and made for the kitchen, where life was about keeping the pot of spaghetti from boiling over. “What about your job?” she called from the kitchen.

“Job’s over,” he called back from the living room. “Like I thought it would be.”

“What now?”

“Well... I look for another job. That’s what.” Tinker got up and went over to his laptop desk.

“Maybe you should look for another career,” Charlotte prodded from the kitchen. “This high-tech thing is over. The CEOs and CFOs and CIOs and COOs that broke the rules — they won. You work hard and play by the rules, and you lost. And when you’re dead and gone, what will you be remembered for?”

“I wish it was that simple. But it’s not. I’m going to have to figure out what to do next.”

She thought, he almost said “by himself” and that’s what he meant. There it is again, that vague and uncomprehending attitude, like his mind is somewhere else. That was number five on the list of tips on whether your spouse is cheating.

But Tinker cluelessly busied himself with his laptop, to avoid continuing this conversation. Slowly his focus narrowed, his shoulders hunched forward, and he reached a kind of satori with the

machine that he could never reach with humans. The direct manipulation of objects on his desktop, rearranging and organizing programs and data icons, imbued him with a power he never felt in the real world.

He launched the Web browser, forgot to turn on his ISDN modem, sat back while the software took forever to figure this out and respond with "Connection not made" and "OK" — and really, how could it be OK? After a restart, he brought up the spam on Smolder and clicked on the smiling Bob cartoon in the window. It led to the Whole Planet MUD, Rob Smolder's favorite playground when he was alive. The window filled with a photorealistic enchanted forest. He spent a few minutes navigating around the space and through the forest, eventually reaching a wide meadow with crystalline pieces jutting up where there would have been prairie grass. A group of avatars, all different colors and shapes, some of them low-budget stick figures, were congregating, chatting about Rob Smolder's accomplishments. He switched from linear output in the chat window to cartoon-style pop-up balloons linked to each avatar.

All during this, his BusyBot window kept popping up reminding him, annoying him really, about special sales at sporting goods sites for wet suits, tickets for the upcoming film festival, exciting new music from Sony, registration for the Internet Vegas trade show, and so on. After just a few minutes of this, he switched back to the system's control panel and turned off the BusyBot option.

Coincidentally, while mucking about in the control panel area, his computer was invaded. The intruder was a software virus with a set of instructions. The virus had no trouble installing itself. Then it systematically copied everything from Tinker's hard disk that was of any value as information, including accounting files, email, preferences, and so on, capturing passwords in the process. It was more or less a complete theft of his digital identity, though not really theft — only a copy.

Finally, before self-destructing, it installed an embryonic version of itself, undetectable, that would monitor all system activity from that point on, bundling the data packets and sending them back to its home server, which was housed in a nondescript regional FBI office in San Mateo, just a few miles up the peninsula from Woodside.

* * *

After what seemed like an eternity of spousal indifference, Charlotte put on a CD and turned it up loud.

*How the hell can a person
Go to work in the morning
And come home in the evening
And have nothing to say?*

— Bonnie Raitt, “Angel From Montgomery” (John Prine)

Tinker was used to this kind of treatment, and reacted by selecting a tune from his MP3 library on his laptop, and turning up the volume.

*It's getting to the point
Where you're no fun anymore*

— Crosby Stills & Nash, “Suite: Judy Blue Eyes” (Stephen Stills)

Eventually Tinker reasoned with himself that this tension would only be dissolved by him, and it would happen quickly if he would only make a move toward love. He broke the ice with a smile, a touch, and finally a hug, and by the time they were huddled on the couch, kids tucked into bed, the volume turned down and only one CD playing, the warm glow of family life had settled on them.

Making up after a fight was Charlotte’s favorite activity, and she pulled out a crinkly, bent joint, softened by her body curve against the tight jean pocket lining. “This came from Rachel about two months ago, before Rob, y’know...” She frowned, but then brightened up. “I’m sure she’d want us to think nice thoughts now.”

Tinker took the joint and lit it up, without drawing too much, so that his handing it to her would seem a bit like old-fashioned chivalry. But euphoria was hard to come by, with bills piling up and his career in ruins, and he just wanted to suffer alone, with neither criticism nor comfort. He was afraid that he would stop loving her, that she would detect his lack of devotion, and as a result the tiniest faults in their relationship would lead to earthquakes. He wanted life to seem normal, at least to his wife and kids. Any slip in the amount of attention he gave her would be reason for alarm. So when he suddenly heard disk access noise coming from his laptop, he decided not to leave her embrace to find out what it was, even though he was curious.

She suggested that they watch her favorite Sixties movie, Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. They sweetly touched hands during the musically charged scenes of naked flower children cavorting erotically on the floor of Death Valley. But Tinker kept getting distracted by the disk access noise. The computer always seemed to be doing something out of his control.

Eventually he could stand it no more, and he left the couch to check out his laptop. Charlotte frowned but kept watching the movie. Tip number eight on the list, the list of tips that suggest your spouse is cheating, was excessive use of the computer, especially after you've gone to bed. Was he communicating with someone? Charlotte kept one eye on him and one on the movie.

Mysteriously, the BusyBot option had somehow turned itself on in Tinker's laptop. He was getting solicitations from sporting goods sites again, then another one from Aggregate Networks reminding him to update his browser. He remembered the spam about Smolder, and decided to click his way through the MUD it pointed to, until he could find something of interest. Indeed he did find something. A longhaired, bespectacled stick-figure avatar claiming to be Mort Gill's agent was giving a short testimonial about the new HADES product,

HDE (Halfway Decent Encryption). He clicked on the button for downloading and that was that. He opened up the folder after logging off, and restarted his system with the new HDE security extensions. Everything seemed to start up OK. No funny messages, and no goofy come-ons. The system was now supposedly secure, even from pesky law enforcement agencies. But what would anyone want from his computer?

Charlotte had put on another CD with the volume turned up.

*There's no time to lose I heard her say
Cash your dreams before they slip away*
— Rolling Stones, "Ruby Tuesday" (Jagger/Richards)

She was rubbing her ankles on their bed, in her nightgown, smiling. Let's see if he's still interested in me. Tinker saw her, gave his laptop another thought, but then gave up on his laptop and came to the bedroom, returning her smile, grateful that the fight was over.

But his laptop was still on, and as he left for the bedroom, it was invaded again. Now there were two mysterious digital strangers lurking inside his computer, preparing to do battle with each other like a deranged version of the Disney movie *Tron*, armed with encryption-cracking subroutines.

As the digital invaders attacked each other silently, without so much as a flicker on the computer's screen, Tinker buried his head in Charlotte's breasts. She was his anchor in the world, and at that moment she represented the Earth Mother. His primal urge to plant the seed made his longing pure, his lust perfectly natural. Mounting the usual way, he found her spot and she welcomed him. Ahh yes... And as he came, thoughts about the girl across the driveway danced through his head... And Charlotte decided that he'd passed the test of tip number 18, that he still enjoyed having sex with her.

Around the time of Tinker's climax, the war in his computer ended. One virus had defeated the other, but the owner of the lost virus, receiving a steady stream of information, did not notice when the information turned false. The victorious virus had simply infected the defeated one, using it as a Trojan Horse, co-opting its agenda.

Sometime in the night, toward morning, Tinker had another dream. Keith Richards was sitting on a couch, looking on as Brian Jones played him the dulcimer part he'd learned for "Lady Jane". Brian's shiny blond hair jumped as if startled by every note he plucked on the dulcimer. Keith in a flash saw that Brian's genius, his contribution to the world, and to the Rolling Stones, was to push the envelope of experimentation, to go out to the very edge with different sounds. Keith realized then that Brian would burn brightly and die quickly. And he felt sad for Brian, Keith did, knowing that he and Mick and Andrew, the Stones' manager, were edging Brian right out of the band, because Brian couldn't keep up anymore, and the Stones had to move on and make the kind of hard rock the audience wanted — this was a commercial venture after all. Fragile Brian, the innovator, the one who could pick up any instrument and learn to play it right away, would eventually have to be sacrificed. And Tinker woke up shaking, pleading for the life of Brian in a darkened, empty room.

The Minefield

The night air was lively with ocean spray. Two FBI agents sat in a black '66 Plymouth Valiant parked at Bob's Beanery in Half Moon Bay. They were decked out in surfer dude clothes, Agent L with a burr haircut and a Larry Mullen, Jr. stare (the look copied right off a U2 album cover), and Agent M with a Mike Mills haircut and glasses (off an R.E.M. album cover). Just like two nerds from Mountain View, except that both were smoking Camel Filters — an immediate tip-off to anyone hip enough to notice that they were Feds out of uniform.

"We got the passwords, we got the intruder installed," the butch Agent L said between coughs from the last hit of his cigarette.

"An' we got the fuck outta there without anyone knowin' it. Shit." rasped Agent M, in an uncharacteristic Brooklyn accent for a guy who looked like he came from the Midwest.

Agent L pressed a key on his laptop to bring it back from sleep. He had a wireless high-speed connection to the Internet through a special antenna installed in the trunk. But the connection wasn't working. Cursing, he got out to check the rig in the trunk. After tinkering with it a bit, he came back to the driver's seat, thumping the top of the car with his fist as he got in. "Best car ever made, the '66 Plymouth Valiant." He looked at the other agent, expecting an argument.

"Is that why you requisitioned this piece of shit? Shit." Agent M looked out the dirt-streaked window.

"Best car ever made," he repeated, smiling broadly. "Ever. And *that's* what's important. American-made, the best quality. They stopped making 'em after this. It's been junk ever since."

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. Mercedes, BMW, those are the best cars. Those Germans know how to make cars, shit.”

“Yeah but would you put your life on the line for Germany?”

“Shit no,” Agent M laughed, slapping his knee. “I wouldn’t put my life on the line for fuckin’ Indiana, shit.”

“Indiana, fuck, I hate Indiana.”

“Me too, shit.”

“Looks like he took the bait,” said Agent L, watching the status of the digital intruder.

Agent M smirked. “Yeah, well, he’s got nothing to lose. Or so he thinks. Shit.” Agent M was always good with the last word on a subject. That last word was usually “shit”.

“OK, let’s put our report up,” said Agent L, who then switched to their report, scrolling the text so both could do a final read-through.

“You didn’t mention those bums Tinker stopped to talk to, the bag lady and Buckskin Bob. Shit.” rasped Agent M, with a hint of swagger.

“Bag Lady and Buckskin Bob, sounds like a rock combo,” Agent L smirked. “Well, since we didn’t get anything outta them, I don’t wanna mention them. It makes us look bad. And they stunk up the backseat.”

“Stunk it up bad, I mean bad. Shit.”

They waited in sullen silence for their software to start up and connect them to the protected FBI network.

“That’s funny — the connection’s gone. Shit.”

“Huh?”

“Yep, the two-hundred-thousand-dollar extranet connection is gone, zip, gonzo,” shouted Agent M, shaking his head ruefully. Then, “No waitaminute... Here it is. Oh Shit. Shit! SHIT!!!” He slapped his thighs repeatedly.

Agent L craned his neck to see the laptop screen. In the center was a cartoon of Bill Gittelson, the Chairman of Aggregate Networks, with a bouncing smiley face and a cartoon finger repeatedly pushing his glasses back up his nose. It appeared where the usual FBI logo would be on this supposedly top secret network page.

“Jeez,” Agent L moaned.

“He’s not only on to us, he’s fucked us,” said Agent M, resolutely, staring out the window. “I wish I didn’t have to tell Cheney. Shit.”

Agent L sighed again. “‘G-Men Foiled by Webomber’ — that’ll be the headlines.”

“And that’ll be our *jobs*, shit.”

After a pause, Agent L spoke up again. “Shit. Let’s go. Let’s get a beer.”

“Yeah, if the webmaster don’t already know by now, he ain’t worth a damn, shit,” said Agent M. They both nodded and got out.

“Y’know, he *ain’t* worth a damn!”

“Yeah, tell me something I don’t know. Shit.”

“No really! Once I walked in there, in the IT Lab, and he had these machines running, and the hard disks were just dangling from the machines by their wires, man. And that was our fuckin’ mail server.”

“Yeah well, I got somethin’ better ‘n that. O’Brien’s porn site? We couldn’t copy the files over a secure network to the NSA. The fuckin’ NSA people were pissed! We had to burn a CD and hand-carry it the fuck over there. That sure as hell embarrassed the chief. Shit, we’ve had a pretty fuckin’ hard year. Shit.”

Bob’s Beanery assaulted all senses with beerish humidity and the overpowering aroma of refried beans left burning on the stove. The two ordered brews and sat on stools with a view of the TV. The sound was turned down, but they could tell that the news story was about this new electronic terrorist, the Webomber. The intranet of a prominent San Francisco hospital had been worked over by the Webomber, rerouting X-rays, pharmaceuticals and procedures for hundreds of patients, some of whom died before the mistakes could be corrected.

Agent L asked the bartender to turn up the sound. “— is perhaps the first Webomber incident that actually hurt people,” the announcer was saying. “Over 50 patients received incorrect procedures ranging from enemas to open heart surgery, and over a hundred received the wrong drugs...”

“So does this mean our surveillance plans are changing?” Agent L was concerned. He hated to do work that would not be useful later on.

“You know better than to talk about it here, shit!” snapped Agent M.

“Sorry...”

“Nuthin’ personal,” said the agent, a bit softer. “I’m just pissed about this shit. I mean, Cheney knows all about O’Brien and the Pot Page

and the connection to Smolder. Shit, Smolder's the key to this Webomber shit. He's out there somewhere, and Cheney probably knows it. This hacker, whoever he is, or maybe it's a she — whatever, he's got balls. And he knows what we know. And that's shit."

"So, what. You don't buy the official story?"

"That Smolder's dead? Not for a minute, shit. Not with all his connections and all this shit that's going on." He turned the key, but the Valiant wouldn't turn over. He tried the ignition again, and the starter kicked in again, but wouldn't turn over. "Shit."

"Best damn car ever made, huh?"

"Ahh, nuthin's working right anymore, shit."

* * *

Mal Contour, reporter for the *Bay Radical*, wore a raincoat with its collar up, sitting in his Chevy van watching the hookers go by, straining every few seconds to keep the young Latino gang member in view. He had checked the police records on Pico and knew where he hung out. He owed a favor to the vice squad anyway, and anything he turned up would immediately be turned over to the undercover cops in the white Buick.

He was following a tip from the cops in an effort to get to the bottom of this mysterious Smolder suicide and the subsequent hacking of his Web page suicide note. He knew something was fishy about this guy Pico — why hit *that* car, why not any other car in the lot? Maybe he took something, or maybe he planted the note on the front seat. Contour was an avid reader of conspiracy theories. Years ago he headed an investigation of a CIA-related crack cocaine epidemic for an Oakland newspaper. Then he fell victim to a scandal of his own, bribing witnesses to a police action in an effort to get them to tell the truth. Now he worked the *Radical* beat, for peanuts. He had a lot to

prove, and not much time to prove it. The Rob Smolder story would be his meal ticket.

He picked up the trail of the young Latino on Eddy Street in the Tenderloin. He watched as this guy did his thing, which was mostly hanging out in doorways, meeting people one on one, walking a bit up the street with them, then out of a pouch on his hip came something handed over to the people, who popped it immediately into their mouths while handshaking folded dollar bills to him. A drug dealer, no doubt. Contour knew this lowlife had no business ransacking Smolder's car. Someone paid his bail in cash. It was Contour's only real tip.

Then he saw the Toyota, a familiar-looking one. Contour shot upright in his car seat, eyes front. Someone looking a lot like Charlie O'Brien was leaning out of the driver-side window. Sure looked like his car, sure looked like him in profile, but hanging out here? A gorgeous blonde dressed like a hooker got out of the passenger side. Contour watched as the girl walked up the street. As she passed Contour's van, he lowered the window and beckoned to her. She walked over to the door, leaned in, said "Huh?"

"Can you tell me the name? Just the first name, I mean — of the john you're with?" Contour asked her abruptly. She gave him a quizzical look, caught off guard, what kind of question is that? She stepped back, continued on her way up the street. Contour continued to watch as the girl met with the Latino, and they walked around the corner into a dark alley. Sensing that this was a dead end, Contour decided to leave.

* * *

Pico glowered in anger as he glanced up and down the street from the apartment doorway, hidden in its shadows. That crazy Chevy van tailing him, he didn't know what to make of it. He'd seen the guy before, talking to vice. He must have already seen him dealing, why

doesn't he just get on with the bust? Pico was not afraid, he could just drop the drugs he had in his possession right there on the street; they'd have no case. He watched out of the corner of his eye as he walked on.

Now what? Tiffany is talking to the guy. Sure enough, Tiffany is talking to Mr. Fucking Chevy van. Pico's blood boiled with anxiety. Eventually Tiffany walked past his doorway, looked at Pico and stopped. "Hey" she said, "How 'bout that notebook?" She was holding two folded \$100 bills.

"Sure, follow me" he said, a bit too surly, still just barely holding his composure.

She followed him into the alley, out of view of the street, which was not standard procedure for any kind of conversation or transaction except a drug deal. She wasn't paying close enough attention either, because suddenly she was on the ground, tripped, and Pico's arms were pinning her down, his breath in her face. He asked over and over, who is that guy in the van? She had no idea, she cried hysterically that she didn't know, he just asked her the same stupid question, but her answers were not enough to keep her from getting the worst beating of her life.

Fortunately he didn't rape her, though a look had crossed his eyes that suggested he had considered it. All this bullshit surveillance on him, all because of this one gig for these white assholes from the suburbs, was killing his bread-and-butter street business. Now he'd have to move his business uptown, find new cops to bribe. He took the \$200 and the contents of her pocketbook and left her semi-conscious in the dark alley suffering from a concussion and a broken jaw. He threw the notebook she wanted so badly, the notebook from that car near the Bridge; he threw it directly at her head, and it bounced off her shoulder into the street.

After a while, the strength came to her legs, and she walked out closer to the edge of the alley, and slumped to the ground. The crazy homeless man with the streamers on his glasses and the gray flannel suit with sneakers — a regular in that part of the City — stopped to see if she was alright, and gave her a bent cigarette. As she smoked, she began to feel a bit stronger.

Charlie O'Brien was nowhere in sight. She had finished her shift with the film crew for Charlie's porn site, and he no doubt had thought she'd be safe, since she lived in the neighborhood. Besides, he didn't know about the special assignment or about Pico. Rosemary DeSantis, or "Tiffany" as Pico and others knew her, had a little nighttime business on the side, the oldest profession, and one of her "clients" had given her this assignment — a fortyish, tall, fat, and balding man named Peter. He was a friend of Charlie's who had met her at Charlie's studio. She didn't know his last name and really didn't need to, as he paid cash, twice. The first time was for posing as a tourist at the Golden Gate Bridge and giving a videotape to the police, and the second time was for springing Pico from jail and getting the notebook. That second time, Peter had said something about recovering from a mistake, and that she might be needed again if Murphy's Law struck again. Apparently the notebook had been left by mistake and Pico had been enlisted to grab it. Peter had met Pico once, in her apartment, so it all made sense, except the part about Pico beating her up.

Eventually the cops found her on the sidewalk and took her to the hospital, where she was treated in a special guarded ward reserved for crime suspects and witnesses, as the cops assumed she had been plying her nighttime trade when it happened.

* * *

The next morning Tinker awoke with a fear that mottled his brow and saturated his t-shirt with sweat. In the dream, he had had an urgent need to speak at a press conference, announcing...

something... what was it? Anxious and dressed in uncomfortable mod clothes, he had grabbed his executive briefcase and struggled through a phantasmagoria of fast driving, running with someone chasing, slipping out of the grasp of someone else, falling into a window, running out to a hall, and down the hall to a great auditorium where there were hundreds of press flashbulbs. John Lennon and the rest of the Beatles were up on the podium in their mod suits, their hair even longer than expected. Ringo looked bored; George's eyes were piercing the eyes of a woman in the front row. Paul was concerned. John was apologizing to the press about his "better than Jesus" remark, quoted out of context. John's remark was read aloud by a journalist who looked a bit like Brendan Barcode, the wild-haired three-piece-suited eccentric videographer. "We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first — rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary..."

John stuttered his apology. "I apologize for what I said, it was wrong, or it was taken wrong, and now it's all *this!*" He was practically in tears, naked in a way that was worse than nude; a very frightened human caught in the menacing glare of a hostile press in a dangerous world. Lennon had spent more time in the death glare of the public eye than anyone comparable in his time... Thick and ordinary... Tinker tried to elbow his way up to the podium. The dream abruptly ended as he felt hemmed in on all sides by wool-suited journalists, claustrophobic in the media throng, with Lennon's off-camera remark floating by, "I never meant it to be an anti-religious thing. I apologize if that will make you happy. I still don't know quite what I've done."

Awake now, Tinker shivered until he changed his sweat-soaked shirt, then went out to the living room to find his 10-year old boy crouched in his pajamas, yawning fiercely, studying his Pokemon cards while the TV series of the same name blared on TV. His five-year old stumbled out of the bedroom to join his brother, rubbing his eyes. They looked so innocent in the morning, but within a few minutes

they were bickering about Pokemon card trades, their arguments interrupted every so often by an action sequence on TV. Asch, the human trainer, had to be rescued from the jaws of some giant dinosaur-like creature with an arrow for a tail. The characters all blended together, humans and creatures, all somehow equivalent.

Tinker, too jittery from his dream to meditate in his denim polka-dot mushroom jacket, watched the show for a while, and studied a few cards. The trading of Pokemon cards is not unlike trading baseball cards, except the cards are more colorful and exotic. It is an escape hatch, a door into another world. Like father, like sons; they instinctively sought out escape, and used the talisman-and-ritual approach to focusing their concentration — with father it was the polka-dot mushroom, and with sons, images of Pokemon characters. Charlotte continued to snore lightly in the bedroom.

Eventually Tinker turned to his magazines. The cover article of this month's *Fizz* was about digital agents that scurry about across the net looking for things you might want to buy, so you don't ever have to leave your desk. The question never raised was *why* you'd never want to leave your desk. As a child, Tinker had been taught to hide under a desk in the event of an atomic explosion, to save his life. It was amazing how wrong an entire generation could be.

Tinker rubbed his eyes, sipped his steaming coffee, and tried to focus on the article, but he kept thinking about the big picture. How far would the high-tech industry go before it left the vast huddled masses completely behind? It was already leaving behind some of its best foot soldiers and wrecking the economy for everybody else. There seemed to be no top or bottom to this thing. In only five years, many people Tinker knew had gone from one high-tech failure to another, as if somehow his dark cloud had spawned a terrible progeny. So if he were jinxed, would it be possible to spread this jinx around and maybe even take it to the heart of the industry itself? Self-destruct and take the industry with it?

With that in mind, he went to his noon meeting with Jill Metrose, editor-in-chief of *Fizz*. Outside the South-of-Market café, Tinker waited in the glare, looking uncomfortable in a navy blazer, beige chinos, and a Beatles tie, waiting for Metrose. He'd known her from the old days, writing articles for computer magazines, and he thought he might cash in a favor.

They greeted and took a corner table, ordering coffee. Jill Metrose was, as usual, stunning in corporate way, smart and sexy in her tight pin-stripe skirt, frilled blouse and ample bosom. She looked a bit like Jackie Kennedy Onassis — a Connecticut heiress with a Jewish father and a Greek mother. The combination gave her a kind of garlic-tainted chutzpah lubricated with *retsina*. Tinker always thought he had a way with women, but not with Metrose. She intimidated him at all levels.

"The first thing is, you have to get a haircut," she told him over sips of blistering hot coffee, smiling.

"I thought creative types have to look more authentic," Tinker replied bleakly, looking around the café at people in long hair, jeans and flannel shirts, or in black or strange outfits, kinky hair, ear rings, and the odd girl with purple hair sticking straight up. Java programmers, Web designers, sound engineers, commercial artists. And hidden behind a potted plant in the corner, a trio of businessmen in dress shirts and chinos.

She followed his gaze, anticipating his reply. "None of the real ones make more than sixty thousand a year, and the rest are imposters."

He didn't reply.

"You want a creative job?" She pressed on. "You want to stay underpaid? You have to think larger, aim higher," she crossed her arms and leaned forward, a friend lending a helping hand.

"You're right," he replied lamely.

"You have experience, and I know you're smart. The problem is, you don't sell yourself. You have to get out there and promote yourself." She punctuated each point with a dainty sip.

"I'm certainly not big on salesmanship."

"And you have to be," she pounced. "People won't take you seriously unless you demonstrate that you have style, grace. Enthusiasm."

"Yes well... *excuse me* for whining," said Tinker, warming up. "But things have changed, as you probably noticed. A guy in his forties... I mean, I have a lot of experience, a lot of *hands-on* experience... But what happens is, I get no respect. No one thinks of me as management material. The more they find out what I can do with software, the more they want me to *just do that*."

"Well... now you *are* whining."

He stared out the window at a homeless person in dreadlocks, carrying a decrepit sleeping bag. What was this preoccupation with the homeless? Then he turned back, leaned forward in his chair just like her, just two friends trying to work out a problem. "Yes, I'm sorry..." He shot her a meat-eating grin. "It's just that I can see myself doing great things, running companies, or at least running their new business development efforts. I'm a pathfinder. I know a lot about technology and how to apply it properly."

"Yes, you do," she responded warmly. "And you have to figure out how to capitalize on that."

"Any ideas?"

“You mean, at *Fizz?*” she sat back suddenly, and gave off just a hint of displeasure, but then resumed her nice-gal close friend attitude. “You don’t want to work there. You don’t want to work for *me*, and you don’t want to work for the Web team either. We’d just use you for your technical skills and we wouldn’t pay you enough even for that. The pace is just too quick, you’d burn out in a month. Besides, we’re actually cutting back.”

“Preparing for Armageddon?” Tinker asked casually.

“You *can* do something...” she paused, sipped. “You could write an article for us, about Mort Gill and the C-Dome.”

“You mean, about encryption?”

“Encryption, yes. And the impending meltdown. You know, when security fails everywhere.” She was smiling wickedly at him, as if doing this article was somehow a key to unlock something. “We have a name author writing a feature article,” she explained. “What we want from you is a personal perspective, of who you know and what you know about them. We want the personal angle on this, any anecdotes, anything juicy about them as the encryption freedom fighters.”

“You bet,” said Tinker, thinking, *it’s the formula... And when I turn in my first draft, they’ll rewrite it so much that the “personal angle” will be lost, replaced by some mythical “South of Market” point of view, in which the world is presented as everyone’s oyster ready to disgorge pearls.* “So I’d be a sidebar to someone’s feature article. About encryption. You need me to write that part because it is the technical meat of the story, while someone else gets the feature article by-line writing anecdotes and the usual preachy nonsense you find in general interest magazines.”

“Don’t complain,” she muttered as she stood up to leave, reaching for her pocketbook. He was going to let her pay, for sure, and without

complaining. "Maybe if you had your own idea for a feature article..."

"I do," Tinker retorted, perhaps a little too fast. "We already know there is a vast difference between the *haves* and *have-nots*. What we don't know is the true value of philanthropy. We don't know which projects will actually help those on the other side. Computers in the classroom? What for? Today's kids need to defend themselves against automatic weapons. They need to learn how to hack their own personal identities and credit histories. Now *there's* an angle on encryption you probably didn't think about. The real power of strong encryption technology will pass to the next generation of hackers who will use it to organize themselves and start a revolution."

"Oh come on..." She had already given up. "Where's the angle? What's the hook?"

"No, listen. This is a good idea. Why do we think the Information Age is *progress*? It seems like our society has more or less reverted back to something Darwinian, it's all now the 'survival of the fittest'. Information seems to have displaced human compassion and reason. Democracy has become a tyranny of the majority, as Thomas Jefferson warned. There is no free market, with corporations fixing prices and forging monopolies. There is no innovation, with a company like Aggregate Networks dominating every sector and shutting out competition. There is no privacy now that the government can dictate the type of encryption we use. But there is plenty of unrest in the land. There's an 'impending meltdown' for sure, but it's not the one you think it is."

She laughed, looked down at the remains of her coffee. "You know we'd never run an article like that. Go talk to the *Bay Radical* or the *Vanguard Voice*, or *Soirée*."

"Well, neither the *Radical*, nor the *Voice*, would pay well enough to cover all the research I'd have to do, and those smug bastards at

Soirée would probably rewrite it and add quotes from the usual industry pundits and lightweights.”

“Now you are really whining. I’m outta here.” She picked up the tab. “So let me know, really, if you want to do that sidebar. Take care.”

He watched her briskly dodge a beggar on the sidewalk on her way to work. At one point in his life he was attracted to her, but now, watching her leave, she seemed more and more like a general heading into battle. Tinker sighed and sipped his coffee, waiting for time to pass before his next interview. The café played enduring 1960s music. “A little dream to build my world upon...”

Can I cry, a little bit?

There’s nobody to notice it...

— Blood Sweat & Tears, “Just One Smile” (Al Kooper)

* * *

The Webomber’s attack on the San Francisco hospital the night before had generated little news outside the Bay Area. The Webomber had left a signature, a link consisting of the phrase “Your inside is out and your outside is in” (from the song “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey” by, of course, the Beatles). When clicked on, the link connected you directly to a page listing the largest pharmaceutical companies on the planet, with the comment — “This is my favorite list, the Webomber” — added to the bottom. For the first time, the newspapers now had the correct spelling.

For many of the patients, procedures were scheduled and medications prescribed that were utterly wrong. The Webomber must have gotten some kind of kick out of prescribing drugs to people who didn’t need them — mostly addictive opiate-based painkillers — and procedures that were embarrassing and uncomfortable, such as enemas and hemorrhoid surgery. However,

if the Webomber cared, this prank was a public relations disaster, as some people were seriously injured by procedures not meant for them.

But for “Tiffany”, whose real name on the hospital form was Rosemary DeSantis, the prescription for Delaudid was just right, if only they’d increase the dosage a bit.

Earlier that day cops had swarmed through the hospital. One of the cops that had brought her in the night before stopped for a brief chat, offering cigarettes. She craved nicotine almost above everything else — in particular, Kools, known as the junkie’s brand. It seemed that every junkie was also a cigarette smoker, and even if they quit junk, they would still be addicted to cigarettes, which are more harmful than shots of heroin. Junkies typically die of something else, such as emphysema or lung cancer, or an overdose of junk because they don’t know its purity. She remembered a “recovering” addict employed by the government’s DARE program that gave a speech to her high school class, telling the kids how it was wrong to be addicted to drugs while he chain-smoked cigarettes. Kools, in fact.

The cop told her that the hospital had been attacked by a hacker. The records were all mixed up. He was there helping detectives look for any accomplices that might still be in the building, as the hacker would have needed inside help to get the passwords. “We’re conducting a full search,” he said, smiling and running his eyes up and down her bruised body wrapped in a hospital gown, her butt nearly exposed. “We’ll arrange for your trip downtown in a few minutes.” He then left to join the search.

As she smoked in the bathroom, the nurse wheeled in a new patient for the other bed, who seemed distracted but awake. When Tiffany came out of the bathroom, the other patient, a woman with raven-black, spiky hair, no eyebrows, and two rings through her ruby upper lip sat upright on her bed.

Tiffany looked her over. "You a working girl?" she asked the patient. The patient just looked at her, not comprehending fully, just shaking her head. So Tiffany pressed on cautiously. "What're you in for?" she asked, then laughed. "I mean, what are you in the *hospital* for?"

"The electrodes implanted in my breasts, one of 'em caused an abscess," said the woman in an intonation that reminded one of North Beach and, at the same time, Brooklyn.

Tiffany nodded. "So that must hurt," she said with genuine sympathy, as the woman smoothed out her hospital gown to emphasize the bandages over both her breasts.

"Yeah, they both had to be replaced," she said. Then she quickly added, blushing, "Not the breasts, but the *electrodes*, had to be replaced."

Tiffany nodded, but after a moment, she had to ask. "So why didja have — whaddaya call 'em — 'lectrodes in your tits... what for?"

"Oh it's the coolest thing," the new patient said right away, still blushing, and yet smiling. "Quite stimulating. Y'see, they've got processors and memory, and you, or your *partner*," she squealed, "can program 'em to do all kinds of things, to stimulate you right there..." she paused and looked upwards as if in a swoon.

A nurse came in and looked at the charts on their beds. "Rosemary," she addressed the new patient, "you have an enema scheduled for an hour from now, but with the computer attack, all the procedures are mixed up, so I will check first to make sure." Then she turned to Tiffany, who's real name was Rosemary DeSantis. "Sybill, you can get your valuables from the front desk, you're ready to go. You have an outpatient clinic visit scheduled for this afternoon." Then she left.

The two patients looked at each other. "Obviously they screwed up, and they think you are me," said Tiffany.

“Yeah, well, I don’t want an enema!”

“Too bad, girl. Don’t let them do it.” Tiffany was already half into her street clothes. She snatched the chart with Sybill’s name. “Thanks for the loan.” And before the real Sybill could complain to a nurse, Tiffany had gathered some bills from Sybill’s wallet and taken off. That hacker attack had been quite convenient for Tiffany; not only did it prescribe the right medication, but it also set her free.

Moment of Clarity

The next day Eric Mauer performed his morning ablutions in exactly the same order as he did every day. He put on his uniform of button-collared starched white shirt and sky-blue jeans, took a cup from the automatic coffee maker, and walked out the back door of his half-million Portola Valley redwood home to his cottage office. There he saw all his music CDs — 4,000 CDs, representing a major slice of rock and pop music from the Sixties to the present day — stacked up in boxes, waiting to be shipped out. There was also a stream of encrypted email on his screen.

First things first: the paper note on top of the music CD boxes. It was from Laura, his wife of almost ten years. She was gone, and she wanted him out by noon. He was amused. Did she really think I would be hurt by this gesture, surrendering the music library to me? Last night, over a dinner truce, they'd discussed the separation with equanimity and had even come up with a plan to divide various assets without even so much as a moist eye. But Laura always had her way of getting the last word, and somehow getting even. Eric refused to get mad about it, or about anything.

He walked over to his state-of-the-art flat-panel display. His desk was completely clear, just the display, keyboard, mouse, and mouse pad aligned properly with the edge of the desk. Eric hated mess. He hated all forms of human incompetence, especially the kind that accompanied high-strung emotional states. He preferred corresponding by email, and never answered the phone.

Today's email included marching orders from various clients, including a new one, Mort Gill. And there were non-encrypted messages from friends, including Tinker and Charlie. So many messages with so little thought behind them, like so many idiotic startups flooded with speculative capital.

Mort Gill had picked up the reins of Rob Smolder's project with Eric, involving automatic steganography — the practice of embedding secret messages in other messages, in a way that prevents an observer from learning that anything unusual is taking place. The Greek historian Herodotus described how one of his cunning countrymen sent a secret message warning of an invasion by scrawling it on the wood underneath a wax tablet. To casual observers, the tablet appeared blank. Spies in World War II used invisible inks based on milk, fruit juice, urine, even semen, that when heated or chemically treated, revealed the true message within the message.

Eric had written a class of objects that used a special version of the HADES encryption software, known as ICE 8.8, to embed messages in rich media — audio, video or still image files. It worked by storing information in the least significant bits of a digitized file — bits that could be changed in ways that aren't noticeable to the human eye or ear. The least significant bits, it turned out, mattered more than the significant ones. You had to look at the individual trees to really see the forest. God is in the details.

Eric was well aware of his wife's criticisms. He knew that he fit the stereotype of the nerd, as in social dysfunctional. When challenged, he turned on his Germanic precision. That's what his wife had grown to hate... his precision... his need to do things the right way. She sometimes would just go out of her way to do things abnormally, inefficiently, with gusto even. Sometimes she would say things that penetrated Eric's gut like a sword. She seemed intent on disemboweling the relationship in order to gain self-confidence.

Discordance. The word just came to him: a spirit of discordance was influencing the world, interfering with things, and causing trouble in nearly all the relationships of his friends. The discordance knew no social boundaries, as even some gay couples he'd known for years were splitting up. Even people Eric didn't know were having

problems, such as his Porsche mechanic arguing with his wife the other day even as he worked under the car. There was a restless spirit in the air.

Eric knew something about restless spirits. His ancestors were restless spirits involved in the founding of America. They were German philosopher-magicians, members of the Bavarian Illuminati; he could trace his family back to a cousin of Adam Weishaupt, whose grandniece had indulged in the Mysteries at an abbey in Italy with the infamous Aleister Crowley. He had read numerous books on the origins of the occult and had come away feeling less enthusiastic about responsibility in this world and more enchanted by the possibilities of the *next*.

The occult books were stacked neatly next to the boxes of music CDs. Apparently Laura wanted no part of that, either. All this stuff had to go, because she was staying and *he* was leaving. Ah, but the trick is to zig when they zag. Eric had always been prepared for moving. All of his important files were out on the net, and backed up to his laptop. He checked his remote site directories, making sure everything was still there, then abruptly canceled the operation with his usual signature routine that enabled him to tell the difference between authorized and unauthorized access. It was the electronic equivalent of laying a hair on a doorjamb to see if the door had been opened.

Laura had thoughtfully included a box of photos with the CDs and books. Photos of the shy altar boy in priestly robes at age 12, the nerd with blond bangs and crooked glasses in high school, the longhaired freak with granny glasses at UC Berkeley, the skinhead hacker in flannel shirt giving a demo at the Hacker Con, the crisply-shorn research wonk testifying before Congress as Mort Gill's earnest sidekick. Packed in with the photos were his all-ASCII-character nude-girl computer printouts from the 1970s, Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, Aleister Crowley's *Moonchild*, and *Computer Lib* by Ted Nelson.

Sighing, he searched the Web for “movers” in his part of the Bay Area. Banners came and went until he saw “Atlas Shrugged? Try Movers and Shakers” (a subsidiary of Starving Students Moving Co.). He arranged for them to pick up the boxes and deliver them to a storage shed in Redwood City.

Eric had no forwarding address. His wife... his ex-wife, that is, would be stuck with the paper mail, which he didn't need. He owned his Porsche, paid all other bills electronically, and answered only email. She could keep all the party invites, conference promotions, press releases, Publishers Clearinghouse junk mail, and all the bills associated with the house. No mess, no fuss.

By moving with no forwarding address, he would be one more level beyond the reach of either the Feds or his latest ex-client, a shadowy man who called himself Grogan, referred by Peter Moaning and the Pot Page's Amsterdam connection. Mort Gill had warned Eric about arms dealers involved in reselling to Middle-Eastern terrorists the arms and ammunition confiscated from the Irish Republican Army, and had hinted that Moaning knew a contact. Eric had supplied Moaning with some basic encryption software, and had insisted on having no physical contact with Grogan. Even if sophisticated trackers chased down his signature, they would still have to navigate a physical space, using a different set of search rules.

He geared up his Porsche fast as he left his Portola Valley ex-home, heading east toward I-280, punching up music at the first opportunity.

*I've got a feeling, a feeling deep inside
I've got a feeling, a feeling I can't hide*
— Beatles, “I've Got a Feeling” (Lennon/McCartney)

Stuck behind a Volvo, wouldn't you know it, filled with overfed hyperactive kids and a burly sheepdog. His friend Gooky's latest game, the Vigilante Driver, offered multiple escape routes. Machine

guns rotated out of their placements behind the Porsche headlights and commenced firing, blowing out all four tires in less than two seconds, and as the hapless Volvo careened toward the shoulder, an extended hand appeared out of nowhere, plastering a note to the Volvo's windshield, an admonition from hell, Stay! Out of the Way! Out of the way of the Bloodstained Bandit!

Yes indeed, quite a fantasy. He must remember to tell Gooky to add the extended hand trick to the game. He kept his distance and waited for a straight section of the road to pass the smug Volvo and its fat-ass driver, whose kids and sheepdog leered at him as they passed. With only a few minor imaginary skirmishes he managed to reach Redwood City in ten minutes, and geared down into a parking space in a lot behind a slightly run-down, yellow-walled, stucco-roofed apartment building. The lot afforded some privacy for his car, while the road in front offered, besides a string of fast-food joints, a quick getaway route — either east toward 101, or west to I-280, or the back streets behind the lot, which connected eventually to the El Camino Real and Menlo Park. There were many escape routes.

The second-floor apartment gave him a view up and down the road, and the kitchen window gave him a view of the parking lot and side street. He had secured the apartment a month ago, installed Net access and set up a pseudonym for the service. The work he did was not too demanding of bandwidth — just some low-quality webcam video, images, text, applets, an occasional virus, and lots of unauthorized code breakers. Eric belonged to an elite group of Internet mavens who volunteer to kill spam. They perform more of a janitorial service than a censorship one, cleaning up when problems occur rather than blocking them before they start.

He opened a webcam window, positioned himself to be caught by his digital video camera mounted on his display, and connected with Mort Gill over an encrypted channel. Gill was smiling, in a bathroom, in what looked like his house in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco.

“I wanted to enlist your support again,” said Gill, his face appearing closer in the webcam window. “Things have taken a turn.”

Eric smiled back. Gill would never say “for the worse” because Gill is eternally optimistic. “You need something from the black market?” Eric was a specialist in black market encryption.

“Not yet,” Gill laughed. “Our code works fine. Besides, I don’t approve of the black market. The war against free encryption — it’s absurd, like gun control. The more the government clamps down on free encryption, the more it becomes irrelevant to do so, because it generates a black market. Criminals and terrorists are most likely to have foreign, wiretap-proof encryption.”

“Yes, while ordinary citizens would *not* likely have it, putting them ever more at risk from nefarious schemes that part them from their money,” replied Eric. “My Marxist father used to say, ‘read the dialectic’ in the situation. Now people say, ‘follow the money’.”

“And you thrive on this business, keeping one step ahead of everyone. That’s why you are so valuable to me right now. You know how to work both sides of a situation.” Gill paused. “I have two clients with competing agendas. It’s not really a conflict of interest, because I’m only interested in free encryption. Both clients want to have some control over their versions. I need a bit of work done that will ensure that everyone gets what they want.”

“You usually do things out in the open,” replied Eric. “I was impressed with that kitchen project. No one came knocking on your door while you were breaking the national security encryption standard.”

“That took less than six months,” replied Gill, frowning. “Perhaps it takes longer for the enforcement community to react. Of course, the point is now moot. By cracking the code so publicly, I helped establish

the propaganda for the Encryption Act, which of course was the opposite of what I wanted.”

“Well I’m still impressed. But I thought the whole point of ICE was that no one would be able to get backdoor control.”

“You are aware of decoy strategies, Eric. You grew up with the best writers for *Mission: Impossible*.”

Eric laughed. It was true, he’d lived his teen years near La Cienega and Beverly, cruising Melrose Ave., helping his father come up with plots for the *Mission: Impossible* TV series. His father, a theatrical producer blacklisted in the Fifties, had gone to work for the enemy — the CIA, Hollywood Branch. The TV series was essentially a public relations cover-up of gross CIA incompetence, ordered by CIA chief Allen Dulles to paint a different picture than the one Ian Fleming did of the CIA in his books and in the internationally popular “James Bond, Agent 007” movies. Allen Dulles and his people were not to be trifled with. Indeed, one of the more amazing gaffes of JFK’s career was when he said he liked reading the Fleming books, in which the CIA were nearly always portrayed as stupid thugs compared to the suave Agent 007.

“A decoy version, or perhaps several, will be necessary,” said Gill. “You also have your alternate networks. Until this problem is solved, we need to distribute versions in a more secure fashion.”

“We could go back to the post office,” said Eric. “Secret couriers, alternate postal systems. Revolutions were coordinated that way.” Eric believed in the very idea of freedom. He understood the need to communicate in code, in secret furtive gestures, in blood, in pure deeds.

“This is as big as any revolution,” said Gill, solemnly. “We go back a long way. You and I, we were never interested in breaking the law for its own sake, or for money. You respect private property, and so

do I. All we ever wanted to do was liberate the network, drive out the money-changers. Open the doors to the Library of Alexandria.”

“You sound like those idiots in the Media Liberation Front.”

Gill’s eyebrows shot up, betraying his surprise. “You don’t approve? On what grounds? Copyright infringement?”

“They’ll get caught before they can do any real damage.”

“Well I, for one, hope they succeed,” said Gill. “Otherwise, history itself will cease to exist in any objective sense, as corporate control over information will be complete.”

“Are you involved with them now?”

“There are levels of involvement, like a stack,” said Gill. “Some are near the top, close to the surface, the interface with the media and so on. Some are in the middle, passing messages. Some are closer to the base platform, setting up infrastructure. Each level works on its own, need-to-know basis. You should know that.”

“Indeed,” replied Eric. “Well, I’m available.”

“Then it’s done. We’ll communicate again by the usual methods.” He paused. “Oh, just one other thing. You’re not... you’re not doing any of this Webomber stuff, are you?”

Eric laughed. “No, too amateurish. But I heard a rumor that Rob Smolder is behind it.”

“Smolder? Isn’t he dead?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Eric closed the webcam window and looked out the physical window of his freshly painted apartment at a lone oak tree and the roadway beyond. He sympathized with the agents charged with watching his movements, who were now most likely searching his former home in Portola Valley. The intrigue got the adrenaline flowing and focused him on his work.

* * *

The Webomber had struck again, but not for publicity. The attack on the California Dept. of Motor Vehicles had been subtle, and only a few people knew about it. One was the IT director at the DMV, who contacted the FBI immediately. The action item had been referred to Cheney, who recognized the signature “Baby you can drive my car” as a distinctive mark of the Webomber. Another Beatles tune.

Cheney smiled. He loved the Beatles. While growing up in the 1960s, his father had been lead agent in San Francisco for the infamous COINTELPRO operation, discrediting leftist groups, infiltrating the Yippies, bankrupting underground press operations, and even executing Black Panthers and members of the American Indian Movement. Young Ray Cheney’s eyes were open the entire time; he dabbled in left-wing politics and soft drugs, and the album he associated most with that period was the so-called White Album, an album that settled on the Sixties like a blizzard, obscuring everything, and leaving an eerie premonition of danger. Cheney took it to mean a life confronting contradictions, so he followed in his father’s footsteps with the idea that revolutionary change had to come from within. He would change “the people with minds that hate” and would no longer carry pictures of Chairman Mao.

The Webomber’s attack on the DMV’s database had been somewhat specific for a range of driver records spanning a certain period of time, 1972-1976, in an area of the East Bay encompassing Berkeley and Albany, including UC Berkeley. Unfortunately the strike had not been surgical enough for Cheney to derive specific clues from the

attack. The net effect was that the DMV had to reconstruct driving records for about 150,000 people, which would take about half a year. During that time those people could probably break any traffic law they wanted without it showing up on their records. Too bad they didn't know they had this opportunity.

Perhaps the Webomber was covering his or her tracks... Cheney thought it was quite a long shot that this event would be connected to the Smolder case, or to the encryption hackers associated with the Pot Page, or to the Media Liberation Front. Nevertheless, Rob and Rachel Smolder had gone to UC Berkeley during that time. So had Charlie O'Brien and his friend, Andrew Tinker. So had the elusive Eric Mauer. All out-of-state students had to change to California driver's licenses within a month of arriving for college.

The communications link failed as Cheney was probing UC Berkeley's school records, looking for anything that might pop out as a clue. He sighed and left the makeshift tent. He was in the hills of Sonoma County, overlooking Lake Sonoma, on a pot farm in the midst of a raid. The perps had escaped, but if they had been caught Cheney would have stepped in, representing the FBI, to take them into custody as witnesses for his case, which was more important. The Pot Page had been linked to the Media Liberation Front, and yes, they all smoked pot. But that wasn't as important as its link to another operation in Amsterdam that had Cheney truly worried. The Pot Page hippies had no idea what was happening behind the scenes, funding the Amsterdam connection. Their happy-go-lucky attitude would get them into trouble. He wished he could have grabbed them for their own protection.

Cheney, in his Air Force leatherneck jacket and pistol on his hip, circled around the farm on horseback. The crime scene was secure at the perimeter and had been adequately turned upside down at the center. They'd captured the server and database used for this particular mirror-site for the Pot Page. Evidence indicated a backup had just been made, and in all probability, this backup was in the

hands of the fleeing perps. There were other mirror-sites, and shipments were made out of Amsterdam by an international courier service. The original files copied to the backup disk had been deleted; while recovery was possible, it would take a while because the algorithms they described had also been used to encrypt the files. It was like locking the safe key within the safe itself; one wonders how they were able to do it with such drug-addled brains. These digital crimes seem to slip right through their fingers. Months of work saved on their side and lost on his — it would now be that much easier for the perps to set up another site.

The county enforcement squad that led the raid used an informant, Pete Drake, a local grower who'd produced such bad weed that he was out of business in two seasons, which left nothing for him to do but inform on others. He doubled as an Earth First infiltrator, which is probably why the county cops used him. Jerking spasmodically, sweating profusely, lurking at the perimeter, Drake was in dire need of formal acceptance for his Judas role here.

Cheney was given a chance to interrogate him. Each question sliced Drake in various ways to reveal a compromised soul, a classic liar who batted his eyes and bit his nails even when telling the truth. Drake stammered on about having done his part. He got the proprietor of this mirror-site into a raving nightmare of days-on-end crank use, just to get him to drop his guard. He had done what he was told, and now, please god, he just wanted to get some sleep.

Ray Cheney stood solidly, his feet planted firmly, nearly sinking into the ground with each step, his horse nearby. He held Drake in his glare for a full minute of silence, and Drake whimpered again about needing sleep. "You'll get plenty of sleep," Cheney said angrily, and barked orders into his cell phone. Two FBI agents then escorted Drake to a patrol car, which took him away. Such incompetence! It figures these local cops wouldn't know the difference between crank users and pot users. Some are born incompetent, and some achieve a

high level of incompetency over time. And try as he might, he could not escape it.

Cheney established voice contact with the team down south, on surveillance. He was told that the MLF had scheduled a meeting in an encrypted multi-user domain, and that they could not penetrate it. Cheney informed them that the encryption decoding software would be available within the hour. He then placed a call to Mort Gill, who was under a secret contract to provide that software with a “back door” for law enforcement officials as mandated by the Encryption Act.

The Pot Page was a textbook example of the domestic uses of strong encryption that, if misused, could also cover violent, criminal behavior. The FBI now had several examples that demonstrated that key-recovery encryption systems were not hard to build, and could be used to help tech-savvy criminals and international terrorists cover their tracks. All of these examples found their way into presentations the FBI top brass were assembling in a lobbying effort to increase their power over domestic as well as exported encryption products. The bottom line for Cheney’s boss was that as long as Cheney continued to provide great examples for these slide presentations, he could continue to run his operation independently.

The problem was that Cheney’s boss was so inept at using presentation software that his first meeting with the top brass had been a disaster. First, the audio-visual equipment had failed to display the slides. When that was fixed, the slides were presented in the wrong order, and the transitions between slides, though clever, were so slow as to be obnoxious. The results were presented before the data, which confused the top brass enough to start them questioning the wisdom of the lobbying effort. Fortunately an independent lobbyist from the giant public relations firm Skill & Scrotum, with plenty to lose if the effort was called off, interrupted the presentation and rescheduled the meeting for a later date.

Cheney understood technology more than his peers, but he was at war with its complexity and the priesthood that served it. The more complex the systems, the less conviction in the people who work them, and the less they strive for competency. The internetworked world will make its people vague and pliant, unsurprised by anything. A powerful government will convince the people that war is good if for no other reason than to capture dominance in the oil market. It will convince the people that the mission of government is to lower the taxes on the rich. The people will eventually be so easy to convince that they will cease to exist.

As slowly turns the grinding wheel

In the court of the crimson king.

— King Crimson, “The Court of the Crimson King” (McDonald-Sinfield)

And here he was, surrounded, as it were, by peaceful redwood trees. He wondered if it was possible that Druids still existed in this day and age, and if they did, could he tap into their magickal powers? The pot smokers understood Druids, and here he was, wasting his time with the war on soft drugs. His superiors, his associates, his friends in other agencies, the county cops... they might as well be chasing after Druids. There was real danger in the world, and they were not focused properly enough to deal with it.

* * *

Peter Moaning’s meeting in the encrypted MUD session commenced at 6 p.m. that day. Stick-figure avatars, no frills, represented each member, and since the encryption software was still in its beta-test phase, they were limited to using the type-chat feature, so conversations were stilted and trifled with those silly emoticons.

Tinker had logged in from home and discovered, to his surprise, that Charlie was also online, along with Ted Anson. Gretchen Grubstein and her friend Gooky Karma were also there, representing the Media

Liberation Front hackers. Gossip traveled in hiccuping packets... Charlie chatted with Gretchen about his first look at the Smolder site and how often hackers were changing it. Gooky reminded everyone how easy the hacks were. Ted Anson weighed in with his condolences for the widow Rachel, who was momentarily expected to join them. And at that moment, Peter Moaning's avatar shouted in capital letters for attention. "We have a message from beyond the pale, so to speak," he said to everyone, with a smirking emoticon. "Rachel Smolder is here to deliver the message, supposedly from her late husband."

All avatars turned to "face" the new avatar representing Rachel. She began by saying hello to everyone and thanking everyone for coming to this MUD. "You all now have the special encryption software, ICE, to use for this MUD and for your emails. You must use this software to secure your communications from now on. I know you have many questions, but we must keep them to a minimum. I have a message from Rob, from before his... his disappearance. His vision of the Other Internet is now my vision, and our shared vision. Let me read the message."

She began. "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream..." The avatars fidgeted, some letting go bursts of typed talk, which others stifled. "We are prepared to go beyond the boundaries of governments," Rachel continued reading, "beyond enforcement agencies, beyond censorship. We are going forward, underground. We are... the *OtherNet!*"

She paused as the avatars fidgeted again, then continued reading. "The OtherNet implements free speech, nothing more. It won't encourage or enable criminal behavior that wouldn't have happened without it, and it might actually help us better understand and deal with criminals. The hope of the Media Liberation Front is to create a free, uncensored, and complete online library of all content. That goal is similar to my own: to free the Internet itself from any government intervention. The OtherNet serves both purposes."

She paused again, then continued. "While it is also possible for a terrorist to publish on the OtherNet his reasons for bombing a building or hijacking a plane, that doesn't matter. That terrorist could have used other means anyway. A document on the OtherNet is like an anonymous letter to a newspaper, but one that always gets published. The public may learn more about such people and their motivations when these activities are more open."

She continued reading from the message, which contained more specific details, including how the OtherNet would be set up and how the encryption clients would be distributed for people to use. At the end of the talk, two buttons appeared, one for a gambling network, the other for porn, and above them a message: "Get ICed." Furious clicking on the buttons did not prevail; they were not working. Rachel apologized and offered to email the software. Moaning adjourned the meeting.

"Another hack," grumbled Charlie, before signing off. "Y'know how you can tell? There were no references to 'Paul is Dead' or a Beatles album. Rob Smolder was a Beatles fanatic." Tinker had wanted to respond to Charlie, to tell him that yes, indeed, there was a Beatles reference, right in the opening of the message. But by then the MUD had ceased to exist.

* * *

An hour later, Steely Dan on the radio, the radio in a sleek silver Jaguar, the Jaguar halted at a stoplight on Middlefield Road in Palo Alto, the Palo Alto of Hewletts and Packards. A woman pulled up alongside in a Triumph MG, and smiled sweetly at him. This is *the life*. Peter Moaning smiled back, but didn't press his luck. He knew he was a hot property, in the same class as the richest in the Valley. He wasn't hitched or going steady with anyone and he never passed up a good opportunity, but he didn't really have the time. Time was everything to him, and time was always running out.

He was on his way to Assholes Non-Anonymous Limited, or ANAL (or just “the Assholes Club”), a group of successful Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, a club he had founded. To join, you needed to have a self-centered, no-holds-barred attitude that other people refer to as “being an asshole,” and yearly income of more than \$100 million and less than \$500 million.

“Let those other pricks have their own club,” laughed Gordon Henley, the group’s other official spokes-hole, referring to the assholes that make *more* than \$500 million a year. And in fact, the over \$500 million assholes *do* have their own club — the Pricks Club, or PC. Like ANAL, they met in secrecy, and also like ANAL, they excluded the highest among their ranks — Bill Gittelsohn was not welcome. Somehow, by excluding assholes worse than they were, they felt righteous.

The Assholes met at a sports bar somewhere in Mountain View, an unpopular place that they could take over. Gordon Henley was there, and other notables like Pierre Marie Blasé, owner of a networking firm; Randall Pomposti, publisher of *Fizz* magazine and CEO of Fizz Ventures, with editor Jill Metrose; Scott Comick, super-salesman of Silicon Valley; and Sterling Allman, the famous stock-watch columnist from *Bull* Magazine. Comick had joined recently, still wet behind the ears, still talking about deals he’d made that day and so on, acting like a premature asshole, not quite getting the distinction, not quite tightened up yet.

This month’s guest asshole, Howard Marker, was nowhere in their league with respect to income. Marker was a player in the world of journalism, the space where these rich Assholes had a major stake in manipulating the outcome. Each Asshole had a personal stock that was either rising or falling in the market where history is written.

Scott Comick had taken Howard aside to talk about the tough life of a high-powered salesman. Comick had just closed a major deal by

“listening” to the customer. He took what the customer said, and repeated it like a mantra. He wore the customer down. “I’m ready to go out on my own,” Comick boasted. “Find a solution to a problem, do a business plan, put together my dream team. Then come to one of these ANAL meetings. Talk to these people. One of them, just one of them, is all I need. One of these Assholes,” Scott laughed, and Marker smiled. “Just convince one of them, who can then introduce me to someone who can put up the money. All I have to do is convince just one, and he’ll flip the switch for me. He’ll just flip the switch, turn on the light on some investor’s mind, and I’ll have all the funding I need.” But Howard Marker was barely listening. He was trying to hear another conversation going on.

“So you haven’t seen him,” said Peter Moaning to Sterling Allman.

“I haven’t. And he was always there, before. Just standing on the corner, smiling at everyone, wearing a buckskin jacket.”

“A burnout. An acid casualty,” said Blasé, in a French accent that accentuated the last syllable of each word.

“Probably one of the patients at the VA hospital,” said Marker, joining the conversation.

“You’ve seen him,” said Moaning to Marker.

“Of course. You can’t miss him, if you’re driving into Menlo Park from Sand Hill Road,” said Marker.

Moaning snorted. How would Marker know? He had driven it many times, had frequented many of the venture capitalist enclaves on Sand Hill Road. He hadn’t seen Marker at any of these places. But he had to be polite to him, even at an Assholes meeting. Marker, who wrote high-tech columns for a popular business weekly, getting things wrong all the time, still quoted Moaning a lot, giving Moaning the opportunity to plug his ideas and products. Inviting him to this

meeting was a form of payback. The others did not like Marker, because he was not a player on Sand Hill Road, where publicity in any form is bad news.

“Well he’s gone. He hasn’t been out there, for at least a week or more,” Moaning replied with some irritation.

“Maybe he’s been cured,” snickered Allman back to Moaning. “Maybe he’s back in his cubicle, writing code for the next killer app.”

“Maybe he’s the Webomber,” Comick chortled. Much laughter.

“I think the Webomber and the buckskin man have something in common,” said Marker solemnly. “The madness that comes from too much stimulation. We live in overstimulated times,” he said, spreading his arms wide to encompass everyone in the room. “It is perhaps inevitable that we as a society will hatch more madmen. It’s like Maxwell’s Demon in physics. If you stare at one side of the empty box and concentrate your energy on it, the air in that side of the box gets hotter. Maxwell’s Demon is the basis of the branding business, the spin business — the *hype* business. All it takes is for people to concentrate on making it happen.”

In the silence that followed, Pomposti, Moaning, and Allman exchanged anxious glances. Metrose fidgeted, watching her boss Pomposti, wondering if the silence had anything to do with his presence as the newest member. Then Moaning adjourned the public part of the meeting. “It’s time we got back to some serious wheeling and dealing,” he explained to Howard Marker. “You can’t stay for that. You have to leave. So do you,” he said to Scott Comick.

“Why me?” asked Scott, devastated. “I’m not a journalist. I’m here to wheel and deal with the rest of you.”

“Not a chance,” said Moaning, smiling like the Cheshire Cat. “You’re not that big an asshole yet.” He looked over at Jill Metrose, still

smiling. Metrose fidgeted, but Moaning's finger of death did not point to her. As Comick and Marker left, Moaning cleared his throat to command everyone's attention.

"You all know about my side project with the Media Liberation Front, the MLF," announced Moaning. Everyone fidgeted, especially Jill Metrose, who did not know about it.

"I have Gill to thank for our version of ICE," continued Moaning. "We have our own back door, so to speak. The only uncorrupted version is still in good hands, of course. Ted, you had that company that Tinker worked for shut down, right?"

"Gone, and the assets redistributed," said Anson. "But Tinker may have a copy of the documentation with him."

An audible sigh. "This means the uncorrupted version of ICE will be loose in the world," said Gordon.

"Indeed," said Sterling. "And no one will have a monopoly on the keys."

"Not even Aggregate, not even Bill," said Moaning, almost gloating. "Gentlemen, the monster from Seattle has been tamed, but the doors of perception have opened. The alternative network is about to come to pass, led by the MLF. And we hold the keys to it, but so do others, and we don't know who they are. We must move fast, before anyone realizes what has happened. We must start negotiations," he looked around, a smile plastered on his face, "negotiations with the various factions."

"You've heard from Amsterdam?" asked Gordon.

"Yes. They want to disrupt their opponent's operations, contaminate their database, and so on. They need our keys to do it."

“They think the OtherNet will be safe,” said Allman with a grunt of irony.

“But they recognize the value of what it is *today*, and they want to buy the keys we have,” stated Gordon for the benefit of everyone.

“That’s right. And not only that — the CIA want our keys too.” Moaning was gloating again, laughing that hideous bad-boy giggle of his.

“But if the CIA get it —”

“Not a problem. The FBI, other agencies, won’t be able to get near them. Not even the NSA. The company wants to deploy sparingly, only to go after terrorist groups before they bomb, that kind of stuff. No violence, no headlines, no publicity. Not even Congress knows about it. The FBI doesn’t know.”

“How do you know that?” Pomposti interjected.

“My informant is well connected,” gloated Moaning.

“Wait a minute,” interrupted Gordon, glowering at everybody in that way of his that made people think all hell was about to break loose. “We’re here to talk about what *we’re* gonna do, not speculate on what others might do. What’s *our* next step?”

“Jamaica,” said Moaning. “We are setting up the offshore part of the operation. Ted’s funding it.”

Anson nodded and smiled at everyone. “Wait until you see the fringe benefits. Jamaica is wonderful this time of year.”

“And what about Smolder?” asked Pierre Marie.

“Not to worry,” Moaning answered with a twinkle in his eye. “He’s dead, right?”

* * *

Howard Marker and Scott Comick left the sports bar together. “It’s not fair,” Scott was saying. “There are too many rich guys in this industry already. They should be giving new people a chance.”

Howard was scribbling in his notebook. “They say the rich hate other rich people more than they hate the poor,” he said without looking up. Comick just stared at him. “But did you notice their fascination with the homeless guy in the buckskin jacket? It’s as if they envied him and his lack of responsibility.”

“I dunno, I thought they were just making fun of him,” said Comick. Marker looked him over briefly. Comick was not deep, but then, most sales people he knew couldn’t hold a conversation about anything other than playing games, killing the opponent. These young slick bastards with their gold bracelets and Armani suits had invaded Silicon Valley more than a decade before, and brought everyone’s standard of living up, way up, before the investment bankers swindled the stock market and brought it all crashing down. He hoped his contempt didn’t show, but Comick probably couldn’t even recognize contempt in any form unless it somehow was involved in the negotiation of a deal. Only in the midst of a deal did someone like Comick come alive and see everything clearly.

“Probably so,” Marker mused abstractedly. But he made a point of getting Comick’s card. He liked using sales people as anonymous contacts. They were always so full of themselves, and though the commissions they made were excellent, the money was not enough to appease their voracious appetites for recognition.... Which, ironically, they did *not* receive, as he would never quote them by name.

Marker walked out into the smoggy sunset and paused in the parking lot, checking out Moaning's vehicle, a sleek silver Jaguar. Moaning had been such an asshole all these years. Right now the man was conducting some kind of conspiracy, Marker could feel it in his journalistic bones. He had been invited to this conspiracy only to be used, once again, by Moaning, to intimidate the other conspirators. Marker knew nothing substantive about it. But by god he would still write something about it. Something about ANAL itself, something to embarrass Moaning.

He bent over the right rear tire of the Jaguar, feeling creepy but also elated. Moaning wouldn't see it from this angle as he strutted to his silver prize. Using the tip of his pen, Marker bent the tire's pin and let out just enough air to cause the Jaguar to slump only slightly but not noticeably. Yes, there are many types of assholes in this world, he chuckled to himself.

Tradeshow Blues

Since the MUD session a week had gone by without email. Charlie O'Brien, scratching his two-day-old beard, barely awake at 6 a.m., tried one more time and got nothing. Cut off from the Net by his provider. He felt terribly alone; everyone was out there carousing and doing business, but he was shut out, face pressed against the glass of his computer display like a hungry homeless man peering into the windows of a fancy steakhouse.

He absent-mindedly picked up the plastic trophy he'd received last year from *Fizz* for his *Swinging London in the Sixties* DVD rockumentary. He let it drop, and it split neatly in half, with one half spinning hysterically until it came to rest next to a pile of unpaid bills. On top of the pile was a bankruptcy notice from his streaming video service.

Reflexively his gaze had wandered over to his extensive music library, the only possession he really cared about. Fleeting thoughts about packing all this stuff into boxes, how *many* boxes. What *size truck*? How long would it take? Where would he take them? The preparations were endless. He couldn't bring himself to do any of it.

In the next room the naked beauties were relaxing, putting on silky robes. The photo shoot had lasted all night. The photographer was exhausted, but Roxanne, Charlie's girlfriend, was berating him. "You didn't get Tiffany," she was yelling at him.

"We can do that tomorrow night. There's enough to get started with the series." The photographer was weary of these fights. Roxanne simmered down, moving off to vent some wrath at the girls for this and that. Charlie knew she was just venting her frustration. The limits and stereotypes of the porn genre worked against her impulse to be innovative and unique. You have to be half-mad to be a great

pornographer; she knew that. But half-mad people did not run businesses very well.

Charlie poked his head in. "Don't worry, love. Things can always be worse." He flashed her that rueful smile of his. Her angry mood melted a bit.

"Let's talk."

She followed him back into his office, and they shut the door.

"So, Moaning shut us down?" she asked, as soon as he sat down. Her body language, usually all come-on with her raven black hair and perfect body illuminated by a bloodthirsty grin, was now withdrawn.

"Completely."

"What does Rachel think about this? Have you talked to her?"

"No," he said, lying. His leg started vibrating a bit, and he made an effort to stop it. He longed for Rachel but Roxanne didn't know anything about that. "My instinct is, she wouldn't want to be involved."

"What, based on this rumor? The FBI visit?"

"Isn't that enough?" Charlie was now in a mood. She was leading him into a severely depressed state, to a place where information existed that he didn't want to know.

"So, what now?" She looked up.

"What now. We're in limbo. Nothing we can do. Can't even send email."

There was a knock. The ladies were at the door, looking for compensation, still naked underneath very flimsy robes. Charlie got a good look at one, who flashed him a toothy smile. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't really get excited by these ladies unless they were outside, in some other place. The porn business acts on the pornographer in a way that makes him less human. Bodies become objects to manipulate. Charlie could feel a different kind of hardening, not one of lust, but of inconsolable desperation.

Roxanne silently wrote out the checks. The photographer slipped in, dropped off several digital camera flash cards — images for a porn site that was now, suddenly, shut down. Charlie didn't want them to know, and he admired Roxanne for her intelligence as she coolly wrote out the checks without saying anything.

Some of the worst things that could happen to a business had happened virtually overnight. Site shut down, debt spiraling, email blocked both in and out. All he had left was a voice-mail from Moaning, one of his two silent financial partners in the porn site. "Let it go," the voice of Moaning said. "Meet your contacts in LA and get going with the music site. I'll meet you there, at the Digital Media trade show."

Charlie had always wanted to bring Hollywood to Silicon Valley, not the other direction. His other silent partner, Nanker Phelge, had worked in the rock music scene since the 1960s and was helping him get outtakes for the music site. Moaning must have already talked to Phelge, but Charlie had to find out. He had to go to Los Angeles. And he needed his sidekick.

* * *

"Are you tired of Internet time? Tired of the hustle and bustle of Internet commerce? You thought it would open a window of opportunity for you, but instead, it opened the door to competition from every ambitious person in the world?"

“Have you reached a dead end? No reason to go on living?”

“Are you looking for a place in cyberspace to hang up your inhibitions, put on a show, engage in gambling, get laid? Without any legal interference?”

Tinker yawned and clicked on the link. It had been a week since the meeting with Moaning, and he'd finally received the email from Rachel promising secure encryption, his first step as a recruit for the MLF. To the scraggly sounds of Woody Guthrie wailing, “I ain't got no home in this world anymore...” the Web site appeared. Promising a new opportunity outside the normal space. “Escape the ordinary. Join the fun. Join the Other Internet.” It went on to describe the encryption code you would acquire, by registering with the site, which would enable you to host an OtherSite that anyone with the proper client software can reach, with all transmissions encrypted and perfectly legal, insofar as anything outside the law could be considered legal. “Put up your own porn site! Gambling site! Host a guerrilla movement! Whatever you want to do, no one can stop you! No government has the means to shut down the OtherNet or its OtherSites. If your ISP won't let you post your nudie pictures, just put up your own OtherSite, completely encrypted, and the ISP will never know what you're posting!”

Tinker plunged ahead into the registration process, where there was only one question: “Do you solemnly swear to provide nothing but false statements and false facts to regular Internet sites from now on? If you answer yes, you are obligated to invent false personal data about yourself and use it whenever a site asks for information, and to edit your cookies with our handy Falsifier.exe utility (download here), so that sites from now on will compile only false information about you.”

With a yes answer, Tinker was inside the site, automatically downloading the utility and the encryption code for viewing

OtherSites. He had officially joined the otherculture. But he had no time to enjoy it. Charlie was on the phone.

* * *

“What just happened?” FBI agent L, dressed like some kind of Hollywood super-agent, with a beret on his head, scanned the display on his laptop, which showed some activity.

“Another recruit, shit,” laughed Agent M, dressed like Arnold Palmer on the back nine, plaid pants and Cardigan sweater. “Tinker’s got the software. Shit.”

“OK. So can we go now?” Agent L was eager to move on to the next stakeout, in Los Angeles, a rave of some sort.

“Yes, yes, shit,” answered his counterpart. But first, a stop for brewskis at Bob’s Beanery in Half Moon Bay, which was getting to be a habit. It just happened to be on the way to LA, if you took the long way along the coast.

“I don’t get it,” Agent L said to his partner. Both slouched on their stools in front of their beers. “Gill seems to be working both sides of this thing. Charlie O’Brien and his Pot Page friends, and the MLF, they’re getting ready for something. We’re just sitting on our hands here. What does Cheney have in mind? I don’t see our play in this.”

“That’s one thing for sure, shit,” replied his partner, Agent M.

“What?”

“That you don’t get it. Shit.”

“Yeah, well, I’m in the middle of this. I’m afraid that what I *don’t* know *will* hurt me,” the first agent replied gravely.

“Take it easy, take it easy,” Agent M looked around. No one was within earshot except the bartender, who seemed busy washing glasses. “Just shut up about it, and don’t worry, shit.” They sipped in silence, and eventually hauled their asses out of there.

The bartender, who happened to be Dan Rose, Tinker’s Menlo Park friend, watched them leave, then leaned down behind the bar and switched off the remote control for the hidden video camera.

* * *

Charlie and Tinker drove across the Coastal Range to the Central Valley and Interstate 5. Charlie needed to put on a brave face. The trade show in LA was a turning point for all new projects such as DVD games, entertainment sites, and anything having to do with content. If you wanted to play in this industry, you had to be there, announcing, pre-announcing, demonstrating, or at least negotiating. Every production company and distributor had a booth, including Charlie’s distributor for his *Swinging London* title. Studio moguls paced the showroom floor looking for ideas to appropriate, and successful media and game companies with brand names hired surplus actors to cavort in ultra-large exhibits that resembled Hollywood movie sets with false fronts hiding conference rooms and mini-skyscrapers offering a view of the hall.

*Now If there’s a smile on my face
It’s only there trying to fool the public
But when it comes down to fooling you
Now honey that’s quite a different subject*
— Smokey Robinson & the Miracles, “Tears of a Clown” (Robinson)

The loud baritone sax and bass in the song bolstered his confidence; the high flute sang of freedom; this was today’s theme song. Interstate 5 at 90 mph with Motown and then Jimi Hendrix on full volume would cure any depression, at least for a while. They stopped only once, at the Harris Ranch, to eat steaks, Charlie explaining that

they would need the blood-red meat, the raw material for aggressive behavior, and get psyched for meeting this show head-on. He thought he recognized a man at the counter at the Harris Ranch, but the man had disappeared... How could it be anyone he knew, here? At such a politically incorrect place, surrounded by acres of dusty pens stuffed with bleating cattle primed for slaughter. Stuffed in there like... tradeshow attendees.

In Burbank they stopped to call Nanker Phelge. "Was this your decision, to shut me down? Or did Moaning convince you?" Charlie was mad.

"You're hot," Phelge said to Charlie. "The FBI came to visit the other day. I had some fantastic unreleased material for you, from McCartney's latest tour, but I think we should put all this stuff on ice until the heat goes away. Let's meet tonight, at Leary's."

Charlie explained that he wanted to try to set up a legitimate music site tracing the blues roots of rock music. The site would support itself by selling rare recordings. "Only licensed material this time," he said.

Phelge gave him the name of a record label executive willing to talk to him. "This prick ruined my best friend's career. Be careful talking to him. He's also on the board of the recording industry association. It's good that you're trying to do this legit. But keep in mind, these pricks started out by ripping off poor black musicians, paying 'em \$10 for their songs, and they sure got nerve calling *us* rip-offs. In fact, this prick has co-authorship of one of Chuck Berry's songs, as if he helped Chuck write it from 3000 miles away." Charlie took down the executive's name, and they were off again.

They drove to the black tower at Gargantuan Studios in Burbank. It loomed in the sluggish haze like an armed guard tower in the largest prison Charlie'd ever seen, stretching in all directions. The atmosphere in LA that day had tipped the scales into smog alert, and everywhere they looked, the world was dirt brown and stained with

human neglect. Too much dirty, litter-infested vegetation by the side of the road, too many fast-moving lane-changing cars on the freeway, too many people trying to cross the street, too much traffic to make a decent left turn without running a yellow light. He squeaked by, cursing, sweating from all the pockets of his body, and entered the black tower's underground parking lot.

Up the ivory elevators to the 18th floor, and into an icy reception area. So cool and oblivious to the outside that it seemed to be in the clouds itself, far away from the teeming population. They were greeted by a balding, bespectacled transplanted New Yorker, mid-thirties, wearing a sweater in the cool office despite the heat outside. In his oak-paneled office filled with chrome furniture, the executive recalled excitedly his days signing British Invasion bands of the early Sixties, one clone after another, then hastily added that his son now excelled at certain video games, and that his son could probably "program one of those games" in just a few years.

"Or just claim co-authorship of one," Charlie muttered in reply, but the executive just smiled back. The framed Herman's Hermits poster should have tipped them off. The guy asked all sorts of questions about the business model. Tinker had that "what the fuck?" look on his face the entire time, but he let Charlie do the talking. Charlie was gritting his teeth, beseeching the executive for some help in securing licensing for music that the company had sat on for years without releasing. These people wanted everything handed to them on a silver platter. They controlled the licenses for all the music, all the film, and all the literature... just about every artifact in popular culture. Tinker looked at Charlie as if to say, they have no intention of helping us.

But Charlie had swaggered into this meeting with a vision, of rock music fans flocking to a site loaded with historically significant music... Charlie worked up a sweat answering questions. The Gargantuan executive in the black tower soaked it up, tried out some of Charlie's language so that he could use it later, and took notes on

expected rates of return-on-investment. And yet, to Tinker at least, it seemed that the executive was stalling for time. He'd probably hire someone to work up Charlie's ideas into a treatment that Charlie would never hear about, never profit from.

*I went to the crossroads,
Fell down on my knees.*

— Robert Johnson, "Cross Road Blues"

Charlie's cell phone interrupted the meeting. It was Phelge. "Listen, you gotta get out of there. The FBI knows you're there, and the recording industry association is sending over a subpoena. Get outta there!" Charlie was looking out at the parking lot from the black tower, and he could see two blue-suited men approaching the entrance.

The executive smiled, but at the same time was pressing a buzzer under his desk. Charlie grabbed Tinker. "They're coming to get us." He didn't say who, but Tinker didn't protest. They made a run for it, taking the stairs all the way down eighteen floors as an elevator carrying a subpoena was on its way up.

* * *

Later, in a traffic jam inching past the Capitol Records building shaped like a stack of vinyl 45-rpm records, Charlie smoked a joint with Tinker to steady his nerves, which were now sputtering with tension. He hadn't told Tinker about the FBI, just the part about the legal arm of the recording industry trying to close down his bootleg site and get him into court. Tinker looked scared enough with just that bit of news, so there was no point in telling him more, not yet.

It took an hour to get to the LA Convention Center parking lot, and yet another half-hour to get *in* the parking lot, cars around him filled with executives yakking into cell phones and switching from accelerator to brake every two seconds. Charlie was so nervous that

he walked away from his parked car three times, each time going back for something else that he'd forgotten. The final time was for Tinker's tradeshow badge.

*Do you like to take a yo-yo for a ride?
Zombie I can see you're qualified*
— Steely Dan, "Sign In Stranger"

They barged into the thick of the crowd entering the North Hall. "Let's spread out," said Charlie. "I need to find Moaning. And here..." He took off his knit cap and gave it to Tinker. "Wear this, so the guys following us will follow you. They don't know who you are anyway. And if you find Moaning, call me on your cell." Tinker took the cap and frowned.

Charlie cut through a group of cigarette-smoking Japanese businessmen in charcoal gray suits, sidestepped a geek with prickly purple hair, got in close behind a gorgeous orange-haired Penthouse booth nymph, and as soon as he had an opening, cut in front of a Star Trek Klingon in full battle dress and passed through the security gate into the harshly radiant and pulsating showroom floor. He stalked the aisles looking for Moaning, dodging the hordes of people gathered around demos and fighting for brochures that ended up later in unread piles back at their offices. Exhibit madness surrounded him; booth barkers shouted for attention, booth bimbos smiled and wriggled suggestively and multimedia displays blasted music. People walked by these exhibits amused, paying little attention. With so much noise and commotion, even celebrities went unnoticed in the crowds. Charlie saw Graham Nash standing amid the mayhem, in casual clothes and tradeshow badge, clutching an empty plastic bag that advertised AudioMax MIDI controllers. He was about to go up to Nash when he saw the same blue-suited men from Burbank coming up the aisle. He quickly ducked down another aisle.

He reached the SalesSoft booth safely, where he assumed his *Swinging London* title from the previous year would be running.

People crowded around a game of intrigue and mystery, featuring shoot-em-up sequences with babes in skimpy gowns, and metal giants taking over a cybercity. Charlie moved quickly up and down and around the exhibit, looking for his station. It wasn't there. He gathered his strength and reasoning, and calmly walked to each display in the SalesSoft exhibit, playing with demos. Encyclopedias with people sitting looking at fish — funny, those navigational symbols are the same he used for his *Swinging London* title. Onward to an insipidly shallow music title about Motown. The jukebox interface and rockumentary format looked familiar and operated pretty much the same as his prototype site, but the content was not deep enough for anyone more than a casual fan to enjoy. Onward... to a DVD game about a dead president, and what would have happened had he lived. But now Charlie was even more alarmed: the navigation, storytelling, and random access operations were virtually the same as the other DVD titles, and the same as *Swinging London*. He rounded out his tour ending up at the place where his demo should have been; an information booth was there.

Charlie's stomach churned. His music posters were not on the walls; his title was not on display, and his interactive designs had been pilfered... An anxious lump formed in his throat, blocking his speech. Jennifer, the PR assistant for SalesSoft, came up to him, a nice-looking teased-blonde-haired El Segundo girl of about thirty with one of those harmless trade show smiles on her vaguely pretty face.

"Hi! How are things going?" She asked innocently, with a nasal twang. He gulped, couldn't answer. He looked from side to side, then back at her, and answered her inquisitive look with a frown.

"Where's Jay," Charlie croaked.

"Oh he's around," she replied, yawning. "He just had a meeting with an ISP from France." She looked around, up on her tiptoes in her beige suit, shaking her blonde mane. "There he is," she said, smiling broadly, pointing to a group of suits gathered around. Archibald

“Jay” Markem, in a blue serge suit, was holding his hands in such a way as to suggest he was holding a box, perhaps a game or interactive title, and talking animatedly.

Charlie sidled up to one of the suits and waited his turn for Jay to notice him. When Jay did notice him, his animated talking stopped, and he looked coldly at Charlie, eyes glittering as if ready for battle. “Charlie. Nice to see you. We have to talk later.”

“What about my station, my title?” Charlie had found his voice, and projected it far enough so that even Jennifer could hear it.

“On hold,” Jay said frostily. “Look, I know it’s a surprise to you. But it’s on hold for now. It’s been a bad year, and we’ve had to make some changes and put some things on hold, at least temporarily. Let’s talk about it later.”

“Uh — ”

“Let’s meet at 5 o’clock, here in the booth. OK?” Then he turned and started a conversation with one of the suits, in that deliberate way people have at trade shows to let you know that time is running out.

Charlie was stunned. The deafening roar of the show had gone silent. His life was falling apart. Net service gone, site down, his title no longer selling... and goons are chasing after him. And now he had to play the Tradeshow game. You roam up and down aisles, shaking hands, exchanging business cards, talking optimistically, pouncing on potential deals, closing them, etc. All the while looking over your shoulder, trying to avoid getting spotted by men in blue suits. Your score is based on the virtual revenue you generate. You collect information on the way, try to coax investments for ideas that are figments of your fevered imagination. Pitfalls include geeky-looking dull people from the heartland clutching business plans obstructing your way, and late-afternoon appointments that no one ever keeps. Major villains include the slimy, devious distributors and their

lawyers. They offer enticing advances, but ensure that you take all the risk. And just when you are about to make that deal, Murphy's Law takes over, the deal goes wrong, and you realize how financially precarious you are at that moment, the moment the abyss opens up before you and you stare down, down, down...

*You zombie!
Be born again my friend
Won't you sign in, stranger?*
— Steely Dan, "Sign In Stranger"

A hand on Charlie's shoulder brought him back. Jennifer stood next to him, her frown held on her face with wax. "You all right?" He looked at her meekly, all his energy drained, the tradeshow seething around him. He was dizzy, sick with a cold sweat. He wanted to cry, but crying in public was something an O'Brien never did.

Out of the bustling crowd walked a familiar figure. "Hey man, how're ya doin?" It was Gretchen Grubstein, a frizzy-haired, wild-grinning, freckle-faced, hippie-chick programmer from the old days, now approaching the age of fifty. "You got the party list? There's a party at Leary's tonight..." With her was Gooky Karma, a.k.a. Guileford Carmichael, her thiryish jovial red-haired wiry-thin sidekick. Charlie had known them even before the Media Liberation Front, and had bumped into them an equal amount of time at computer shows and at Grateful Dead shows. There was a considerable overlap, although on the surface it didn't make sense. Here were programmers and computer scientists who excelled in an exact science of ones or zeros without ambiguity. But you could find them twirling in the tie-dye swirling craziness of a Dead show, swishing and jiggling to a primitive African rhythm, delighting in the pungent aroma of pot smoke, cavorting in loose scarves and shorts, bopping to the improvisational music. Music with no right or wrong notes or mistakes — just lots of random ambiguities and mushy emotional outbursts of peace and love. Was it some kind of yin-yang thing? Meticulousness balanced with disorderliness? It's no joke, or

perhaps it's the Cosmic Joke, that the NASA space program's software was written by Deadheads hooked on "Dark Star" and "Mountains of the Moon".

They all hugged each other, Charlie and Gretchen and Gooky, in a kind of sloppy Sixties-style embrace that caused stares from the conference attendees.

"So we haf'ta wait for Moaning, he stopped at the Aggregate booth, though I wouldn't call it a booth, it's like a goddamn city within a city over there..." Gretchen pointed across the hall. "Hey didja know I'm going to work for LeftBanke Software? Yeh, they liked my ideas for a MUD the size of AOL..." She went on as if the conversation had been going on for some time, and was carrying it on from the last tradeshow to this one, interrupted only by random weeks of isolated work. "And Gooky here," she put her arm around Gooky, who just beamed with satisfaction at the attention, "he's such a *flat-out fuckin' nerd*, he spent an entire weekend without sleep, eating fig bars and drinkin' Jolt, and hacked the *Fizz* chat area so that anyone, y'now, non-subscribers, can get in." Gooky looked proud. "So anyway," Gretchen went on, "Peter really wants to be sure to run into you."

"I just got the shit kicked outta me," said Charlie, distractedly, but Gretchen and Gooky picked up on it.

"What happened?" Gooky asked first, while Gretchen, open-mouthed, just peered into his face.

"The distributor dropped my title and put a 'hold' on my site. And the recording industry association is after me." Charlie looked down at his shoes. What the fuck was happening here? Was this Tinker's black cloud? Was it now following *him* around?

A big slap on his back and he recognized his friend Dave Biehl, wearing a fancy no-collar shirt over his large belly and a big wide grin on his face. "Budd-*ih!*" Biehl's Brooklyn accent hadn't diminished

in the ten years he'd lived in California, working in computer graphics and special effects, and now working as *Fizz* magazine's digital photographer. Large, surly, and always in somewhat of a bad temper, Dave was a force of nature. People stood back as he walked by, and some even formed a parade behind him. "I just saw Moaning. He said to meet him for a Level 1 diagnostic." This was code for smoking a joint in the parking lot, a mid-afternoon tradeshow tradition, and somehow the only relevant thing to do, after you've seen hours of mind numbing booth demonstrations.

The cavernous, three-story indoor garage was as completely empty as the show floor was completely crowded, and sounds bounced relentlessly off its concrete walls with multiple Doppler effects sustaining the echoes indefinitely. It was not the showroom of automobiles for kings, but rather, an oil-stained warehouse of cars for the middle class, mostly Toyotas, Hondas, SUVs, a few BMWs here and there, and lots of nondescript Ford and GM rentals like Charlie's. The celebrities and other members of Hollywood's and Silicon Valley's ruling classes must have parked somewhere else or were hustled in and out of limos; either way they didn't come through this garage, so everyone felt safer.

"I don't know what to do now," Charlie said again, between coughing spasms echoing throughout the garage, as he handed the joint to Gooky, who took a puff. Dave Biehl was looking up and down the aisles. Gretchen was rolling another one on the hood of a Buick. "I'm already in debt from *Swinging London*."

"Didn't sell enough?" asked Dave.

"Didn't get paid," said Charlie, coughing again. "Distributor went bankrupt, and I can't change distributors for six months. Meanwhile, they want me to return the 50 grand advance." It all sounded confusing, even to Charlie as he tried to explain it in a weary voice. "They've got the masters for some of the music that I want to use on

my new blues site, but now they've pulled back from launching it. And the recording industry association is after me."

"They're all assholes, man," Dave said sympathetically. "These music industry people, they're much worse than what we're used to. It's like sharecropping. You make a deal with them, and then they charge back all this marketing stuff and junkets and parties and the next thing you know, your advance is all used up, and you owe *them* for the next two years."

"Bullshit," said Gretchen. "More like *ten* years. Music artists have it much worse than us. They're stuck in ten year contracts, and band names are like brands owned by the labels instead of the artist."

Gooky hadn't said a word, just kept toking. Charlie thought that Gooky was probably engrossed in some obscure problem he's having with his network simulator, working as a contractor for some giant Internet hosting service. He was wrong: Gooky was thinking about getting laid while he was in LA, and whether or not he had any chance with Gretchen, who was quite attractive for her age, and her pride made her sexy. Like a well-worn subroutine in his code toolbox, this fantasy of Gretchen had sustained him through momentary bouts of loneliness for several years now, without consummation.

At that moment a booming voice shouted hello across the giant garage. Peter Moaning, looking a bit more athletic than usual with his six-foot, 220-pound frame encased in a tight-fitting Hawaiian shirt and leather pants, had found the party, and had brought Tinker with him. "Alright!" He reached into his temporary Aggregate-labeled show bag and pulled out a small baggie of grass.

"Dude!" Dave Biehl was happy to see him. They slapped hands and squared off like two sumo wrestlers.

"Plans are set," Moaning announced to everyone. "Rumor Central is up, and the Jamaica operation is coming together."

But Moaning's unbridled enthusiasm wasn't penetrating Charlie's mood. Dave spoke for him. "Charlie just got fucked," he said. "The distributor just canceled his blues site."

"Bad news," said Moaning nonchalantly, "What about *Swinging London*?"

"Half of 'em sold, and half they want to return to me, put me out of business," mumbled Charlie.

"Why don't you sue them?" asked Gretchen from the car.

"Can't. I'm broke, and they're about to be acquired."

"Bad news," said Moaning again. "Y'know, you should just forget it. Forget those slimy scum-suckers."

"What you need is money to do the site on your own," offered Tinker, moving closer to Charlie. The hint of his loyalty to Charlie did not escape Moaning's attention.

"What I need is a fucking *job*," answered Charlie in disgust. But he couldn't say what really bothered him, because his arrangement with Moaning for funding the porn site required secrecy. Yet it was Moaning that had shut him down. He gave Moaning a look that would sear paint, but Moaning was somehow always immune to bad energy. He just stayed effervescent.

"Don't worry, my man," Moaning said to Charlie, then turned to the group. "We all have important jobs to do."

"I think I was set up," Charlie said to no one in particular, but everyone stopped to listen. He wanted to drive the conversation to a higher level, see how much he could draw about of Moaning. "I mean, I think I figured it out. I was using that special code that —

remember, Peter, those undocumented features of the sound mixer? It's possible to use sound files to convey encrypted messages. You can hide anything, even an entire video clip, inside a sound file. I used it to deliver videos to subscribers of my..." Charlie looked at Moaning, "... my porn site."

Peter Moaning looked blankly at him without saying anything, but Charlie could tell he was on edge. Still, Charlie hadn't crossed the line. No one in this group would infer from this conversation that Moaning had bankrolled the porn site.

Gooky spoke up for the first time. "Y'mean, you're using this undocumented stuff, and Aggregate tech support is letting you do this?"

"Well... I didn't tell anyone at Aggregate." Charlie looked a bit perplexed. "Was I supposed to?"

Moaning gave him a sour look. "It's their authoring tool. You used their software and they require registration, a copy of your code, a license fee, and so on. I guess you didn't do any of that," he sighed.

"I'll bet Aggregate doesn't want developers to know about the encryption option," mused Gooky with some admiration. "It lets you import any content and insert it, right?"

Moaning roared with laughter. "Great! Aggregate has unwittingly let this cat out of the bag. Charlie, how'd you get the run-time player to work without a registration code number?"

Charlie smiled. "That's an easy hack."

Dave Biehl chuckled. "Man, you tempt fate when you use undocumented stuff," he said to Charlie. "Don't you think you may have scared the shit out of SalesSoft? They want no part of a conflict with Aggregate."

“Yeah, well,” Charlie sighed. “I guess you could do what you want if you were Rob Smolder. He showed me the encryption editor when we worked on the first Pot Page. We used it in the marketplace MUD, encrypting the avatars with accounting and physical address information, so that the avatars could conduct transactions in private.”

“The so-called ‘malleable avatars’ bit,” said Dave. “That’s some innovative shit.”

“The avatar learns by your actions. It can repeat what you just did, but even better, it can anticipate what you might do next,” said Gooky, by way of explanation. “Cool!”

“Kind of like a younger generation of rock and rollers, copying your licks,” said Tinker.

“Only doing them better,” replied Charlie. “These things could anticipate the DEA’s next tricks.”

“Well, Smolder wasn’t independent,” interrupted Moaning. “He got a grant from Aggregate. They just didn’t know what kind of virtual marketplace he set up on the side.”

“That’s true. Smolder was legendary at getting sponsorship,” said Biehl. “He even got the FBI’s help on his *Wounded Knee* title, and it didn’t paint a pretty picture of the FBI’s involvement in that massacre.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t cast the FBI as evil conspirators, either, just as dumbasses — which they are,” said Charlie. “Rob had the Midas Touch with company sponsorships, and *Wounded Knee* is a good title, but I know some Indian folks, and y’know, I worked with some of them up in Mendocino, and they consider it to be a whitewash.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Moaning between tokes, “the title still raised money for their projects, the gambling casinos on the reservations. It still did some good. They’re not gonna bad-mouth it in public. Besides, Smolder’s main contribution was the wireless PDA interface so that anyone can gamble from anywhere in the world, with encryption so that you remain anonymous. Everybody wins.”

“Yeah,” replied Gretchen, “he kinda snuck that into the design, didn’t he?”

Clanging metal echoed through the three-story garage. Everybody looked around to see Brendan Barcode, the crazy video-journalist, rolling a beat-up shopping cart from one end of the garage floor to the other, filled to overflowing with video cameras, tripods, batteries, converters, and other electronic junk. His dark stringy hair was matted to his forehead revealing a shiny circular bald spot on top of his head that looked like it had been attached to something, perhaps an alien mind-sucking vacuum tube. Something had been done to his mind; it was as likely an explanation as any other. Barcode glowered at them as he arrived, with a glare that spoke of the gravity of the world and his misfortune.

“Barcode, you sonofabitch,” moaned Biehl, his pained expression giving in to a grin. Charlie handed Barcode the joint, and he brightened up.

“You guys are talkin’ about Smolder, right?” Barcode asked between tokes. They all just looked at him. “Haven’t you ever wondered why he would do it? Why he would jump? There’s no reason! No reason!”

“People can be complicated, Brendan,” said Moaning with a sweeping, patronizing gesture that took in the entire group.

Brendan Barcode, fidgeting and withering in the glare of this group in a way that seemed to Charlie like a bad imitation, unconsciously, of the Peter Lorre character in *Casablanca*, murmuring and seeking

approval from the Humphrey Bogart character. "There are all sorts of rumors," Barcode wheezed. "I heard that he was part of a conspiracy to destroy the FBI's computers."

"Crock of shit," Biehl said, sounding like John Wayne.

"Yeah, well, I heard another rumor that he had AIDS, and he was seen with a hooker at last year's tradeshow." Barcode was plaintive, seeking recognition for the scraps of information he could provide them.

"More bullshit," said Biehl. "You repeating this bullshit?" he glared at Barcode.

"Oh yeah," Barcode now revived, hatred being at least some form of recognition. "I also heard he was going bankrupt, and he was about to be accused of plagiarism."

"Jeez, Brendan. You're a veritable font of information," said Biehl in a menacing tone.

"Well, you wanna know what I think?" clucked Barcode, eyes flashing.

"Tell us," said Moaning.

"It's a conspiracy. The Feds were after him. A-and, he didn't really jump. He's holed up somewhere, running from the Feds."

"Feds? Which Feds?" asked Moaning.

"The FBI!" Barcode's eyes were extremely wide now. It was suddenly apparent to everyone that this kind of behavior was not appropriate in any group of people, especially stoners. They started looking around for ways to escape. "They want him for his connection with encryption, with Mort Gill. The FBI is in cahoots with the CIA and the

DEA, and these right-wing paramilitary groups who want a special encryption code-breaker, so that they can stop terrorists and... and disrupt revolutionary groups... and lock up pornographers.”

“Oh, give it up, Barcode,” said Biehl, sighing. With a lot of foot shuffling, averted eyes, and suppressed giggles, everybody looked for exit signs.

“You give it up, Biehl,” snarled Brendan Barcode as he started off, clanging his shopping cart as he went. Off to some press conference to make a nuisance of himself. They all sighed with relief.

“And you should just give it up,” Moaning said to Charlie, resuming the conversation. But Charlie had started thinking about the FBI and porn sites. The encryption stuff, the undocumented calls. Didn’t Moaning once set up Gill to be a consultant to Aggregate? That was before Charlie had started the porn site. “Charlie! Just give it up!” Moaning poked him with his hand that held the joint.

Charlie gave him a look, but Moaning just blinked at him with all the innocence he could muster. “Well,” drawled Charlie finally, breaking the tension, “Don’t Bogart that joint my friend.” He took it from Moaning. “You want me to go bankrupt so that you can hire me for a song.”

“You bet!” Moaning laughed.

“OK, ok, it will happen probably the way you say it, but I got a lot of baggage to take care of —” But Charlie was interrupted, once again by the sound of a rolling shopping cart. Was Barcode coming back? No, an old black man pushed a cart filled with maintenance supplies. With hurried good-byes, they dispersed.

Charlie caught up with Tinker at the entrance to the show. Both were fried to their eyeballs from the grass, grinning from ear to ear, and about to enter the maelstrom of computer games and technology

displays. And looking forward to it. Especially the new and improved control gear for game machines, from nearly weightless stereoscopic 3-D audio-video headgear to body capsules.

“Hey man,” said Dave Biehl, catching up to them and suddenly serious for a moment as they walked through the entrance and had their badges checked, taking Charlie aside as if pausing the Giant Game of Life. “Watch your back with Moaning. Did you tell anyone about using the undocumented encryption stuff?”

“No,” said Charlie. “I don’t exactly publicize the porn site. Tinker here knows, and you-all know, and someone at Aggregate must know or I wouldn’t have been shut down.” He was careful not to mention how Moaning fit into this picture as the ghost-host of the porn site.

“Tinker, when you worked for Private Key, you wrote the documentation for those encryption calls, for the API, right?” Biehl referred to the application program interface, the code that allowed the encryption editor to make use of the new ICE encryption system developed at HADES by Mort Gill.

“Yeah...” Tinker thought for a moment. He had the documentation in his laptop, but was afraid to say anything. “I had finished it right before getting laid off.”

Biehl frowned. “You guys watch your backs. That’s all I gotta say.”

* * *

The freeways of Los Angeles were seething and pulsing with traffic, even at 10 p.m., as Charlie drove out to the last party of the tradeshow. Tinker and Charlie had split up to cover the schmooze action at the dozen or more parties, agreeing to meet later at the Leary rave. A solid wall of traffic greeted him on the onramp to the Santa Monica Freeway. He fought for space between a dark green

Mercedes and a Chevy convertible, both with beautiful blondes at the wheel, both chatting into cell phones — in constant communication, perhaps with each other. He remained within the wall of traffic, creeping forward slowly with his dark thoughts about the rape and pillage by the entertainment industry, until he reached the first exit. He hit the surface streets in a menacing neighborhood. As he pulled into a parking lot for a Seven-Eleven, three hookers vied for his attention, one offering to sell him crack cocaine. Charlie considered it to be an omen of what LA had to offer him tonight — nothing but false pretense and poison.

*Are you a lucky little lady in the City of Light?
Or just a lost angel...*

— Doors, "LA Woman" (Jim Morrison & the Doors)

The party was still growing at the rate of ten beautiful people a minute, overflowing the two-floor headquarters of The Pathfinder Company in Santa Monica. A pioneer in multimedia design and content, the company employed artists, programmers, authors, and specialists in a building on the very edge of the civilized continent, surrounded on three sides by wind and beach and on the fourth by the Pacific Coast Highway. On the sidewalk in front, sitting between two sports cars, Andy Ames was lighting a hash pipe. Charlie wandered over. Poison is one thing, hash is another.

"That's DMT," hissed Andy as he handed Charlie the pipe.

Well... DMT, that old brainstormer... Charlie took a generous hit, held it in. He knew Andy only slightly, as Dave Biehl's housemate. Biehl must be inside; why was Andy out here by himself?

That thought was all he could muster as the DMT hit him like a landslide. Reality switched to a virtual holodeck in an instant transition, not a dissolve, more like a fast wipe, into... something... else... Andy's face hovered in the swirling blackness. "Wild! Isn't it?" Charlie could only nod, his voice had left him. Cars swished by, their

sounds dopplering away like guitar feedback. For what seemed like an eternity he was suspended in a barren space, with no discernible difference in objects or consequences. As he regained his senses, the plastic world of LA materialized like a miniature toy set at Christmas, with toy cars moving on plastic streets and toy people driving them... And then the plastic turned translucent and he could see the skeletons inside everything, the code that kept everything together.

Andy's face again, wrinkled plastic with a skeleton of interlocking code, an alien's face, bobbing in the night. "Charlie, can you introduce me to Mort Gill?"

Charlie reassembled his mind, put on his identity carefully like a new skin, tucking in and adjusting his personal mannerisms and speech like a fresh outfit, working his tongue again. "Yeah... I don't see why not," he said thickly. "Is he here?"

"Not sure... wait, I'll be right back." Andy walked off to a van parked down the street, went inside, came out a little bit later. Charlie swallowed and regained his composure. Andy came back and led him, weak-kneed, up the stairs. Inside, the vibrations dimmed and Charlie's strength returned. Upon entering the upstairs office, he nearly walked into a 300-pound hairy hacker who was yelling at the top of his lungs, "Somewhere there is an algorithm that performs color cycling among the palettes — "

"Yes, shifting hues as it goes..." Someone shouted.

"Yes, and producing the most soothing, the most *mind-numbing phantasmogoria* of patterns! Light shows! Throbbing transitions that induce psychosis! Just slip right into virtual madness!"

"Or a reasonable facsimile," interjected one of his cohorts. The upstairs room had been filled with such conversation for hours. The hairy hacker was already off on a new tangent, arguing about the merits of different streaming digital video standards, but then

veering off into a lengthy description of a monster scene he makes whenever he attends his local Coastal Commission meeting. His goal is to blunt the ever-expanding wedge of development in the hills northwest of Malibu. He would barge into a meeting of local conservatives, wild-haired and barefoot, bad-rapping the land developers. Then he'd turn to one of the local archconservative ranchers and talk about ham-radio data-packet networks, and then turn around and discuss Cajun cuisine with a Hollywood mogul. This longhaired gorilla was worth about \$50 million; small potatoes for either Hollywood or Silicon Valley, but enough to be dangerous in Malibu.

Charlie scanned the crowd for Bob Gilder, the soft-spoken fearless leader of Pathfinder, and spotted him standing on the balcony overlooking the beach, next to a homebrew propane barbecue that looked like it would explode at any minute. Charlie took up a position near his left elbow, nodding to whatever was being said, waiting for his moment. When it came, he quickly introduced himself and explained his latest project.

"Now it's just a matter of securing the rest of the licenses," he finished, "and raising the marketing budget."

"I'll bet it's more than that," Bob Gilder spoke directly to him. "Investors are skittish about music sites, since all the music is controlled by the major labels, and they don't play ball unless it's by their rules." Gilder used the same casual but polite deference when talking to Charlie as he would to anyone, even a particularly nosy public relations expert. His self-effacing manner was contagious — after talking with him you feel important and yet at ease.

"I know it will be tough," said Charlie, trying to look thoughtful and less desperate.

"You should just do it yourself," said Gilder, looking straight at him, giving him the handshake that meant it was time to part company, to

move off to find other paths through the schmooze circuit. “You should just get a few people to work with you for the cause, and do it in your spare time, whatever. The most creative people are those on the edges of the industry, the eccentrics, the individuals who ignore custom and venture out into the unknown. That’s what you have to be.” And with that, he was off to another part of the room, another conversation.

Several notable industry people were gathering around a demo station where George Vest was showing a presentation. Charlie joined them and put on the plastic-and-cardboard 3D glasses that looked like they came out of the Fifties. They all watched the animation of the estranged individual trying to delete his name and address from the vast data banks of the universe. At the end, someone asked George if he continually encountered glitches with the multimedia technology, and he replied that the glitches are part of the performance — the random elements help to make the audience think the performance is real.

Gretchen happened by and grabbed Charlie’s shirt. “We’re going to Leary’s,” she laughed, “for some more of those *random elements*.”

* * *

At about the same time Charlie was enjoying the DMT, Tinker jumped out of a cab on Sunset Boulevard to check out the Aggregate Networks party at the House of Blues. There he ran into Mort Gill near the entrance, talking with some folks wearing promotional t-shirts over dress clothes, looking somewhat ridiculous for it. Gill was lecturing to them about civil liberties, in his blue jean shirt and sarong, reddish-brown beard and long wispy hair. He looked like someone imported from San Francisco for a part in a movie about hippies — gnomish and anachronistic, standing on Sunset Boulevard, the heart of the entertainment industry, where Fake meets Hype to produce Product. And even here Gill was pushing the envelope, hacking the very center of Western commercialism, Sunset

Boulevard. Gill was explaining his motivation for co-founding specialist alternative newsgroups on the Internet nearly a decade before. "They wouldn't let me lead discussions about drugs. It was an example of petty bureaucratic indecisiveness, like putting a finger in a dike to stop a leak. They couldn't decide, so I went off and did it on my own. Now there's a flood of discussion than they can never stop."

"Hey Mort," Tinker gave Gill the high sign as he joined the group. "Many of the best inventions came about that way." They hugged each other like old friends, and the oddly dressed bunch melted back into the Hollywood night.

"You look happy."

"Happiness is my default position," said Gill with a smirk. "So you finally joined the team."

"If you mean, did I click on the thing on the page, yes," replied Tinker. "I now have a secure laptop that can reach the OtherNet, right?"

"Yes, secure for now," said Gill. "But you need to stay up to date with it. There is a new version in the works."

"Somehow I knew you would say that," said Tinker with a sigh.

"The beauty of the new version is that it can't be corrupted. Back doors can be opened, but only temporarily, until they are automatically shut down. The encryption is entirely reprogrammable, new secure keys can be generated in an instant. And anyone will be able to get the code, and the cracking tools, for free. That's also the beauty of it. It creates a truly level playing field for all groups, law enforcement, even terrorists. No one is above the law of mathematics."

There was a pause, and Tinker remembered the article idea for Jill Metrose, and how he should be doing some research on it for his own sake; the Moaning thing might not pan out. So he asked Gill about the C-Dome.

“Going well,” said Gill, looking up and down Sunset Boulevard. “The government is taking an interest,” he said.

“An interest? Shouldn’t you be worried?” Now Tinker was also looking up and down Sunset. He could see a hooker up at the bus stop, waving some kind of fake boa at the passing cars. At another time, if he were by himself, he might have considered checking her out, but not now, not with Gill nearby. While Gill’s libertarian political views were slightly left of Camille Paglia, his sense of moral outrage was nearly as far to the right as ex-drug czar William Bennett.

“I have nothing to fear,” Gill said solemnly. “Maybe you do, though. Your company, Private Key, was working on the server-side API. You wrote the documentation, remember? The server-side API is necessary for my encryption clients to work. Offshore servers already have copies of it, but the government seems to want to grab all the copies they can find, so if you have anything, even the docs, you should hide them.”

Tinker thought he heard the creaking noise of a backyard gate slamming shut, someone shuffling off into the darkness. A back door man? “But if I don’t have anything...” Tinker’s voice trailed off in the sound of traffic.

“They may still want to talk to you,” Gill laughed. “They would not believe you know nothing about it. My advice is to drop out, stay low. Maybe it will all blow over.”

Tinker frowned. It was all so confusing. The night deepened in texture, as more limos pulled up with more people for the party. He could tell they were not from Hollywood, or even LA. They were

dressed for LA, wearing expensive slacks resembling desert wear, along with ill-fitting leather jackets, tight skirts or blue jeans. But their heads stuck out, abnormal, bulging too fat or sunk too thin; beards were too scrawny, makeup too obvious. Everyday heads in slick, stylish outfits, with faces that belonged somewhere else, Portland maybe, or Seattle, or even Des Moines. Wicked smiles betraying utter fascination with the scene. Real LA people didn't smile like that, didn't have heads like that. And they all just ignored the two longhairs on the sidewalk.

"So how does one drop out?"

"I don't know," laughed Gill, "but there's a party going on at Leary's, and I bet someone there knows."

* * *

The party at the late Dr. Timothy Leary's house in the hills above Beverly Hills started at 11 p.m., and a note on the unlocked door said don't knock, just come in.

Andy Ames watched people go into the house, fumble their greetings and spazz-out on the dance floor in the overlarge living room. One wonders how these people came to know Leary, or whether he was just another dead celebrity to them, albeit one with a nice house. Such a mindless beast this generation is, Ames thought, such arrogance without memory and therefore no need of history.

Tinker joined Ames at the curb. "Didn't figure you for a raving lunatic," he said.

Ames pointed to the door. "Go in there, you come out twenty years younger and without a conscience."

"So where's Dave?" Tinker meant Dave Biehl, Ames' housemate.

“Busy tonight. Got a pictorial in *Fizz* to get done before morning.” Andy didn’t want to offer any more information. This conversation was as terse as it could be. Tinker wasn’t Andy’s surveillance target tonight, though he probably would be at some point. Andy needed to keep his distance without making Tinker suspicious. The last thing he wanted was for Tinker to see him with Dan Rose, who was now working with Ames on audio capture. Tinker knew Dan and it would be hard to explain. He’d just have to go inside and take Tinker with him. He’d find his target, Charlie, when he showed up inside. Andy grabbed his arm. “C’mon, my friend, the fountain of youth awaits!”

Tinker couldn’t believe how trusting Leary’s people were. The man had been dead for years, but his dependents and admirers were now running parties as if he’d never left. Leary’s ghost haunted the liquor cabinet, which never ran out of good Scotch whiskey, and also frequented the brightly-lit kitchen with photos of the good doctor cavorting with bikini-clad models and actresses covering the walls and the refrigerator. The house was not out of the ordinary for the neighborhood, with its sweeping view of the LA basin, leather furniture, and an awesome audio and video rack. But inside, it looked like the lair of a mad scientist, with strange equipment attended by nerds lurking in back rooms, including a full-sized MRI unit, an EEG hooked up to a dentist’s chair, and a biorhythm recorder connected to a full-body immersion tank.

The activities tonight were not focused on exploring inner space; tonight the main event was an effort to get the Webomber to respond to a makeshift site, to communicate with the person or group posing as the random Web terrorist. They wanted to know the game plan, why the Webomber chose certain sites to disrupt.

I was born in a subroutine, raised on hard drives in tandem.

My number one occupation, bombing Web sites at random.

— The Webomber’s Song, according to several inebriated partygoers

But the Webomber hadn't shown up yet in their diagnostic reports of site visits. Perhaps the Webomber was physically among them, one of the partygoers. In the extra large living room with its own dance floor, bodies gyrated to the throbbing beat of house music as celebrities and beautiful people pretended to have conversations. There's M. I. Gnuts, the editor of a local 'zine, dressed in a leather Elvis jumpsuit with a feather boa around his neck, snapping his fingers and looking cool. There's bald-headed Lena ("has anybody seen 'er?"), goddess of the Ambient/Trance Salon, dressed in a gown of pure satin, with nothing underneath, the fine strands of her pubic hair arrayed in silhouette. A dozen leather-clad Zombie-haired tongue-pierced punks circled around the dance floor. A wild Jamaican man with swinging dreadlocks caressed the turntables and cross-faded tracks of trance music. Twirling pixies scattered magic dust over the heads of the true believers, just like the early acid tests of the Sixties, brimming with sweet naivete... And on the fringes cameras were recording every movement.

Tinker knew his way around a rave, and knew how to find the center of its energy — in this case it was the DJ with arms flailing at each synthesized arpeggio and body rocking to the trance rhythms. His stage was surrounded by lush tropical plants suggesting an open vagina with him at clitoris-central. The sound was under his control, the laser lights shot out from his crown of circuits. The overall effect stimulated the Sixties circuit in Tinker's brain, recreating in a flashback the psychedelic voyages of his youth. An unseen hand had cranked the room intensity dial up past 11; everything was altogether too vivid. The party was growing more cosmic by the second. Tinker felt vibrations in each atom of his body, from which poured out animated gradients of energy tuned to the harmonics in the sounds. It seemed to Tinker that the sound had the power to transmute matter into energy. The sound was a catalyst, but as pure frequency it had no leverage; it needed a conduit to focus the energy waves on a single point. That single point seemed to be located in Tinker's brain, right behind that imaginary Third Eye described in literature on the Eastern religions.

It was certainly not his first illumination, and he reckoned it wouldn't be his last, but this one at least had a name: the Vision of the Conduit. He was the Conduit through which the sound passed to transmute matter into energy and liberate the consciousness of anyone he pointed his mind to. All he needed to do was look at someone, focus the sound flow, and... zap! That person was now integrated with the cosmos. Simple as that.

Well, not so simple. The aliens turned to look at him, then look away amused. Like other holy men and prophets, the conduit would be scorned in his own time, or worse: ignored. Conduits, and holy men in general, face an organized, established opposition — perhaps just gravity itself, applying a drag to the energy as it rises. But conduits, like poets, are necessary, at least to insulate the energy to maintain its potency as it travels upward. This is akin to making up myths to explain those unexplainable supernatural phenomena. Conduits, in fact, have been integral parts of all human religions, or as many as Tinker knew about.

Eventually it dawned on him that the music was too loud and causing a serious amount of cognitive dissonance, so he stepped out on the balcony overlooking the LA basin. The dogwood trees surrounding Leary's balcony grew their branches straight up and back like an electric-fried Don King hairdo, recoiling in horror from the dangerous activities happening inside the house, their stark white flowers seemingly in agony against the pitch black sky.

The music was filtered now through the open doors and windows and bodies... and from a distance Tinker could hear the music's inner meaning, its DNA. The rock music held within it a blues riff, and the "blues" were actually an early form of *encryption*. The world had done the original bluesmen wrong, and they had fought back with coded messages. Blues is a very simple form of music — just three chords in 12-bar sequences in infinite variations. But blues music is actually a way of stomping the real blues away. It is the ultimate

escape key, coded with lyrics and riffs, to make it possible for a slave or a downtrodden person to live a life of some sort. If you decode the blues, you find that it really is about freedom. And you can find the blues everywhere.

Music. Everywhere. Put the code into the music. Encrypt the code within the music, and give the music away. Tinker thought, this is for sure the best way to spread a revolution. He had to tell Charlie about it. So he thought real hard, and sure enough, Charlie found his way out to the balcony. Tinker smiled at him. "I got an idea," he said.

"What?"

"The Media Liberation Front wants to spread the encryption code. We can encrypt the code inside music files, and spread the music files over the net with free downloads."

Charlie blinked at him, stared at him for 30 seconds, then smiled. "Tinker, my man, sometimes it's a pleasure having you around." He looked around to make sure no one was listening. "That's a great way to circulate the client software, once the server software circulates. But the server stuff has to happen first. That's the problem Moaning's talking about. But that's a good idea, maybe even for the server stuff. We could put out some vintage outtakes, some of Nanker's best stuff. I'm sure he'd be into it. In fact," Charlie snapped his fingers, "Nanker's gonna get board tapes from the upcoming Stones private party in Las Vegas."

"Yeah, well, maybe we could do some original music. I got some material I did with the Duck."

Another group joined them on the balcony, interrupting their conversation with talk about the Webomber. Thought to be a male hacker in his forties, the Webomber had never actually been seen, and all efforts to track him turned into dead ends. The "Paul is dead" signatures he left behind were related to the great myth of 1969, that

Paul McCartney of the Beatles had died in an auto accident and had been replaced by Billy Shears or some lookalike. There were clues found by fans on every record from *Revolver* on.

Even the younger ones knew about it. "Yeah, I heard that the Webomber plants clues in every job he does. Just like that Beatles myth."

"But that was a bunch of crap," piped up Tinker. "The Beatles didn't even understand how it started. Paul was as mystified as everyone else."

"Not true," said Mal Contour, one of the group, in LA to follow up on more Smolder leads. "Paulie is the ultimate revisionist, forever proclaiming that the Beatles didn't deliberately put those clues in. But in fact it was one of the greatest hoaxes of all time, and it proved to be a fantastic boost for record sales. There are some clues that *had* to have been deliberate."

"That's scary," cooed a pretty young thing. "So you think the Webomber is going to bring down the whole Internet, a giant crash?"

That's it, Tinker thought. It all came to him again, another cheap flash; this time he saw the world caught in a complexity catastrophe, drowning in information. Some unseen power was manipulating events behind the scenes, using this complexity as a smokescreen to hide nefarious activities, the way the FBI used a blizzard of IRS audits to shut down the underground press of the 1960s.

"Oh now *there's* a myth," said Contour, responding to the sweet young thing the way men usually do, trying to impress a gorgeous babe, "the Internet crash — that's a myth perpetrated by the service providers to put pressure on the backbone companies. Or some people think it's a plot by the largest service providers to control

access so they can charge higher fees, while the rest of the poor folk have to wait in line and suffer bad connections.”

Tinker watched them as they talked — they were helpless little creatures stuck on this hapless planet, powerless to understand the true forces at work. Everything was myth to them. Even through this acid-like brainstorm he knew that what he was about to do was no myth. Something had changed — the world had caught up while everyone he knew had been standing still.

From the swirling pit of his stomach, the nausea grew, and he knew right away what it was. The Earth itself was moving and he was standing still. Completely still. He had to hop from one foot to another to keep moving along with the Earth. His heart rate increased, a cold sweat broke out over his body, but he kept hopping from one foot to another, thinking about the Earth’s movement, and the Net’s tentacles wrapped around it, and himself caught up in those tentacles... By this time Tinker’s hopping from one foot to another irritated just about everybody on the balcony.

“He’s out of it,” the sweet young thing said, and the group moved on leaving Charlie to deal with hopalong Tinker.

“So this is what it all comes to, hopping about like a scared rabbit in the land of the lizard king?” asked Charlie, taking his arm.

“I just thought it was the right thing to do.” Tinker was calm, and felt once again synchronized to the Earth’s movement. “But now I’m OK.”

Charlie looked at him with a mixture of disgust and pity. They had been friends for a long, long time. Tinker always was slow on the uptake, so he talked slowly. “This new encryption you wrote the docs on,” Charlie explained slowly. “It’s the server-side stuff. The code is not only probably illegal, it can’t be stopped. The Feds can’t crack it,

so they can't stamp it out. But for some reason they're coming after me, and that means they're also coming after you."

Tinker blinked. He couldn't put it all together, what it all meant. All he really knew was that he trusted Charlie's instincts more than his own. "So what do we do?"

"I don't know, yet," replied Charlie, looking around "I can't figure out why, if the FBI is looking for me, they can't just have the cops stop me. I'm well known in California, I have something like ten unpaid speeding tickets. My DMV record must be on every CHP car-computer. A lot of this doesn't make sense."

"What about Moaning?" asked Tinker, his head coming back to him but dragging with it the beginnings of a headache.

"We should convince him to let us go to Jamaica to run his server project there," said Charlie, starting to smile as he thought about it. "We can just skip town! That's what we can do."

Suddenly a crashing noise came from inside the party. A lanky young punk rushed out to the balcony shouting, "It's a bust." He then leapt over the railing and rolled as much as ran down the steep hillside.

Charlie looked at Tinker. "Let's go!" He followed the punk over the railing, and Tinker followed him after a slight hesitation. They scampered down the hill into a ravine of bushes, getting all scratched up by twigs in the process. The commotion up the hill was getting louder. "Quick!" rasped Charlie as Tinker stumbled. They emerged from the ravine at a culvert under the street, and crouched in the darkness.

"No cops yet," muttered Charlie.

"Why are we running? Everyone knows what goes on at Leary's."

“I don’t think it’s cops, I think it’s the Feds. Maybe they think the Webomber’s in there.” Charlie scanned both sides of the street, then motioned for Tinker to cross it. They reached the other side, darted through the woods to Laurel, then straightened up and strolled, almost nonchalantly, down Laurel toward Hollywood.

“So why did we run?” asked Tinker. “We didn’t do anything.”

“It’s guilt by association,” replied Charlie. “I just don’t want to be associated with any conspiracies I don’t know about. Let them investigate all the people in that party first, before they get around to figuring out we were there.”

“Yeah, but you said yourself they were on to us.”

“They are. But we can escape while there’s still time.”

They walked on in silence, under the swaying branches of eucalyptus trees, down the road towards Hollywood and Vine, as various fancy cars zoomed past carrying some of the other partygoers escaping the raid — first a Rolls with a famous disc jockey in the back, then a Bentley with a Gargantuan executive, then a Jaguar with the lady-friend of a well-known Hollywood mogul, followed by a Mercedes Roadster driven by a well-known actor, a Porsche driven by a Silicon Valley CEO, and an Aston-Martin wheeled by a film special-effects master. Then, a bright yellow Hummer decked out with speakers roared by, hogging most of the road. A Land Rover and a Cherokee driven by rival agents jockeyed for position behind it, and screeched around the curve, followed by an SUV filled with giggling, squealing fashion models. Tinker and Charlie just watched the parade go by, and only stopped for a moment to listen as the last car, a shit-box Toyota loaded with hippies, careened by with music at top volume...

*Who’s to say where the wind will take you
Who’s to know what it is will break you
— U2, “Kite”*

Illuminati

The next day, in the late afternoon, Mal Contour adjusted his newly acquired bolo tie, with the Grateful Dead logo inscribed in its silver holder, before entering the chic Sausalito digs of Rachel Smolder. He was feeling a bit pasty from the flight up from LA that morning, since he'd been up late talking with the police after the Leary raid. Ushered in by an androgynous, waif-like "friend of Rachel's," he entered a parlor of chrome art and neon sculpture, and windows looking out on San Francisco Bay. The android abruptly disappeared.

He heard a cat purring, and Rachel languidly moved into the room, her long bright red hair flowing around her shoulders, a slinky velvet white dress draped over her lithe body. Boris the calico cat followed from behind, suddenly pouncing into the center of the distance between them. "How do you do?" Rachel inquired imperiously, sounding like the wife of a politician.

The entrance had been quite dramatic. Contour croaked his reply. "Fine... Fine." He didn't elaborate; she already knew who he was. She motioned to a couch, and that's when he noticed the coffee table with props and brochures for the Smolder Foundation already in place, ready for use. He sat down and fingered the brochures.

"So, you want to know about the Smolder Foundation?" she asked sweetly, taking a seat opposite him on an office chair, and crossing her legs in the classic Sharon Stone style, offering a very brief glimpse up her nether regions, where, to Contour's surprise, there was nothing but darkness, no hint of undergarment.

Contour looked up, obviously distracted. "Uh —" he reached for his pocket notebook, but now his balance was lost. "Yes. I'm interested in knowing who the investors are." *Interested in knowing, ugh.*

"You can get that information right from our Web site." She said it so cheerily with a voice that could have been recorded for a company receptionist's voicemail.

"Yeah..." He was floundering, sweating. This was most unusual for him. He struggled for some composure. "Well, I'm really interested, ah... That is, I mean, my paper wants to do a story on your, ah... foundation. But we need some background information, and that's part —"

"I understand," she said, this time with a warmer, huskier voice. "What you really want to know is, why did my husband Rob commit suicide." She smiled at him, full force. There was no telling what was behind that smile.

Contour looked away to regain his composure, and searched the room for familiar items. On the wall were several rare posters of the Beatles. "So Rob was a Beatlemaniac. Which was his favorite Beatle?"

The question caught her off guard. "I don't know... I guess John. Yeah, I think it would have to be John Lennon."

"It hit me hard when Lennon was shot," said Contour, quietly, almost to himself. Then he turned to Rachel, who was still momentarily flustered. "Lots of people think Rob didn't commit suicide. They think that maybe he faked it."

"You mean he's alive? Somewhere?"

"You tell me."

Rachel stared at him open-mouthed. Then she realized it was all a game to this journalist. She closed her mouth, crossed her arms, and looked away. "It's not polite to talk like that."

"I'm sorry, Ms. — er, Mrs. Smolder, I don't mean to frighten you. It's just that Rob was involved in many things, some of which may have involved criminal activities, and maybe he had a reason to want to disappear."

"Like what?" She was indignant.

"Like Charlie O'Brien and the Pot Page, for example."

Her eyes flashed at the mention of O'Brien, and Contour couldn't help but notice it. "I know Charlie, but I don't know what you're talking about."

Contour frowned at her. "You didn't know that Rob and some of his other rich friends, Mort Gill and Peter Moaning, were financing some kind of software development effort to give the Pot Page some kind of encryption to protect it from the law?"

She put on an act of bewilderment. "It sounds all too fantastic."

"I think it's bigger than that," said Contour. "I've heard rumors of something called the Other Internet. Ever heard of that?"

"Sounds like a joke. A Deadhead, quoting from the song, 'That's It for Other One', like the name of the post-Dead band, the Other Ones."

"Doesn't sound like a joke to me, Mrs. Smolder. Porn and gambling sites that were just starting to thrive are mysteriously disappearing. I heard some of them were put out of business, but I also heard that some of them recently came into a lot of money, and were closing down to make a move to a larger installation, a-and a new network."

"I wouldn't know anything about that," she replied, the smile freezing on her face. Then shaking her head, and with a coy shrug and a Southern belle accent, she said, "I really don't know much about porn and gambling."

Dead end. He had fumbled this interview badly, giving away information without getting any. "So... what are the goals of the Smolder Foundation?" His voice held a lot of reverb, as if he were at one end of a tunnel watching himself perform at the other end. He used her lengthy, rehearsed response to regain some composure. He didn't have to actually write anything down, as this part of the interview could be cut and pasted from the Foundation's Web page. The gist of it was that the Foundation raised money from large companies like Aggregate Networks to fund technology grants to colleges and universities. It was a great gig, a kind of institutionalization of Rob's fund-raising skills, with an unending supply of cash flow.

After Contour left, Rachel Smolder placed a call to Ted Anson at Rumor Central.

* * *

At Rumor Central, the late Rob Smolder's production office in the South of Market area of San Francisco, a half-dozen employees were working around the clock, bookmarking Web pages with stories about Smolder, flagging for special treatment those with photos and images from Smolder's projects, and writing statements of fact to counter the thousands of rumors that had piled up. They were also keeping track of attempts, at least once an hour — there goes another one — to divert official site traffic to rogue sites, some of them nearly perfect counterfeits.

It was a war of hackers against hackers, and the effect was to amplify the rumors rather than quell them. Perhaps that was the point. The official line was that Rob Smolder had jumped and the body was simply not recovered, and that we all must go on with our lives. The public wasn't buying it.

A spiky-haired young man with a cafe latte stain on his madras shirt jumped up from his PC. "Man!" he exclaimed to no one in particular. "I just put it out there, and it was gobbled up like *that*," he snaps his fingers, "like some kind of precious gem. The story was there for about five seconds..." He looked around the room for recognition, and paused for effect. That worked — everyone was now looking at him. "Five fucking seconds! And it suddenly appeared on at least ten other sites. Now it's on at least 300!"

"The pace is staggering," remarked one woman at a PC in a deadpan tone, still typing away.

"We're well past Internet time," said another worker. "Used to be, not long ago, you had to put out a revision twice a day. *That* was Internet time."

Rumors that were constantly battled by this crew fell into several camps, and each camp had at least one fact finder, one Web analyzer, and one storyteller. The Personal Problems Camp had to deal with everything from notes in Rob's supposed diary linked to Webomber attacks, to rumors that he had AIDS and was seen with a hooker not less than one week before his radical departure. The hooker thing was especially pernicious, as the rumormonger was adamant, extremely stubborn, wouldn't even accept free Smolder Foundation merchandise. One wisecracker on the team joked that Rob himself, in exile, was the source.

The Drug Dementia and Conspiracy Theories Camp answered rumors with fantasies rather than facts, assuming the readership would recognize common sense lurking within. One persistent fantasy involved inept enforcement-agency thugs chasing benevolent, conscientious pot smokers. Another had a desperate Rob holding hands at ecstasy parties, singing the Dave Matthews song,

*Twenty-three I'm so tired of life
Such a shame to throw it all away*

The images grow darker still

Could I have been anyone other than me?

— Dave Matthews Band, “Dancing Nancies” (Dave Matthews)

The Business-as-usual Camp took all serious rumors in stride, claiming that Rob Smolder was an excellent fundraiser and never would have had a reason to declare bankruptcy, and so on. It offered links to his flourishing projects, although the link to the Pot Page and the Indian casinos in Mendocino County were inactive.

The Humor-us Camp had posted on its bulletin board the ten most popular ideas for how Rob Smolder faked his suicide, presented in David Letterman “top ten” fashion:

10. He threw a dummy over the railing (as told by Letterman’s sidekick, Paul Schaffer, typically grinning from ear to ear).

Letterman: For some reason, no one saw him carrying the dummy — perhaps it was inflatable, but no one saw him inflate it. No one saw him throw it over, either. Whaddaya think, Paul, you’re a dummy, you should know, right? (I dunno, sez Paul).

9. He used a bungee cord (as told by actor Jack Palance while doing one-armed pushups).

Letterman: A bungee cord would be an incredible feat of athletic skill. He must have had an accomplice to rescue him from the water. Jack, was it you? (At that point he puts on a video of Jack Palance rescuing someone from the bay.)

8. Simple, he used mirrors (as told by comedian Jerry Seinfeld).

Letterman: There is, of course, a meticulously annotated diagram that goes along with the mirrors theory, very hard to decipher in most browsers. (He flashes that gap-toothed grin.)

7. Obviously the video is a fake (as told by Pamela Anderson Lee from a beachfront house in Malibu).

Letterman: Later it was learned that both the beach scene and the Pamela Lee spot were both fakes staged by the Media Liberation Army. (He flashes that gap-toothed grin again.)

6. *He* is a fake, a clone (as told by actor David Duchovny of the X-Files).

Letterman: Later it was learned that all the episodes of the X-Files were, in fact, fakes staged by the Media Liberation Army, and David Duchovny is actually a clone of a young Claude Raines. (Letterman looks pained, no one laughed; must be too complex. Fire those writers in Dubuque!)

5. He jumped, then walked on water (as told by televangelist Pat Robertson).

Letterman: So whaddaya think, Paul, you want to jump on the next comet that comes by? (I dunno, sez Paul, laughing, as Letterman throws the index card into the stage backdrop and everyone hears a crashing window sound effect).

4. His wife Rachel was there to catch him in her lap (as told by talk-show host Bill Maher).

Letterman: Whoah-oh-woah! She's a hot one, eh, Paul? A hot redhead? (Ah hah! laughs Paul).

3. He was caught by some Indians in a rowboat, and off they went to Alcatraz (as told by actor Marlon Brando in a bathrobe).

Letterman: Now that's a lame one, just what you'd expect from the home office in Outoftheway, South Dakota. (I dunno, sez Paul).

2. He's such a flat-out-*bleeping* nerd that he hacked his way out of San Francisco Bay (as told by singer Courtney Love).

Letterman: (Raised eyebrow.) Could this be the answer to life's problems? Just hack your way out? And who let her on this show? (I dunno, sez Paul).

And finally, the number one way for Rob Smolder to have faked his suicide, as told by actor Patrick Stewart in full costume as the Captain of the Starship Enterprise:

1. It was all a dream on a holodeck. Oh, I'm sorry, I thought you said "faxed" his suicide...

[Band starts up with uptempo number as the audience applauds...]

Rumor Central was, of course, funded by the Foundation, which had just secured a bridge loan from an anonymous group of Silicon Valley executives led by Ted Anson, who had started the ATA Fund (Alternatives To Aggregate) to help startups in the Valley compete with the giant from Seattle. He was also noted for his passion for liberal peace politics and freedom of encryption. Anson acted in board meetings as Rachel's proxie, and signed the checks.

A power broker in standard blue blazer and chinos, tall and gaunt with more than a slight resemblance to Paul Kantner of the Jefferson Airplane, Ted Anson could be both authoritative and disarming. Friend of the stars, he seemed to be looking out for Rachel's interests for no financial gain for himself. Anson had found ways for the Foundation to make a considerable return on its investment in Rumor Central. He had built a solid organization, and had lined up relationships with advertisers and other content providers. An imminent feeling of "coming together" permeated the workplace, causing employees to routinely call home to say they'd be late, working at all hours, slapping each other on their backs for jobs well done.

Anson was honing this organization for something that would benefit not only the Foundation and its public and private ventures, but also benefit himself. He had taken at least one month from his busy schedule to do it. The IPO madness of the Millenium had made him very rich, and he'd cashed a lot of it before the dot-com bomb and the 9-11 disaster. He prided himself on knowing how to play the game of life, which was not, as many suspected, like chess — with fixed turns and appropriate moves. No, the game was more like poker, saddled with superstition and changes of luck, in which you had to know when to raise, when to fold, how to bluff, and how to hide an ace up your sleeve. Due to his own colleagues' risk-averse strategies in these troubled times, there was less money available for new ventures, reducing growth the way a snake might eat its own tail. As everyone at the poker game decides to hold, he may decide to raise the stakes.

Anson was at Rumor Central that night writing checks when the alarm went off, signaling that the Smolder site had once again been hacked and diverted. He was curious about the mechanism of how outsiders could do this kind of diversion. A project leader told him something about the security of domains and methods of counterfeiting IP addresses. Anson took sparse notes, and within minutes he was talking into his cell phone again, talking to someone named Drew, about something called the C-Dome Project. Later he assured the project leader, "I've made a connection to another venture, they're doing some new things involving site security. We'll get together for a meeting sometime tomorrow." Anson said this last sentence to close down the conversation; his mind was already working on something else.

Using a cell phone was a momentary lapse of reason for the security-conscious Anson. Cell phones are notoriously open to interception. Even Anson's PowerBook, sitting on a makeshift desk at Rumor Central and plugged into the lab's Ethernet, had been compromised within an hour of his arrival.

* * *

Not just the FBI; another shadowy group had also recorded just about everything that transpired while Anson was there.

“Did you get the entire conversation?” Andy Ames, in bright Japanese floral shirt and khakis, asked his sound technician in the back of the van. Ames looked like he just stepped out of a marketing convention, which he in fact actually had, a tradeshow on Internet advertising.

“Got it all,” said the technician, a burly, gruff, bearded fellow by the name of Dan Rose, from Menlo Park. Ames didn’t really trust Rose, and worked with him only because he was recommended by his client.

“Including the one with Rachel?” Ames was referring to Anson’s quick conversation with Rachel Smolder.

“Yes, the whole thing.” Rose had a defiant throaty voice, like a carpenter or plumber who hasn’t yet presented his bill. “Don’t know why you want it though.”

“Anson is one smart dude,” said Ames. “A lot of people hang on every word he says.” He was still unsettled about the operation, and moved back to see for himself, as if by staring at the filename on the screen, he had proof of the sound track’s existence.

“Ahhh,” Rose snorted, “he sure looks the part. But you don’t have to be a rich guy to be smart in this business. I know people who are a lot smarter, who know things way before this guy knows ‘em.”

“Doesn’t matter what people know,” Ames replied. “What matters is what people *do*. And this guy Anson has a major influence on what people do.”

“Yeah, well,” Rose said resignedly, “that *is* unfortunate.”

“Let’s get it up to the server, right away.” Ames tried to sound like an authority figure but was aware of his pipsqueak voice. Rose grunted and went about the task. Ames went to the front of the van, and once again looked through the binoculars at the FBI van, most probably monitoring the same conversations. Ames and Rose hadn’t been spotted, yet. All was well.

* * *

That same evening Eric Mauer learned more about the Leary raid that had occurred the night before. He’d received ICE-d email from Charlie and Tinker, telling him to lay low. Eric no longer trusted this version of ICE, since talking to Mort Gill about the back-door custom jobs. But he knew where the technology was going. Laid out before him, in his mind’s eye, was a simulation of the complete Internet, more like a battlefield than a grid, with fortresses that control intersecting backbones. There were exactly 19 of these fortresses, but only five were required for the plan to secretly insert camouflaged “hooks” into the very infrastructure of the Internet. The “hooks” allowed the new version of ICE on each server to connect directly to the Internet and implement a new, impenetrable layer of encryption, enabling the OtherNet to piggyback the real Net.

Five insertion points — five control points for “conduits” to use to change the encryption keys. These conduits are supposedly uncorruptable. And yet, this uncensored, totally protected network is far too useful to organized crime, terrorists, and rogue nations to remain uncorrupted.

*Architects may come and
Architects may go and
Never change your point of view.*

— Simon & Garfunkel, “So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright” (Paul Simon)

This plan will fail, Eric reasoned, unless he could arrange to make himself something like a super-conduit — in effect, policing the other four conduits by default. Wouldn't that be a corruption of Gill's plan for power-sharing and equal protection? Only if they could get to Eric. And they could never get to Eric, because Eric was a modern-day Knight, of an order devoted to the ancient mysteries that saved Earth's culture once before... and his bloodline demanded him to save it again.

He once again made a visual sweep of the Redwood City neighborhood street outside his window, up to the main drag. The apartment building was well hidden. Gooky Karma was still snickering in a Webcam window on his screen.

"Those G-men must be tripping over their ancient surveillance equipment," Gooky was going on. "We got away from Leary's so easily."

Eric frowned, and put his face back in view of his own Webcam, to fill a window on Gooky's screen. "Don't bet on it being that easy. They must have wanted you to escape."

"It's like, don't they have their hands full with *real* terrorists?"

"It's been a hard year," said Eric. "They suffered a lot of criticism."

"Yeah well, wait'll see how far ahead of them we're gonna be with our new content sucking machine!" Gooky burst out in a geeky laugh, which in some cases spewed saliva, so Eric instinctively recoiled, even though Gooky was on video and the spittle could not travel through the Net.

"Wanna play Maze Love?" Eric was terse. Maze Love was typically used for totally encrypted conversations.

“Sure.” And within a minute both were jacked into a shared encrypted 3D room with scans of their faces pasted on top of animated characters. The setup allowed any two people to share this space and converse in private without anyone noticing, sitting at opposite ends of Silicon Valley in their respective offices, glued to their displays and keyboards, with headphones and throat microphones if necessary. Gooky in particular could mutter very quietly under his breath, unheard above the drone of the computers and video games loudly playing in the background of the game company where he worked at night. Connected like this, protected by the latest encryption software, they could even sit and compare source code, look at 3D objects and textures, test simulations, and so on, inside this 3D room, without ever leaving their locations or speaking above a whisper. Indeed, they were safer here than in a room or cubicle that could be bugged. As if the Cone of Silence, a joke from the 1960s TV series *Get Smart* had finally been implemented correctly.

Eric’s face appeared with a pirate captain’s body aboard a tiny sailing ship, the floor of the room awash in day-glo suds. Gooky’s face appeared on a puppy dog icon, straddling a floating log.

Eric spoke first, his avatar waving a pirate flag. “You sent the Epistle to Dippy?” The voice sounded a bit synthesized; the speech was encrypted and then reconstructed.

Gooky replied, using the agreed-upon Donovan-inspired code words for their objects. “Yep, the Hurdy Gurdy Man is singing his songs of love.” The puppy dog wagged its tail. The waters went still, then disappeared. They were underground, in a cave with walls of solid rock.

“How about the Super Lungs?” Eric’s avatar, still in pirate garb, waved a wand to display an animation of a subway tube, trains coming and going, and in the middle, a yellow membrane of some kind that each train went through without even slowing down, like a

thin slice of water, but leaving no trace of wetness on the trains. A membrane collecting information on each train that passed.

“Mellow yellow. Working. There is a mountain,” Gooky replied, meaning a mountain of data, as he demonstrated with a mountain of trash piled high and on fire, changing the environment to a night-time industrial park on the edge of a ghetto. A train went by on an elevated line past the park.

“Next stop Sunny South Kensington,” said Eric, in a mock London accent that probably did not make it through the compression algorithms. At that point, both switched to a new section of the source code, indicated by a sudden change of the environment to an ordinary room, with the “wall paper” switching from deep blue to the psychedelic swirls of a popular screen saver, interspersed with video clips from last year’s primary elections. A typical work space. The talk switched to the administration object that wasn’t working, and stayed there for at least another hour.

* * *

Cheney kept an eye on the monitors. Gooky’s workplace had been suitably bugged and Cheney now had a copy of the latest ICE, direct from Mort Gill. Cheney knew Gill was working both sides of this particular fence, as Gill made no secret of it. Gill wanted to spread ICE no matter what. Cheney didn’t care one way or the other, as long as the software trail led to the real terrorists, the one whose contact was Grogan from Amsterdam. At this point he had evidence of a connection between the Pot Page people, who were mostly harmless, and the Amsterdam pot distributor, who had a connection with Grogan. But Gill would never deal directly with terrorists. Somehow, some version of ICE was in Grogan’s hands, and Cheney needed to be on an even footing, with the capability to crack the encryption through his own custom back door.

He hadn't told his boss any of the details. The top brass cared passionately about clamping down on domestic encryption, and would have wanted Gill and the others arrested immediately. With automatic steganography on the loose, the FBI had quickly swung into action with reports and documentation, and agents were expecting terrorists to hide maps and photographs of targets in ordinary spam, in messages and pictures on pornographic bulletin boards, and even in Webcam streams. And who could possibly know what lurked within the 44.1 KHz samples recorded in 16 bits per sample for a song? Or whether the entire song might be, in some way, a key to another locked room?

His agents dutifully copied byte by byte all of Gooky's activities since they'd identified him as a player at the Leary party. They had a transcript of the Webcam conversation with Eric Mauer, who had eluded their field agents but was presumed to be somewhere on the Peninsula. They also had a huge mass of encrypted data, clearly the output of a game of some sort, with characters moving through 3D space, but indecipherable. Cheney told them to copy it all to his special isolated server. He went off to write his report. He could no longer hold off some kind of action against Mort Gill. Too bad, really, because Cheney understood where he was coming from.

* * *

Eric broke off communication with a final message to Gooky to end the simulation. Some kind of monitor was trying to attach itself to the encrypted data stream, tripping his silent alarm. He guessed that Gooky's line had been compromised. His Redwood City hideout was probably fine for at least a day or two, but not much longer.

The 3D room Eric and Gooky had cavorted in was a prototype of a full-blown commercial version Eric and Gooky had collaborated on and delivered to Peter Moaning for his first cyberclub a year ago, located temporarily in a SoMa warehouse. Eric slipped out of the apartment and headed off to a cheap hotel in S.F. He knew Gooky

would head up to the cyberclub. The parade of spies could easily pick up Gooky's trail on Highway 101, while hotshot hacker-jocks from the FBI's intelligence wing waited in cyberspace. Eric's choices were narrowing but he knew he'd be safer on the move, implementing his own Plan B, which involved switching hotels often and using the computing facilities at coffeehouses and Kinko's shops.

* * *

As soon as Gooky pulled out of the company parking lot, his fantasy kicked in. Something shattered his windshield, and then he heard the *thwup* of something hitting glass. Whatever it was, it had travelled faster than sound, and before he even heard it, shards of glass fell all over him and his cringing passenger. He pivoted his Aston-Martin to the right, using its "turn on a dime" feature, and aiming up the street at the black Mercedes, he pounded his missile firing button. The Mercedes blew up in a bright orange flare and metallic debris flew out of the thick rising cloud of smoke. His passenger, a twentysomething thin blonde woman with a really thin nose was screaming in an erotic frenzy. He gunned the motor and accelerated to 80 mph, approaching the intersection. Out of nowhere motorcycles swarmed around his car, each of them carrying a shooter with an automatic rifle. Bullets splayed across the sunroof and nicked large holes in the rear window. He suddenly jammed on the brakes, causing one cycle to crash into his rear bumper and sending both the driver and his machine-gunning passenger over the top of the car and bouncing off the front hood. His fast move left the cycles in the dust, and he careened the Aston-Martin left onto a dirt road shortcut that would put him back on the Lawrence Expressway heading out toward the Interstate. Except that he hadn't expected a land mine. It blew out his right front tire, and now he was nearly losing control of the vehicle, slowing down to about 60 mph, and he was far more vulnerable for attack. And sure enough, it came from above. A Nighthawk chopper, vintage Tet Offensive, but armed with heat-seeking missiles, now hovering just ahead.

The scene shimmers in the afternoon sunlight, then dissolves into white. Just another daydream in the life of the Vigilante Driver. Gooky Karma was all hyped up after his session with Eric, because the Work itself was now in jeopardy. The Work not just any type of work; this was the work of the century, the ultimate simulation, and he worked for the ultimate game developer in Silicon Valley. A jovial, red-haired, wiry-thin thirtysomething nerd known for his wizardry in virtual reality world building, Gooky was obsessed with this idea of the Vigilante Driver, who blows away stupid drivers who slow him down or otherwise get in his way while he tries to reach his destination and dodge the missiles, torpedos, and bullets of numerous enemies.

Gooky's friend Tinker had even written him a script for a game version, beginning with the initial encounter with the impatient driver, in which you take on the personality. You have to decide what you are steamed about — various optional pressures coming to bear on you including your job, your wife, your drinking and drugging buddies, and a long list of personal and business failures, that led you to the pivotal moment in your life, the moment you strapped the high-tech battle gear on your exquisite European car. Now you could shoot out all four tires of that fat-assed, gas-guzzling, slo-mo SUV full of religious zealots blocking your way on that country road; swiftly mount an alarming police beacon to pull over that old man in a hat (and how often have you wanted to do *that?*); cunningly lay down an oil slick in a wide fan behind you, to keep the CHP 'suckers slipping. You become hell on wheels, the nemesis of bad drivers. *You are the Vigilante Driver!* You take out your self-righteous Aggression on the Road! Next stop Yosemite...

Gooky has been thinking of world levels for this game. One level would be in San Francisco's Chinatown. A box pops up with a message about DWC, as in "driving while Chinese," or WAC, as in "without a clue", or OMaHa, as in "an old man in a hat". Five points each, for taking out someone DWC or WAC; twenty bonus points for hitting an OMaHa. Another level would be, natch, Silicon Valley,

between Highway 101 and Interstate 280, using 85, 17, and the Guadalupe Parkway as crossovers. Lots of targets, especially fat middle-aged wives in station wagons filled with kids and dogs, cut-in-front-and-screch asshole engineers in BMWs and Jaguars trying to get somewhere just a bit faster, rich handsome suits in Mercedes talking on mobile phones...

Of course, it would also have to have its space-station race, desert derby, and ghetto riot. Marketing, y'understand. Gotta have the stuff people want. But he would also have to put in the Alpine Roadhog, riding the crests of the Santa Cruz Mountains on one lane roads, passing everyone you see... And he'd have to put in the Nuke the DMV level. Nuke Caltrans. Nuke the CHP. Hell, Nuke Southern California.

Lost in thoughts like these, his crusty Mitsubishi sped along at 65 on Highway 101 past the decrepit, crack-ridden, nicotine-stained slum-dwellers of East Palo Alto on one side, and the anxious, energy-conscious nonsmoking Stanford grads of Palo Alto on the other. Past the billboard showing a beer-bellied white-trash garbage collector throwing off his gloves and the message "Someone will Win the Lottery; Just Not You — It's Time for E*STOCK." He didn't notice the red lights in his rearview for at least a minute or two, and by then, the siren was howling.

The C-Dome

High up in the Santa Cruz Mountains; near Loma Prieta, east of Soquel, home of the Doobie Brothers, the place where they spent their youth; on the perimeter of Silicon Valley, just a few miles from the lecture hall at U.C. Santa Cruz (the “Cruz”) where Margaret Mead’s husband Gregory Bateson introduced the Sixties generation to cybernetics and feedback systems; off the heavily wooded road where Neal Cassady once careened and zigzagged in a spark-sputtering, backfiring Buick every week to visit his ex-wife; and right up the blossoming hill from the farm where his buddies the Merry Pranksters staged one of the first acid tests... Here, then, was a hive of busy longhaired freaks running from keyboard to keyboard in bare feet, cats scampering across the floors and raising clouds of dust that settled on various flowcharts scrawled across three white boards, which if put together represented a blueprint for a totally secure, encrypted network. The C-Dome, named for the area dubbed as “Cyberia”, and it’s an honest-to-god geodesic, so Bucky Fuller would be proud indeed.

They worked not in secret but in obscurity, confining their results to code that worked with one of the more obscure operating systems. They could work on the core technology and let someone else take the risk of porting it to popular platforms on the open market. Markets! What did these genius hackers care about markets? They didn’t need no stinkin’ markets! Tofu sprouts, cat litter, “blueberry” sinsemilla buds, Jolt Cola, Phish CDs, and tantric sex oils — these were known quantities of known qualities. The other necessities, such as computer hardware, always seemed to just “show up”, on loan from some company. Software tools in the Open Source world were, in a word, *free*. These code monks shared the concept, or hallucination, of a “free market” as one in which everything is truly free. As in the Digger philosophy.

And yet, freedom is relative. There is always gravity to pull you down. There is always some logic for governments to consider encryption to be a form of weaponry. But Mort Gill agrees with Peter Moaning on this point: that encryption is more a form of subversion. All countercultures in history needed underground communications, alternate messaging systems, and new forms of the old-boy-networks.

Mort Gill makes the payroll for the C-Dome. They have recently finished a software module that authenticates domains. This security hole in the Internet had been scapegoated as the wormhole of terrorism. You think you are making a safe, innocent transaction at your banking site, but you are actually transferring your account to an unscrupulous counterfeit bank site, a mirror image right down to the face of the bank chairman and his message to the shareholders. Counterfeit sites were responsible for lost revenues at major retail sites. In other countries counterfeits wreaked havoc with propaganda sites, sabotaged treaties, dispersed armies, and sent death squads to the wrong addresses.

Which is *not* why Mort Gill was bankrolling this new level of security. His professed reason, precise and clear to anyone who visits his Web page, is to advance the cause of individual liberty. Is it not everyone's right to have secure messages and transactions, free of government scrutiny? The "intelligence" community a.k.a. law enforcement does not agree. Secure transactions, yes; but governments were organized precisely to scrutinize, to employ the busybodies of the world, the Nosy Few, They who Need to Know what it is You are Doing at any Moment.

You would think the C-Dome is in trouble here, at direct odds with the security forces of the most powerful government on Earth, but complacency impedes paranoia when you're nestled smugly in one of those peaceful, sun-collecting pockets of redwood forest that dot the Santa Cruz Mountains, with Jethro Tull on the box...

*Now there's revolution
But we don't know what we're fighting*
— Jethro Tull, "Living in the Past"

And if there are G-men in the bushes, who cares, they can read our flowcharts, they can implement as they see fit, because by its very nature, as Gill would explain at length if anyone asked, the technology can't be integrated with existing infrastructure without liberating it! How breathtaking — a revolutionary attachment, an ideological ice breaker, a piece of shareware that announces itself as "free" and seduces all the code around it, liberating code as it goes, a Johnny Appleseed of encryption and freedom. The code can only open up, it can't close down or obfuscate, nor could it be used for such nefarious purposes. So let them look.

And look they did. FBI video cameras whirred 24 hours a day, with live feeds to the NSA and CIA for parallel deconstruction, and then after a censor's interlude, over to the Pentagon for prototyping. All this espionage had merely served to illuminate the obvious: that homegrown encryption had arrived and was totally out of control. Back doors were already wide open, with only a hint of the surreptitiously fleeing lovers that had already compromised them.

"We have to make it easier for the Pentagon propeller heads," said Drew Anatole, a bearish, overweight long-haired disciple of Gill, one of the lead programmers in the C-Dome, as he adjusted the flexible chunk of flat white bathtub enclosure to lean it against the wall to use as a white board for today's talk. "Now they can see our diagrams through the window."

"What's the plan for today for The International Conspiracy of Encryption?" asked a gnomish, bearded, bespectacled man with long hair emanating from a bald spot on his crown.

"Today we lock and load, lock and load," said Drew.

“An apt metaphor, indeed,” said Mort Gill, sitting Buddha-like in the corner, legs folded in a yoga position, brown hair spilling out of his rainbow-knit cap, wry mustache and wispy beard not hiding but accentuating his mischievous grin. “We lock in the new ICE key, then load it onto the Net. You’ve all seen the effects of positive and negative feedback, and how it’s all just feedback, and that what we hear is not the actual signal but the amplification of that signal.”

The encryption software had been finished and in a beta test phase for weeks, with several major porn and gambling sites already using it, thanks to Eric Mauer, who served as a kind of scout with regard to distribution. With just a click, anyone with a browser could obtain the plug-in client, and use it to not only scramble the account and personal information to keep it sanitary for those prying marketing eyes, but also send and receive super-encrypted email that nothing, not even banks of NSA computers, could read. And, of course, it could lead you to new places on the Internet that were no longer truly on the Internet, supported by special servers on some level above the true Net, above the world of passwords and club memberships, way above government scrutiny. Landless, not bound by nations or laws. The major enabler of the “Other Internet” — whatever you think that might be.

They passed around the hat filled with little slips of paper, each containing a unique key for decoding the new encryption algorithm. It was a primary ritual for this group. Each person committed his or her key to memory, filling in the gaps with acronyms and phrases, eating the paper slip. No evidence, no way to crack the code, unless you were one of these chosen few. The new Conduits of the Encryption Age.

*Said the straight man to the late man
Where have you been?
I've been here and I've been there and
I've been inbetween*
— King Crimson, “I Talk to the Wind” (McDonald-Sinfield)

Lighting some incense, Drew asked Mort about his plans for that night. "Going back to the City," drawled Mort Gill, "the Discordant Society is having an event out on Ocean Beach. They're burning Christmas trees." Ah yes, just the sort of thing Mort Gill would be doing, attending some pagan ceremony, then going out for vegan Indian food, sweet ginger ice cream, mango lllasa, a walk through Golden Gate Park, swinging at the playground with some homeless children.

Incense swirled, the group huddled around Drew as he locked in the codes and loaded the software. In less than five minutes, the encryption software was up on the Internet, organically spreading to other harbor sites where it could turn itself loose on the unsuspecting public.

There was no stopping it. Not the crashing door, not the hatchet job on the T1 line, not the guns drawn. By the time the FBI had secured the control room and held Drew and Mort Gill at gunpoint, the rest of them had vanished into the nearby forest of hobbit-like crawlways through the dense underbrush. The forests of Cyberia led all the way to Silicon Valley and beyond.

* * *

People have their routines that get them up and about and ready to go to work. Tinker's routine did not vary just because, well, the *cops* seem to be after him. He had laid low for two days. Nothing had happened. So he got up early enough to sit on the couch with his kids and wake up to TV cartoons. This morning they were watching *Yellow Submarine* by the Beatles. They'd seen it only about 118 times. In fact, it was a staple of their belief systems.

Tinker and Charlotte had raised their kids without religion, but religion had found its way into their lives anyway, in the form of media. They decided to take a proactive approach, and taught their

children the most important laws of the universe: "All you need is love" from *Yellow Submarine*, and the Prime Directive from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which states that you should never, ever, interfere in the lives and the well-being of other sentient beings; or as Tinker put it, "Don't fuck with other cultures." Recently they had added a third law, really a synthesis of the first two, so the kids could explore feelings of heroism and treachery with clear examples of good and evil: the law of The Force, from *Star Wars*.

The Blue Meanies were retreating to the sound of music when his six-year-old yawned and asked him, "Daddy, who's God?"

Tinker was now wide-awake. "God is a concept, really, that represents the entire universe." This was going over his son's head. "God is a concept, by which we measure our pain," he quoted John Lennon and smiled at his son, just a joke, heh heh. But his son's look made him try again. "Remember when we talked once, about religion? We said that people believed in different rituals and personalities that they called gods, but that basically, we all believe in the same rights and wrongs."

His son just stared back at him.

"What it is, is, there are these laws that we live by, see, and everybody has a different interpretation of those laws, including where the laws came from, everybody believes something different about that, but basically, the laws are the same."

The kid thought about it for a moment. "You mean, like, the different churches in town, they're different inside but they're still churches?"

"Yes, good. Some people like to go to church, some people, like your mom and me, we like to go for a hike in the redwood forest. It's basically the same thing, we go into the forest to pray just like people go to church." This was essentially true.

“If they’re like different churches, then,” his son paused, his eyes flashing, “then it’s like when I play Sim City, and I start a new city. Each city is different but they have the same things like airports and subways.”

“You got it. A religion is like a city.”

“That’s why I save each new city,” he continued. “So that when I start up the computer again I can find the city and maybe continue building it.”

“Yes. Now let’s watch the show.”

But the cartoons were over, so Tinker found a show about archaeologists uncovering a lost civilization, and at that point in the show, the archaeologists had found a mysterious thousand-year-old temple with corners that were oriented exactly north, south, east, and west, with monuments laid out to form a map to a star cluster.

The show linked the mounds of Ireland, the Egyptian pyramids, the astronomy of the Incas, the statues of Easter Island, and the temple of Angkor Wat. Beliefs and systems had been wiped out by wars and new religions and sometimes by churches built right on top of the ruins of ancient shrines. Maybe religion is the most important form of entertainment, Tinker thought; maybe he was robbing his children from having what he himself had as a child: belief in a purpose in life, and in a grand reward after death. It didn’t matter that he’d rejected the Catholic religion and notions of a human-like God. He at least had had the luxury of having a system to reject.

His kids seemed to be embracing all forms of information with no critical eye and no reasons to reject anything. Tinker had grown up in the shadow of the Bomb, with the fear that everything might disappear in an instant. His kids were growing up in a world filled with random acts of terrorism that destroyed people and things but never really changed anything.

“So why did they build a church on top of the ruins? Didn’t they want to know about the ruins?” His son wanted to know, really, why they hadn’t done a “save as” on the ruins before building the new church.

“I guess not,” Tinker replied. “As Mark Twain once said, history doesn’t repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.”

Charlotte was up and about and already picking up dirty clothes to start a wash. Tinker crept guiltily from the couch to his laptop, fired it up, and collected email. Eventually she joined him in the living room, nearly fuming already with the weight of world and the lack of appreciation from her husband.

“Andrew, what are you going to do?” she asked Tinker pointedly. The trip to LA had been unexpected, to say the least. Then he’d spent two days moping around. Did he have an affair? Had he been rejected? Tip number three, a big tip that your spouse might be cheating, was any unexpected trips, and tip number 14 said something about days spent being depressed.

He looked up at her. “I have a job interview. Remember? Made the appointment two weeks ago.”

She frowned; unreasonable self-righteousness was yet another tip.

Tinker, once again clueless, returned to his email. One was an ICE-d message from Charlie.

Dude, the time has come. C-Dome is no more, Gill’s been arrested. Eric’s on the run. The only reason they haven’t got you yet is because you’re not as important right now. But don’t bet on that lasting. They’ll come get you, if only to make you a witness. If you want to join me, I’ll be at Rikki’s tonight. I’ll be gone by morning, so make up your mind.

Tinker sat back and almost cried. He looked up at Charlotte, his wordless expression enough to cause her to drop everything. So he had to tell her about the Leary raid, and now the C-Dome. While she knew some of these people, she hadn't yet made the mental leap to recognize the enormity of the situation.

"The fact is, I'm caught up in this and I didn't do anything. I mean, I just did my job, at Private Key, and as a result I'm a possible witness or something. I don't know what's going to happen."

"How can we go on living in fear like this?" She held her hands up to her face. Tinker got up quickly, and wrapped his arms around her.

"I know, I know," Tinker comforted her. "There's good reason to be scared. You know, for a while I just thought I was paranoid. But you know, this is actually better, knowing it's real, and it's not just me." He stopped, as this was doing Charlotte no good. He sat down while Charlotte continued to sob. Danger had never presented itself so palpably on this impossibly brilliant sunny morning in the redwood hills so far from civilization. Would they come through the door? He didn't have anything to hide except his old bong shaped as the head of Richard Nixon, a relic from the past, which they could have, really, if they want to make a federal case out of it... fine... Why would anyone care, really, that he liked to smoke pot every now and then? What else could they possibly hold against him? His own intelligence?

Tinker stood up and held Charlotte tightly. On the ridge, up there alone, they had sidestepped the mainstream carnage of life in the Valley, of dark ambitions and failed marriages, creeping anxiety and numbness. Somehow through the last decade they'd maintained roots in the hippie lifestyle, ignorant of how to manipulate the levers of stocks and investments while the Valley surged with wealth and then crashed. Now they existed only marginally, as a footnote on the history of the decade's economic turbulence. But they were true to themselves and their footprint on the Earth was minimal. He could

explain all this to a judge someday. Consorting with copyright thieves is easy to do these days, just go to any party in Hollywood or Silicon Valley...

"Are you gonna keep that appointment for the interview?" She looked up at him with moist, caring eyes.

"Yes, I have to," he said thickly. "It would look bad if I didn't." He disengaged from her embrace. "We have to go on like nothing's happened. Because, well, *nothing has* happened, really. Not to us."

"Not yet." She dropped her arms and paced around the room. "But it will. And when it does, what are we gonna do?"

"We're gonna be smart," said Tinker. "We're not gonna blow our tops. If we have to split, we'll take the kids and go to San Diego, to your mother's place. We can just take off for a while."

She stood still for a while, but eventually was drawn back to the kitchen and other tasks. It occurred to her that perhaps Andrew was inventing all this, to hide something else. Another tip from the spousal-cheating scorecard was to look out for elaborate, perhaps even outlandish, reasons for his abnormal behavior. As more tips added up to a high probability of a cheating spouse, she grew more despondent, just waiting for the next thing to happen.

Tinker got himself ready for the trip to the Valley. He changed his outfit from basic hill hippie to Silicon Valley suit. But this time he packed a suitcase of clothes and his laptop. He was thinking seriously about going up to the City and meeting Charlie. He just didn't know what to expect.

Dead Night

The afternoon grew ominous with petty aggravations. The merciless Sunnyvale sun blared through Tinker's dirty windshield like a chorus of Motown screamers through a scratchy speaker. He fought for a space between a car and a dirty truck as he merged with the freeway. It seemed that everywhere he drove there were cars moving aggressively toward him, threatening to cut him off, moving at terrific speeds down wide, clogged thoroughfares only a short distance to the next red light. It was unsettling. He felt so blithely inadequate down here, just another failure looking for a job, getting jostled and pushed around, no closer to the money flow than he was when he first learned of its tributaries. Maybe the world was just going past him. It was all too big now, millions of information workers, all of them younger.

What a great frame of mind to be in, to start a job interview. His Starbucks spilled over the lid, burning his wrist, leaving drops of coffee in the groin area of his neatly pressed slacks. He gathered up his briefcase and jacket, and crossed the sun-baked parking lot, just one of thousands of mini-mall parking lots spread out in the Valley, just one of thousands of valleys across the world paved over in asphalt and office buildings. A culture that had reached the limits of its influence; it could only retreat into pathetic caricature.

*I just gotta find a way
To get through another silly day
Without thinking about
Getting out.*

— David Crosby, "Traction in the Rain" (D. Crosby)

The interview had been exceedingly dull, held in a cement-and-steel office building near the junction of Highway 101 and North First. The

armpit of San Jose. Dull gray streets and sun-baked parking lots, a deli that looked like just another office building lobby, a Denny's, not much else. Nothing but highways and work.

The interview had gone sour when the project manager quizzed him on SOAP, J2EE, JavaBeans... A new alphabet soup for Tinker, who had hop, skipped and jumped over each new wave of high tech in the last two decades but now had somehow lost his momentum. He bluffed his way through the interview to get a free lunch, which unfortunately was brief. He hardly got a bite in before he had to explain why, after all these years in the exciting fields of tech journalism and multimedia, did he want to settle down and write documentation about wireless devices.

"Well, it's been a hard year." Why indeed? Could it be he had no choice? He was at heart a tech writer, and tech writers are expendable. As soon as computers became easy to use, Tinker could no longer make a living writing about how to use them. Engineers dreamed of making devices so easy that they don't need manuals. Tech writers typically came from the ranks of failed programmers. Tinker could see the pain on the face of the man who interviewed him, of years of disrespect for tech writers. The man had asked him to write an example in Java, and when Tinker resisted, he asked Tinker to explain a code fragment he'd hastily magic-markered on the white board. Tinker had swallowed hard and explained that his skills were in getting the information out of programmers, not in reading the code itself. The man registered the pain of working on the fringes of the priesthood, silently rebuking Tinker for not having progressed further, whacking Tinker's self-esteem in the process.

How am I supposed to know

What's for real and what's for show?

— Flying Other Brothers, "Tell Me It's OK" (R. McNamee)

On Highway 101 heading north, Tinker interrupted his feeling sorry for himself and swerved just in time to avoid another car ablaze in

the right lane. Was this becoming a trend? The freeway shot north through the smoggy, diesel-fueled industrial corridor linking the Valley with San Francisco. As he approached the City, the cars seemed to move a little faster, switch lanes without the slightest warning, make dive-bomb runs for exits. San Francisco was an edgier place than the Valley, more like an East Coast city; so much so that it seemed logical to have to take more risks while traveling through it. Agitation rose in waves from the City's skyline.

Tinker found Charlie outside at Rikki's, a favorite bar that often held Grateful Dead tape nights. He followed Charlie through the sweating dread-locked dancers, neatly sidestepping a portly fortyish twirling couple in tie-dye, back to a line of seats behind the pool table. Up front the crowd was reeling and rocking to Dead tapes. DJ St. Stephen played rare live recordings from the band's early years.

"Moaning is set up in Jamaica," Charlie started, "And we wanna be there with him."

"But Moaning's a maniac," countered Tinker. "He has a habit of ripping people off."

"I know, I know. He even did it to *me*," explained Charlie. "I helped him set up that whole Web news operation last year. I even brought him Eric Mauer and other heavy hitters. Ahh... he just fucked us all."

"How's that?"

"Like it's usually done," said Charlie. "We go in, spec out the contract for the software, and he pays us up-front to get started. So we get into it, I had to put in new servers at my place to support the effort, yada-yada and, y'know, we get to a point where he just wants everything different, everything changed..."

"He's a maniac," offered Tinker.

“Right. He wants to follow a plan, then he changes the plan. He gets up at 4 a.m. and takes a deep breath of his rich life, and then he changes things.”

“And he harasses you until you do things his way.”

“That’s right. He’s always looking over your shoulder, always criticizing. He doesn’t want to hear anything. If you have any ideas you keep your mouth shut. He’s impossible to work for.”

“It’s a wonder he can still operate, with so many programmers burned.”

“Actually, if you look at his commercial operation,” explained Charlie, “he keeps hiring young ones, right out of college, or people who don’t know his history. I mean, how many of these hotshot programmers stay around working for Moaning? I know of only one guy who’s stayed with him for more than a year, and he’s pretty abnormal, anyway. I mean Troy Sultan.”

“Whaddaya mean, what’s wrong with him?”

“I mean the guy dresses up in women’s clothes and puts out pictures on the Internet,” said Charlie, laughing. “Moaning’s got him working on something special, and he must have cut him a deal.”

“Or the guy *likes* to be treated that way.”

“Anyway, Moaning didn’t pay us, refused to pay us in the end, and it was for about three months work, maybe 15 grand.”

“Geez,” Tinker wheezed, immediately depressed. Moaning owed *him* only \$5,000, which he had promised to pay. “What did you do?”

“What could I do?” Charlie arched his eyebrows. “I had no paperwork. It was all a verbal agreement.”

"I guess I'm in the same boat," said Tinker. "He told me if I'm not willing to work for him with an agreement over the phone, then I'm not capable of working for him from home. He put me on the spot and I agreed to work for him without paper."

"Yep," said Charlie, sadly. "That's the way it's done. And you can't sue without getting it on paper first."

"But you work with him again and again," said Tinker. The rowdy song ended and the dancing people, and most of the people at the bar, turned to face the DJ booth to applaud as if it were the stage of a live Dead concert. Embarrassing, yes... but they needed to applaud something. The Dead had long ago disbanded with the death of Jerry Garcia, but these folks went right on clapping at the DJ booth, their visions of Jerry and Phil and Bobby and the rest of them appearing right before their eyes on the windows of the booth.

"Yes. I'll let you in on a secret." Charlie leaned close. "Moaning agreed to fund my porn site, which kept me going for nearly a year."

"So you got something out of him."

"Then he shut it down, since he also controls the service provider. *He* was the one who shut it down, not the Feds."

Tinker just stared back, uncomprehending.

"It's just that, well, we're moving our operations," said Charlie. "Moaning is fronting it again. The OtherNet is taking root in an offshore location. Jamaica."

"So... So that's where you're going?" asked Tinker as the applause subsided.

“Why not? I got him to pay me an advance, and I’ll *be* there. Y’know, you *have* to do business with one or another of these assholes, and Moaning’s is the only game in town.”

The DJ had put on a very rare live version of the Dead’s “Cream Puff War” and nearly everybody was up and dancing. “Wait a minute now, whatcha doin’ with your time?” Jerry sang. Indeed. Why not jump on the bandwagon? Later, over pizza, Charlie outlined the deal. Moaning had said he wanted Tinker in the project anyway. Moaning already had several C-Dome veterans, numerous others, an angel investor from Sand Hill Road — “You know him, Ted Anson” — and so on. But the clincher was Charlie.

“We got to do this together. Just like old times. Remember back in high school, we’d trip out and listen to that album, what was it... Jefferson Starship, *Blows Against the Empire*. Remember that? Hijacking a starship?”

“I still have it, the LP version, which has all that stuff on the sleeve and the insert.” The lyrics, mostly written by Paul Kantner, were about hijacking a future starship and turning it into a latter-day Noah’s Ark for “cooks, dancers, energy centers, astral navigators; experts in explosives, wave mechanics, laser technics, atomic and trionic physics, labrian tantronics, telemetry; telepaths, machinists, chemists, woodworkers, physicians, craftsmen, poets, artists, recording engineers, moon pair, & particularly people who don’t have any idea what they’re all about.” The record sleeve told all those who were interested, “... you will not be contacted immediately. Please just prepare your minds and bodies. Experiment — move your mind.”

Hijack the starship!

Carry seven thousand people past the sun

Our babes will wander naked through the cities of the universe...

— Jefferson Starship, “Hijack” (Paul Kanter, Grace Slick, Marty Balin)

“You will not be contacted immediately,” said Charlie, laughing.
“Well, that’s certainly true. We had to be chased by the FBI first, not even knowing why.” He laughed again.

“Remember that record shop?” Tinker was getting into the spirit of this adventure. Years earlier, in their last year in high school together, they’d worked a summer in a record store in the Samson Street area of Philadelphia, their hometown. That’s where Charlie dreamed up the idea of printing flyers and putting them all around the city, announcing the formation of the Philly chapter of the Starship Foundation, quoting liberally from the booklet and sleeve notes of *Blows Against the Empire*. Recruiting the hipsters for the next millennium conquest. Signing up names for the record store’s mailing list. That’s how Eric Mauer, living in Philly at that time, came to find them in the store, following a poster’s directions.

“And Eric walked in, thinking it was real,” Charlie laughed.

“I know! He was so serious...”

Charlie gave him a look. “Eric’s with us now. He’s on the run, but he can’t leave the country yet. He says he has a job to do here, and I believe him. He’s on our side.”

The Starship Foundation had been Tinker’s first taste of escapism. Charlie had engineered it. Now he would step out of his past life and join Charlie in some new, unimagined present. They were going to hijack some new starship.

At first, I was iridescent...

And then Tinker remembered where he’d seen that line before. Not just on the *Blows Against the Empire* album. Rob Smolder! His last words. This was all connected somehow. Tinker was almost certain that Smolder was still alive.

“Which side is that?” asked Tinker. It was a valid question. Who, really, was on Tinker’s side?

“Mort Gill is making a deal with the government,” said Charlie. “He’s going to show them how to crack ICE. In return, he gets out, along with Drew Anatole.”

This took a moment to sink in. With C-Dome veterans loose in the world, setting up new encryption systems the government can’t crack, what was Gill doing working *for* the government? “I don’t get it. Which side is Gill on?”

“He’s his own side, all his own,” said Charlie with a knowing smile. “He doesn’t want the tools that can destroy the Internet in the hands of the wrong people. Not until he’s got enough of the new encryption stuff out there.”

“He can’t hurt the MLF? What about all those plans they have? Those plans Moaning talked about, with Rachel.”

“Rachel’s too hot. They think Rob Smolder is alive, and somehow behind the Webomber. You read the latest? The Webomber struck a bank, man. Wells Fargo, the branch in Woodside.”

“Shit, that’s my bank!”

“Well, maybe it’s bad news, and maybe it’s good! Didja owe any money? You could probably argue them down.”

Tinker was essentially broke, so perhaps it was good news. He could disavow any of the checks that hadn’t cleared yet. Maybe just withdraw as much cash as he could... “Say, are the ATMs working?”

“Probably not,” said Charlie, “but you could try. Look. There’s a flight tomorrow morning out of SFO to Minneapolis. Don’t ask why Minneapolis. Moaning bought electronic tickets. You just show up,

outside at baggage claim, and use the automated boarding pass machine. Just bring carry-on, no luggage. Then all you do is show your ID at the gate, and when you get inside the plane, that's where you'll find me. Departure's at 8:30."

They split up outside. Tinker walked the streets of the lower Haight, past hookers, crackheads, dealers, and students from UCSF slumming in neighborhood cafés and bars. There was nothing left for him to do. Moaning's project could just as well be the logical climax to his life. He wanted to slam the door impulsively on his past, and shed every last bit of clothing, aspirations, life. To break the bleak pattern of his life. It was a night made for hard thoughts. Sharp, single stars pierced the blackness, with no sweep of friendly light, no comfort of a Milky Way. Just single, chilled points of light, as unromantic as sharp knives. And there, in the black sky, a knife heading straight for him.

Tinker decided not to dodge it. He owed it to himself to meet this crisis head-on. He had been stranded in some kind of spiritual cul-de-sac, with the whole world converging elsewhere. It was time for him to step out. The ATM was still working, so he took out as much as he could. It occurred to him that perhaps the Webomber had hit this bank on purpose, just for him. But it couldn't be related. Nothing like that, nothing that momentous, had ever happened to him before.

* * *

It's just as well that Tinker took the money, thought Andy Ames as he watched Tinker walk away from the ATM. He'd been shadowing Tinker since Rikki's, and he also noticed the FBI suits that had been following Tinker, but was sure the suits hadn't noticed *him*. What a bitch, and what a stroke of luck. The FBI had just slapped a lien on Tinker's funds to keep Tinker from traveling. Son of a bitch, not two hours later, the Webomber struck that very same bank, coincidentally removing the lien. It was as if a guardian angel watched over Tinker, giving him just what he needed to get away.

Ames' client wanted him to spy on Moaning and Gill and others like them — the people at or near the top of their organizational pyramids. But Ames preferred to study the lesser ones, the weak links: the people who filled out the organizational pyramids. He learned more by following them. Just like tonight, he learned a great deal more about the Moaning operation from O'Brien and Tinker talking in the pizza parlor, than from other surveillance work.

At first he'd considered the possibility that FBI surveillance itself was the only link among these so-called conspirators. You watch lab rats long enough and they begin to perform for you. But now, Ames was certain of more than that, and he didn't need proof. Neither did his client, Aggregate Networks, a global conglomerate that acted for its own interests, which were much larger and far more intricate and global than any one country's interests. Aggregate moved in mysterious ways, only tangentially involving Ames.

And Ames had his own interests. The C-Dome hackers were loose. Maybe there was hope. Maybe Gill and his cohorts will prevail, and enforcement agencies won't have the goods on all of us. That is, if Gill really is on *our* side... Ames was a Star Trek fan. He believed the world would get better, more benign, in the future. He believed in the future, and in the Prime Directive. He didn't believe in the sterile future of the TV version of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, but a future where Kirk is caught getting a blow job from his yeoman in the conference room, where Dr. McCoy and Spock get together to indulge in pot and mushrooms, where Scottie is drunk at the helm of the starship. And it wouldn't matter that these people had faults, the universe was, still, theirs to explore. Ames loved the old episodes, and even the ones from the Next Generation, like the one where the chief engineer wakes up one day to find everybody different, in some kind of sinister conspiracy to do heaven knows what. Only Ames would like to think it was a benign conspiracy. He identified with androgynous beings, he was a fan of the Spiders from Mars...

Look south, to where your mother dwells

*If she knew what's going down, she'd give you hell
I'm the kind of man she warned me of
'Till there was rock you only had God
— David Bowie, "Sweet Head"*

Smolder's jump had been the start of something. Ames wasn't sure what. But all the evidence pointed to a new, perfectly encrypted and safe network, with offshore servers far from the reach of U.S. law enforcement, and even far from the reach of his client. And now it all made sense that Peter Moaning had left for Jamaica.

* * *

The Webomber jokes were growing stale. "Hi, I'm the Webomber" had already been used in David Letterman's Top Ten List several times, as a girl pickup line, as the words of apology that should have been spoken by the President, as the angry shouts of the Yankee coach to the umpire, as the political pitch by the mayoral candidate for New York City, and countless other comedic bits.

There were also serious, thoughtful discussions on talk shows. Speculation of how long it took for encryption to be used as a terrorist weapon. Comments on how fast the world's networks could be compromised for evil purposes. Comparisons to the Unabomber of yore were obvious. Did this Webomber, if it was one person, have a manifesto? The acts were more like those of the Joker from the old Batman TV series.

Eric Mauer watched a lot of TV, when he wasn't out walking the streets of San Francisco's Tenderloin, looking like another homeless person. He had lots of time on his hands. There was a Kinko's up on Market, and another downtown, and an Internet café around the corner on Mission. He'd rented a room in the dingy Retch Hotel, and he had made it there unobtrusively, ditching his car out in the Mendocino woods and hitchhiking back into Marin County, then over the Bay on the Tiburon ferry, dressed up in a suit and tie. He

reached the City and holed up in the dingy hotel room, singing the blues.

What was it like when you saw your whole life go under?

Did you cry?

Was there someone there

Or were you on your own?

— Little Feat, “Somebody’s Leaving” (Bill Payne)

He missed his ex-wife about the same as he missed all the comforts of his so-called life. As a very real suspect that the FBI wanted to find, he might as well *be* the Webomber. And since he wasn’t, with his skills and connections, he would probably be treated worse. If this were another country they’d simply kill him. And yet, everyday, the USA seemed to be turning into some other country.

* * *

Tinker got off the phone and sat down in the airport lounge. He had just finished a shouting match with Charlotte. At least it was a lot of shouting on her end. On his, Tinker just kept repeating a mantra about going to San Diego.

“Gather up the kids, get in the car, take the credit cards, and head south to your mother’s house in San Diego. Stay there until you hear from me. I’ll be gone for at least a week, maybe two. So get the kids together and go. Do it! Do it now!”

“So this is what you’ve been planning all along!” she yelled back through the line. “You have a girlfriend now? Is that it?”

“Whatever,” he said, and instantly regretted it. He kept repeating the message to gather up the kids, etc., each time more distinctly, as if there was something in his diction that wasn’t getting the message across correctly.

She was not very understanding, even though she had been told nearly everything Tinker knew, that he'd been followed by the FBI, that the C-Dome had been raided, that their friend Eric was on the run, and that they were thought to be connected to all these people. But it just didn't sink in. Tinker kept repeating his mantra. Get going. Her shouted words ran together into a stream of shouting that he could not understand. It sounded only like noise. He had hung up on the noise, and that was that.

Now Tinker sat, exhausted from this mix of emotions, looking out at planes bound for many destinations. This was not a fantasy, not like the many fantasies he'd had before, of running away, escaping a boring life, diving into the unknown. As a pre-teen he would walk the boardwalk of Atlantic City as an excuse for sneaking a cigarette. On those lonely walks, from one end to the other, out to the ends of piers, the farthest you could go, he would dream of leaving on a ship to cross that dark ocean. He was never really special in his own family, but he was determined not to fade into the woodwork and live the sort of lives they were all destined to live. Looking out to a sun-emblazoned horizon, to the East, the sky filling with pink cotton candy as the sun set in the West, the first notes of a song he sang to himself back then...

*If you smile at me you know I will understand
'Cause that is something everybody everywhere
Does in the same language.*

— Jefferson Airplane, "Wooden Ships" (David Crosby, Paul Kantner, Steve Stills)

A war is on. The refugees are haunting the land. Dark Forces have laid everything to waste. A human being from one side meets, he doesn't know, something or someone from the other side. Who won? It doesn't matter anymore.

*You stare as all your human feelings die.
We are leaving*

You don't need us.

— Jefferson Airplane, "Wooden Ships" (David Crosby, Paul Kantner, Steve Stills)

Feeling somewhat irrelevant as part of a large Philadelphia family, Andrew Tinker naturally gravitated to its fringes, to cousins that dabbled in the hippie lifestyle, uncles that drank and told jokes, a grandmother who would always smile and serve ice cream, no matter what was happening. And, of course, his great-uncle Adam, the closet catatonic. It was family folklore that Adam had once been a mathematics prodigy at age five in 1926 and had predicted the stock market crash of 1929, but no one took the five year old seriously. Adam had degenerated by the time the Roaring Twenties was in full swing, and was institutionalized. The shock treatments did not help and in fact brought on excessive bouts of catatonia.

By the time JFK took office, Adam was the old, lovable "Uncle Adam" living in a specially outfitted walk-in closet under the stairs at Tinker's grandmother's house. Grandma would come out smiling with trays of ice cream despite mom's complaints about how it would spoil their appetites. Grandma served the ice cream oblivious to these complaints, using senility as a filter that let in only nice thoughts, her eyes wide in wonder just like the kids. Tinker stood near the mantle trying to figure out how Grandpa had put that sailing ship inside that bottle. *Sailing ships, on the water, very free and easy...* Grandma came over and knelt down, looked at the bottle with Tinker, and just giggled like a little girl. "Yeah, what is that? How did they do that? I don't know! It doesn't make any sense, does it?" As a kid, Tinker thought that kids and grandparents were about the same. As you advance up the parabola of life gaining emotional and financial security, you lose that innocent, unprejudiced wonder about life. You peak at around age 40, or perhaps 50 — the peak age seems to have crept ever upward over the last few decades as people live longer, continue to work past "retirement" — and then you go downward, *retreat* actually, back to childlike behavior. That's when you become Uncle Adam. On cue, Adam would come out of his closet dressed in

an undertaker's suit, walking with a limp and cane, and kneel down next to Tinker, smiling, reeking of stale cigar smoke. Grandma would frown, and tell him to go sit down, and to stop scaring the children. And Adam would go off and stand in a dark corner, lurking forever on the fringes of the family.

Charlie O'Brien had sparked his first adventures in high school. Charlie knew every city they'd ever played in, especially the first, Philadelphia. Charlie knew uptown, downtown, how to act in black neighborhoods, where to go for cheese steaks, how to dance on Two Street with the other Two Streeters in the bar near Second and Passayunk. Frankie Avalon and Fabian came from this neighborhood. So did the Italian Stallion, Sylvester Stallone, and Irish heroes like John Kelly and his lovely daughter, Grace. Charlie was an original Two Streeter. His father was a Two Streeter. Tinker could still see Charlie, lanky and strutting, an unbuttoned wool coat with fur trim ballooning out and around his thin frame, top hat and cane, dancing the Mummer's strut out on Broad St. with his old man as the Two Street brigade strummed banjos in the New Year's Day Parade. Charlie's father was a silent, brooding Irish ex-Marine with a top job at the shipyard, and an upbringing in West Philly that left him with angry red hair and a permanent frown. Tinker had a lot of respect for Charlie's father and feared him. There were rumors that Charlie's father was involved with the Mafia, helping to control the shipyard. Any other time of year Charlie and his father would be arguing or at least casting furtive glances at each other; his father wanting him to behave himself, to carry his name with dignity, to stay away from drugs, to sit and eat with the family, to sit and entertain relatives... But on New Year's Day, South Philly's major holiday, Charlie and his father dance, share a flask, and pound each other's backs, all in plain view in the middle of the street in the middle of the parade.

Years later Charlie and Tinker would be best pals at UC Berkeley and Eric would also be there, lurking in the computer lab. They'd left behind the angst and coldness of the East Coast, the clashing ethnic styles and overly humid weather. Tinker had not quite recovered

from the shock of being eligible for the lottery for Vietnam. His number had come out high, and the very next year the lottery was abandoned. But he had come too close.

As a kid he had watched the sad horizon from that Atlantic City boardwalk and hoped for a glimpse of the wooden ships, like the one his grandfather had somehow stuffed into the bottle. Now he watched the airplanes take off, bound places unknown. His flight was next. He would meet Charlie in Jamaica, and dance like a Two-Streeter.

And it's a fair wind

Blowing warm out of the south over my shoulder

Guess I'll set a course and go

— Crosby Stills & Nash, "Wooden Ships" (David Crosby, Paul Kantner, Steve Stills)

Jamaica

By midnight, they had changed planes in Minneapolis, flying from San Francisco, bound for Jamaica. Moaning had paid for a round-trip ticket, but Charlie wasn't going to use the return flight. Without telling anyone, not even Tinker, he had made up his mind to disappear for a while, leaving his girlfriend in the lurch and his business teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

*'Cause it's time for you and me
come to face reality.*

— Jimi Hendrix, "Straight Ahead" (Hendrix)

Things were about as bad as they could be. And he had been rendered powerless, mostly by attaching himself to people who adjusted their lives to the beat of things. If you are constantly adjusting, you will fall victim to the whimsical aspirations of others. Life then goes by at such a rapid rate that there is no time to plan your *own* moves. This is Tinker's problem, not Charlie's. Like Neal Cassidy the Prankster bus driver used to say, you've got to zig before they zag.

As the plane lifted off from Minneapolis, remorse settled in. He shrugged it off, staring into the Minneapolis rain, a purple rain indeed, as this was the land of The Artist Formerly Known as the Artist Formerly Known as Prince. Gloomy, actually murky, tense with dramatic guitar flourishes, out of nowhere a beat. Charlie didn't even know Prince's music but he could hear a kind of frozen, emotionless funk in that rain that he would always associate with Minneapolis at night. Jimi Hendrix was the most obvious influence on Prince's guitar style. Both of them had been described in their times as the inheritor of the Robert Johnson myth, of the devil at the crossroads. Now Charlie was flying across that great haunted blues

land, tracing backwards the route of the bluesmen from the southern Delta who moved north to Chicago.

*I got stones in my passway
And my road seem dark as night*

Jamaica once served as a way-station for the slave trade, like Haiti, a trade dominated in part by Irish sailors manning ships that set out from Liverpool to Africa loaded with Western goods to trade for natives. The ships brought slaves to the Caribbean and eventually to New Orleans, where they were traded for tobacco and cotton in a marketplace also dominated in part by Irish-American settlers in the Deep South. These ships would return to Liverpool, completing the circuit, carrying the latest American potions, inventions, and poisons back to the Old Western World. This circuit was later established with music: Africa, Jamaica, New Orleans, and back to England. The hypocritical Irish Catholics of that era were Charlie O'Brien's ancestors.

Thoughts of his ancestors kept him awake all the way, while Tinker fidgeted in his sleep next to him. Charlie could never sleep in an airplane, and he arrived finally in Montego Bay in a sour mood. He trudged bleary-eyed through the immigration line, sweat crawling under his clothes in the humid airport terminal. Outside, in the unrelentingly bright yellow haze of Jamaica, a short black man with a quick smile told them to follow him. So Charlie and Tinker schlepped their bags through the hot trash-strewn parking lots, hopping over smoldering tires, literally making a leap over a small canal... to get to this man's car. All the way followed by six or eight black hustlers repeating "yah mon" over and over. With the smoky haze and the irritating smell of burning trash, the location could have been Cape Town, or Watts.

Once inside the hot car, with his bag tucked away by the short black man (whose name, it turned out, is Tutu Ford, head of Ford Tours of Negril), he felt safe. So did Tinker, who handed a dollar to a small

black boy that had helped with one bag. Right away, like a swarm of vultures, the hustlers gathered at the back door of the car while Charlie swung into the front passenger side, and Tutu gunned the engine. A swarm of beggars surrounded the car.

“Don’t ever do that, man,” yelled Charlie, as Tutu edged forward. “Don’t ever tip these people.” Some of the people were now rocking the car as it moved.

“The kid helped with a bag,” was all Tinker could say. Without realizing it, he’d stumbled into the role of the ugly American.

“Man, you don’t know,” Charlie said. “Just watch me. Do what I do.” Tutu nodded with him, as if he understood. They broke free, and Tutu drove furiously through the muddy streets of Montego Bay, then headed west along the northern coast. After about a half-hour of nausea-inducing highway weaving to and fro, passing trucks and slow tourist buses, Tutu pulled over at a beer shack. They tumbled out into the hot sun, and Charlie gratifyingly downed a cold Red Stripe. He was starting his second when Tutu passed him the biggest spliff he had ever seen.

It could have been a minute, an hour. The nausea was gone. Beautiful black teenage girls danced languidly in the sunshine on the edge of the lush jungle. After a while they were driving, and he daydreamed in the back seat gazing out at the beaches, absorbing the reggae culture.

*Take the blinkers off your eyes,
The power’s in your hands...
There ain’t no heaven, and there ain’t no hell,
Except the one we’re in, and you know it too well.*
— UB40, “Don’t Let It Pass You By” (UB40)

“Yo man,” Tinker laughed, “Why are we listening to some British group that picked up on reggae, instead of the real thing?”

Tutu laughed back. “Y’know mon, what ‘UB40’ stands for, in the English? It’s the name of the unemployment form.” He laughed again. Jamaica is somewhere between the second and third worlds, with enough tourists and culture to keep the revenue flowing. Negril is a tourist town, and the beaches are sparkling and beautiful, and the local people are friendly as they hustle you for everything from guided tours to gigantic spliffs. The mix of European, Japanese, and American tourists keeps the prices high and the choices broad. Every night there’s a live music party on the beach.

That night, perhaps it was the lack of sleep for 24 hours, or the sudden rush of a laid-back attitude, but whatever it was, it acted like a switch on Charlie’s soul. He no longer felt the melancholy of the road. He danced on the beach to the reggae and soka and carnival music. The next day he learned how to snorkel. He floated above the coral, sea water so consistently blue it seemed virtual, like you could fake it in Photoshop. Schools of shimmering fish swimming by, in swirls of pink and blue unimagined even by the designers of special-effects filters.

* * *

On the third day in Jamaica the group got together for a planning session. Peter Moaning rented a huge yacht — enough to hold 40 tourists — for a meeting of six and a support staff and captain. They piloted the yacht around the western tip of Jamaica and along its southern coast for a while, far enough to glimpse the Blue Mountains in the distance, framing the area around Kingston; then headed back to Negril. During that time Moaning and crew had established goals and milestones for setting up a high-volume server farm in Jamaica that would host the OtherNet sites. The six were Charlie, Tinker, two Jamaican hackers, Ted Anson, and Moaning. Tutu, his wife, and his young son prepared the food and served everybody.

Not just tall but large in every way, Peter Moaning could intimidate when he bellowed instructions to servants and announced his plans. He could just as suddenly turn into a charming, erudite, worldly host, speaking with the native patois, coming on like he understood. The locals sensed that he was a piece of work, and they catered to his every whim. The taxi drivers would jump in their cars, referring to the big man as “Beeggs! Hey Beeggs!” to try to get his business.

Moaning gave a speech on the yacht about his dream. “We are here to exploit the offshore situation to set up the OtherNet.” He paused to let that sink in. “Jamaica offers a temporarily secure site away from prying eyes of U.S. enforcement agencies. But it is only temporary — there are a lot of small islands off the coast of the Florida Keys, and between Jamaica and Cuba. We can reach them from here. An operation on any of these islands would be offshore, and wouldn’t have to comply with American laws.”

“Yeah, but —” Tinker started to say something, but Moaning interrupted

“Laws about indecency and censorship, for example.”

“All this just for offshore porn sites?” Tinker asked incredulously.

“Laws against gambling,” Moaning went on. “Money laundering. Spamming. Encryption software.” He looked directly at Charlie now. “Free music downloads. Pirate Net radio. Whatever,” he said.

“How’re you gonna do this?” Charlie asked with renewed interest.

“It’s done.” Moaning shifted in his seat. “It’s an infrastructure for a completely free network. Whatever you wanna do — set up porn sites, gambling sites, music downloading, political mischief of some kind somewhere, get some money laundered — I can help get it done, with a base here in Jamaica and the islands off the Keys.”

“I don’t get it. *Why* do it? Why take such chances?” Tinker asked.

“No pain, no gain,” Moaning chuckled. “It’s more money than you’ve ever seen. You can get out if you want. You have a free return trip to the USA. Only we’d have to kill you,” he laughed. The others reacted with uneasy giddiness. The boat ride was mostly shrimp, beer, and architectural plans for the server farm. Restless, ever dissatisfied, impatient with little concepts and little people, Moaning was serene but never at peace. Jamaican grass seemed to have little effect on him, though he smoked it voraciously and kept several large stalks of the plant in a dry vase on his balcony at the beach resort. Moaning had picked Jamaica for a lot of reasons, but to Charlie there seemed to be two important ones: Moaning needed some time to relax, and he needed to get laid.

Moaning himself said the reason was the food. But there was really only one dish he wanted — jerked chicken, with red beans and rice, the staples of the Jamaican diet. He’d made contacts in Negril to find the best chef with the baddest jerk sauce, and he set up a video crew to get footage of making the stuff, to use in his database of video recipes. It somehow must have escaped his awareness that jerk sauce was historically used, like the Cajun spices in New Orleans cuisine, to mask the unpleasantness of old meat.

* * *

The steady sensual thick beat of reggae served as a soundtrack for the bumpy jeep ride, with each bounce off the seat in counterpoint to the rhythmic base lines. Tinker and Ted Anson were in the back of one Jeep, driven by Charlie, following hot on the heels of the other Jeep carrying Moaning and the two Jamaican hackers, driven by Tutu.

As they approached a roadblock outside Negril, Tutu swerved into the oncoming lane, motioning Charlie to follow — which he most certainly did, this being a foreign country and all. For one alarming

moment, Charlie thought the guards were about to shoot at them as they unshouldered their carbines. But the guards used the weapons as batons to control the traffic and waved at Tutu as he drove through. With a bit of hilarity Charlie waved back as *he* drove through. Tinker was shocked, but Ted Anson looked on with admiration.

They were on their way across the Great Morass east of Negril and up into the hills near Grange. A pilgrimage to a pot farm, in Moaning's words. Everyone was a bit paranoid, on edge, wondering whether this pot farm trip was as important as everything else and worth the risk. They stopped in Grange at an intersection, pausing to take sips from a large hot cauldron of soup on a pushcart driven by an old Rastafarian. They ate beef patties and drank Red Stripe in the morning sun.

Don't worry

Cause everything's gonna be alright

— Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Three Little Birds" (B. Marley)

"Hmmm," Tutu murmured to Moaning with a mouthful, pointing up the street. "Beeggs, wha's dat?"

"Don't worry," said Moaning, shielding his eyes, looking up the street at a beige Toyota Corolla, parked in the shade. "They're probably DEA. They know exactly where we are going and what we're doing, but it's OK. They won't hassle Ben, they just want to identify the middlemen."

Tutu shivered, looked away. "Some, those middlemen, *friends*, I-mon," he said to Charlie, who could only avert his eyes. Here was Charlie, once again in the role his ancestors relished, helping fat Yankees exploit the local black population.

In a short while they were bouncing again, this time up roads that no one would follow, ruddy steep curves negotiated only with four-wheel

drive, all the way up into the mountains, to a point where even Jeeps could not go. After stashing the Jeeps under huge fronds, they proceeded up a steep trail, over a ridge and down along a waterfall, where a guide met them and took some of their provisions on his back. They hiked another two miles huffing and puffing up the slope, to reach a small green valley nestled in the sunny hillside, an indentation of green paradise, lined with row after row of fragrant flowering tops of ganja.

They all breathed in, with gusto, as if they could inhale this paradise. Immune to the civilized world, ensconced within this nurturing expanse of nature, they settled down in the cool shade of a large mango tree. A Rastafarian in dreadlocks to his knees, shorts, and nothing else, came out from a hidden shack to greet them. Ben the Rastaman, sharecropper manager of this pot farm, hadn't had visitors in a year. Turns out this hermit had a college education and had lived in LA before dropping out altogether and moving back home, stepping outta Babylon forever, forever loving Jah in all his ways, raising the lovely ganja and working with the Mother Earth. "Respect!"

"Yes, respect!" They each touched fists with him the Rasta way, up and down and then together. "Love Jah!" all around, and then the ritual rolling spliffs. Ted Anson was rolling them thick, saying over and over, "It's the killers! The killers!" Referring of course to the pot, with his way of saying killer buds. "We came up here, man, and we got the killers!" Everyone was laughing at this line, so he kept saying it. But they were laughing at his nasal whine, and the spectacle of such a stiff, upperclass white guy in these surroundings, crouched pensively on a dirt trail getting wiped out by ganja. Ben watched for a while, frowning. Why did the other disciples, for they must all be disciples of the great Beeggs Man, treat this one so disrespectfully?

After what seemed like an eternity of spliff smoking, coughing, laughing at Anson shouting "the killers!" and staring at the countryside view, Moaning asked Ben about his situation. "Ya

Beeggs,” Ben said loudly to Moaning and to everyone, changing his mood to one of philosophical contemplation. “I-mon, everybody have a bad year. Badly in need of da money y’know, I-mon don’t have even ‘nough for new pair of pants, d’ya hear?” He giggled, showing off his holy shorts.

Turns out Ben was getting about 700J (Jamaican dollars — about \$20) for a pound of his regular ganja, about 800J for the finest, ‘lamb’s bread’ sinsemilla. The middlemen were selling it for more than 20 times that amount — about \$400 a pound — to American and European smugglers who thought that was cheap enough, and to the beach sales force that charged about \$100 an ounce retail, but risked arrest every day. The middlemen also skimmed an ounce per pound to donate to the local security and police to keep them interested in the whole game.

Ben didn’t like the economics, and Moaning sympathized with him, winking at Charlie. “You saw those cars down there, in town. They *are* bad for business in one respect, but good in another. These little monopolies they got going, among the middle tier — they have to bribe the police or get wiped out by the competitors who will. Of course, the police win no matter what, and competition rules.”

Charlie just looked at Moaning with contempt. “Man, you got it wrong. How does any of that help Ben here?”

Moaning had that look like he’d done his homework. “No, you don’t understand. Whenever the police act, it changes the buyer-seller relationship. Ben can dictate new terms each time it happens.” He turned to Ben. “Man, pretty soon you’ll be able to tell the forces of Babylon that your prices have gone up,” said Moaning. “I’m going to help you become the Voice of Jamaica!”

“Ahh, yah mon! I-mon the Voice of Jamaica, the voice of the E-Rastaman!”

“Sure ‘nuff,” Moaning replied in a mocking, but friendly voice, just busting his balls a little. But it turns out Ben has a story, and a “voice” to speak with; he’s not only well versed in Rastafarian history, he also draws the connection of Jimmy Cliff’s character in *The Harder They Come* to the Stagger Lee (or Stackalee) myth that permeates the black post-slavery culture. He goes on about the Second Coming of Stagger Lee, an apocalyptic vision of a Babylon civilization forced underground after the revolution, when the Jah brothers institute a thousand years of peace. Stagger Lee comes back to wreak havoc on this peaceful utopia, subverting the status quo, bringing us back to the bad old present, where guns and money rule, and the Man, black or white, no matter, He would sooner kill you then let you have His Stetson hat.

Charlie listened with interest, shushing Tinker whenever Tinker blurted out things like “he’s got it backwards, the underground must be good guys, not bad guys,” and so on.

Ben went on talking about the never-ending struggle of good and evil, while Tutu had gathered up stuff and was motioning for everyone to get it together, let’s go. Moaning pulled a wad of Jamaican dollars, about 2500J or so (about \$50), and handed it over to Ben, who stopped his story abruptly and began thanking him over and over. Moaning had just overpaid completely for a bag that was only about a quarter of a pound, as Tutu would laugh about later with his wife; but it didn’t matter, because Ben was happy, and that made Moaning happy as he stalked down the path, his entourage following him, and Tutu bringing up the rear.

* * *

They walked another mile or so, over the ridge and through another plantation managed by Ben, to a place completely hidden from the air, a steep ravine, which they entered cautiously. Eventually they reached a trap door, and everyone went down into the lair. They climbed down a ladder past thick conduit that brought electricity and

high-speed data lines all the way from a hidden link to a transfer station on the south rocky coast of Jamaica where some very rich Jamaican aristocrats kept their summer homes. No one in that neighborhood was suspicious when it came to high-speed lines, as they all had them in order to link to their pals in government.

The link, established by one of Ted's partners in a huge US network services firm that recently opened a branch in Kingston, went for miles and miles through the backwoods and up the mountains to this very spot in the remote highlands above Grange, surrounded by pot plantations. Inside was a digital video and audio editing suite and computer lab. The engineers were mostly Jamaican natives; some of them had worked at Island Records in Kingston, and at the Channel One studio and Bob Marley's own studio in Kingston as well as at Compass Point in Nassau. They had the latest equipment, and a test version of the 'server farm' located on a remote island off the coast of Southern Florida. The server farm hosted thousands of Web sites in a completely lawless territory, yet the domain was only a single step away from the Caribbean Internet backbone and control point.

Tinker, Charlie, and Ted got a complete tour of the place. Moaning was happiest when demonstrating the technology he had to play with. Underneath the earth, in that air-conditioned electronic bunker, the equipment hummed, the reggae boomed out from speakers, jasmine incense filled the air, and programmers clicked incessantly on their keyboards. It could have been London, it could have been Toronto, it could have been the Cote d'Azure, it could have been Santa Monica, it could have been the moon; for these people, it was all an inner environment of displays, keyboards, white boards with flowcharts, toys.

But when they went outside, into that blinding Jamaican sunshine, they stepped into a wilderness paradise amidst a seemingly never-ending field of ganja plants.

* * *

Heading back to the coast in the Jeep with Charlie once again driving, Tinker finally found *satori*, which felt more like a warm belly full of beer than anything Eastern. He stared off into the dark thunderclouds, lurching from pothole to rut as Charlie steered around the cows and tried to keep up with Tutu, who drove the other Jeep as fast as someone on the lam. But for Tinker, the acceleration was a quiet uplifting feeling of well being, like everything in the world was going to be all right.

One Love! One Heart!

Let's get together and feel all right!

— Bob Marley and the Wailers, “One Love” (B. Marley)

Why not move out here? Why not set up a new life here in Jamaica? With his wife and kids? How about without his wife and kids? Jeez, did he really think that? He sat there buzzing in the back of the jeep, legs vibrating, all the way back to Negril. *This was it*. A moment of truth in a long, not-so-invigorating life. The knee-shaking, stomach-plunging, handwringing decision: to join Charlie and his merry band, or to return to a life of responsibilities, stressed-out job situations, and so-called progress back in Silicon Valley.

“I don’t know...” Tinker started to say to Charlie when they got back to the resort.

“See, that’s just what I can’t stand about you,” wheedled Charlie.

“You cop out right at the wrong moment. You get into some kind of befuddled mess, and I show up with the right solution, but I gotta sell it to you because you’re so befuddled.”

“Wha...” Tinker responded in the latest generation’s version of the Cheech and Chong call and response routine, inherited of course from Groucho and Chico, and Laurel and Hardy — the dull, stoned voice of Chong’s “Dave’s not here... Wha’s happenin, man?” back to

the mortally wounded voice of Stan Laurel's "What's the matter?" (But of course abbreviated in this fast, modern age to "Wha...").

"Yeah, great partnerships come to mind," Charlie steamed on. "Great partnerships *we're* modeled on. The Skipper and Gilligan. Rocky and Bullwinkle."

"Peabody and Sherman," replied Tinker with a blank frown.

"See what I mean? You don't get it," replied Charlie impatiently. "Moaning's already put you at great risk, and you ain't getting squat for it. He told me all about his connection with this guy in Amsterdam, Grogan. Man, he's on his own with this, and it's way out shit, something to do with helping terrorists. *Real* terrorists. Man, this shit is serious."

Charlie let that sink in for a moment, then went on. "This is not what Mort Gill had in mind, and it's not what I signed up for. We should be spreading this encryption software to promote freedom, not to help terrorists or help Moaning rake off millions. Whatever happened to hijacking starships?"

"What about survival?" Tinker had blundered into this situation and he wanted nothing more than to blunder his way out of it.

"What about it?" Charlie was incredulous. "Are you gonna go back home, with the FBI chasing you? What are you gonna live on? Do you have some *offshore bank accounts* or something? What're you gonna do if Moaning makes good on his promise to pay? You can't deposit that money in a bank back home. You can't even use the Internet to transfer it. This connection to terrorists could screw us up for life. We need a plan. We need to set up our *own* accounts in the Bahamas, Switzerland, somewhere. We need to get a plan."

"I thought I would just ask Ted for some advice," said Tinker, trying to calm Charlie down.

Charlie looked at him with an arched eyebrow, but said nothing. Ted Anson was probably the smartest man on the island at that moment, despite his momentary lapse of reason back on the farm shouting “the killers.” Anson was the only one of the group that Charlie truly feared. They started up the beach passing a joint between them, but there was too much tension in the air, dissolving the euphoria as fast as it formed.

Tinker brought up the subject of Rob Smolder again. Charlie stopped, turned around, and put his arm on Tinker’s shoulder. “You obviously haven’t read the documentation you carry around in your laptop, about that encryption software,” he told Tinker.

Charlie explained the concept of Conduits. To make the OtherNet secure, the encryption keys are changed randomly by a Conduit who can access by fingerprint or voiceprint a special piece of software that updates the encryption algorithm instantaneously across the OtherNet, transparently, so that users don’t even know it happens. A Conduit should be unreachable, incorruptible — especially outside the reach of the law. In fact, Conduits couldn’t have any real contact with the Internet or any conventional networks without being compromised. Gill stipulated that there had to be multiple Conduits to keep everyone honest.

“You’re saying Smolder may have dropped out to become a Conduit.” Tinker was catching on fast.

“I’m saying I don’t know, but it’s possible. It even makes sense.”

“So where is he? Here in Jamaica?”

“He could be anywhere,” Charlie said smugly. “What does it matter, his physical location? That is, if he is indeed a Conduit right now.”

“The Conduits, aren’t they weak points in this whole system? What if one of the Conduits works for the Man?”

“That’s highly unlikely.”

“Well, what if one of them is caught?”

“The current Conduit, the one that controls the security of the OtherNet, changes randomly. There are several key individuals serving as Backup Conduits on call.”

“Backup Conduits! ... Who makes the call?” Tinker wanted to know.

“That’s another subject altogether,” said Charlie. “The point is, people can do whatever they want using this encryption. It puts them on the OtherNet, where they can’t be traced. So of course, there are important people who know about it.”

“Important people.”

“Yeah,” said Charlie, impatiently. “You know, the NSA, the FBI, the CIA, the PLO, the Taliban, Osama bin fuckin’ Laden,” he spat. “You name it, anyone really interested in security knows about it. It’s like the opposite of a back door that lets enforcement in — this is one that lets subversives *out*.”

“Y’know,” chuckled Tinker nervously, “I understand how we went from being punks on dope to nerds hacking on phone lines, and from there to rich yuppies with stock options. So how did we turn into criminals in exile?”

“It’s just the new economy,” replied Charlie. “Everything happens faster.”

* * *

The clubs up and down the beach were gearing up, with live music at De Buss and at Margarita's, and a crowd of rowdy Americans wearing World Cup t-shirts were eating jerk chicken at the adjoining restaurant (with the sign "Hard Rock Café" but "Rock" crossed out and replaced with "Reggae"). Anson had already gone to bed, the "killers" having gone to his head. Charlie saw Peter Moaning cruising with the local hookers, guzzling from a bottle of Wild Turkey.

"Ragga ragga ragga," sang Charlie to the music. "This is wild. Look at Peter! Let's get some women..."

Tutu pointed at the Americans in the World Cup t-shirts. "They all checked in last night, at a resort not far up the beach." He looked concerned. "They don't look like real tourists. They wear the same t-shirts, mon. Same shoes, too. They act like tourists but they're not tourists."

Charlie stopped chortling at the women long enough to take a long look at World Cup guys. "Black wingtips. Black shiny FBI shoes," he said. Tinker jumped. "Don't worry, Moaning's got it under control. I think. As long as we're here, on Jamaican soil, they can't do anything to us." He turned to Tinker. "I'm working on a plan, don't worry. Just enjoy the vacation."

"Ah..." Tinker shook his head, demurely. He left Charlie and the rest and walked slowly back to the resort in the moonlight.

The next morning Tinker went off to get some condoms. All this danger and excitement had increased his sexual appetite. But he didn't understand the quantity or the Jamaican money, and the clerk put an entire box of 50 on the counter and rang it up. Two local girls waiting in line were giggling, and he didn't see any other choice but to pay and get out of there.

Back at the resort, he threw the box on the picnic table, to a riot of laughter.

“Tink, you think you got enough for one night?”

Red-faced, Tinker tried to put on a smile. “I just... I just thought it might be right for you guys to be protected. Take as many as you like, I don’t need any. Hell, leave ‘em for the G-men.”

They all laughed again, and the box of condoms sat there through the afternoon rain. But later that evening, Tinker stumbled upon a local seamstress on the outskirts of the beach party, someone he recognized from earlier that day, selling baskets. She had smiled mischievously at the shy American, and now, without hesitation, she grabbed his arm and led him off. He did not protest, even though his sexual tension had dissipated in fear. She took him to a shack close to town, a driveway off the main street, as she was in a higher-class of beach people, in a position to do retail business with tourists. But still it was just a shack, no electricity or bathroom, just a pot to pee in, rough cloth for window shades, a tin roof, and a mattress, which they settled into. The hooker took his cock out, and he wasn’t ready. He fumbled with the condoms, taking out two for extra protection. She gave a short laugh and went down on him, putting both condoms on with her mouth as she did. It was almost too absurd for him to get hard, but eventually he did, and eventually he came, feeling more drained than satisfied.

A little later, Tinker lay awake while she snored, thinking about his great adventure that had ended so pitifully. At daylight, he was supposed to grab a cab to Mo’ Bay, catch the next flight, and meet up with Charlie at the Atlanta airport with a rental car, using his blemish-free California license. Charlie had made plans, and Tinker needed to follow through. To truly drop out, one had to do more than live for the moment; one had to expand that moment to encompass the recent past, the present, and the foreseeable future. It was time for Tinker to take on a new role, a paleface version of Stagger Lee. These kinds of encounters, as with this black woman of the tropics, were just props for the movie.

He got up, trying not to make any noise, but she rolled over and smiled. He no longer recognized her; or more truthfully, he now had seen too much of her, too closely. She was probably thinking about money. He gave her some before she had a chance to ask for it, before it would have been embarrassing for her. It was the least he could do for her, seeing as how he had played so nicely the role of the Ugly American.

* * *

Jamaica was fine this time of year. FBI Lieutenant Ray Cheney adjusted his fake ponytail, tucked in his Earth First t-shirt, and stubbed out the spliff he'd been smoking while catching the action at an outdoor boombox party. He then headed into the office of the Jamaican secret service in Kingston.

A hurricane of law enforcement had gathered on the island, or so it had been reported to Cheney. Word had leaked out about Moaning's operation and Cheney had reluctantly stepped in to take charge. Reluctant because he really didn't have a problem with the concept of the OtherNet flourishing in this region, attracting some real dangerous groups. His department could then monitor these groups more easily. But his bosses didn't think that way. His bosses were incensed with the idea that these pot-smoking hippies might somehow compromise national security.

Within an hour he'd assembled his top people in the Kingston office. "This raid is top priority everywhere," said one investigator, referring to the other law enforcement agencies. "It's quite a big feather in our cap."

"Yeah, well, it's one thing if terrorists use some encryption product from somewhere else, maybe Russia," said another investigator. "But it's quite another thing if citizens get hold of encryption we can't crack."

“Yeah, say goodbye to undercover taps. We wouldn’t even be able to shut down Web sites. And email intercepts? Fuhgedaboutit!”

“What’s the situation with Mort Gill?” Cheney barked, getting attention from everyone without having to look up from the papers on his desk.

“Well,” began the lead agent, “we have his cooperation, and we have a copy of ICE. We’ve learned that there are ways to change the source code of ICE to allow ‘back doors’. And these ‘back doors’ can have master keys that are held by more than one party.” He paused to clear his throat. “It is thus possible to distribute versions of ICE that provide us with our ‘back doors’.”

“You mean, these versions can be put out there and the perps will think they are totally secure when, in fact, we can still go in.”

“That is correct, sir.”

“And there is no way the perps can tell that the encryption has been cracked?”

“I don’t think even Mort Gill could tell,” said the agent.

“You don’t *think*?” Cheney looked up, irritated.

“I am sure, sir. No one outside this room knows.”

Cheney looked around the room. The FBI’s top hackers were there, along with investigators and agents assigned to the operation. The agents, of course, understood what the rewards would be for their silence. The hackers, never a trustworthy lot, were in it strictly for notoriety among their peers and whatever fun they could have in Jamaica.

“So as of this moment, those who obtain ICE from the usual downloading sites, they get the ICE we want them to get. Is that right?”

“That is correct, sir.”

There was a prolonged silence. Agents fidgeted, hackers whispered to each other.

Cheney cleared his throat. “What have we heard about the Media Liberation Front?”

“Some kind of event is set for Las Vegas,” said one of the investigators. “O’Brien seems to know about it, and he sent Tinker back to Atlanta in advance, so we think he’s also leaving today.”

Cheney winced at the incompetence. “We need to clamp down on leaks,” he said through clenched teeth, and his associates shriveled from his gaze.

After a moment, the lead investigator spoke again. “We could pick them up in Atlanta.”

“No. We want them to connect with the others in the MLF, now that they know too much. Go on with your report.”

“We believe the MLF have some kind of contact inside Aggregate Networks,” the lead investigator continued. “They plan to use this contact to gain access to the backbone control point of the Internet outside Las Vegas.”

“There’s another control point near here,” said Cheney. “Does anyone know how many control points need to be compromised in order to —”

“To bring it down? Five,” shouted his lead hacker, a fat droid in dreadlocks. “And remember, we now think that Grogan’s organization has already gained control over two others.”

“Oh, another thing, sir,” said the lead investigator. “We can’t seem to penetrate the secure firewall around the server farm here. It seems to be a new version of ICE.”

“Did Gill double-cross us?”

“I don’t think so,” said the hacker. “I’m guessing that this Moaning character got a new version directly from Eric Mauer.”

“Then by all means, we need to secure the copy at the site. Did anyone leave this island with a copy?”

There was silence, and Cheney knew his answer. He moved back in his chair. The conference was over. He watched them file out of the office as the Jamaican police looked on. This was turning into a nightmare. The MLF had gone too far, unfortunately. Various terrorist groups, under the umbrella organization coordinated by Grogan in Amsterdam, were about to crash the MLF’s show and make off with the most secure version of ICE ever invented.

But word had leaked out about the upcoming Jamaican bust; as a result, he had lost track of O’Brien and his friend Tinker. Of course, Moaning had already gone back to San Francisco, but he would soon contact Grogan, and Cheney needed to eavesdrop. He needed to crack this new ICE, or they’d all be going to Vegas blind.

As he walked out of the office in Kingston, he passed a group of hapless street dwellers lounging in the shade inside the atrium. The hackers were negotiating for spliffs. Cheney looked over his shoulder to make sure his investigators weren’t watching, and went to join the hackers, fishing the stubbed-out spliff out of his pocket.

* * *

Ben the Rastaman was daydreaming under the huge English oak tree on the hilltop above the smallest of the ganja fields. The morning Jamaican heat was just beginning and most of his chores were finished, so he sucked on a huge spliff, huge even by his standards, and day-dreamed about the movie set where Jimmy Cliff, in *The Harder They Come*, swaggered across the street, gun in hand, ready for anything.

I shot the sheriff,

But I did not shoot no deputy...

— Bob Marley & the Wailers, "I Shot the Sheriff" (B. Marley)

Ben dreamed of being Jimmy Cliff, the singer and actor. He would be just leaving his trailer after having snorted several lines of the finest Peruvian coke with Heidi and Trudi, his two blonde Swedish bombshells that accompanied him everywhere. He would be boldly walking across the set to confront the movie director, tell him how he wanted to change the scene so that his character had enough time to ball this chick down a side street while still being chased by The Man. But just as Jimmy Cliff was about to approach the director, the daydream evaporated, and Ben was aware of someone coming up the trail to his field.

It was one of Moaning's people, Charlie O'Brien. Grim-faced and unshaven, he was looking a bit worse for wear, like he had jogged through that quick morning thunderstorm and then walked nine miles through the morning heat, all the way from town. He was out of breath when he reached the cabin, and by then, Ben was standing in front of it, a big smile on his face and the rest of that big spliff unlit, ready for a match.

"Hey mon, wha's happenin, mon? You come back! Where Beeggs?"

"I came back alone," said Charlie in a weary voice. "I'm supposed to pick up a few things for him."

"Ya mon, but you need to kick back for a minute, mon, you ha' all de time you want, mon. T'ings happen slowly here, mon. Here, got a light?"

Charlie lit the spliff for him, but continued to the bunker's entrance. Ben followed, and silently watched the others acknowledge Charlie's return with a bit of wonder. Charlie announced that he'd come to make a complete backup of the entire host infrastructure, and to take that backup with him. They all naturally assumed that Moaning had ordered the backup. They never questioned Charlie, just showed him how to use the automatic backup system that produced a data-formatted DAT cartridge holding about 12 gigabytes. That's it, and it fit inside Charlie's shirt pocket.

Outside, Charlie lit another spliff for Ben. They had just left the bunker and were sitting under the English oak, worshipping the blue sky, passing the huge joint back and forth. All his life Charlie had waited for this moment, his first lucky break. In his shirt pocket was a complete backup of the OtherNet infrastructure with backbone connections — the beginnings of yet another completely secure public network, and an opportunity to start anew.

"Ya mon, you in good shape now. You got what it takes now, mon," said Ben, grinning from ear to ear. "You ready for the new order of t'ings now, mon."

Charlie kept his eye on the ridge, as if expecting something to appear. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh mon, y'know what I-mon talking 'bout. You just like that Mr. Burn, up on Blue Mountain. You *seen* what went *down*, mon, and now you do somet'ing for yourself."

“What?”

“Mr. Burn, mon. Y’know, the yankee, he leave everyt’ing behind and go live on Blue Mountain. Yeah mon, dat white guy, y’know, likes the Beatles, sings dat one by Paul, ‘Yesterday’ and all dat, mon...”

Charlie thought for a moment. “Mr. Burn” indeed. Of all the places for Smolder to run to... But his prickly awareness kept him looking over at the ridge, and then, as if to substantiate his predilection, something suddenly started raising dust against the purple sky — a line of Jeeps, then helicopters. A raid in full swing. He heard the rattle of gunfire. So now it would happen in earnest. Another quick puff of the huge spliff, and Charlie was off, on foot, through the thick Jamaican jungle. After an eternity of trudging through rain forests, swamps, and the Great Morass, he reached a foothill town and hired a driver. In Mo’ Bay he dodged the heavy traffic and made it to the airport just in time to catch a flight to Atlanta.

Gumbo Variations

Tinker was out walking the parking lot of the Atlanta airport, having successfully brought five big Jamaican spliffs through customs without incident. What balls! He thought to himself. He couldn't wait to show Charlie. But as he started hitting on the first spliff, he started thinking about his wife, his children, and running over and over in his mind whether he should call them. This indecision was excruciatingly painful, giving him a smarting headache. Finally he put the spliff out and went to use a pay phone.

After the tenth unanswered ring, he realized that she would have split, taken the kids back to her mother's in San Diego just like he told her to do, leaving the house and its overdue rent... Her mother always told her, in one of those standard motherly lectures about leaving the unfaithful husband, that the financial support would be there for her and the kids if she walked out. So... they were gone. Everything had just stopped.

*If you tend to live in the moment,
The moment is right now.*

— Charlatans, "Time to Get Straight" (Darrell De Vore)

Remorse choked Tinker's throat. Tears threatened to flood his eyes, his face strained to keep from cracking. What if she had found out, somehow, through some psychic power or perverse version of Murphy's Law, about his stupid tryst in Jamaica? This romantic adventure had turned painfully real. He'd reached a point of no return. Contrary to what he thought before, this sudden freedom did not feel so liberating.

When he returned to the terminal and saw Charlie sitting at the gate, head in his hands, Tinker snapped out of his funk. He came running up, wild-eyed and bursting with questions. Charlie wearily shut him

up, and started looking around nervously. "There's a lot you don't know," he hissed at him in a low voice, scaring Tinker. "And it's gonna stay that way until we are outta here." Charlie gave him that goddamn-it look. He was always impatient with Tinker, wanting him to be more instinctive, more aware of his surroundings.

Within the hour they were speeding out of Atlanta in a rented Toyota Corolla, and at least two government cars were following them.

* * *

A day later Charlie and Tinker drove along Highway 61, parallel with the big muddy Mississippi River, down through the Delta, a vast floodplain from Memphis to New Orleans, the home of the most original music ever to come from America. Charlie could almost hear the harmonica moan of an old black sharecropper, the singing of the roustabouts as they loaded bales of cotton onto the paddlewheel boats, the guitar-pickin' levee workers. As he drove through the Delta, he couldn't really see the river, because the monstrous levee blocked the view. The levee rose gradually from his side, some 40 feet high and 400 feet wide, with towns and cities spreading right up its slope.

Charlie's ancestors had helped build it. The levee is truly immense, higher and longer than the Great Wall of China, holding in the giant Mississippi floods from Cairo, IL, all the way down past New Orleans. It was first erected by poor whites, mostly Irish immigrants, including three of Charlie's ancestors migrating west from Philadelphia. The levees made the land extremely valuable, enriching the white families and providing instant fortunes for the next generation. The plantations established in the rich delta region were worked by black sharecroppers who'd inherited the skills for agriculture and the strength and talent for group singing from their African ancestors. Over time, as the levees needed to be built higher, contractors hired mules to haul materials along the river, and discovered the hard way that white folk just can't handle mules the way black muleskinners

can. The newly “freed” blacks were put to work, often at gunpoint and for little or no pay, and often after a beating they would never forget, from the white foreman, the “Mister Cholly” of so many old songs, and indeed one of the O’Brien’s had been named Charles.

The black muleskinners would go on to invent the first country blues songs, set to an African-based beat, and with an African-related melody so harmonious to animals that it would stimulate the mules to continue working. The white foremen couldn’t figure out how it worked, and could never duplicate the blues well enough to move the animals. The black muleskinners knew how to *use* the blues as a form of encryption, and the encrypted messages were how to obtain freedom. How to bust the locks, and when to drop everything and rush Mister Cholly and grab his rifle. The information they needed to escape.

Charlie was going to use a song for encryption. He needed to encrypt and spread across the Net the server infrastructure with the new version of ICE, which he’d taken from Jamaica. He needed to be able to retrieve it in time of need, and keep it safe until then. He needed to embed the code in songs that could be unlocked by password, and spread the songs around the Net.

Charlie had no doubt they were being followed. The FBI was his first choice, for the obvious reason of association with Moaning. But Grogan’s people might not be far behind. According to Moaning, Grogan had been monitoring the situation in Jamaica, perhaps even physically, though Charlie had never seen this mystery person. And then there were those *other* mystery people in the van that time, back in the Bay Area... No matter. Whoever wanted the infrastructure on the DAT cartridge burning a hole in his pocket wanted it so badly that they were willing to circumvent international law.

*I got to keep movin’,
Blues fallin’ down like hail.*
— Robert Johnson, “Hellhound on my Trail”

Charlie explained to Tinker that New Orleans was the best place to go at that moment. A friend of Nanker Phelge's, the famous producer Chester "Don't Wanna Discuss It" Blunt, was a minor connected person there, and owned a studio that once recorded Professor Longhair himself. "We need to convert some old tapes into digital form. We can use this music to hide the new ICE infrastructure and source code," he explained to Tinker, patting the DAT in his shirt pocket.

The annual Special Graphics and Animation (SGA) convention was going on there as well — lots of high-resolution computer graphics nerds and video special effects wonks. Blunt could get them into SGA, where they could disappear into the dark halls of the virtual reality exhibits and find Gretchen and Gooky, the two MLFers that were still on Charlie's side... as far as he knew.

Approaching New Orleans from the north was like diving down into the lap of Venus, sinking into a humid animal passion. The city and its suburbs form a giant tongue, surrounded by dark bodies of water and velvety bayous that form the mouth of the Mississippi. Floodwaters of the massive northern continent carry sediment from Wisconsin on down through the soft plains of the Midwest to the rich, fertile Delta region. The river's waters leave behind mud like the train of a long bridal gown.

*You know your mama, she was a stone gumbo cooker,
And you know your old man, he was an alligator hooker,
Where ya at mule?*
— Dr. John, "Where Ya At Mule" (Mac Rebennack)

The course of the mighty Mississippi changes every year, the people of New Orleans readjust their seats, and the forces of industry remake the levees. Chet Blunt's father, in his time, was the single most important link in the security force monitoring the river. His job was to open the floodgates to send the bulk of the rampaging

Mississippi down across the mudflats on the far side of the bayou. Of course, this was rarely done, since it wreaked havoc with the few landowners on the far side, mostly blacks; but it would preserve the thriving tongue of land that was New Orleans, sticking out into the Gulf of Mexico tasting the salty brine, and bearing a lascivious Zydeco grin.

On the outskirts, in Metairie, Charlie pulled over to pick up a female hitchhiker, thinking it would be a good move to look like a couple of students or something. Tinker awoke from his stupor but not in time to complain; besides, once he saw her, his juices started flowing. She got into the car and Charlie pulled away quickly. Off he roared down a shaded street of split-level early Sixties houses with quaint front lawns and little porches shrouded in shrubbery, havens for the largest cockroaches ever seen north of Florida.

Twentysomething, wearing a bandana and Deadhead tie-dye shirt with a sexy impish smile and shiny black hair, she said her name was Bobbi — “Like that girl in that song Bob Weir sang about.” Meaning of course “Me and Bobby McGee” by Kristoferson, a hit for Janis Joplin, that Weir and the Dead covered. She was headed to Tipitina’s bistro, on Tchoupitoulas Street, to see the Alligators. Tinker was distracted by the hippie chick, which annoyed Charlie. A bit later, after a short bit on a freeway and a ride through mysterious neighborhoods, they parked near the levee, around the corner from Tipitina’s. Tinker and the girl walked into Tipitina’s arm-in-arm, already sweetened by Jamaica’s finest, and settled onto barstools near the heart of the dance floor, sipping bourbon. A side door offered the outside night air and a pay phone under the Dixie beer sign.

“Yo Chet,” breathed Charlie into the phone’s mouthpiece, exhaling cigarette smoke, and as soon as he established his identity, Chet told him to wait right there, he’d be down in about half an hour. Looking forward to it. Charlie hung up the phone, dropped and stepped on his cigarette, and then lit the roach he’d shared with Bobbi and

Tinker, sucked on it a bit, and passed it to a biker standing by the door before going back in.

Just a working class bar from the decor, but Charlie recognized the band stage as a landmark, the place that Professor Longhair and the Neville Brothers called home. The Alligators were paying a tribute to Longhair, belting out blues with a Professorial bent, superimposing fast triplets on a syncopated 8/8 rumba beat.

*Just because I love you
Cross my heart I do,
If you don't wanna believe me,
what more can I do?*

— Professor Longhair, “Hey Now Baby” (Henry Roeland Byrd)

Everyone was dancing the Second Line, a stomp with your right (or left) arm raised like you're poking the sky with an umbrella, punctuating the space between beats. Then you walk down that road, hit that bridge, jump with your fancy footwork, and get back in rhythm just in time to punctuate the space between beats. Then repeat.

Folks were rubbing up against each other, one couple doing a gator on the floor (gettin' down in one step and bouncing around on their stomachs, then up again in one step), all in rumba-rock time. The place was mobbed now, a bunch of SGA attendees had shown up — Charlie could tell they were from SGA, some still wearing funny badges with multiple ribbons attached consecutively down to their navels, signifying different interests; some carrying bags emblazoned with corporate logos; some just looking like they stepped out bleary-eyed from behind a computer to hear some boogie, perhaps dance a little. As Charlie sipped his bourbon, Bobbi eyed him, looking like she was waiting for something to happen, and then she focused back on Tinker. He couldn't explain his paranoia or stop Tinker from falling into what he thought was a trap. He didn't trust Bobbi. She was almost too hippie to be true.

He sipped more of his bourbon, and the room intensity switch was suddenly cranked up past 11. Everything was altogether too vivid. He began to think... Then he was sure. His drink must have been laced with something. Was it LSD? It came on like acid. He could feel the familiar rush, that old feeling of the universe crashing inward; the very idea of self, dissolving in a pool of quivering energy. No, it was something else, something acid-like, but incapacitating; instead, it propelled him to speak, the information flow coming right out of his mouth like a locomotive, no stopping it. And Bobbi was still looking at him, now smiling at him.

“Do you want to tell me anything?” she asked, in total command, for this was a new kind of truth serum left over from the CIA’s MK-ULTRA experiments in the late 1950s.

“Yes,” he said and swallowed hard, not sure how it sounded. She seemed pleased. He was not. He was already paranoid; this would intensify things exponentially. For starters, who was she really? He couldn’t even ask. He looked around, not actually seeking escape, just seeking something he could trust.

“You OK?” She wouldn’t let it go.

“No, I’m not fine at all,” he said neatly, regretting it, because he had meant to lie, but couldn’t. He suddenly understood; this drug disarmed you like an acid trip, and like an acid trip you would convince yourself to go with the flow, but that only caused you to babble on like a fool. She had her hand on his arm. He smiled at her, but fought furiously to keep his mouth shut. On the next stool, Tinker leaned over and smiled at both of them, rather approvingly. “I really love my wife,” Tinker announced, grinning like an idiot.

Charlie’s mind was in full resplendent irony when the Blunt man appeared, fat and sweaty in a leather jacket and madras shirt, fancy jeans, Texas boots, gold chain around his neck. To Charlie he was the

urban cowboy from hell, until he recognized him. It took Charlie a while to connect, but Chet Blunt was already talking about one of the guitar players in the band.

"Just saw him the other day, playing on the train platform, no shit. These guys have it tough."

Charlie could only nod, and Tinker could only smile. The girl, Bobbi, held onto Charlie's arm and stared blankly at Chet.

"So what's the shit?" Chet asked Charlie.

"We were followed to New Orleans," Charlie said in a long drawl, obviously inebriated, but nevertheless telling the truth. "She's some kind of government agent or spy."

Chet averted his eyes to look at the girl, and at Tinker. Then back at him.

"Tink' and I just got back from Jamaica," said Charlie, as if by explanation. This was going nowhere; Charlie realized that explaining this shit to Chet at that moment was just about impossible. But he tried. "I got this software," he said, then paused, then continued, "I think the funk's after it."

This got Chet's attention, "the funk" being code for the authorities.

"So you're in a bit of trouble," Chet said in a mellifluous Louisiana drawl. "Well, you're in the right place. This town is wired. Shit, this town could cover up the assassination of a president, it can deal with anything." Then he peered into Charlie's face. "Everything's gonna be OK as long as it doesn't get funky," he said, shouldering an imaginary gun in an imaginery holster. "That's what I'm here for. I'm here to eradicate the funkiness."

To Charlie, Chet's smiling face was a synthetic mask pockmarked with large pores, the pores growing wider... Charlie shook his head, looked back again, and Chet seemed perfectly normal. Charlie searched for his shot glass of bourbon. "We need to get Nanker's tapes together."

"Yeah, I got 'em. So, you — the three of you — need a place to stay?" Chet asked hesitatingly, sipping his brew. His manner suggested that perhaps Charlie and Tinker should dump the girl and come with him.

But the girl answered first. "I can cook," Bobbi said plaintively, with the hint of a southern belle, "I'll cook y'all a nice breakfast tomorrow morning!" She positioned herself on a stool between Tinker and Charlie.

Two drunken sailors chose that moment to stumble by, one bumping Chet from behind, and the other practically falling into Bobbi's lap, laughing and giggling. She laughed along with them, and helped the sailor to his feet. Charlie chose that moment to flee. He dashed toward the side exit, upsetting at least one person's drink in the process. Chet followed him out, with Tinker staggering behind, and they met up on the sidewalk under the Dixie beer sign.

"Hey man..." Chet grabbed Charlie's arm.

"Sorry..." Charlie stopped, turned and gave him a look of pure agony. "Just had to get outta there." Chet looked at Charlie uncomprehendingly, so Charlie tried to explain. "We've been dosed, man. That chick did it. Some kind of truth serum, I think." The horror on his face melted, and he relaxed.

Chet looked puzzled but then it dawned on him that his friend Charlie was on acid or something, perhaps not willingly. Charlie had relaxed very quickly and was now beaming back at him like an idiot who'd just discovered the meaning of life in a parking lot.

“Yeah, no problem,” said Chet with a knowing smirk, and he put his arm around Tinker. “I can see it in his shit-eating grin,” he laughed, nudging Tinker, who started to giggle and couldn’t stop. There was a commotion at the door, and Bobbi leaned out with the two sailors, looking for them. They quickly ducked back into the darkness of the levee, among some cypress trees. “Let’s go back to my place. It’s not far,” whispered Chet. “It’s right on the riverbank.”

They cruised down the levee, Tinker stopping every once in a while to gaze in wonder at the miraculous Mississippi River, Charlie grabbing his arm and moving him along, hiccupping bourbon, stumbling into lampposts and signs, trying to keep up. They reached a point where Chet stopped to point out the view. They were standing in the billowing moist wind coming off the river, cooling the layer of sweat underneath their clothes. Chet pulled out a pint of Stolichnaya vodka from his back pocket. These folks in New Orleans sure know how to drink, thought Tinker. Pure alcohol, sliding down his throat, cleansing his need and quenching his thirst, and starting the fire.

*You know I'd rather be sloppy drunk,
Than anything I know.*
— Sonny Boy Williamson, “Sloppy Drunk Blues”

The fetid air was 101 proof, heavy to breathe. They trudged onward to Chet’s studio off Tchoupitoulas through the back door that faced the muddy levee and the Mississippi. They walked through small, acoustic-paneled rooms loaded with equipment where some of the greatest New Orleans musicians had played, including Professor Longhair, Dr. John the Night Tripper, and even Louis Armstrong right before he died. They passed gold records and rare promotional posters, stepped over microphone cords, and walked up the back stairs, and all the while, Charlie could see ghosts of the musicians sitting around the mixing consoles, smoking butts and drinking beer, while others were setting up or tearing down.

Chet threaded the tapes and manned the controls. Tinker loaded the software from Charlie's cartridge into Chet's massive digital recording computer. Charlie used the steganographic editor to embed the entire ICE server and client package into music files. They chose a variety of songs, from recent live Stones concerts to a Robert Johnson tune covered by the Alligators, and even an original tune written by Tinker and recorded once by the Graceful Duck, called "Escape Key".

*And when you talk about the Fall
Will you refer to it all
As just a pop in the night?
Or just a moment of fright?*

"Blues in the key of E," said Charlie, smirking. "E for Escape. My god, Tinker, I think we have a hit here!" Sure enough, the truth serum was still working.

* * *

Tinker, not knowing he'd been dosed with truth serum, had no explanation for his exhilaration, which had lasted most of the night but left him tired and spent. Was this simply how his new life would feel, always bubbling over with the need to tell the truth? And if he was having such a great time, why wasn't Charlie? Charlie had always led the way on voyages. He had always been the Rock of Gibraltar, but now he seemed to Tinker more than usually paranoid, more disengaged from his surroundings, or unable or unwilling to communicate.

As the truth serum took leave of Tinker's brain, he stared at what he thought was a mandala on the ceiling, and fell into a deep sleep, dreaming of a voodoo computer invested with Crowleyian magick that had the power to reroute any message packet to anywhere, wreaking havoc throughout the world... And so it went until morning (or perhaps the dream, as they say, occurred in the flash of a

few seconds before waking). When he awoke and looked right back up at that ceiling, the mandala was gone. In its place was a ceiling of rippled plaster, vaguely circular and concentric.

Chet was already awake, cooking breakfast. “Hey, get yer ass out here.” Some kind of Cajun gumbo filled the kitchen with its overpowering smell. When Charlie walked in, he saw his place at the table marked with a press badge for the SGA conference. There was one for Tinker, too, who was just about inhaling his breakfast.

“Yo, my man,” Charlie said to Chet in a hoarse, nicotine-stained voice, “press, no less.”

“Press badges for tradeshow are easy. FBI surveillance — now that’s hard.”

Charlie turned to Tinker. “We’ve got some talking to do,” he barked. “We got to split up —”

A blast suddenly ripped through the adjoining studio, instantly filling it with plaster dust. The explosion collapsed the studio building and rocked the neighborhood.

Everyone in the kitchen was pushed to the floor, and the kitchen table collapsed. Dust was everywhere. The rumblings echoed in the street as Charlie and Tinker shoved aside debris to get to the door, which was no longer there. Chet was crying. His entire studio had suddenly blown up.

As soon as Charlie realized this, he grabbed Tinker. “No time!” he shouted hoarsely, but he could barely hear himself. Tinker somehow understood. They ran blindly up the alley, clanging into garbage cans.

They ran out into the street, smack into the Endymion parade, a rehearsal for Mardi Gras. Neighborhood culture barons were dressed up in Big Chief feather addresses and painstakingly sewed sequined

blouses, throwing out hand-carved coconuts representing mildly Haitian hoodoo magic. In the peach blossom sunshine Tinker thought he was seeing aliens — multicolored creatures peeling off various textures of skin, wrinkled like prunes, sweating in the heat, then a layer of smooth jello-like skin, then fish scales, then lizard hides, then jellyfish-like atrophied flesh... vivid colors seemed to sweep right through him. Reality finally came to a rest with a stable view of the costumed parade members and partygoers. He walked up to one of the creatures and asked, "What's happening?"

"Car exploded!" the Spy Boy cried, pointing back over to where they'd been. "Took down the whole building!"

Charlie was tugging at his sleeve. "We have to get out of here." He seemed remarkably calm for someone who just witnessed an explosion. "Let's grab a cab and go to that graphics show." He was holding the SGA press passes and the data cartridges from the studio with the encrypted songs.

* * *

A half-hour later Tinker and Charlie stepped out of the cab and into a throng of casually dressed nerds, some wearing blinking jewelry, and more than a few wearing propeller caps. In the surreal atmosphere of a virtual reality exhibit, surrounded by people with curious hairstyles and clothing, they crossed over into a calm numb zone, staring blankly at wildly animated exhibits, breathing almost pure oxygen in the semi-darkness. Waves of nausea were dispelled as the negatively charged air calmed their stomachs and the darkness enveloped them in safety.

SGA was the only show in which the nerds of the military industrial complex mingled with the technoids of the movie industry. What they had in common, besides a keen interest in high-end graphics technology, was a love for extreme experiences, and the contrasts of

darkness and light. The virtual reality room, called "Tomorrow's Realities," provided some comic relief.

They walked without talking. Each booth they passed was decked out, floor to ceiling, with high technology gear, giant video screens, lots of pony-tailed guys in dark olive suits handing out brochures to the sound of screeching guitars. They were going down the new media entertainment aisle. Charlie, his mind still singed by the truth serum, could only see each booth as a carnival sideshow, a state-of-the-art digital video editing system as just another bearded lady.

Tinker saw her first as they walked up to the booth. "Hey man, how're ya doin?" Gretchen Grubstein was full of joy. "You got the party list? There's a party in the French Quarter tonight..." With her was her eternal sidekick Gooky Karma, smiling and nodding. They all hugged each other and went into the MLF booth, which had an inner sanctum. They hunkered around the stacks of literature and Gooky started rolling a joint.

"This is so cool," said Gretchen, nodding at Gooky. "We get to sneak in here, in the middle of all this madness. The FBI had Gooky here in for questioning, and we found out that they don't know much at all."

"Yeah!" smiled Gooky. "We skipped town as soon as we could."

The conversations were heavy, dense with destiny. The Media Liberation Front people were in the final stages of planning two major events that would establish the OtherNet. "Moaning said he needed this guy, Grogan, to secure other control points," said Gretchen. "As far as I know, it all goes down in Vegas. Our contact inside Aggregate has access to the backbone during a presentation at the tradeshow, for just a few moments. That's when the insertion occurs. Grogan, apparently, is hooked up to this event. That's all I know right now."

“Well, I’m making plans of my own,” said Charlie. “I’ll make sure to cut you in.” Charlie explained his situation. He had the data cartridge from Chet’s studio. They needed to distribute the encrypted songs throughout the Net for safekeeping and later retrieval. Peer-to-peer networking would do the trick. Then they would split up. Charlie would handle the details of getting foreign bank accounts. Tinker would make his way back to San Francisco and lay low for two weeks. Gretchen and Gooky would continue with the MLF operation and not tell Moaning anything.

“The ICE-enabled infrastructure, right?” Gretchen was beaming, pointing at Charlie’s data cartridge. “We *all* want copies. Let’s really spread it around so that no one can stop it.”

“Everybody gets it. It’s free. The more copies we make, the less important we are to the FBI.”

Gretchen smiled at him. “So let me take it from here.”

Hot Tub Wino

A week later, Jill Metrose opened a jasmine-sweetened package in her office. It was a gift from a product manager that appreciated her efforts to get him on the upcoming Internet Vegas Show panel to plug his products. It's nice to be appreciated.

All was quiet on the *Fizz* frontier. The magazine editors were off drinking in a SoMa pub. Another issue "put to bed" as they used to say. No longer are layouts photographed for the press and then filed into dust-free sheaths for eternal sleep. Now, digital pages zip across the net, bit by bit, always moving, never sleeping. The information is alive.

She sent her assistant out for café mocha, and in the gathering gloom sweetened with jasmine, she wrote encrypted email messages to the special team putting together the blockbuster story. She wanted an update: had the target been acquired? Where and when would the rendezvous take place?

Anyone "listening in" to her messages would have thought she was after the Webomber. That was turning into the story of the year, perhaps the decade, a nice defining point for an Information Age Uprising. Ironic as it was, she couldn't help but agree that the real story, the one she was actually pursuing, had taken the same shape as the one about the mythical Webomber. The frame of the story could be lifted from one and fitted on the other.

But the real story was a lot more intriguing than law and order and far more interesting and of general interest, in her mind, than encryption and privacy. In a meticulous assembly of Bill Gittelsohn's past schedules and news coverage, all from third-party sources, it

seemed that the number one billionaire had the ability to be in two places at once. It just didn't seem possible, even though Gittelson owned at least one jet, a four-car train, a warehouse of expensive cars, various boats, a hot-air balloon, and, if one had been invented yet, a transporter. Yes, a transporter is what he would have needed to do all these things, from news briefings to appearances on Capitol Hill, from lengthy cruises up the coast of Alaska to safaris in the Australian outback. And he still turned up in the news with brief drop-ins to classrooms in Silicon Valley and Seattle (often the same day) and keynote speeches at large tradeshows.

How did he do it? That was the real story. Metrose was amused by the press Gittelson had received lately, after his stellar voyage up north with a boatload of celebrities, flown and feted at his expense. Before that, his sailing team came close to winning the World Cup. Metrose clucked; he spent all that money on such eccentric, obscene, overblown fantasies. And yet, his foundation fought famine and AIDS in Africa, India, and China.

But so many public appearances, so often, and spread so far apart. Was Gittelson really one human being? Was he some kind of electronic entity that inhabited more than one body? Had the world suddenly gone science fiction on her? She looked out her office window on Second, focusing on the people on the sidewalk. She thought she recognized someone she knew, but it couldn't have been him, because he was dressed in rags.

* * *

Within view of the building that contained the *Fizz* editorial offices, Tinker stood on the sidewalk at Second and Mission peering from the outside through a window into a lively café. Two years ago he had accepted a contract at a meeting at this café. Now, he couldn't get in the door, due to the way he was dressed, or rather, wrapped. Baggy grease-stained trousers, sweatshirt, an old dirty towel around his waist, and battered sneakers all added up to street person. And, just

at that moment, to add insult to injury, some banker-looking dude just handed him a dollar out of charity.

He'd spent the week wandering the South of Market in these clothes and a baseball cap with no insignia, telling anyone who would listen, "I'm a martyr of the information age." It was as good a disguise as any, and it gave him something to do, some way of treating San Francisco like a foreign city. He'd since given up the cap to a crazy guy on Fifth Street. This wild-haired man had garbage bags sprouting from his pockets like cabbages, and hair spilling out of a winged helmet crowned with fresh flowers. He muttered loudly as he walked, informing everyone who passed by that "Heaven is just the reset button, my friend, a chance to start all over with no memory of previous life" and "Inebriation, my friend, is a state of grace." Everyone was his friend. He came up to Tinker, wiped the grease from his hands on his paint-smeared trousers. "My friend, you wanna tie-dye?" he asked, pulling one out of a dirt-speckled garbage bag. "Ten dollars," he spoke solemnly.

Tinker was curious. What is it about madness that enables it to draw such a clear picture of the meaning of life? It all comes down to \$10 for a t-shirt. These mad people of the streets knew so many things that the rest of us didn't, thought Tinker. This crazy one knew how to survive in the highest rent district in the country.

*I got no dime
But I got some time to hear your story*
— Grateful Dead, "Wharf Rat" (Garcia/Hunter)

"I don't have ten dollars," Tinker reached out to shake his hand, try to be friendly. "But I do have a life story. Wanna hear it?"

Sure, the crazy man said, and set about rearranging his garbage bags to sit down on the steps of the former U.S. Mint on Fifth. Tinker picked up an abandoned orange crate and set it down near the steps.

"I was one of a very elite group of high-tech innovators," spoke Tinker from atop the orange crate.

Garbage-bag Man looked up with interest.

"We worked nonstop for years, believing everything they said about how technology would improve everyone's lives and make us all rich. I worked hard, to make those relentless schedules. My 'fingers to the bone,' so to speak, only now I have repetitive stress injury. But I couldn't perform fast enough for Them. So They let me go. So I became unemployed and virtually unemployable, washed up. Broke. So I decided to escape."

This bit of information brought a murmur of approval from Garbage-bag Man. "Escape, that's good."

"Then, I fell in with a group of hackers and copyright thieves, and we tried to set up a whole other Internet where we could do anything we want. But the Feds didn't like that, and the number one company in the world didn't like that. We got chased around the country. Then we disappeared."

Garbage-bag Man looked sympathetic. Then he looked across the street. Something startled him. "Hey friend, that building disappeared."

"What?"

"That building disappeared. Just a few minutes ago."

"What?" Tinker had heard him, but still couldn't believe what he had said.

"That building... my friend, how did they knock it down so fast? How come there wasn't any noise? There used to be a spa in there. I used to go in there with a bottle of Thunderbird and take a hot tub."

Garbage-bag Man suddenly got up, and a new idea occurred to him. "Hey my friend," he asked Tinker, "can I have your baseball cap?"

Tinker spent the rest of that day wandering silently, cap-less, aware that his preoccupation with the homeless lifestyles of the deranged had just been his way of telling himself something, the way your body informs you of its need for citrus fruits or fiber. It was telling him that dropping out of society was not a bad situation, given his circumstances.

That morning he had slept in a doorway up the street from the café, immune to the noises of morning coffee drinkers and delivery trucks. He had dreamed that he died and went to Rock 'n' Roll Heaven, where he ran into Wavy Gravy and Ken Kesey handing out doses of Kool-Aid. So he asked them: "Why did you let Jim Jones and the Guyana People's Temple suicide become the meaning of 'drink the Kool-Aid'?" They both looked at him in surprise. Then Kesey said, "Forget it, man, you keep trying to unscrew the inscrutable." And Wavy added, "There's them that throws it down and them that picks it up." Jim Jones himself appeared, poking his head in from the next room. "It's all about marketing; you're from the high-tech industry, you should know that."

* * *

While Tinker rooted through dumpsters in San Francisco, hiding from everyone until the appropriate time, Charlie had confronted the bull by its so-called horns, without telling his other partners. He'd arranged a meeting at a public spa in Marin, the largest hot tub, which could accommodate up to 10. They were all naked in the tub. Charlie felt right at home with naked people, having run a porn site for a year, but the others were a bit shy. This is a good thing, thought Charlie, it gives me an edge.

Mort Gill also seemed unperturbed, naked with his arm around his naked girlfriend Tina and his penis carelessly poking through the

water's surface. Gill spoke first. "How has it come to this? Factions within the MLF?"

Peter Moaning was the least comfortable, naked certainly, but his hands never left their strategic positions blocking any view of his privates. "I didn't want this to happen," he said, looking over at Rachel Smolder, who was also naked. "We need Grogan. He owns the other control points."

"So *you've* raised the stakes," interjected Charlie. "That's why we want something out of this, for our own survival."

Gill looked at Charlie as if survival was not the issue.

"So *you* have a copy stashed on the Net," said Moaning. "And we need it."

"Yes, and it's stashed well," said Charlie. "So make an offer."

Gill frowned. Rachel squirmed in her seat. Charlie had been avoiding looking at her, inasmuch as you can avoid a beautiful woman naked in a hot tub less than six inches away. But now he looked right at her. She met his gaze well and did not flinch. In fact, she held a kind of Mona Lisa smile on her lips just for him.

Moaning's offer was to share some of the wealth. Grogan had already deposited millions in advance for their cooperation. Gill asked if this was a compromise in ethics, to accept this money, but Moaning pointed out that the money had originally been part of the CIA's financing of a rebellion in an African country, and it had already been stolen twice, first by the dictator-in-exile, then by his brother-in-law the terrorist. "Besides, the money's been laundered and is really just a number in a bank account, untraceable," said Moaning.

The deal was set. Charlie and his people would work together with Moaning to pull off the Vegas event. Charlie would get his bank

accounts and could then disappear, as far as Moaning was concerned. The OtherNet would make a quantum leap in accessibility. Grogan would be satisfied and no one would ever know. The meeting adjourned and everyone left except Rachel and Charlie.

People assume hot tubs are places of wanton sex, but Charlie could never get hard in such hot water. He watched a fly land on the hot water and get stuck, its wings buzzing. Then another fly landed, and both were stuck. A small wave generated by the moving Rachel drowned them in an instant. Wrong place, wrong time, thought Charlie. Rachel smiled at him, her breasts dripping wet. Then she got out of the tub, and Charlie's eyes scanned the length and breadth of her backside as she left. He followed her into a dressing cabana, where they fell on each other with a passion that was indescribable.

Before it was over, Charlie starting to feel guilty, not because Rachel was most likely still emotionally disturbed about losing Rob, but because he was not supposed to get involved with people who held power over him. And he was sure, now, that Rachel was the one pulling the strings behind the MLF. But for the moment that didn't matter. She was perhaps the best lover he had ever had.

* * *

The dog barking in the early gray dawn on the Sausalito hillside didn't disturb his concentration. Mal Contour, discredited but earnest reporter for the *Bay Radical*, crawled in coveralls and long raincoat under the shrubbery behind Rachel Smolder's house to remove the data tap. His fedora got caught on a twig and popped off, revealing matted, unwashed hair going bald at the top.

The trail of Rob Smolder's disappearance had grown cold. Contour had been on this case for what seemed an eternity. He knew all about wife Rachel and her newfound love interest. Charlie O'Brien had been staying there all week. He also knew that the Smolder Foundation

was used as a front for Media Liberation Front activities. And why not? Rob Smolder practically invented the MLF.

Contour was fascinated by Rob Smolder. He'd read everything he could find by way of Rachel's computer, which was, as luck would have it, networked to Rob's computer, which had been left on ever since Rob had departed. If there were clues in all of Rob's writings, Contour had yet to figure them out. Rob had always been obsessed with the Beatles. Contour found a business plan Rob had sent to Apple Records in London, but he didn't find a reply. The plan was for a documentary placing the Beatles in context with the greatest artists of the Twentieth Century. It all seemed harmless enough, but eventually Contour came across this passage, written in one of Rob's endless diary entries:

The Beatles were our heroes, bigger even than any religious figure, be it Christ or Buddha. They stood before the entire world and were not afraid to bring people together with a unified message of love. They were also not afraid to use the power of coded messages.

The Beatles more heroic than Christ? Coded messages? Rob Smolder was balmy, Contour thought. Perhaps he'd gone off the deep end. But just as Contour thought that, he smiled. Rob Smolder had jumped *into* the deep end. But something was not quite right. He came upon another passage in Rob's diary relating to the Beatles:

The White Album offered a veneer of lush comfort stretched thin over the abyss of death. Its sinister overtones were noticed by fans way before Charlie Manson got hold of "Helter Skelter" and "Piggies". You can hear the cruel wind shivering through some of the songs, a foreboding of disaster underneath the surface, and outright death and destruction depicted in "Revolution #9" — whether you played it forwards or backwards, it didn't matter. Every time I hear this album, I feel my own mortality, and I can sense something mysterious and dangerous, a monster in the closet.

For many of my friends and for me, the 'Paul is dead' rumors circulating in 1969 made us return not to other Beatles albums with clues so much as to

the White Album, not only looking for clues but also looking to re-experience the creepy feeling that pervades the album. Pop stars had died before, but after the Summer of Love's wild ride to the cosmos, the pop star death had gathered new meanings, new portents of danger for the entire human race. Within a year of the "Paul is dead" rumors, real heroic pop stars started to really die; Hendrix, Morrison, Joplin, and eventually Garcia succumbed to their live-wire lifestyles, while Lennon was cut down by one of his own fans.

Contour was intrigued. While the rumor mill had briefly flirted with the notion that Rob had disappeared and had become the Webomber, here was circumstantial evidence that Rob was obsessed by the hoax about Paul McCartney's death, which would be enough (given the lack of Rob's corpse) to reopen the investigation.

The problem with this theory was that the Webomber's activities seemed wanton and random, more the acts of a twisted prankster than the work of someone with Rob Smolder's sophistication and depth of reasoning. There was also a subtle intelligence and sly wit about the Webomber's pranks, and although Rob was intelligent, he seemed to be *too* intelligent for such pedestrian wit as using Beatle clues as a signature for these acts. The Great Documentary Director was at times insightful but was also quite ponderous and academic. Given his credentials for gathering up grant money, and his body of work, Rob Smolder could have been counted on to do a documentary about controversial subjects and bury the controversy under a substantial whitewash.

In the diary, Rob's preoccupation with death continued:

Yoko sang, in her mournful dirge "Mrs. Lennon" nine years before John's murder,

*"Husband John extended his hand, extended his hand to his wife
And he finds, and suddenly he finds, that he has no hand."*

Yoko's premonition — how could someone write such beautiful, fearful poetry and then have it come true? What power had the Beatles and Yoko tapped into? Were they Adepts?

Contour was impressed. Rob Smolder had a side to him that almost no one knew, except perhaps his wife. Contour had to get into that house, just to see what he could see. He waited in the shade of a tan oak as Rachel and Charlie drove away. He carefully picked the lock on the kitchen door and snuck inside.

In the living room, against a long wall, was a custom mahogany shelf of plastic-wrapped vinyl records inside cardboard sleeves, many of them in virgin condition. Smolder's collection of Beatles records was prominent, on the first shelf, outside of the usual alphabetical order. As Contour thumbed through mint condition copies of *Sgt. Pepper*, *Revolver*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, and *Abbey Road*, reminding himself of the visual Paul-is-dead clues, he eventually picked up the double-album *Beatles* (a.k.a. the White Album), featuring the all-white cover with just the name of the band and the inventory number stamped on front. Contour saw that the number had been underlined. Why would Rob Smolder so haphazardly deface this famous cover with an ink pen? The number would have to be a real inventory number, stamped on the album in manufacturing; or else it was the number chosen as the final one to stamp all of them. It should be easy enough to check out. But Rob Smolder had underlined it. Contour took out his notebook and copied down the number. The digits could represent anything, but were the exact number of digits needed for a local phone number. On a hunch that it had to be an incomplete phone number, requiring some other clue to provide the area code, he searched the album covers again. On *Abbey Road* he saw that the license plate on the white Volkswagen behind George Harrison's head was also underlined, very slightly. The plate said "28IF" and could represent either two or four digits. He also came upon the *Yellow Submarine* album, one that had not been designed by the Beatles at all but included some new songs to go along with the

animated flick. There, on the shirt of a Blue Meanie, was the number 23, which was again underlined.

The numbers could be put together in any order, but he chose an order related to the album releases, starting with the White Album and leading through *Yellow Submarine* to *Abbey Road*. Eventually he had the final number traced to a public phone at a café in a town on the slopes of Blue Mountain, northwest of Kingston, Jamaica.

* * *

On the slopes of that mountain in Jamaica, about a mile from that café, inside a hut perched on a cliff with a magnificent view of the foothills down to Kingston, a white bearded man in cutoffs, barefoot, a makeshift turban hiding his dirty matted hair, stumbled through a smoky haze over to his laptop computer, brushed off the leavings from the last spliff he rolled, and manually connected it to the phone network. He checked into the OtherNet, using his Conduit privileges to update the encryption keys. Then he shut down the computer, disconnected it from the network, and went back to sleep in his hammock, an utterly peaceful sleep, dreaming of Shiva and Shakti lying naked on leopard skins, caressing each other to the simple music of the sarod...

Maze Love

“You can be the goddess of love, this time around! You can be anybody this time around!” The voice of the long-gone Timothy Leary blasted from the speakers at the ticket window of Maze Love, the San Francisco cyberclub owned in part by Peter Moaning.

Two days before the start of the Internet Vegas Show, Tinker had kept his prearranged appointment to meet Charlie at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. Now they were about to walk into the club, as part of Charlie’s plan to rendezvous with Eric Mauer, who hadn’t been seen in nearly a month but had made his presence felt through ICE-d emails directed at Charlie.

A public videowall showed the interior of the club, with people at computer stations, in booths, and in the VR arcade, and a video clip of Peter Moaning, the public face behind the club, highlighting the club’s features. “Get your Maze Love Smart Card! Tonight you get a free drink from Aggregate Networks if you visit its new privacy enabling site, which offers free privacy and protection from viruses and unwanted surveillance. You also get a special discount on the Tokyo theme room if you make a reservation for a Maze Love station!” He spoke the last line in a singsong manner.

The line was moving quickly enough. People would get their faces snapped with a digital camera, type something in, and receive a magnetic-striped card. They would make a reservation for a station, navigate by mouse through a 3-D simulation of the inside space of the club to select a station or booth (a shared station for a group). Then off they’d go into the dark, noisy club. They got behind a sleek raven-haired woman of about twenty with purple makeup and a Morticia Addams dress with a hole cut out for her navel-ring. She

preened for the camera like a model for a Nike ad — just another good-looking girl out to have some fun. Click, then Charlie was next.

He protested that he didn't want his picture taken, so they gave him a choice of avatar faces. There were categories of original cartoon faces, all designed by local artists, divided into menus labeled superheroes, rock 'n' rollers, dinosaurs, rare fish, goofy farm animals, fierce-looking beasts of the jungle, and generic-looking humans of different races and colors. The caricatures menu offered cartoon faces of a couple of dead presidents, rock stars, and computer nerds.

From the menu labeled Rock 'n' Roll Heaven Charlie chose Stevie Ray Vaughan. Not many other caricatures were left this late in the evening; stars like Kurt Cobain, John Lennon and Jim Morrison were taken early, but Vaughan's was almost never used, for the obvious reason that Vaughan's face wasn't extremely attractive. The club allowed only one use of a special caricature per night, so that there wouldn't be a room full of Elvis impersonators (the exception was the caricature of Pee Wee Herman — there was an unlimited supply). He typed the pseudonym "Double Trouble" for his club ID, and paid a \$50 up-front cash fee to establish a limit. Tinker followed along, choosing Sonny Boy Williamson II for his avatar, and "King Biscuit" for his club ID. They set up a temporary Web page for the night, a standard issue music site featuring links to the BluesNet and Guitar Player and other commercial hosts. Glancing quickly over some of the features, "Double Trouble" showed "King Biscuit" the capability to use the videoconferencing system, and they selected the option to have their avatars appear on the face wall — a giant bank of video monitors off to the side of the main stage. This setup took less than 30 seconds, and they were off into the dark club.

Around the corner, the club was no longer dark. Giant video monitors glared down from the sides of the room, playing clips on request. Computer stations were everywhere, playing games, videos, browsers, and colorful screen savers. Computer memorabilia hung from the ceiling, and attendants in zoot suits with blinking ties

scurried about helping people get settled with the station controls. A local band was covering a Stone Temple Pilots anthem with as much energized angst as they could muster.

*Spin me up, spin me, spin me out
Station to station send me up and out
Is that what life and love is all about
I think I think so*

— Stone Temple Pilots, “Big Bang Baby” (R. DeLeo/S. Weiland)

Patrons were singing up front with the band, moshing along. Behind the band, a wall of video monitors displayed a single picture, a video clip of double-decker busses entering and leaving a terminal, superimposed over a 3D image of a circuit board up close. As usual, every station was taken. The VR Arcade was crowded at that moment with bussed-in attendees of an e-business marketing convention, some of whom had forgotten to take off their badges.

They split up. Tinker cruised over to the shrine encasing the original wirewrap circuit boards of the first model Planet computer and other memorabilia from the optimistic days of the personal computer era. Next to the exhibit, a Japanese-style beverage machine offered him a choice of Sam Adams beer, Mendocino chardonnay, Red Bull, Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Soma, or Japanese beverages such as Porcari Sweat. He chose a beer and swiped his card in the slot.

Charlie strolled through the semi-crowded dance floor over to the tables, and took a seat in a small booth by himself, with an extra seat, to wait for some kind of word from Eric. He punched up the food menu on the computer at the table, and identified himself with a swipe of his card. It immediately displayed a menu on the right side and his avatar face on the left. He dragged the image of a cheeseburger over his avatar face, and a prompt appeared with icons for ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, onions, lettuce, tomato, and so forth, with one icon for “everything”, one for “Western style”, one for “Chicago style,” and so on, and a final icon for “other” that

required some typing on the keyboard to be specific. At this point he could have clicked his way into the entire history of the cheeseburger and the historic use of condiments, but he was hungry, so he dragged over the icon for “Western style” which featured onions, bacon, and barbecue sauce. He went through a similar process with fries, and then dragged the icon for Guinness Draft beer over his face.

The computer tallied the result, listing all his choices, and he clicked the Submit button. A progress chart appeared, showing the message going through credit approval and so on, all the way to the kitchen. After a minute or so, the chart showed that his meal was on the fire — no substitutions or refunds after this point. By this time a cute waitress, looking just like the redhead in a miniskirt in those Ruby’s Diner ads with the bun hairdo, delivered his beer.

He had interrupted the table computer’s attract loop — a video clip of Peter Moaning explaining the features of the cyberclub — to browse through the faces and handles of the people currently in the club. Moaning was here, so was Mort Gill. Jill Metrose, the editor-in-chief of *Fizz* magazine, was looking prim and proper in her face snap; she was probably in one of the VIP lounges. Howard Marker, one of her feature writers, was also here, probably in the same place. They were all dangerous now; Charlie couldn’t really trust any of them. No sign of Eric.

He hadn’t gone very far when the computer beeped (not just “beep” but the “Beep Beep, Beep Beep, Yeah!” from the Beatles, “Drive My Car”). A message appeared at the top of the screen saying an anonymous person was calling using the videoconferencing system. Charlie turned to the screen, clicked on the message, and up popped a video window in the middle of the screen, and he knew immediately by the high quality of the picture that it was a link to a caller inside the club, not from the public Net. It was Rachel. Her red hair framed a lively, triangular face with a sharp nose and a silly grin with freckles on top.

"You miss me?" She was smiling, nearly ecstatic. He could hear her voice through the computer's special acoustic speaker system suspended from the ceiling. The ambient noise of the club would have normally prevented this technology from working properly, but Moaning had paid a handsome sum to modify the system with the latest directional audio placement technology. The sound was much better than over a telephone; he could hear the emotion in her voice as if she was standing next to him.

"How did you find me?" Charlie glanced back at his Stevie Ray Vaughan avatar face on the left side of the screen, still up on the face wall, in the upper right corner in the newcomer space. Next to it was Rachel's real face.

"Lucky I guess," she flashed a wide grin. "Actually, I *saw* you walking through, saw you the old-fashioned way."

"Eric is coming," he said, matter-of-factly changing the subject. "He set up this meeting."

"Good," she said, turning away to smile at a friend, her nonchalance not convincing. She and two others occupied an enclosed station closer to the stage, and all three were on their own computers. She turned back to the small camcorder attached to her computer that beamed her picture across the room to Charlie's booth. "He'll have a surprise for you, I hope," she snickered.

"So I'll be busy," Charlie said with determination. "Don't fool around. I'll see you later," and he clicked the off button. The video image dissolved, replaced by the face list he'd been searching. He posted a flag on the message board to send him a message if anyone named "The Mad Shirt Grinder" appeared, expecting Eric to use that pseudonym, along with the face of Nicky Hopkins, another infrequently used avatar from the Rock 'n' Roll Heaven menu.

To pass the time and not be disturbed by anyone's random video calls, he set the message option temporarily to NO MSG (no messages), which happened also to also be the message most often attached to orders from the Chinese menu. He called up one of his favorite games, *Total Distortion* (Pop Rocket), to play at his table while eating.

Tell me why you're here

I came to disappear...

— R.E.M., "Disappear" (Buck/Mills/Stipe)

Tinker wandered around the club, checking out various rooms, and was right near the stage when the MC announced the Web Site of the Moment. First he showed various sites that were equivalent but not quite as good. These sites appeared behind him on different screens of the video wall as he spoke. Tinker winced; here were the intelligentsia of the information age, gazing up on their own creations paraded about in an award ceremony, absolutely oblivious to the suffering world outside. Then the MC clicked the mouse at his podium, and the entire video wall filled with one screen, the Web Site of the Moment. It was Rob Smolder's suicide note site.

The crowd roared in amazement. This was the most hacked-upon site in the universe, changing almost hourly, as new hackers tried to outdo the ones that came before, so that the site had long since become a parody of a suicide note, then a parody of a parody, then a party page, then a page of random faces, then a page of random feces, and so on. At this point it was totally unrecognizable from the page that first appeared after Smolder's jump. In fact, someone was hacking the page at that very moment, and it changed again while up on the video wall. It was now displaying a link to Web pages dedicated to Stevie Ray Vaughan. Then it changed to pages dedicated to Sonny Boy Williamson II and then to Nicky Hopkins. Then, just as quickly, it changed again, but the message had made it through to Tinker — Eric was in the house.

The plan was to hook up in Maze Love. Tinker took a seat at a station in the game room, and switched to the 3D Maze Love cyberworld, where he could either use a full-body version of his face avatar, or pick a new one just for Maze Love. He decided to go incognito, and chose a standard male stud-puppy body in a matador's outfit. Before long his avatar had found a room in the maze with a very sexy blonde babe, a Kim Basinger avatar in a slinky white dress right out of Tim Burton's *Batman*. As soft-porn video clips graced the walls of the room, the two avatars swirled through the room under mouse control, throwing virtual kisses at each other, each one seeking a way to bring the avatars together, to make them cuddle. The tension was building as the owners, unknown to each other, maneuvered their avatars to mash into each other. The program had been designed so that the avatars could stay locked together in an embrace while dancing throughout the room. The effect was stunningly erotic.

Tinker signaled the owner of the babe avatar to meet again in a Webcam link, where they could see each other. He got no reply, and signaled again, and again, until the babe avatar dissolved in his embrace. The Webcam window popped up automatically on Tinker's screen, as the owner of the babe avatar finally honored Tinker's request. The window showed three burly college-age men laughing hysterically, and one of them quickly ripped down his pants, bent over, and gave Tinker a full view of the moon.

* * *

At that moment Charlie's *Total Distortion* homemade music video, which he'd worked on in two beers' time, was interrupted with a video call from "The Mad Shirt Grinder". Charlie smiled; only Eric could break through the NO MSG lockout, and without crashing any stations. Eric *wrote* most of the cyberclub's operating system under contract to Moaning. He could enter this club anonymously and do as he pleased. Sure enough, it was Eric in the video window, not some avatar. He was calling from the total immersion room, where he was entirely enclosed in a coffin-like body station that offered sensual

thrills as well as surround-sound and the equivalent of an IMAX Theater experience.

“Move into Maze Love.” Eric was terse.

“OK.” Charlie clicked his way into a Maze Love room with walls of pink coral. His Stevie Ray Vaughan face appeared on the avatar body of a serpent. Charlie was momentarily startled, because he seemed to have no control over it. Eric’s avatar, with a Nicky Hopkins face on the body of a T-Rex, prowled around the room. Eric must be showing his tendency for anger with this T-Rex avatar; perhaps he meant to chew my head off because I made a deal to work again with Moaning.

Eric had brought a baby T-Rex avatar with him, or more like a miniature T-Rex, with the face of Babe Ruth. The mini-T-Rex held a scroll in one of its clawed front feet, which he extended in Charlie’s direction. “Take a look at this,” said the Babe face on top of the mini-T-Rex. At that moment, the room’s walls changed from pink coral to video clips of an approaching thunderstorm.

Charlie’s avatar changed automatically from a serpent to a revolutionary war hero in a tri-cornered hat standing like George Washington in a dinghy crossing the Delaware. It unsettled Charlie to not have control over these avatar changes — did Maze Love really allow this? But he had some control over movement, so he had his avatar grab the scroll and unroll it. The scroll immediately morphed into a free-floating cube with the same video clip playing on all sides. It showed Peter Moaning shaking hands with someone Charlie didn’t recognize, a man in a ponytail. When the man turned around, Charlie could see the man’s FBI field jacket. The next scene was Moaning again, shaking hands this time with a shadowy man in a trenchcoat. The scene changed to a terrorist training camp. It dissolved into an animation showing a complex system with a rather large, cartoonish back door and a huge green foot coming through it.

When the animation finished, Eric's T-Rex had changed into a Confederate general, with his aide now a bandaged soldier with crutches right out of *Red Badge of Courage*.

The gist of Eric's message was clear. Moaning had provided versions of ICE to the Feds and to the terrorists, and they both had their own back doors. Only Charlie's version, copied from the Jamaican site and hidden in music files copied across the Net, would be useful as a base to build a new version.

Tinker's avatar, Sonny Boy Williamson's face with the body of a Confederate infantryman, arrived in the room. It seemed to be the cue for a thunderstorm to approach from the distance, its ferocious howl gaining in amplitude. "Give me the key to the copy," Eric spoke first. "The FBI's already in the house, trying to track us. There's also another group following you, and I'm not sure who they are."

"Here," said Charlie, and he typed the peer-to-peer protocol and URL for retrieving a copy of the song "Escape Key" from the net. "Use this password." He typed the password. "But why did you need *this* copy? Why didn't Moaning or Gill already get it to you?"

"Look, you can make a deal with Moaning, but I don't trust him," said Eric through his avatar in a voice clipped, Germanic, baritone. "I don't trust anyone anymore, not unless I know what they want. This is my code, I wrote it. And Gill is under too much scrutiny right now."

Tinker was about to ask a question but Eric's avatar suddenly grew huge. "The cyberclub system now has a nice feature, not documented, that lets you essentially eavesdrop on other private Maze Love sessions."

"Wow," said Charlie. "Isn't that an ethical or moral issue?"

“Maybe,” said Eric, “but the club couldn’t get insurance without the ability to monitor these sessions. So anyway, check this out. The MLF operation is about to begin.”

A window opened up to occupy one entire wall of the room, and it felt as if they were actually in the room, hiding inside a painting on the wall.

* * *

Mort Gill’s avatar looked like Mort Gill, and his current girlfriend Tina’s avatar looked just like Tina, sitting in his lap. Howard Marker, the journalist, was using a Sam Spade avatar holding a notepad. Gill was holding forth on a topic dear to his heart: the war on drugs.

“Look at who this war benefits. Follow the money. First, the politicians, then the enforcement community. The politicians use this war to gain votes, by appealing directly to people’s fears. The enforcement community and the prison industry get subsidies for overtime pay, electronic gear, weapons, and so on. And they can keep the money and property they seize in drug busts. Did you also know that the prison industry is the fastest growing industry in this country, faster even than high-tech?”

On it went in the 3D party room, other avatars rapt with attention at his feet, until Peter Moaning’s avatar, looking of course just like Peter Moaning, joined the group, bringing with him a gorgeous blonde female avatar, who introduced herself as Tiffany.

Back in the wall, eavesdropping on the party room, Charlie’s avatar nudged Tinker’s avatar, nudged it again, and then winked. “I know that girl, Tiffany. She’s one of my models. You should see her with nothing on except her earrings.” Eric’s avatar seemed to perk with interest, turning a mellow yellow.

Then Gretchen's avatar entered the party room with what seemed like an entourage but was actually only Gooky's avatar, talking rapid-fire about the coming media apocalypse. "To the OtherNet! Hip hip, hooray!" Gretchen's avatar raised a virtual glass of champagne.

"And now, we start the *real* party," said Moaning, and his avatar pressed a large button that had appeared in mid-air. "Eric's got the setup rigged. My eternal gratitude to you, sir," his avatar bowed at Mort Gill's avatar, "for the loan of one of the greatest hackers of all time."

"You are more than welcome," replied Gill, his avatar raising a virtual glass of champagne. "You and the entire Media Liberation Front have helped to advance the cause of freedom, and that makes you all modern-day heroes."

Gretchen noticed Howard Marker's avatar and moved her avatar closer to his. Gooky was reading aloud from a virtual window that appeared in front of his avatar, shouting stats. "90 seconds, already we have 100,000 copies in progress... 2 minutes, 200,000 copies..." Marker's avatar looked at Gretchen's avatar, who, with what seemed like a furrowed brow on the avatar face, looked back at Moaning. Moaning's avatar nodded at her. "Folks," announced Gooky, "5 minutes into this party, and we now have over 1 million copies in progress."

Gretchen's avatar touched Marker's avatar's shoulder. "Yo, this is *way* off the fuckin' record, you got it?"

Marker's avatar nodded. "Off the record. Absolutely."

"What you're seeing here, organized by the Media Liberation Front, is a new kind of privacy party," said Gretchen. "You know what a *privacy party* is, don'tcha? You get someone using Napster-like software, y'know, peer-to-peer, and putting large quantities of copyrighted warez on the servers of unsuspecting companies for an

evening or a few days, and announce a privacy party, and millions jump into the party and download the warez."

Howard Marker sighed. He knew about privacy parties. They were no big deal. It cost the music industry very little, even less of a hit than a day's worth of Napster sharing back when Napster was at its height of popularity. Gretchen sensed his sudden relief, and ratcheted up the volume of her considerable voice. "But like I said, this is a *new kind* of privacy party. The MLF mean business with this one. People are copying millions of works to the OtherNet, not just to their own systems. They are unknowingly creating the largest library of free content ever seen on this planet. It's a new Alexandria."

Marker's avatar looked up in virtual alarm. "That means the content is... will be... *always available?*"

"That's right," boomed the voice of Moaning from across the room. "It's the piracy party to end all piracy parties! It's the one that keeps on giving, and it goes on forever!"

Eavesdropping on this party in cyberspace, Charlie's and Tinker's avatars slapped high-fives. "Shouldn't we be in there, enjoying this celebration?" asked Tinker.

Before Charlie could answer, Eric's avatar got in close as if to whisper. "If we can eavesdrop, so can the FBI, and so can Grogan. Think about it: do you want to pop up on either one's radar right now?"

"Yeah," agreed Charlie. "Besides, this is Gretchen's show. She kept things secret for us. Let's not disturb things. We'll catch up with her in Vegas."

The party room was still going strong, but Tiffany, Moaning's date, was restless and bored. Her avatar twirled around the room, attracting Eric's attention as he watched with Tinker and Charlie. Then her avatar left to explore the maze.

Eric's avatar hovered for a moment, indecisively. "You guys should take off. The FBI is here, watching the front and back entrances, so go through the service door in the game room. I'll see you in Vegas."

"What about you?" Charlie asked Eric, but Eric's avatar was already moving quickly down the route that Tiffany's avatar had gone. The storm on the walls of the 3D room had dissipated, leaving behind a clear night sky. Eric's "mini-avatar" morphed into a butterfly held in a spotlight. The butterfly spread its wings, and flew around the room; as it flew over a section of the room, a portion of a miniature replica of the cyberclub would appear there, complete with tiny stations and the appearance of people. Little captions appeared, labelling the FBI agents. One label indicated an agent from Grogan, which put the fear into them. Charlie's avatar turned to Tinker's avatar. "Let's split."

* * *

A hand touched Charlie's shoulder, warm, pressing down. A real hand on his real shoulder. The virtual room dissolved into tiny pixels, and Charlie looked up from his screen to see Rachel standing there, hand on his shoulder, a drink in her hand.

"Hello," she teased.

"I just finished talking to Eric," Charlie said, looking up.

"So what?" she flirted. "So how is he?" she asked, serious again.

"I don't know. All I know is, the heat is here and they're after us. They're also after Eric. But he did something, made them temporarily blind, so we have a chance to split. He's already gone."

"You know Eric," Rachel smirked. "He's always on his own."

"We're all on our own," said Charlie.

The music had switched to ambient techno. Rachel's face shone above her drink like a harvest moon. Charlie longed for nothing more or less than Rachel's fragrant body draped over him. He logged out of the station. As the music swelled and developed a jungle beat, they held hands and skirted the crowd, navigating through the rush of dancers, and in the heat of the dance, without anyone seemingly noticing except Tinker, they went out the service door, Tinker following, and disappeared into the night.

* * *

Eric, his physical self, escaped the immersion body station unnoticed, and snuck through a side door into one of the unoccupied alternate control rooms for the club. He sat behind a bank of computers, darting across a row of keyboards in a rolling swivel chair and pounding mouse buttons in sync. This man behind the curtain was controlling three operations at once, while also tracing the path that Tiffany's avatar had taken, in an effort to communicate with her. He had seen her before, in his only face-to-face meeting with Moaning, and he had been bewitched into silence. Beautiful women did that to him, and he resented it.

But this beautiful woman was not someone to resent. Like an exotic butterfly, she was something to capture. She had slipped him a note at that previous meeting, just one word, and he knew it to be a special password. Indeed, the password had worked to get them into eavesdropping mode for the cyberspace party. He wanted to thank her for that bit of 'social engineering' as hackers called it. But she had dumped her avatar and had most likely escaped the club. And he still had work to do.

The MLF had its Alexandria Project, a.k.a. privacy party to end all privacy parties, going full-force now, completely protected from outside scrutiny. But Eric had piggybacked another project onto its search-out-idle-servers routine. Companies with idle servers were

not just lending themselves to the largest copyright piracy act in history; they were also now being used to flood the National Security Agency's phone and data wiretaps that were operating on all international streams. Hackers everywhere were tuned in and disrupting taps with bogus phone calls and emails using trigger words. The effect was a momentary meltdown of the enforcement community's surveillance efforts all at once. Eric laughed, thinking, blame *this* on the Webomber. As usual, Eric left no signatures of any kind to mark his work.

Not everyone

Can carry the weight of the world

— R.E.M., "Talk About the Passion" (Berry, Buck, Mills, Stipe)

The third project was somewhat personal. The FBI's Carnivore "black box" allowed agents to bug a keyboard or remotely capture keystrokes from outside the building in one of their ubiquitous black SUVs. They could follow a trail of Web browsing, email, instant messages, whatever. But Eric had switched on a magnetic field to disrupt the electromagnetic energy the "black box" tapped into. The FBI saw nothing on their displays outside but swirling displays of computer graphics, a sort of up-to-date lava lamp.

At some point Eric knew he had to leave the club, at least physically. He had been working on a special program that could act on his behalf, a super-agent, that could mimic all his activities in proper sequence and continue the operation of all three projects — an Eric bot. After a deliberate pause, he hit the mouse on his recording software, and the super-agent was ready. He tested it once, then switched on the autopilot. The Eric bot took over.

Quietly, stealthily, he gathered a few backup cartridges and discs, put them in his backpack, and left the room. No one saw him leave. No one knew where he was going, except those ready to receive him. Eric had contacted them a few years ago, when his research in cabals had reached dizzying heights. His father had given him the calling

card, when he was 20, to use only in an emergency. The address was a mansion on Broadway in Pacific Heights, near other embassies. It was the embassy of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (SMOM) — the Knights of Malta — which is extraterritorial property and not subject to the laws of the host country, just as any embassy for a foreign sovereign land.

Long ago the Knights of Malta had been organized as the third oldest order of Christianity, consisting only of non-clerics, and had served as a secular infrastructure and military arm of the Vatican during the Crusades. Expelled from Turkey for fomenting political conspiracies, the order settled in Malta until the island was taken over by Napoleon. Since then, the Knights of Malta existed as a sovereign state without land, but acted mostly as a charitable organization allowing the royal families of Europe a chance to mingle with the newly rich. There were rumors that SMOM diplomatic pouches, especially ones transported from various places in South America to Los Angeles, were used in the drug trade, as it was sovereign protocol to pass these pouches through customs without inspection.

Eric knew he'd be safe in the embassy for a few days, and the Knights of Malta computers would be safe from electronic eavesdropping. The FBI had most likely found his Redwood City hideout by now, but Eric had abandoned it with time to spare. With all his files encrypted on the network, and with the most important source code hidden within songs dispersed on servers around the world, the computer hardware didn't matter anymore. He appreciated the irony of his using the Knights of Malta, a tiny pocket of sovereignty. Eric wanted to transform the Net so that each individual in the world could make himself the equivalent of a sovereign nation, untouched by local laws, unlimited in scope and power, using encryption "packets" to pass information without inspection, just like those diplomatic pouches.

Yes, Eric was about to go way beyond the MLF's concept of the OtherNet. He was about to install the software infrastructure that would guarantee secure encryption, with no "back door" for law

enforcement of any type. He would create a new nation in official cyberspace that anyone could join and become a citizen. Mort Gill had kept him on a short leash, on a “need to know” basis, but Eric had his own agenda. Eric had followed the Webomber’s electronic trail; he’d poked into Tinker’s computer without his knowledge and read the documentation. Gill himself had let a few nuggets slip in conversation. Eric knew, for example, that the contact within Aggregate was high enough in the organization to use Bill Gittelsohn’s own laptop and slide presentation program. That was supposedly how the initial insertion would be made, the hook to get Eric’s code into the infrastructure at the control point. Once again, it involved a bit of social engineering.

Eric also knew that some of the Conduits were corrupt and at least one, Grogan, was linked to real terrorists. He suspected that another was an FBI infiltrator. They seemed to be involved in an arms race over ‘back doors’ to the encryption system. Eric’s agenda was to undermine this roundtable of Conduits with a single, immutable infrastructure, one that could not be corrupted, one guaranteeing freedom of censorship of any kind.

Eric himself would assume the Super-Conduit role, and he would have to drop out of his normal life in order to do it. He smiled; he had already virtually dropped out, just not in name, and not in physical space.

The gates of the mansion filled him with those old-fashioned feelings of courage and destiny that were the very foundations of all the conspiracies that had existed from antiquity. The Knights of Malta, the Knights Templar, the Hasheeshin, the Jesuits, Opus Dei, and so many other orders and sects used these feelings to manipulate their members to do unspeakable acts, and to imbue them with the sense of purpose and order to the universe, however fleeting that may be. And Eric, a student of all these conspiracies, believed he was now ready to assume the role of a master.

Queen of Las Vegas

The Las Vegas evening skyline was ablaze with unearthly delights. Tinker saw it first, blinked, and saw it again, as he drove over the slight rise in the desert plain on Highway 95, heading south from the Amargosa Valley, on the edge of Area 51.

They were living in the moment. Tinker was feverish, a vision of thousands of computers crashing at once, displaying the symbol of the Media Liberation Front, spreading the encryption client and making his song a hit throughout the Internet, and at the same time, marking him for life as a fugitive. He had driven most of the way from the upper Sierras, through Death Valley, out past Beatty and the infamous Nevada Testing Range and Area 51, all the way to here, without feeling tired. He punched out U2's *Joshua Tree* CD and popped in the B52's *Whammy!* and ran it up to the track "Queen of Las Vegas".

This woke Charlie from his stupor. Charlie looked up from the front passenger seat, and didn't have to say anything. They were both in awe of the Las Vegas skyline shimmering out there, another 50 miles away.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Charlie mumbled, or more like grunted.

"How can I sleep with my life so turned upside down?" Tinker whined. "I'm frightened out of my wits."

Charlie didn't want to argue, so he did what he usually did when irritated, and offered an ultimatum. "You have a choice," he said to Tinker in his stern voice. "You've always had it in your laptop."

“Oh!” exclaimed Tinker, “Like I could have just tapped my shoes and said, ‘there’s no place like home’?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Charlie sardonically. “Just email the code to the Feds. There’ll be no hassles. You can return to your former life.”

“My former life,” answered Tinker ruefully. “No one wants it, least of all me.”

“So get with the program,” scolded Charlie. “Think about what we have to do.”

And so they did. Vegas shimmered like a jewel in the desert. To Charlie, it represented everything shiny and promising and false about the high-tech industry. The tradeshow was just another gaudy spectacle. You had to wear your best suits; or if you were a rich entrepreneur, your best casuals. Despite the miles of aisles you had to walk, you still had to wear your best shoes, and cram the latest personal digital devices into your belt. You had to meet potential investors or partners in piano bars of posh hotels. You were not a player in this industry if you couldn’t work the casino lounge late one night and the exhibit floor early the next morning.

This would be Charlie’s last Internet Vegas Show, for sure. The last time he would witness entrepreneurs begging for capital, small companies begging for customers, and journalists begging for access.

* * *

Eric Mauer flew into McCarren Airport in Las Vegas on a chartered flight, after a police escort from the Knights of Malta embassy in San Francisco, arranged by the Knights. He felt like he was moving with the real power of the world when he moved with the Knights. If an alien being from another planet landed and asked to be taken to our leader, the alien would not be taken to the US President, the so-called

Leader of the Free World. The alien would be taken to a holding cell somewhere out in the Nevada desert, perhaps Area 51, where it would be visited by a leader of an unknown but vast conspiracy stretching back through the ages to the time of the pyramids. Perhaps the Knights would be there, too, acting as bodyguards. They seemed to have an unlimited capacity to move people, or information, or money, or any other substance, through established channels undetected. This capability fascinated Eric, and he studied the order's organizational strengths to see how he could apply them to his own venture. They had mastered the physical world, and Eric would one day, with luck, master the cyberspace world.

One strength was their vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience, followed by all the order's top leaders. Poverty in appearance only, as in a parsimonious and unpretentious lifestyle, for all of the order's members were rich. But the leaders now practiced a new form of poverty, like the Diggers of the Sixties, eschewing leadership postures and publicity. Which meant that any of the older Knights could claim leadership or non-leadership, but for all Eric knew, the ultimate leader might be the doorman or a member of the kitchen staff.

Chastity was a quaint holdover from earlier times, but in practice it meant focusing sexual energy on the task at hand. Masturbation, indulging in sexual fantasies, even having sex — these were all activities that weakened a knight's resolve to press forward. Fanatics and extremists of all kinds, including many politicians, are able to focus solely on their agendas because they don't get laid often. Like a Zen monk, Eric had chosen to focus all his sexual energy on meditation, hoping to encourage a deep fanaticism.

*And I don't wanna live my life like everybody else...
'Cause I'm not like everybody else*
— Kinks, "I'm Not Like Everybody Else" (R. Davies)

Eric recognized the discordant nature of reality; that the random element of surprise and mystery would always exist below the

surface, foiling any effort to control the world. For example, this airplane could suddenly crash — there was some probability, however slight. Even more improbably, taking a page from Douglas Adams' guides to galactic mysteries, the airplane could turn into a giant cheeseburger. Most people can't suspend disbelief long enough to accept that. Only the fanatic can act upon the improbable, and seize the power of that surprise and mystery. Eric was now focused to become a fanatic, the latest Random Element in the Scheme of Things. His project would succeed because he was focused and confident of its success, and because nothing else mattered to him.

Eric was acting, as usual, alone. Although Gill, Moaning, and even Grogan depended on his work right now, none of them owned him or could stop him from doing what he really wanted to do. And right now, he wanted to help Charlie, Tinker, and himself to some of the loot that would be electronically transferred at the instant the Net came back to life, after the Event. That loot was supposed to go back to the financial backers, shadowy men connected with Grogan and Moaning. He didn't really care that Grogan was part of some terrorist network, or that Moaning was essentially an asshole. He disliked the way his friends Charlie and Tinker had been treated, and he knew they'd be cut out if he didn't do something. So some of that loot would be diverted to new accounts set up by Charlie.

Mort Gill would understand, and there was no reason to think Gill would take sides in this. And Moaning, walking the delicate line between terrorism and organized crime, couldn't afford to make noise about what Eric wanted to do. The FBI and Grogan both wanted their own back doors to the encryption system; neither would be satisfied when the system was no longer under anyone's control. Even Aggregate would be unhappy when this happened. But they would have no say in the matter. It was in Eric's hands now.

* * *

Rachel Smolder rode into the Amargosa Valley ranch in the Nevada desert on her Harley, covered in leather, a dagger sticking out of her boot, her red hair spilling out from under the helmet. The ranch was buzzing with activity, the satellite dish rotating back and forth. Drew Anatole and some of the original crew from the C-Dome were operating the studio control booth, and Gretchen was on the air as a guest of Radio 51 (the all-night talk show), taking phone calls.

The topic on this night was the mysterious disappearance of three private planes that had been circling Area 51, and the prattle of callers was interleaved with appropriate desert music...

*There's a killer on the road,
His brain is squirming like a toad.*
— Doors, "Riders on the Storm" (Doors)

Drew swore he saw an experimental fighter jet, with flat black wings, cruising the mountain range in the glistening, glorious sunset behind the ranch the day before last. Some of his colleagues had seen or heard black helicopters in the night. Everyone was tense. The radio show beamed out through a Las Vegas transmitter to millions of listeners at over thirty stations worldwide, and was simulcast over the Internet. Tonight's segment was titled "Armageddon in the Amargosa Valley" and hinted that a group of eco-terrorists were planning something big for Las Vegas.

Moaning was in the camp; Rachel could feel it. Eventually, she was called into his tent.

"You know where Charlie is?" Moaning got right to the point.

"I know he's on his way to Vegas." Rachel tossed her hair, but nothing would charm Moaning at this moment.

"You know, with so much involved, so much money at stake, and you know the kind of people involved in this... well, he'd better not

fuck up.” Moaning turned back to his computer. “Your job is to manage the operation from here. I’ll be going into town, to the Imperial Palace.”

“AdultDex,” Rachel smirked. “To get your jollies, no doubt.”

Moaning glared at her. “Grogan needed to be satisfied, so he had his hackers go over the code and put in their hooks. He will give his CD to Charlie. And Charlie better not fuck up.”

“What makes you think I have any control over Charlie?” she asked, innocently.

“Just keep everything cool out here. I’ll be back later.”

* * *

While hundreds of trade show attendees waited in cab lines or lines for rental cars, and registration lines at hotels, Brendan Barcode arrived in Vegas in his self-sufficient, solar-powered Econoline van loaded with electronics gear. Late at night he pulled into the Hilton’s outer parking lot, a stone’s throw from all the action, and settled in for the week. It really wasn’t that much different than the parking lots and campgrounds he parked in throughout the Bay Area, just the air was much drier and he had no source for his favorite fruit juice. “Hey, no problem” he was fond of saying to himself. And so this time he’d stocked up on the juice back at the California border.

The convention center parking lot stretched out nearly to the horizon, festooned with giant balloons, inflatable signs, streamers, and cowgirls on makeshift stages barking through megaphones. A group of young people decked out in hippie garb handed out fliers for a new PC card offering built-in encryption and firewall protection. Asians lined the sidewalk outside the Beach Hotel, across the street from the show, handing out ads for nude dancers. Brendan caught one as it blew by, propelled by the hot Nevada wind. He wondered if

the nude girl in the photo would be interested in trading some time for a latest model digital camera. He wandered off into the parking lot, looking for someone he could talk to about it.

* * *

Mal Contour took a cab to the Las Vegas newspaper building to meet his contact. A nasty rumor had circulated around the press lounge that the largest telephone and Internet service provider in Las Vegas had wide-open security holes in the private high-speed data network used for transferring large sums to and from the casinos and several banks in the Bahamas.

Contour thought of himself as a tenacious, incorruptible investigator. He would never suppress information, no matter how damaging to a company, and he would never accept a bribe, or even a book contract that required him to stay silent. Indeed, sometimes he imagined himself on a long journey, like Ulysses, heading for home from great adventures, listening as he passed the deadly sirens of corruption while his ship's crew covered their ears.

*Well the dangers on the rocks have surely passed
Still I remain tied to the mast
Could it be that I have found my home at last?
— Steely Dan, "Home at Last"*

It was his destiny to hear the deadly sirens' songs. Whatever it took to get at the truth, he would do it. Unlike those *Fizz* dilettantes, those suburban slickheads like Marker, Contour's journalism credentials reached back to when San Francisco newspapers covered labor strikes, and Contour had stood with the men on the picket lines.

This much he knew: Moaning and ANAL, the Assholes Club, were under surveillance for having ties to an arms dealer in Amsterdam. Somehow, Mort Gill's encryption software was involved, probably in some scheme that ANAL had set up for its millionaire friends. That

was probably how Gill's extracurricular projects were funded, but now Gill's C-Dome hackers had all dispersed, and Moaning was running with the MLF. Those rumors about a gathering in the desert were worth tracking down. Contour knew that Charlie and his friends, including Tinker, had some kind of falling out with Moaning. He knew there was a connection to Rob Smolder, and possibly to the Webomber, and it may be all connected to the FBI raid in Jamaica. The rumor about the Vegas service provider got him thinking about hubs and backbones, and how vulnerable the Internet itself might be.

The contact was the business reporter at the newspaper, who greeted him in the lobby and promptly took him outside into the hot afternoon sunlight. "Look," he said to Contour, clearly exasperated that he had to write about high technology companies rather than the sleazy nightspots and hotel conglomerates. "I need some background, you need the latest report we have, so let's do some horse trading. This group of hackers, calling themselves the Media Liberation Front... you know about them?"

Contour filled him in, and in the process, learned that the group had indeed gathered in the desert, out near Area 51. But Contour held back the bit he knew about Peter Moaning, one of the group's ringleaders, and the public phone in that café in Jamaica. He didn't say that there might be a connection to the infamous Webomber. He specifically did not mention his fear that the FBI had discovered a connection to terrorists. Maybe he was violating his own cardinal rule about sharing information, but the business reporter didn't seem to care about going any deeper. He just wanted to know why the MLF would want to disrupt Vegas. Contour patiently explained the MLF's charter to create a censorship-free network with most of the copyrighted works of the world available for free.

On his way back to the Las Vegas Convention Center and Hilton complex, he stopped the cab when he saw Brendan Barcode's van and Brendan himself sitting on the roof, shirtless, sunning himself. Everyone knew that Barcode was always good for a laugh, but Mal

Contour was the only journalist that took Barcode seriously for the information he could get.

“Hey man,” Barcode called out as Mal walked over. “You probably didn’t hear about this!” Barcode swung down through the sunroof and came out the side door of the van. “My friend at the NSA said there was a special meeting out in the desert. I think they may have found out who the Webomber is. And did you know that there is someone who claims that Bill Gittelson hired some kinda lookalike to stand in for him when he gives speeches? Man, I think this is going to be one hell of an interesting show!”

* * *

Peter Moaning and Tiffany arrived at the Imperial Hotel by cab from the airport. Eventually they made their way over to the convention hall in the hotel, the site of AdultDex, the porn wing of the tradeshow. At that moment blue-shirted union laborers were assembling large displays, and forklifts cruised the aisles with rolls of carpeting. The show would not officially open until the next day.

A mysterious-looking man in a trench coat, with a pockmarked face and a wiry mustache, met Moaning at the booth for one of the offshore porn sites Moaning was starting. Moaning introduced this man, identified as Grogan, to the booth staff and to Tiffany, right under a giant poster of a nude version of Tiffany, her scrumptious ass facing the camera, and her impish smile peeking around, smiling at everyone from behind pillowy breasts. Tiffany gave the man that wicked smile she summoned up whenever she needed to grab a man’s attention. And from what she’d learned so far about these high-tech guys, it was real easy to get their attention. They acted like they hadn’t had a piece of ass in decades. But this man was different. He paid her no attention at all.

“The drill is simple,” Moaning explained to Tiffany, smiling broadly. “You get to stand in this booth all day, wearing, y’now, what you

usually wear, signing autographs. You get two coffee breaks and another break for lunch. There will be two other girls here with you, plus the booth staff."

"Sounds fine with me," she purred, swaying a little, still checking to see if Grogan would show any interest.

"And you, my man," Moaning turned to Grogan. "You can find Charlie O'Brien at the Bellagio, as we arranged. O'Brien takes care of it."

"It had better go as planned," Grogan hissed in reply.

Moaning just gave him his trademarked grin, and turned back to Tiffany. "You know, I'd like to get in some gambling. Would that be alright?" His request was more like a statement. Grogan shrugged and walked off.

Tiffany wiggled in her walk up the aisles past the union laborers and forklift drivers, arm-in-arm with Moaning. She was looking forward to being treated like the Queen of Las Vegas by this rich man. But she never really made it past the hotel lobby as Moaning led her to an elevator and up to his suite. He wasn't at all suave or sophisticated about what he wanted.

She performed for him with an intensity she had not drawn on recently, as if she were reading for a part in a movie, a performance that was truly convincing. Moaning got way more than he expected or probably deserved. This woman was a tigress on top of him, she took his body and shook him up and down, and left him beached like a whale.

Later, Moaning got out his wallet, turned his back to her, and pulled out five hundred dollars for her. As he went off to the bathroom to wash, she lifted another fifteen hundred from the wallet and closed it before he noticed.

* * *

Internet Vegas was a monster show, with more than 200,000 attendees, filling up every hotel and every fleabag motel in town, with people staying as far away as the Utah border. Las Vegas was a carnival and theme park, powered by the latest technology; a bizarre Metropolis of carnal delight. Extravagant demonstrations fit right in here. Inside the auditorium were flybys and surface renderings of the planet Venus; outside there was a Frankie Avalon imitator singing "Venus". Inside, multimedia artists presented a live performance with projected interactive real-time computer imaging; outside the fake volcano out in front of the Mirage Hotel erupted every fifteen minutes, stopping traffic on the Strip. The line between real and virtual reality was blurred on the Strip, where you could get an all-you-can-eat breakfast for \$1.95, and get married to someone in a vibrant pink chapel in less than 30 minutes.

Unlike Vegas itself, the parties at Internet Vegas were legendary and boring at the same time. People went to these extravagant affairs dressed to the hilt, ate mediocre food and marveled at the gaudy Dionyesian aspects of Las Vegas with the same group of people at every other tradeshow. Everyone pretended not to partake of the seamier sides of Vegas entertainment. Maybe they had experimented with a bit of gambling, but that was it. None of these people paid any attention to the millions of pornographic leaflets blowing in the wind out in every parking lot. The tradeshow could have been in any city, with the cocoon drawn around these people; the only real difference, besides the gaudiness of the architecture and signage, was that the Internet Vegas parties were more crowded with the gin-and-tonic yuppies looking to score with booth bunnies from AdultDex.

To drink with journalists, because they knew how to drink and they tolerated nearly any kind of behavior, Tinker went to the *Fizz* magazine party at the Liberace mansion and wandered through the fabled bed and bathroom of the late great transvestite, only to find a

Liberace look-alike poised to take his picture with a poodle. This freaked him out a bit, sending him back out the gates of the mansion looking for a place to smoke a quick joint, where he ran into Ted Anson.

"This place reminds me of the frat parties back at UC Berkeley, at the Claremont Hotel, remember?" Anson was uncharacteristically friendly, putting Tinker on his guard.

"I don't remember much from college days," laughed Tinker nervously, pulling out a joint to share with Anson. "By choice," he added.

They moved away from the main path, Tinker by habit, Anson by necessity. They reached a point where the mansion's gilded cupola was visible behind and above them, and Tinker pointed up at it. "I remember one party, and crazy man Youngman climbing to the top of a dome just like this. He was crowing like a rooster at the top of his lungs."

"Yes indeed," Anson laughed. "I remember Youngman. They called him Southern Man."

"I remember that fake Texan accent he had, those buckskin jackets..." Tinker drawled. "Those practical jokes. The weather balloons filled with laughing gas, that was his idea." Anson giggled back at him like a prep-school roommate as they shared the joint. "But whatever happened to him?"

Anson snickered. "Another acid casualty, I think. Back then I heard that he had flipped out and joined the Army, and about ten years ago I heard that he became a crazy homeless guy and was seen walking the streets of Palo Alto."

Of course, thought Tinker, the bell of awakening throbbing now in his temples. He's the Buckskin Madman of Sand Hill Road! That's

why he looked so familiar. But now he couldn't bring himself to tell Ted Anson that Ted and his rich friends drove by this ghost of the acid era on Sand Hill Road probably every day without knowing it.

"The lost souls of our generation," said Tinker in a whisper, in the hope his message would be treated as profound, "gambled on drugs, lifestyles, and spirituality. But that's a step forward. Look at what happened to the lost souls of the *previous* generation. They gambled on booze, broads, and the American Way. And look at the result of the previous generation." He gestured out at the Las Vegas night sky.

They could see the entire Strip from their vantage point, a black pyramid with a Sphinx in front standing guard at one end, followed by massive hotels bathed in sea green, blue, and pink, then the brightly lit, faux-marble Bellagio Hotel looking like an oversized palace transported directly from the Italian Riviera, with a miniature New York skyline next door and a miniature Eiffel Tower across the street... They smoked in silence for a while, gazing in awe.

"Some day, a hundred years from now," said Tinker, "People are gonna look back on this period and wonder, what the hell were *they* thinking?"

"It's becoming a theme park," replied Anson. "Sin City. Gambling is no longer the draw, since you can now gamble almost anywhere. It's the extravagance itself that's the draw. That hotel, the Bellagio. It cost \$1.5 billion. That one over there, Mandalay Bay, cost \$500 million."

Tinker visualized a man in a suit and a fedora, standing out in the evening desert, with nothing around him except right in front, on the only paved street, a hotel and casino. Bugsy Siegel, dreaming big dreams of an emerald city in the wilderness, and not worrying for a minute about costs.

And here was Ted Anson, clearly the financial backer for many of the nefarious activities that Tinker found himself caught in. Anson was behind the Smolder Foundation, the MLF, and who knows what else. But now, gazing out on the city that epitomized everything rotten in the American soul, Tinker feared conversing with this man who had indirectly controlled his destiny. He was sure that the only question he could ask, "What is really going on," would only be met by a blank stare, as if to say, "If you don't know, why should I tell you?"

What Tinker really wanted now, more than anything else, was a true identity. He had really only lived inside a corner of his former self. What he really wanted now was to be taught how to live as someone else. He stared out at the Vegas skyline thinking about how scared he was about this whole operation, and he mustered up the courage to tell Anson, and he turned to Anson and... Anson had disappeared.

Coming out of the shadows was a man in a ponytail and a leather jacket, a large man, well built, exuding confidence. He introduced himself as Ray, from the FBI, and he smiled at Tinker and gestured for Tinker to hand him the joint. Tinker obliged, and was surprised to see the FBI man take a large hit and hold it in like a pro.

"You're in a heap of trouble," Ray Cheney said to Tinker, but in a way that would secure his confidence. "But I can help you out."

"How's that?" Tinker shivered in reply, looking this guy up and down.

"Your associate Peter Moaning is planning some kind of Internet disruption. You know what I'm talking about. There's an encryption system, on a CD, that he will be giving you and your friend O'Brien. You're supposed to deliver it to Eric Mauer. Only you're going to give Mauer this," he held out a shiny silver CD, unlabeled, "as a replacement." He paused. "You realize this is a matter of national security, that international terrorists are involved with this, and we'll stop at nothing to secure the Internet. We'll do what we have to do,"

he said, grinning at Tinker. "You will replace the CD you get with this one. It has what we need to make sure the terrorists don't succeed."

Tinker just looked at him in astonishment.

"Don't even ask if you have a choice," said Cheney, grinning like an idiot. Then he disappeared back into the shadows, taking the joint with him.

* * *

A group of Aggregate Networks millionaires were seated at the piano bar inside the Bellagio. Charlie wandered by and spotted the journalist Howard Marker sitting with the group, and stopped to chat. The millionaires, smoking cigars and drinking the best cognac, had sent a junior member of their unofficial club off to the crap tables with several thousand dollars in chips. The junior member came back with some winnings — they were up by four thousand. Charlie winced as they whooped and hollered for joy, even though they only played the game by proxy. One of them slapped the slender behind of a waitress with the sandblasted look of a southwestern girl, with white-blond hair contrasting perfectly with her blue outfit. She smiled through perfect teeth, pretending to like it.

"They're getting excited," said Marker.

"Yeah. Excited over pennies. It's just pennies to them," Charlie said in disgust. All careers in this industry were crapshoots. What a fitting end, Charlie thought, if he could just pull the one-armed bandit and win a million. Well, that's just what he was going to do.

"So this is what happened to the Woodstock generation," said Marker smugly.

"These people?" Charlie replied, irritated. "If they were at Woodstock, they were the ones that didn't share their blankets and the food in their coolers. And if they *did*, they wised up real fast."

"Do I detect some bitterness?" Marker eyed him suspiciously.

Charlie sputtered, realizing that he'd gone too far already with this guy, who was always a journalist, never one you could talk to. "You're right. It — that whole Sixties thing was just an illusion. No one really wanted to make the world a better place. It was always just about getting *rich*."

"That's just human nature," said Marker.

"No, *survival* is human nature. Competition is aggressive behavior. It's something we learn by living in this competitive environment, but that doesn't make it natural."

"You sound like a communist," said Marker. "A communist in Las Vegas?"

Charlie just grinned. "Why not? Revolution is a crapshoot, like everything else."

A dark man in an overcoat, uncharacteristic for Vegas and too real in the surreal atmosphere of the Bellagio atrium, stood by, waiting for a moment to interrupt Charlie and the journalist. The journalist noticed him first, and backed off, leaving Charlie to shake hands with the man, who introduced himself as Grogan.

"I have something for you, from Peter Moaning," said Grogan, producing a silver unlabeled CD from his overcoat pocket. "It is essential that your friend use this version of the encryption system. You know what's at stake."

Charlie eyed him suspiciously. "What about my arrangements?"

Grogan replied with a smile. "They are in place, as your friend Moaning requested. You will also have a new identity, which is part of the package you have on that CD. My associates tell me that the Identity Kit on that CD works in seven foreign languages and in over 48 countries, and it's foolproof. You should have no trouble with it."

Charlie nodded, looking down at the CD without saying a word.

"You realize, my friend," Grogan said in an oily, con-artist way, "you are responsible for your friend Eric, and what he does with this CD. We will make sure you are held responsible." He flashed a grin at Charlie, and gestured around the Bellagio. "We have people everywhere, remember that."

* * *

Ground Decoy in the Nevada desert, near the Amargosa Valley ranch — much grinning about the name, since it was a common joke among these media liberators that *all* activities were decoy activities, and that the real thing was always somewhere else... But in this case they didn't realize how true that was.

They had assembled a small army of RVs, satellite uplink dishes and aluminum air-conditioned trailers. They'd found a site a few miles away in the desert of the Amargosa Valley where just one powerful set of explosives would damage the trunk lines for phones, the data lines, cable TV, and even the main power lines into Las Vegas. A sane person might wonder how this rag-tag group of misfits had gotten so far into this operation as to be able to wreak real damage, but then a sane person would probably not believe that the operation had been greased by an FBI agent in an effort to smoke out real terrorists.

*Your inside is out and your outside is in
Your outside is in and your inside is out*

— Beatles, “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey” (Lennon/McCartney)

Gretchen and Gooky were entertaining their friends from Earth First in the stand-up tent, Gooky with his collection of deer-antler pipes. A laptop was set up to monitor the activity, with Gretchen at the controls. The Media Liberation Front was running the show, by an arrangement Moaning forged with Earth First. The MLF’s job was to initiate the project, then at precisely the right moment, the Earth First volunteers would blow the cables and power. Vegas would go dark for a moment, and as emergency power returned to the casinos, their systems would restart and resynchronize, allowing the insertion of a bit of code that would enable an electronic skim of the casino’s transactions. In a few minutes time, the amount of the skim, it was calculated, would approach \$500 million.

The power would also go out at the Internet control point, in a bunker out in the desert near Pahrump, not far from the Amargosa. What Moaning didn’t know was that Eric was out at that bunker, with plans to plant code that would enable the implementation, in all it’s glory, of a truly secure version of the OtherNet.

Sniper at the Schmooze Fest

The day started simply, like any day in Las Vegas when a tradeshow adds 200,000 extra visitors. The Bill clone, whose real name was Mark D'Angelo, sat at the counter, alone, at the Blueberry Hill Pancake House on Maryland Ave., just a few minutes away from the largest tradeshow in the USA. Internet Vegas presented a perfect target for those who might want to disrupt the entire industry, offering the highest concentration of rich entrepreneurs that you could ever find on the planet at any one time.

A limousine was out on the curb, waiting to whisk the Bill clone from his breakfast to the loading dock backstage, where his employer would be just finishing his keynote speech. The switch would be made backstage, right after the morning keynote. Mr. Bill Gittelson, America's richest man and chairman of Aggregate Networks, the largest company on the planet, would step off the podium into the gray flannel womb of his entourage of mostly bodyguards. The entourage would then move in unison to the back of the stage and then behind the curtain, where the switch would be made: Mark would replace Bill Gittelson as his clone.

Gittelson had good reason to employ a clone. He was America's richest target. Besides, just being famous was enough to get you killed, possibly for no other reason than the fact that you were famous. Even before terrorists started a campaign to assassinate billionaires, Bill Gittelson knew, prescient as he was about many things, that he would need a clone, at least for travel.

No one really knew, least of all Mark D'Angelo, where the bullets would come from. It could be a terrorist assassin. It could be a disgruntled employee denied a piece of the stock option pie or

banished to an irrelevant project. It could be the founder of a company put out of business by the Aggregate Networks marketing juggernaut. It could even be one of the very few employees that were actually fired from Aggregate. They did not rule out the out-of-the-ordinary, one-of-a-kind crazy person with a gun, so commonly found in America. But the chances were very high that if any kind of attempt were made on Bill Gittelson, it would not really involve Bill at all, but his clone.

This didn't seem to bother Mark D'Angelo, the Bill clone, who was now enjoying a peaceful breakfast. Mal Contour sat at the counter just a few feet away, watching him, but Mark didn't notice, and neither did the security force that accompanied Mark on his personal time, largely because Contour was not on their list of journalists to watch out for.

The Bill clone could stop looking like Bill Gittelson anytime he wanted, first by dropping all the impersonated mannerisms and styles of moving, and second by donning a fake mustache. As the Bill clone, he was capable of all kinds of Bill Gittelson impersonations, from simple walks down corridors to a waiting limo, to trademark Gittelson gestures from behind tinted windows. He walked, talked, and looked exactly like Bill Gittelson — no plastic surgery had been required. The Bill clone took pride in his acting skills, and Gittelson's chief aide, a slightly-built effeminate man named Barry, had once put in a report to his boss that the man's own facial characteristics seemed to disappear, or to actually morph at will, into Bill Gittelson's face.

No one knew about the Bill clone except those who had a need to know — Barry, Bill himself, Bill Gittelson's wife, and a few of the bodyguards. There had been other Bill clones, but Mark had turned out to be the best choice, and he especially impressed Bill's wife. Mark's first code name was Clone 1.01b, as in the "beta" version of the first clone's first revision. Technically, this meant that he was not formally ready for public use, but could be field-tested. Eventually he became Clone 1.01, available for public use, and stayed that way for a

while. He was so good at being the Bill clone that he grew to enjoy the mystery of leading a double life.

He finished his bacon and eggs with enthusiasm. A lot of people work a day job, like it's some kind of act, and then do something else in their spare time. In his case, he worked and lived as a real-life avatar of a famous human being. His spare time was his own and well funded, but he never knew where he would get personal time, as he traveled on demand. He had many of the perks of a corporate credit card user, save one: he couldn't make or change any of the travel arrangements. The compensation, besides a hefty salary, included use of the credit card at any time, as it had a fake name — Larry McNealy — with a photo showing Mark D'Angelo with a mustache, and Mark's version of the Larry McNealy signature. They had even given him a passport for Larry McNealy; it was hinted that they had a complete identity set up, even with a birth certificate and social security number, in case it was needed. Mark would use the credit card freely and offer explanations at the end of the month, but the bills were never too high for anyone to notice. This was how he kept his bar stocked at home — buying liquor at duty-free airports on the corporate credit card.

Contour watched the man eat, and he knew it, just knew it, this was either Bill Gittelson himself, or a look-alike employed to be Bill Gittelson, as Barcode had suggested. He didn't know how this could tie into the Rob Smolder affair, or the Webomber, or the rumored event about to occur out in the desert, but he was sure that Marker from *Fizz* magazine was chasing the same story. Typical, wasn't it, that he could beat Marker so easily, simply because he was the kind of guy that would go to a diner like this, while Marker ate steak in his hotel. And why would *Fizz* put its key man in the field for something as mundane as a story about Gittelson himself?

Contour sighed, weary of chasing the story. It seemed to go everywhere, and he was getting older, huffing and puffing through the maze of clues.

*One moment's face,
One moment's final fall from grace*
— Procul Harum, "Wreck of the Hesperus" (Matthew Fisher / Keith Reid)

It really unnerved Contour to hear Sixties rock music, especially obscure psychedelic rock, blending in with the pop songs and elevator tunes. But that day, it was like the music of the Sixties was following him everywhere he went, which was mostly on the Bill clone's trail, shadowing him throughout the day. This high-tech industry was hard on people. There were rewards, such as money, fame, and power, but they were joyless. There was no sex. The richest people partied the least. The worst example was this clone's boss, the most powerful human being in the industry, a man who could certainly afford to take a lot of time off; a man who did nothing else but work.

The restaurant interrupted its sound track to air a report from the AM news-radio station, and the waitresses stopped to listen. At the World Series in Los Angeles a shot had been heard, and billionaire Angmar Sadraju, a huge baseball fan and cofounder of two of Silicon Valley's most enterprising startups, slumped in his deluxe box seat, dead from a sniper's bullet. Within a few minutes, credit for the assassination had been claimed. It was the third assassination in so many months for the group known as SWLABR. No reason was given other than the fact that the target had amassed billions in personal wealth. The group's charter was to close the gap between the haves and have-nots of this world, to rearrange the financial landscape to benefit the poor. Somehow, killing billionaires was supposed to help advance this cause.

Almost immediately, the Bill clone was on the move, and Contour hastened to get his check and pay it. The Bill clone's limo was off and in traffic by the time Contour got to his car. Fortunately for Contour, Vegas' legendary traffic jam down Desert Inn Road was in full force.

He regained his target by the time they reached the back entrance to the Las Vegas Convention Center.

* * *

After the keynote speech, the real Bill Gittelsohn shed his trademark Cardigan sweater for a leather jacket, and the Bill clone put on his sweater. The limo was waiting right outside at the service entrance. While the real Bill Gittelsohn took a service elevator with three associates to the penthouse suite at that hotel (registered in the pseudonym of a rumor columnist for one of the trade magazines), the Bill clone strolled with a phalanx of bodyguards out through the service entrance and into the limo. This moment was perhaps the most dangerous part of the clone's job, the likeliest time for an assassination attempt.

To make matters worse, there was no alcohol in the limo's bar to help calm the Bill clone's nerves after the adrenaline rush, and he wasn't allowed to smoke while playing the role. This was Las Vegas, and he knew it would take more than an hour to go the short distance from the Hilton to the Desert Inn, all in dense traffic.

"Let's walk," he said to the first bodyguard next to him in the back of the limo as it sat in traffic on Paradise. He got nothing but the usual stony look from the bodyguard. Oh well... he reached for the portable CD player on the limo seat, rummaged through the discs, picked one, and sat back to listen.

We are spirits

In the material world...

— Police, "Spirits in the Material World" (Sting)

When the Bill clone finally reached his suite at the Desert Inn, which happened to be the final home of America's first billionaire, famed recluse Howard Hughes, he was left alone by the bodyguards, who had been given the night off. After ditching the sweater for a blue

blazer, the Bill clone put on the fake mustache, and headed out to the bar. He was ready for a night with the Larry McNealy credit card.

Safe, unchallenged, and alone, Mark D'Angelo, posing as the mythical Larry McNealy, could finally enjoy his cigarette and bourbon. The bar was loaded with show attendees, many still wearing their badges. A group on the left were fat, lonesome career salesmen partying together, their guts spilling out over their belts, ties undone; slovenly beasts slurping happiness in the womb-red warmth of the hotel casino bar. The real mavericks of the industry, the interesting people, the inventors, and the rich, were off somewhere else. The socially active ones were at private parties, while the introverts were asleep or eating room-service dinners. The public dancing extravaganzas were for the "booth people" who worked at the exhibits. The really good parties required some initial schmoozing at a booth to get an invitation. Some spent their entire time at the show going from one booth to another collecting invitations. Then they would go to one or more of the beer-soaked decoy parties, where the action was focused on scoring booth bunnies from AdultDex. The decoy parties were set up to divert the crowds from the inner-sanctum parties, which were mostly boring, the talk mostly about technology, and the refreshments mostly wine and cheese.

Mark was not interested in parties, and since he was not a gambler, he didn't see any point in being in Vegas, other than to get laid. Of course he was here to do his job for Aggregate as the Bill clone, and his secret job for Peter Moaning. Mark was the Aggregate insider that would insert the first hook that would enable the rest of the MLF operation. He would do this during the presentation at the press conference the next day, in which he was scheduled to perform for Bill Gittelson, who'd be back at home by then. The presentation required a special Internet connection, and he'd already prepared the insertion routine, so that it would take only a single click of the mouse. For that, he would get a cool \$1 million in a foreign bank account.

With that kind of money coming to him, he could afford some of those legendary Vegas hookers, the ones who are so beautiful that they can play this game in the Capital of the Uptight, a county and city government as intensely anti-prostitution as you could find anywhere. It is routine for upscale men to be chauffeured to the next county for a taste of the legal brothels, but if you want a really good-looking woman, like the one in the movie *Leaving Las Vegas*, you have to hit the most expensive bars of the largest casinos.

But this bar seemed dead, as far as illicit sex was concerned. Even worse, one of these tradeshow lemmings wanted to talk to him. He was surprised that the man, fortyish, wearing a stylish blue blazer, came right over and introduced himself.

“You look familiar,” he started, smiling broadly. He was still wearing his Press badge. “Hi. I’m Howard Marker, I write for *Fizz*.” He was referring to *Fizz* magazine, of course, which his badge spelled out. He held out his hand, and Mark turned toward him, put down his cigarette, and shook it. Marker pressed on. “I’d swear you look like Bill Gittelson, if you got rid of that mustache.”

“Nope,” the Bill clone said, perhaps too hastily, but without giving Marker his name.

Marker looked him over carefully. This assignment, handed down by Jill Metrose, was the most important of his career. His fellow journalists usually form a party all their own, or migrate from party to party until they find what they think is the right one. They don’t hang out in dull hotel bars like this one, and Marker knew he had a scoop. But if this was the real Bill Gittelson, Marker had to pose as a technical journalist, and that would mean trouble. He always felt vulnerable in the tradeshow journalist pack. These were technical people who wrote about speeds and feeds. Most of them were underpaid and overworked, and the power to draw attention and criticize without fear was the only real compensation, along with invitations to the best parties. He wished someone like Tinker were

here, especially Tinker, who really knew how to talk like a tech journalist. But he had to try something; Metrose was convinced that Gittelson employed a double.

“And of course, Bill Gittelson doesn’t smoke,” said Marker, trying to sound innocent.

“Not tonight,” said the Bill clone, hoping his tone was not too ominous.

Marker’s anxiety was torqued, but he continued. “So, you get mistaken for Bill often?”

“Nope,” the clone said, but was not very convincing. So he added, “Wouldn’t mind it, though. World’s richest guy?”

“Just America’s,” said Marker, settling down. “There’s still a sultan somewhere who has more.” The bartender was waiting, so Marker ordered a beer. Mark, the clone, made no move to isolate his cigarette smoke, wondering if it would drive the journalist away.

“So what would you do with all that money?” Marker asked, jokingly.

Mark, the Bill clone, realized that Marker thought he was talking to the real Bill Gittelson. The Bill clone decided to go along with the charade. The clone answered with the usual Bill Gittelson smirk. “For starters, I’d give more to charities,” he said. “I heard that Gittelson is a stingy bastard, that he gives away only one-tenth of one percent of his net worth, or whatever,” he lathered it on with the trademark Bill Gittelson grin.

Marker was beside himself, confused, and irritated by this confusion, still trying to unravel this knot of mystery. Finally he stopped looking around and looked intently at his subject. He was convinced he was looking at Bill Gittelson, in disguise, but decided that the best thing

would be to go along with the charade. “So which charities would you — I mean, if you were Bill — which charities would you give to?”

“Well,” the clone said, warming up to the subject, “first I would try to get rid of those awful commercials about starving children. Just write a check to buy food and get them to set up proper farms to be self-sufficient.”

“That sounds good,” said Marker. “Of course, that kind of aid could end up in the hands of cattle barons and farming corporations that are destroying the rain forests.”

“Well, I guess I would have to make sure the money fell into the right hands,” the clone added hastily.

“OK, well, go on then.”

“Second, I’d write a check to help create shelter for all the homeless in America.” Then, to add icing to the cake, he executed a perfect Bill Gittelson push of the eyeglasses back up the nose. And, for special effect, twitched the fake mustache.

“Hmmm,” Marker paused, again looking intently at this person who look so much like Bill Gittelson that it had to be him. “So you’re trying to find out what charities are appropriate,” he said at last. “You don’t really know, do you?”

It was an odd question to ask Bill Gittelson. Marker’s look suggested that he hoped Gittelson wouldn’t blacklist him from future Aggregate junkets.

It was an odd question for the Bill clone to answer. But Mark took the plunge. He had nothing to lose. His life had been uneventful. So many people in the world wonder, what is it like to be Gittelson? He knew something about what it is like, and he also knew the real Gittelson. The real Bill Gittelson sends his clone out to foreign

countries on safari or cruise ship, with celebrities and the powerful, while he stays in Seattle and goes to work at six in the morning. What Gittelson really likes to do is make money. Not the green kind you use to buy things like drinks and prostitutes, but the purely abstract kind locked up in stocks and bonds. The numbers themselves — that's what he loves. The ratios. The percent that goes directly to him. He has no sex life to speak of, other than his pretty, fiercely independent wife. He's boring. Most successful people are.

But, the clone thought, what would I do with 60 billion dollars? Or is it 80? The other day Aggregate's stock went up by a few points, and Gittelson earned another 1.2 billion dollars. In one day. There are small countries that produce less than that in a year. Gittelson could probably give every man, woman, and child in America a petty amount of cash, say \$5,000, and still have plenty for his family to live on for the rest of their lives. He most certainly could fund the entire library system of the planet. Just one day's earnings could fund the next stadium in your city. Certainly, the next time you walk into an ice cream store, you might think about what it would be like to buy the place, just so that you could get that ice cream a little faster, with more toppings, and from a more friendly cashier person... whatever.

But Mark, the Bill clone, knew that being rich was not like any of that. Yes, you could buy the airline that's making you wait for hours before the plane takes off. Yes, you could finance the building of an expressway to get you to your office more quickly. You could even turn your home into the equivalent of Graceland. But that wasn't what it was like. And he could not explain it to someone like Howard Marker, even though Marker had experienced a meeting of the Assholes Club. Because when you make that much money in one day, or even one year, you join a special club all your own.

So the Bill clone sat quietly, thinking about Marker's question, and thinking about his past, growing up in a working class neighborhood of Camden, New Jersey. Mark's third-generation Italian-American father was a butcher. Mark grew up surrounded by meat, bones,

blood, large knives, and the smell of groceries in freezers. All his life he associated blood with work — work he didn't want to ever have to do. Mark wanted to be an artist. Unfortunately, most of his renditions of human beings resembled hanging torsos of cattle, but with no blood dripping from them.

He followed the personal computer revolution out to California, and went to the early Homebrew Computer Club meetings at Stanford, on the advice of someone who called himself Tinker down at Peet's Coffee in Menlo Park, that the latest graphics technology would be first discussed there. This is where Mark first saw Bill Gittelson. At that time, with Mark's long hair and flowing beard, no one suspected that Mark looked like Gittelson, except that they were the same size, same color hair, and wore nearly the same glasses.

Gittelson was a simpler man then, leading the uncomplicated life of an entrepreneur. Mark remembered a speech Gittelson made to the Club on that first day he met him, imploring its members not to indiscriminately copy the software that Gittelson's company had so painstakingly produced, because he needed the money desperately to keep his new company going. Back then, people had absolute faith in Bill Gittelson. He seemed so confident. He could argue thoughtfully with anyone on the merits of different operating systems. He looked just like the other nerds in the audience. Compared to the cofounder of Planet Computer, who at the time was noted for his programming skills, wild haircut, and huckster personality, Bill Gittelson was an everyday, honest, hardworking businessman, nothing more.

Over a decade later, Mark landed a job at Parthenon, digitally retouching works of art in high resolution. Parthenon was the company Bill Gittelson founded to license vast libraries of art for future digital delivery. Mark imagined the place was something like the Philadelphia Art Museum, covered in marble and populated by lots of smug, meticulously neat librarians. He found instead a building shaped like a giant cubicle and filled with mostly cubicles of flannel-shirted, bearded nerds in jeans. Most of them were spending

nearly all their time worrying about how to “port” digital versions of major works of art from one encoding format to another.

He remembered years of boredom, of unceasing rain and cloudiness that would turn everything outside into the color and consistency of porridge. There really wasn't much else to do in Seattle except drink coffee and work, unless you were into taking heroin and leaning against lampposts with other members of the grunge rock scene. The record companies had already scooped up the best groups in this scene before Mark had arrived. Courtney Love was already a movie star; Kurt Cobain was already dead.

When Mark showed up for work the first day, everybody thought he really was Bill Gittelson, and word must have reached Bill. He spent only a week at Parthenon getting oriented, and then Barry came for him. His pay was doubled, and he was promised a lot of free time, in return for becoming the Bill clone. During the weeks when Bill Gittelson would not be traveling, just hanging out in his office, Mark would be given assignments to write “dummy text” for the prototypes of various Web content projects. With a background in technical writing, he had no problem coming up with “dummy text” that was convincing as editorial content for prototypes that would be shown to executives around the world. But it was still “dummy text” with no real significance, a clone of the real thing — a man of no real substance.

But now, if he had a chance to change that, he would. Moaning and the MLF had just provided the key to his escape.

This journalist Marker was so confident, so smug in his belief in the objectivity of his own eyes, that the Bill clone couldn't resist pretending, for the first time in his life, to be the real Bill Gittelson on his own time. The act that started it all was a simple, well-executed Gittelson smirk, followed by the usual push of his eyeglasses to keep them from falling down his nose. Then he bobbed forward and backward a bit on his barstool.

That was enough. That was all he needed to do to become the most recognized philanthropist of the information age, capable of feeding millions of starving babies and sheltering the homeless.

Journalist Marker was still making his investigation. "So," Marker asked, hesitatingly, "So what do you think of the show?" It was clear that he was now hooked, and that he thought he was talking to the real Bill Gittelson.

"Oh, it's a good show," the clone said. "Lots of interesting hand-held devices, cool software. I like the emphasis on the Internet as a platform, and Open Source as a standard."

With that remark, the clone had dropped a bombshell. Marker was perplexed, to say the least. Never before had Aggregate Networks' chief executive endorsed a standard his company couldn't control, that in fact his company was preparing to fight.

So the clone gave him another smirk. "And once again, Aggregate Networks will take advantage of all its momentum," he said, again pushing up his eyeglasses.

It was perhaps this final act that brought Marker to attention. He was now convinced that Bill Gittelson was playing with him, warming up to him, perhaps even using him for this evening of cruising Vegas in disguise. And Marker had Bill Gittelson all to himself, no need to jostle for position, shoving competing reporters out of the way.

He was so anxious about his dumb luck that he didn't notice the reporter from the Vegas newspaper, who had taken a seat directly across the bar and was now using a miniature digital camera to snap a few stills of the close encounter.

Marker had steered the conversation toward how deals are made in the industry. "Don't you think deals are made right here in Las Vegas that couldn't be made in any other place?"

"Not really," the clone replied, adding a false aura of authority, for he had never actually done any high-tech deal anywhere, let alone Vegas. "Deals are made mostly in private, but they are reaffirmed in public, at the parties and so forth." Again, he shamelessly applied the Bill Gittelson smirk.

"You mean, mostly to plant press rumors or otherwise apply spin control," replied Marker.

"Yes," the clone answered. Then, of course, he bobbed a little, and pushed his eyeglasses once again. It was enough.

"So, are you going to any parties tonight?" asked Marker.

"I'm not sure," replied the clone after some hesitation.

Marker pulled out all the invites to parties that he'd stashed in his blue blazer, and spread them out on the bar. In the mess of ecstatic exhortations, glamorous graphics, and elegant refined engraved invitations, the Bill clone saw one simple invitation in black and white, with a top hat and cane. It was an invitation to a late night party at one of the suites right there at the Desert Inn, hosted by one of the most famous computer journalists, John Qwerty.

"If anything, I'll go to the Qwerty party," the clone said to Marker.

"Yes, of course," replied Marker. "I've known John for a long time. I used to write for his magazine. Everybody who's really important will end up at that party some time tonight."

Until that moment the clone had no intention of following through with the charade. He could see no reason to. If he wanted to have a

good time in Vegas, he could just use the corporate credit card and make up some explanation a month from now. But when Marker described the party as the most important one at the show, he gave it some thought. He knew the real Bill Gittelson wouldn't be going. And he thought about all those pretty public relations women who worked for Aggregate. They would all think he was Bill, of course. He could walk off with one without having to use the corporate credit card, without having to make up a story. Why not?

So Mark took the plunge. He stood up, shook Marker's hand. "I'm gonna leave now, but I'll meet you at that party, out in front, about 10. OK?"

"Sure!" replied Marker exuberantly, still shaking his hand. At that moment, across the bar, the reporter's digital camera grabbed a still image that he thought would make his career. Bill Gittelson in a mustache, in disguise! Cruising the Las Vegas bars! With a famous journalist undercover!

* * *

Meanwhile, Bill Gittelson — the real Bill Gittelson — had been pacing the corridor between the two mammoth suites at the top of the Hilton, muttering to himself. Bill was in a foul mood, waiting for an old-fashioned fax from Moscow. Using unencrypted fax for an agreement is just asking for leaks, and their Internet connections were too insecure for email.

In a rare moment of self-reflection, Bill stared out at the brilliant glitzy lights of nighttime Las Vegas. From the top of the Hilton, he had a 180-degree view of the Strip, from the profoundly deep blue MGM Grand Hotel, the world's largest, on up past the sleek black pyramid with the bright white light shooting up to the heavens, the giant castle, the miniature replica of the New York skyline, the pink flamingos, on up to the aquamarine elegance of Caesar's Palace.

He probably was not thinking what other mere mortal human beings would be thinking if they were suddenly worth \$80 billion or so, such as, how many of these hotels could I buy right now? Which one is Park Place? Which one Boardwalk? If I buy all the hotels, would I win the game of life? No, he was not thinking anything like that. Who knows what he thought? Certainly not Barry, watching from the darkened bedroom attached to the corridor. Barry remembered the days when Bill could romp around Las Vegas like the big shot he was, unafraid, unescorted. Back in the early Eighties, Las Vegas was a huge oyster containing many pearls. The celebrities, the shows, the girls, the impulsive gambling... All past now.

Bill was in town alone that night, wife back home tending to their new daughter. As was his custom, he kicked back with a movie on the tube and a room service dinner, surrounded by technical journals and trade magazines, a prototype tablet PC at the ready in case he really wanted to answer any of the hundreds of emails he'd received that day. Bill loathed socializing, even at his level — the level of CEOs, diplomats, politicians, famous novelists, Hollywood stars. He had nothing to say to any of them. These high-level people were either inarticulate in social settings or simply uninteresting. Instead, he caught up on badly needed rest and relaxation, and would catch the first flight back to Seattle at 6 a.m. He had a company to run.

* * *

Outside in the chilly night air, Howard Marker waited for what he thought was Bill Gittelson in a not-so-clever disguise, to show up as promised. This time Marker had armed his jacket with a digital voice recorder and a miniature digital camera, and put his trusty reporter's notebook into his back pocket.

Ten minutes late, the Bill clone strolled up the long parkway behind the Desert Inn casino, smoking a cigarette, wearing the mustache. No one paid any attention. Marker saw him coming, and stood there

waiting, amazed that Bill Gittelson could nonchalantly walk up the parkway like that; the man could easily buy the swank hotel.

As the clone approached Marker, he dropped and stepped on the cigarette, and pulled off the fake mustache. They walked in together; up the elevator, and into the suite. People immediately recognized him as Bill Gittelson, not a question about it. The crowd parted as they entered, showing a path to another room. Many glamorous people, skilled at the art of socializing, lined this path looking ready to pounce on the billionaire icon. The atmosphere was of controlled pandemonium, like a violin drawing a long high note, highlighting the tension. Marker led him down this path to the back bedroom, through the industry's richest strata to the top of the class, a place Marker had never been before: the back room with the ultra VIPs.

Inside the VIP room, the party was quieter, and ambience more like affluent acceptance. The guests were playing a game popular with VIPs, called "Shakedown Street". It's a party game similar in form to "The Prince of Wales" (with the lyrics replaced by "Nothing shakin' on Shakedown Street / Used to be the heart of town / Don't tell me this town ain't got no heart / Just gotta poke around.>").

When the bottle of Kendall-Jackson Chardonnay points to you (with the words "just gotta poke around"), you're supposed to answer, "not at me."

Everyone politely shouts, "Then who?" And you are supposed to name a company most likely to go belly up by the end of the year. Participants then place virtual bets, such as sponsoring a round of golf or an evening at a famous restaurant, to be called at the next big conference in Palm Springs in January.

The Bill clone sat next to someone Marker knew — a prominent venture capitalist. There were, in the room, at least several high-level executives of companies that Aggregate had threatened to sue. The clone tried to ignore everyone, including the attractive, blonde ex-

programmer turned venture capitalist that the real Bill Gittelson had dated long ago, before meeting his wife. Marker saw her smiling at Bill from across the room. Marker had read somewhere that she and Bill used to make love in a bed littered with software manuals. Right next to her was Trudi Goldstein, the doyenne of the digerati, the consultant to Wall Street, eyeing Marker suspiciously, looking a little bit too closely at them.

Then it dawned on Marker. Was *this* the impersonator Jill Metrose so fervently believed in? She had sent Marker to Vegas to watch Bill Gittelson, to watch his every move. Was this why? And now... had he unwittingly brought the impersonator to the VIP party? He looked at this version of Bill, at the sudden pleading look on Bill's face, saying in effect, *get me out of here*. Marker thought for a moment — which is better, a story about Bill Gittelson on the loose in disguise, or a story about a Bill impersonator fooling a party of VIPs?

The party of VIPs grew even quieter as philanthropist Randall Pomposti, the financial wizard behind *Fizz* and other ventures, entered the room. He was looking for Gittelson, as they would be sharing the podium the next day at the Aggregate press conference to announce a new charity venture after Bill Gittelson's presentation.

Marker froze when he saw Pomposti. He was a tall, dark, intense-looking, extremely confident man in a dapper olive suit. "Howard," Pomposti said in a whisper to Marker, "introduce me to your friend."

So Marker introduced the man he thought was a Bill impersonator to Pomposti, who assumed the man was the real Bill Gittelson.

"Pleased to meet you again," Randall Pomposti greeted Bill with an oily handshake. "We should talk a little about tomorrow's press conference." Within a microsecond, Pomposti's business card was in the clone's hand.

The Bill clone did the Japanese thing: he looked down at the card, then held it with both hands, studying it for a moment. Then he looked up, straightened up, and bobbed his head forward and back. Pomposti reciprocated. Everyone in the room was watching. The game was partially suspended for a moment.

The Bill clone had been trained to handle such moments in public. He was supposed to smile, avert his eyes, and amble off slowly, bobbing at whatever the person says, but not responding. He started this maneuver, but Marker grabbed his arm.

“Can we talk to Randall about what we talked about before?” Marker asked him. “He could be helpful.”

“Sure,” the clone replied, bobbing, smiling. So Marker led them both off to the empty balcony overlooking the Desert Inn pool with the magnificent skyline of Vegas behind it, leaving the VIP room nearly silent with anticipation.

Marker did most of the talking. He talked to Pomposti about Bill Gittelson’s need for a more comprehensive announcement that would be more specific about how the charity money would be spent. Of course, the Bill clone kept bobbing and smirking, trying to figure out how to get out of there. A casual remark at a hotel bar about charities, and now this!

Pomposti launched into a proposal for a foundation that would be jointly sponsored by Gittelson and *Fizz* magazine, demonstrating his prowess for strong-arming favors from the rich and powerful. The foundation would provide funds to developing countries to improve their libraries, data management facilities, and law enforcement agencies. Pomposti was quite convinced that this plan would offer benefits to everyone involved with it.

The Bill clone kept nodding, bobbing, agreeing. Pomposti was quite ready to get started on the plan, and of course the nods meant yes. So

Randall Pomposti went back into the VIP room, the inner sanctum of the digital glitterati, and announced the plan to everyone. While he told everyone to keep it confidential, at least three trade magazine publishers heard his remarks and made plans for stories.

Out on the balcony, Marker took a hard look at the man who would be Bill Gittelson. "You know, if you are an impersonator, your story would be worth a lot of money, and I'm the guy to talk to about that."

The Bill clone looked away, at the Vegas skyline. He smiled. "First, get me away from these people, and second, get me one of those cute PR girls for the night. Then we can talk."

They left the inner sanctum, averting their eyes as best they could, heading toward the door, which was unfortunately blocked at that moment by the ebullient Joe Balboa, number two man at Aggregate. Balboa steamed through the room, shooting off wise cracks at friends and foes, making sure to say hello to all the important journalists, on his way to greet the pair.

"Hey boss, what's up," he said to the Bill clone, looking around the room in his usual hectic style. "Haven't seen you out and about for a while," he said, looking furtively at Marker and then back around the room.

The clone's blank, slightly drunk expression seemed to cover him for the moment. "I came with him," he slurred back, then started off by himself toward the door. Balboa shot a hostile look at Marker, who immediately followed the clone. Neither Marker nor the clone knew whether Balboa was even aware that Bill used a clone, but since he had a reputation for knowing almost everything in the known universe, they didn't put it past him. Marker and the Bill clone reached the relative safety of the hallway, and Marker stopped to talk to an attractive, twentysomething brown-haired woman, a PR account executive who happened, luckily, to be from Aggregate

Networks' usual PR firm. She joined them, and they hurried to the elevator.

* * *

The next day dawn arrived on time and so did the Las Vegas Sun newspaper, with a front-page photo of a disguised Bill Gittelson hanging at the bar with Howard Marker. "Nerds Just Like to Have Fun" was the headline, but the story went into some detail on the VIP party and Bill Gittelson's promise to start some kind of charity foundation with Randall Pomposti and *Fizz* magazine.

The story also mentioned the joint Aggregate-Fizz press conference, to be held at noon that day in the main convention center auditorium. Jill Metrose was schmoozing so many freelance journalists in the press lounge that it nearly caused a minor scandal. She was never known to be so accessible, but there she was, in a flagrantly enticing bright red outfit, cajoling the newspaper press and anyone she could grab to come to this press conference. The only person she skipped was Brendan Barcode, who of course showed up anyway, with video cameras dangling from his neck, smartly attired in a grey pin stripe suit three sizes too big.

Bill Gittelson, of course, was furious. He had to postpone his trip back by at least two hours, so that he could direct some damage control in this situation. The press conference originally planned that morning about a new type of personal gadget had to be scrapped. He spent the early morning berating his hungover clone for his transgressions, then berating Barry for having hired the clone in the first place. Barry politely pointed out that he could arrange a form of punishment and retribution for Mark, as long as Mark would sign an agreement and play his Bill clone role as best as he could for the upcoming press conference.

All the Bill clone could think about was how he'd screwed things up. Now he wouldn't be using the presentation, and couldn't insert the code for Moaning and the MLF. He also couldn't get word to them.

* * *

The pressroom had a festive atmosphere, a party thriving on bad coffee and questionable Danish pastries. Columnists and reporters from staid publications like the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* sat pensively, looking seriously at piles of press kits with their ties already loose at 10 a.m. Gadflies and freelancers gathered around the rambunctious Mal Contour, who was holding forth with various conspiracy theories, half of which were probably right, especially the one about a Bill clone. But most of them laughed in disbelief and started making up clone jokes. The main topic of debate was the ethical conundrum of fellow journalists and carpetbaggers from the mainstream media who were commanding seven-figure advances for books about the so-called "new economy" while the economy had actually reverted back to older, less glamorous attributes.

Veteran flack Jessie Doubter hovered at the entrance of the pressroom, handing out flyers and cracking jokes with other nervous young flacks in suits also pacing the outside corridor. Press conferences were scheduled for each half-hour in the rooms down the hall, but no one went to them. The working press people were preoccupied with rumor and scandal, and especially with Bill Gittelson's past charitable donations now under intense scrutiny.

Technology writers generally look for the flaws, just like mainstream journalists, but they mostly miss the contrived angle, the mainstay of mainstream TV news. Like the hook in a popular song, TV news can drive a point home with just a phrase and a shrug. Technology writers tend to take many paragraphs of wrangling and justifying before they even make their point. Jessie was explaining all this to Tinker, who wore a Computer Press Association press badge, the lowest order among freelancers who can't get any other kind of

accreditation for the trade show. They were old acquaintances, having survived many tradeshow parties and press conferences with the same practiced ease and humor, the same healthy cynicism. Jess's stunning daughter, a Marilyn Monroe blonde in a low-cut very revealing red dress, was perched by the door of Jess's client's press conference, giving journalists steamy looks while handing out press kits.

"All in the family, Jess?" Tinker whispered.

Jess leered back, with that insane look of his that suggested anything and everything is OK in the eyes of commerce. "Did you see this yet?" He shoved a one-page brochure on something, Tinker didn't know what and couldn't really concentrate on it, something to do with satellite Internet access devices. "This is hot, really hot," Jess said in the same way he always said it, deadpan, like it was really nothing at all.

Tinker tried to read it standing there, but he couldn't concentrate on it. The CD from the FBI agent burned a hole in his pocket. Charlie had told him to meet him at the press conference, because something important would happen there. Peter Moaning had told Charlie that the press conference was the key to the entire event. Tinker shuffled back and forth from one foot to another, doing a sort of tension foxtrot.

"How about this?" Jess was pulling another sheet out of his jacket pocket, like someone on the street with an armful of watches for sale. "A new multimedia tool. It combines drag-and-drop assembly with streaming media types, and it's got an encryption plug-in that supports ICE. This is hot, really hot."

ICE? Must be an earlier version; they couldn't possibly... The tradeshow swirled around them, people were bumping into them, and besides, Tinker was on a mission to find Charlie. He smiled and

waved the brochures, hey, see ya later Jess, stay in touch. He went into the pressroom to get a pass for the *Fizz* press conference.

Behind the curtain, in a cubicle reserved for VIP press meetings, Jill Metrose was struggling to control her breathing, cell phone and pager at the ready, fingers poised over laptop. As far as she knew, it was the real Bill Gittelson back there in an inner sanctum, preparing his speech. She needed final approval on the press release she was jointly releasing with Aggregate. Her story about a Bill look-alike was on hold.

Pomposti was at the podium ready for the conference. He was scrolling through his speech about the plan, dubbed SaveWorld 1.0, to set up a foundation. The hastily written charter for the foundation was somewhat incoherent, and Pomposti knew that the mainstream press would report that the entire event smelled like a publicity stunt for *Fizz*. No matter. The average *Fizz* reader, even the person on the street, would think it's a great idea.

A few minutes later, as journalists poured into the conference room and grabbed seats, a call came through on Metrose's cell phone. Joe Balboa, the number two man at Aggregate.

"Jill, thanks for taking my call," he started, with sincerity, even though it would have been unthinkable not to take his call. "Listen, as far as we are concerned here at Aggregate Networks, the release you are about to send out is OK with us. We just want to keep a lid on the specifics, you understand. We've crossed out some paragraphs; my assistant just emailed you the edited draft."

"Sure," blurted Metrose. It made sense to her. Aggregate can't disavow the plan, due to the pressure on Bill Gittelson to give more to charities. And Aggregate can't let millions in advertising and PR go to waste, which would happen if *Fizz* carried an editorial grudge. Bill couldn't buy *Fizz* outright. He couldn't be devious in any way about

this. Most of all, he wouldn't want to be castigated in the mainstream media.

"We would also like to add a statement from Bill to the release," said Joe Balboa.

"Sure, go ahead," said Metrose, wondering why Bill didn't simply tell her, since he was in the back room.

"The quote is included in the draft. It reads, 'With all good intentions, I must say that in my opinion, no single human being has all the answers. I just want to put the money where it will do the most good. I hope that *Fizz* magazine will play a major role in deciding how it could do the most good, and I thank Randall Pomposti for volunteering to do this.' That's it, that's the entire statement."

Jill Metrose smiled. My god, she thought, how the worm turns! Aggregate just pinned Randall to the wall, garnering free publicity from *Fizz* for the next two years, at least. No more cover stories about how Bill is losing touch. No more critical articles about Aggregate Networks for at least two years.

She could just see the two of them, Joe and Bill, concocting this plan like two college kids in a dormitory, plotting mischief. "Y'know," she imagined Joe saying to Bill, "some high profile projects are just what we need to promote our secure servers. We could donate stuff to backward countries... and it would all be Randall's idea, not ours." Yes, indeed, to help them develop their police states, but also to consolidate Aggregate's control over the world's Internet nodes, especially China's. Not to mention chalking up all those political favors.

She was ready for the press conference. She could talk about all this raving philanthropy for the rest of the day, but somehow she would have to put aside all these other thoughts. Such as how Bill could make large, public donations of technology that locks governments

and their enforcement agencies into Aggregate Networks' security systems. All in a day's work.

* * *

The press conference was packed. Brendan Barcode, right up front with his video camera on a tripod, shouted at people to clear his view. Mal Contour smirked in a corner. Tinker sat near the back, searching the backs of heads for some sign of Charlie. He thought he recognized, off to the right, the head of the FBI agent who'd talked to him the day before. Howard Marker, uncharacteristically, was up front, behind the podium with the other *Fizz* people.

Randall Pomposti gave his speech while the Bill clone sat nervously at a table next to the podium. The Bill clone would not be using the presentation laptop today, and therefore, he couldn't do what Moaning and the MLF was expecting him to do — he couldn't perform the crucial code insertion into the backbone of the Internet that would enable the OtherNet after the blackout. Whatever plans they had now would not work, and the Bill clone had no way of alerting them.

Randall ended his speech with statements about each company's role in the plan. "We at *Fizz* magazine have donated space for Mr. Gittelson to explain his plan in a future issue, and we have offered him access to our extensive archive of information about the problems facing the world today." Then he introduced Bill Gittelson, and the Bill clone ascended to the podium to stiff, formal applause.

The Bill clone read the prepared speech. It consisted mostly of the usual platitudes one would expect to hear in a speech about philanthropy. Then he thanked the audience, giving them his boyish smile and pushing his glasses up his nose.

A dull thud suddenly pierced the room, sounding like a stack of books hitting the floor, and the podium splintered in front of the Bill

clone. The rifle shot, muffled by a silencer, had just missed him. For at least a second, no one moved or uttered a word. Then the Bill clone dropped to his knees behind what was left of the podium and someone screamed. Pandemonium broke loose. The Bill clone's handlers grabbed him, while Pomposti grabbed a frozen Jill Metrose and dropped back behind the curtain.

* * *

The story about the assassination attempt on Bill Gittelson, and the nature of the press conference where the attempt occurred, appeared on the six o'clock news. The would-be assassin got away, and speculation focused on the organization known as SWALBR, whose charter was to assassinate billionaires.

Commentators were sympathetic and described Bill Gittelson as a ruthless, eccentric, but lovable billionaire who may have cunningly captured the leadership of the industry through monopoly power but who, at heart, simply wanted to use his money to help the world. His tics and mannerisms were savagely illuminated by editorial cartoons. Later that week his caricature would make an appearance in Doonesbury as the muddle-headed, pointy-eared, ultimate nerd named Bobby Fence. He was as ubiquitous as a Jay Leno joke, and even merited a Letterman Top Ten list, "Better ways for Bill Gittelson to save the world"...

10. Fix your software. Please (as told by Letterman's sidekick, Paul Schaffer, grinning from ear to ear).

Letterman: Paul, I thought you kept up on these things, I thought you could restore a PC with just your teeth. Doncha think, Paul, isn't that right? (I dunno, sez Paul).

9. Throw away your old, tired code and start using something new (as told by Steve Jobs, celebrity founder of Apple and Pixar).

Letterman: Paul, didn't that guy make a lot of money in the computer industry, and then lose it, and then make a lot of money in movies? What's this world coming to? (I dunno, sez Paul).

8. Buy up all the copyrights to the world's greatest art and music, and then give them back to their original owners, saying "I was only kidding." (As told by comedian Dennis Miller.)

Letterman: You know, Paul, he could be wrong. (I think you're right, sez Paul).

7. Adopt every hungry child in the world and give them a week's worth of spam and a pocket computer (as told by former presidential contender and businessman Ross Perot).

Letterman: Gosh, Paul, I sure miss that guy. Where are the real leaders when you really need them? (I dunno, sez Paul).

6. Take control of the Hilton hotel chain, and replace the Conrad Hilton biography in every night table with the Gittelson ghostwritten autobiography, *The Road I Led*. (As told by Hillary Rodham Clinton, Senator from New York and former First Lady.)

Letterman: See Paul, we do have class, don't we? I bet she has more than an autobiography hidden away in her night table. (I bet she does, snickers Paul).

5. Give billions to libraries in Seattle, whether they need it or not (as told by Tim Berners-Lee, cofounder of the World Wide Web).

Letterman: Gosh, Paul, who was *that* guy? (I dunno, sez Paul).

4. Get a life (as told by a very angry Robert DeNiro, who added a grunt).

Letterman: Gosh, Paul, who was *that* guy? And why was he so mean? (I dunno, sez Paul).

3. Buy an island off the coast of Costa Rica and begin experimenting with computer-controlled human beings (as told by Ozzy Osbourne with his family in the background screaming blipped-out obscenities).

Letterman: Paul, I think we need to talk to the producers about the standards we have for this show. I mean, in terms of market share, we are in a position to set the standards, are we not? (I agree, sez Paul).

2. Develop a sense of humor, like when pies are thrown in your face (as told by Scott McNealy, CEO of Sun, with a pie dripping down his face, adding "you jerk").

Letterman: Gosh, Paul, isn't that the guy responsible for my 401K heading south? (I dunno, sez Paul).

And the final, number one "Better way for Bill Gittelson to save the world" as told by former U.S. President George W. Bush:

1. Clone yourself and stay home. [Band starts uptempo number as the audience applauds...]

The assassination attempt had in fact drummed up more publicity for Aggregate and Gittelson than Aggregate could have instigated with its own PR machine. Even the Webomber got into the act, dive-bombing from secrecy into Aggregate's home page, exposing damaging emails and revealing the secret of the Bill clone, although no one was ready to accept this as fact, given the lack of credibility of someone that would hack another's site. Bill Gittelson himself countered with a message that apologized for the intrusion and promised an upgrade that would beef up security against these "information terrorists," as he called them.

All of which led the Bill clone to wonder whether he'd been set up. Was Moaning for real? Did Aggregate conjure up this entire plan to test his loyalty? Or were there real assassins coming after him? Did they think it was *his* fault the press conference subject matter was hijacked by *Fizz* magazine? Did they think he did it on purpose in order to keep from doing the code insertion for the MLF? And what if the bullet had hit him? The bullet nearly demolished the podium, and it was sheer good luck that it did not hit him.

When the Bill clone emerged from his hotel in his usual disguise, he quickly ducked the bodyguards and whoever may have been following him by sneaking through the huge MGM Grand Hotel parking lot out to the alleyways and back streets to Paradise, where he caught a bus to the Hilton. In the lobby he found a pay phone and made a call to a public phone in a café in Jamaica, near Blue Mountain.

A whispery voice on the other end told him how to find Charlie O'Brien.

* * *

Charlie was on time, but he knew he had only about ten minutes to make this connection. He'd been contacted on the fringes of the press conference, before the assassination attempt, by Eric via his wireless email device and an ICE-d message, telling him to watch Gittelson and see what he does, hinting that perhaps the "Gittelson" that Charlie saw on stage was not what he seemed. Eric also told him to meet the Aggregate insider at the Hilton after the conference, and to not tell anyone, not even Tinker. He was just getting back to the conference when the shots rang out. He connected the thought that the assassin might be one of Grogan's people. Otherwise, why would Eric care about some irrational group of billionaire killers?

So Charlie told Tinker to meet him later, behind the Hilton, and they both dropped out of sight, hoping to shake any tail from Grogan. Charlie ducked into a Chinese restaurant to wait for his meeting, and

Tinker snuck into a dinner show by the reunited Monkees. As in parallel universes, both had a secret to hide from the other — Charlie's message from Eric, and Tinker's contact with the FBI.

At the appointed time the lobby of the Hilton was jammed with trade show attendees looking for ways to beat the taxi lines. Charlie stood in an obvious place, in front of the giant Buddha statue gracing the front of a Japanese restaurant, right next to the restrooms. Eric's message had said that the insider would recognize him. Five minutes passed, and then someone who looked a lot like Bill Gittelson, except with a mustache, appeared before him. "You Charlie?"

"Yes," whispered Charlie. "Eric sent you?"

"The Voice of Jamaica sent me." But before Charlie could open his mouth, the insider warned, "Don't ask." He sidled up to Charlie, facing the same direction, looking out from the Buddha at the crowd. "Someone's after me. Agents from Aggregate, or the FBI, or worse, Grogan." The name snapped Charlie to attention. The insider watched the crowd, shifting from one foot to the other. Suddenly Charlie realized that this guy did not just look like Bill Gittelson, he was either the man himself or a flat-out impersonator. His haircut, the way he walked and talked...

"The press conference we wanted to do got changed," said the insider, "and I couldn't insert the code for Moaning because I didn't get a chance to use the presentation laptop."

"That means the Event won't work?"

"That's right. And as soon as certain people find out, they'll be upset. And I think Grogan already knows, which is why..." He glanced up and down the lobby. "You have to help me get out of Vegas."

The insider watched the lobby entrance for a minute, then turned to face him, and looked him in the eye. "I've spotted someone from

Aggregate security coming this way. We need a diversion. Here —” and then he ripped off his fake mustache. “Let’s go.”

They started off toward the conference area, the Bill clone and Charlie. Whispers flew through the crowd as heads turned, “There goes Bill Gittelson” on every mouth. A small entourage enveloped them, of people who wanted to ask Gittelson a question if they could get his attention, but mostly they kept out of his immediate space out of common decency. These were, after all, professionals in the computer industry, not a gaggle of groupies. The man had just hours ago dodged a bullet! Bill Gittelson was the hero of Internet Vegas.

As they entered the Hilton conference area, the entourage had grown to about forty people, effectively blocking the path of anyone that might be pursuing them. The Bill clone and Charlie went for the first keynote conference room and swept by the security at the door, which then blocked the forty or so followers that tried to jam in there with him.

The commotion of the Bill clone’s arrival reached the speaker at the podium, and he stopped his speech to formally welcome Bill Gittelson to the session. All eyes turned to the back of the room at them. The clone bobbed furiously in trademark Gittelson fashion. People were polite and didn’t interrupt the session to ask questions, but the speaker at the podium was visibly disturbed, and when he reached the Q&A point in his presentation, he offered the audience microphone to the Bill clone. “Perhaps Mr. Gittelson might have a comment or a question?”

The Bill clone walked up to the mike and stood there for a moment, lost in thought. It dawned on Charlie that this was indeed a Bill Gittelson impersonator, but employed by Gittelson. So Moaning’s inside man had been a Gittelson clone! Most likely he was the one who was nearly killed by the would-be assassin. Charlie put it all together: the man was now on the outside, just like him, on the

outside looking in. Trying to escape from the project, from Grogan, from the FBI, from Aggregate... from just about everybody.

The Bill clone looked up at the podium, reached for the mike, and looked exactly like the real Bill Gittelson as he spoke. "Aggregate Networks is about to announce a change in its security plans for the Internet." A hush came over the audience. "The company values personal privacy, and will soon endorse the latest ICE-based encryption software from HADES without any government-related restrictions." A gasp could be heard from a member in the back who understood what this meant. "What happens today will decide the future of the Internet itself. I want you all to know that we intend to make the Internet safe for all people of all countries."

A cheer went up, everybody started clapping. The speaker looked perplexed. He was probably thinking, what kind of ploy is this? The Bill clone politely bowed and waved goodbye and motioned to Charlie to follow as he headed out a side door.

Like an episode of the Keystone Kops, men in blue suits had found the session room but missed the Bill clone. Charlie led the Bill clone out a side entrance and right into the exhibit hall. After about thirty seconds, just standing in an aisle looking at an exhibit, the two were surrounded by admirers, detractors, question mongers, all the celebrity smitten. They formed a kind of security entourage, the best they would get under the circumstances, so the Bill clone started working the show floor with these people. Eventually Barcode and his video crew found them and completed the picture. Bill Gittelson on the exhibit floor!

At one booth the Bill clone played a flight simulator, standing next to a grade school kid. The kid asked how he could someday be as important as Bill Gittelson. The clone told him, "Just don't believe the grown-ups. There's always a back door." The kid seemed to know what he was talking about.

At another booth, a group of kids were playing a new version of Sim City. The Bill clone used the secret key combination he learned at an Aggregate cubicle party months ago. It still worked: the trick automatically added millions of dollars to the simulated city's coffers for more game playing. As he left them, Barcode showed up in time to capture the kids on camera saying "Hey! Bill Gittelson cheats!"

The Bill clone headed straight for the Aggregate Networks booth, and Charlie followed, thinking he was crazy. But with any luck, the clone told him, the real Bill Gittelson was on a flight somewhere, and none of the key people who knew about the clone would be there. Sure enough, the booth was staffed with people trained in how to deal with the inevitable moment when Bill Gittelson would show up at your demo station to put you through your paces.

The clone went up to a demo station, played the usual routine act, and slipped quietly behind the curtain with Charlie. The entourage could not follow and were forced to endure the latest Aggregate presentation, which lasted about ten minutes. That was just enough time for a PR person in the Game Development division of Aggregate to arrange a limo to pick up the Bill clone and his friend out front. A phalanx of Aggregate employees accompanied them out to the front. The Bill clone and Charlie both had to suppress their smiles at the irony of the situation; the company was so large and partially dysfunctional that its employees would be unwittingly aiding their escape from its own secret surveillance team. No one questioned anything as they left the convention center surrounded by a sea of green golf shirts, all emblazoned with the Aggregate Networks logo.

* * *

Charlie and the Bill clone made it to the airport as the sun set. The Bill clone had an American Express card, and they ducked into an agency to rent a car. The Bill clone picked it out, a red Chevy convertible with white leather seats, a "red shark" — "not to imitate but to pay

homage to the good Dr. Hunter S. Thompson," he remarked to the desk clerk as he signed "Larry McNealy".

"What now?" Charlie asked as they sped up Paradise, the Bill clone at the wheel.

"I drop you off at the Imperial Palace. AdultDex. You'll find Peter Moaning there. I have a CD of the insertion code. I don't know if you guys can use it, because you need access to a control point on a backbone." He handed the CD to Charlie. "Eric said I would get whatever I needed, moneywise, as long as I can get away and disappear." He flashed Charlie that trademark Gittelson smile.

Charlie didn't answer, thinking that maybe this Bill clone might still report back to somebody. And he didn't want to tell Moaning about the insertion code CD or the fact that the insider had not accomplished his mission. Perhaps Grogan would tell Moaning, but Charlie thought instead that Grogan would probably just have Moaning killed, as he was even less useful than the insider, which Grogan tried to kill without hesitation.

Night fell as they drove up to the Imperial Palace Hotel, and it was surrounded by dark blue police vans and police cars. All hell was breaking loose. FBI agents had cordoned off the exits for the Imperial's convention center, and the Las Vegas bureau chief and his aides were moving up and down the aisles, collaring the manager of each exhibit. From among those collared they had identified four of the dozen suspects on their list of the owners of major porn and gambling site hosting operations. It did not matter that most of these sites were offshore. The owners were themselves on Nevada soil, and the FBI had a deal with the gaming commission.

Men in blue suits blocked the entrances to the casino and exhibit hall. If Moaning was in there, he was trapped in the porn exhibition. Charlie slipped into the hotel through the kitchen and out the back entrance. He was due to rendezvous with Tinker at the back of the

Hilton, a few blocks up the Strip. Just as he reached the back parking lot, all the lights went out.

All the power in Las Vegas had suddenly been cut off.

* * *

In the eerie blackness and pandemonium, Tiffany jumped out the back exit of the Imperial Palace through the fire escape doors, with Peter Moaning, into the dark night. They followed a crowd of bimbos in skimpy outfits, running right past FBI agents in blue windbreakers, out to the street. Moaning was panting, trying to keep up. Tiffany saw her moment, and stepped sideways, into a different crowd on the sidewalk, and started off down the sidewalk, losing Moaning, who was looking straight ahead for her. She spied the red Chevy convertible idling in the traffic just past the roadblock, and she ran up.

“Please, I need a ride!”

“Hop in,” said the gentleman. Tiffany crouched down in the seat as they sped off. From about 100 feet away on the sidewalk, Peter Moaning saw his blonde bombshell get into the car. He didn’t notice until it was too late that two blue suits were ready to grab him from behind.

“Say, you look a lot like that guy, that billionaire,” Tiffany said as the gentleman driver hit the accelerator and drove off into the blackened night, into what now seemed a ghost town version of Las Vegas.

Key of E

When the lights went out in Vegas, the desert seemed to reclaim this bawdy Sodom and consign it to the sands of time. Vegas was completely, utterly dark, with tiny stars of headlights like fireflies, dancing around freeway overpasses and lining major arteries, trying to escape the black hole that occupied the physical and moral center of Las Vegas. It was as if the desert had taken over again with a vengeance, wiping out years of development, shrouding the housing tracts in a cloak of blackness.

The Pyramid light that usually shined into outer space was, of course, suddenly extinguished. It took about half an hour before all of Vegas was restored and the Pyramid beam was turned back on. Beings from the planet Ononothemagain, completely out of sight orbiting the planet Neptune but monitoring that section of Earth known as Area 51, interpreted the sudden change in the beam's consistent illumination as a signal. The humans on Earth had never before recognized intelligent life outside their own planet, but perhaps they were ready now. Perhaps the blink near Area 51 had been an invitation. The Ononothemagains resolved in a special meeting that plans would be drawn up to make their next visit to Earth openly, in full view. They would forge a relationship with humans. They would read them passages from the human race's esteemed philosopher, Douglas Adams, author of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a text that was essential for their explorations. Oh yes, this visit would be much different than previous Earth visits, in which they posed as members of a French team of stem-cell researchers with a laboratory at the South Pole. The deception had proved to be quite successful, as they were able to visit with scientists all over Earth without arousing suspicion with their eccentricities. But now was clearly the time for

First Contact. They scheduled the visit for the year 2010, to commemorate yet another great Earth philosopher.

* * *

As a true Adept, Eric was in awe of the power of coincidence. He was also a student of Murphy's Law, paraphrased as "if something could go wrong, it will go wrong." The number of people involved in this MLF operation increased the Murphy's Law factor exponentially. He always knew that if you wanted to do something right, you had to do it yourself.

This operation involved the insertion of special code into the Internet backbone at a control point that would affect the entire West Coast, and allow hooks for Eric's version of the OtherNet, the one true OtherNet, to be implemented. At some point, unnoticed by the rest of the world (so preoccupied would they be with other attacks), strong encryption would be initialized, creating an encrypted network on top of the existing one, interleaved within the data streams of the existing one, virtually indecipherable. A totally secure OtherNet would be formed, with no back doors and only two known Conduits and Eric as the SuperConduit. The planned electronic skim on the casino networks would divert a decent-sized stream of revenue into numbered Cayman bank accounts without a trace. Those accounts were for Eric, Charlie, Tinker, Gretchen, Gooky, the Bill clone, and Rachel Smolder.

This backbone control point, located a few miles from Pahrump, Nevada, only about 50 miles from the decoy site, in a wide flat valley criss-crossed with power poles and dotted with satellite dishes, in a bunker the size of a rural ammunition depot... this was the real target. Moaning and the MLF had been counting on its Aggregate insider; only Charlie and Gretchen knew that Eric might have another plan.

The power blackout in Vegas and the surrounding areas had provided him a way to get inside the main gate at the bunker. He surprised the guard at the entrance and made short work of tying up the technician inside. He reached the main computer console and inserted a CD he'd brought with him. As the power came back on, the console restarted and booted the CD, and the insertion was successful.

* * *

In the darkness and confusion of the casinos right after the power outage, people were screaming and bumping into each other as their eyes tried to adjust to sudden, inky blackness. For a full minute there was pandemonium. Then, hotel and casino emergency lights and exit lights came on, piercing the darkness, catching people in the act of stealing chips from the gambling tables. Security guards blockaded the exits and searched people as they filtered their way to the blackness outside, where the only lights were headlights of cars stalled in traffic jams.

When the lights came back on, and every computer in Vegas rebooted, hundreds of bots developed by Eric for the MLF scurried about the Las Vegas node of the Net gathering pertinent data from each of the casino's computer systems. In the movie *Ocean's Eleven*, the character played by Sammy Davis Jr. drove the trash truck loaded with the goods out of town. In this caper, the monetary data traveled at light speed without any garbage collection. Billions of dollars were transferred in an instant to offshore bank accounts, and passwords were collected for future access. Eric's diversion for his own accounts left no tracks.

* * *

"So, is it a heist? What is it?" The beefy US Marshall followed the younger National Security Agency staffer into the Quonset hut in the

desert outskirts of Las Vegas, where the enforcement agency big shots were meeting to coordinate activities.

“We don’t know yet,” said the NSA staffer. “We know only that the different groups working together are doing things for different reasons.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The Marshall was naturally suspicious of these government hacker types, especially ones with goatees.

“It means what it means,” said the staffer. “From what I’ve heard, the Media Liberation Front are a bunch of idiots — they’re just looking for attention. Peter Moaning took over the group, and with Ted Anson’s funding from somewhere, most likely the Smolder Foundation, instigated this operation. But he had help; we’re not sure from where, and it could have even come from our own ranks,” he paused, raising his eyebrows, then continued, his goatee twitching as he talked. “Moaning had been contacted by Grogan, so we know that Grogan’s network was involved. The FBI had a man on the case, Ray Cheney, and he is now missing, presumably undercover. He was also looking into Rob Smolder’s disappearance. We don’t have anything on that now, though.” He paused again, this time with a downcast look. “Our servers behind the firewall were hit last week, we think by the Webomber. We lost all our files on Smolder.”

“Jeez, is there any sense to it?”

“Yeah, there is, if you follow O’Brien. I think he’s the one masterminding the heist part of it. Supposedly the FBI’s man has been on this guy from the beginning.”

“Hmm.” The Marshall looked thoughtful. “So, what are they gonna steal, besides the loot from the casinos?”

“Beats me. Must be a high tech scam of some kind.”

The senior director from the National Security Agency had the podium. The assembled enforcement agency men — not one woman in the entire group — sat fidgeting on metal fold-up chairs, and the noise of all this movement sounded like one large squeaky wheel.

“We arrived too late,” the director said with a sigh. “The perpetrators have dispersed, presumably with new identities.”

He paused as the fidgeting squeak quieted down.

“They left behind a Web site with dossiers on each member of the group, a group that called itself the Media Liberation Front, or MLF. You can go to each member’s diary, or biography, or whatever. Some of them wrote about themselves in the third person; they’re a pretty eccentric group. All of them joined more or less permanently about a year ago. We suspect the group of being responsible for at least half of the Web attacks of the past year, and for the mass uprising of pirate media sites on what they call the OtherNet, which at this point is just a collection of offshore servers that we’ve successfully isolated from the real Internet.”

There was a bit of murmuring on that factoid, until the NSA director cleared his throat.

“You can find information at the MLF’s Web site. In particular, you are all encouraged to play a game you can download from the site. When you play the game, you have to find the informant, or as they say in the game, ‘throw the switch on the witch,’ in a certain amount of time before the informant finds you. There are at least seven levels; unless you have encryption experience and training, you should start at level 1.”

The director paused, and the crowd started murmuring again. The director cleared his throat louder, to get their attention.

“Everyone, please note: there is an extraordinary amount of detail in this game, which we now know was developed by the MLF in conjunction with Mort Gill and an independent hacker named Eric Mauer, who is still missing. The game offers blueprints for taking down the entire Internet.”

At this point there was quite a lot of fidgeting, and the NSA man nearly lost his voice groaning to get their attention.

“In fact, gentlemen, the game unveils one of the biggest secrets of the Internet. It mathematically models the current real-world Internet and identifies a set of just five electronically vulnerable sites that, if compromised, would take down the five Internet backbones, essentially disconnecting most of the next tier from each other.”

“One of the campaigns in the game is extremely sophisticated, and everyone should take note of it. It involves an assault virus carrying a destructive payload, capable of making PC drives unusable and the data on their drives anything between inaccessible and gone forever. Further, consistent with the messages used in the last major attack from the Alpha terrorist group, it overwrites key files and displays a message box that says, ‘Another haughty bloodsucker... You think you are god, but you are only a chunk of shit’. My apologies for the language, but that is verbatim.”

A wave of nervous laughter swept through the audience, reviving at least temporarily the smug attitudes that law enforcement officers have about the criminal element and how stupid criminals often are. But this smugness dissipated in the face of the complex scenario presented by the NSA man.

“We believe that there will be an extremely widespread assault involving the simultaneous release of five-to-six times more new threats than the virus companies can handle, which is currently, I believe, 50-70 per day in what they call their ‘routine mode’. We believe these viruses will be combined with address-book-poaching

worms as carriers. We believe the perpetrators will use the currently available spam lists as a first-burst measure, but they will also hack the antiviral pattern files, so that the often automatic act of fetching updates could become a vehicle for delivering the damage.”

The NSA man allowed that thought to sink in for a second, then he leaned against the podium with his elbows, hunkering down as if delivering the end of a sermon. “Folks, we have a lot to go on. We’ve received early warnings of anomalous packet events, strange packet patterns that might be interpreted as probes of a sort that could reasonably precede an unspecified denial of service assault.”

A murmur spread through the audience, but was quickly hushed.

“But folks, we also know the MLF’s action, which knocked out power and Internet access for all of Las Vegas for a short while, did not in fact harm any of the five vulnerability points. Something must have failed in their plans, and apparently that’s why the FBI’s man hasn’t reported in yet. Now, we don’t have the resources in the next few hours to cover all points, some of which are in this country and others on foreign soil, but we are moving as fast as we can do so as soon as possible. In fact, we have just learned that a special FBI task force has been dispatched to a location only about fifty miles from here, which happens to be one of these vulnerability points.”

* * *

Outside the hut, nearly a quarter of a mile away, Mal Contour sat in Brendan Barcode’s self-sufficient, solar-powered Econoline van loaded with electronics gear, using his latest gadget that Barcode had somehow scored from his hacker network. It could re-create, out in his van, the pictures on a computer screen over a quarter of a mile away from its electromagnetic energy. Combined with the high-powered long distance microphone, Contour could hear the entire NSA man’s speech and see his presentation.

Contour could not believe what he was hearing and seeing. Barcode, of course, had gone apeshit, raving on about conspiracies and the Webomber and Smolder's disappearance and how everything is linked. Well, Barcode could rave on forever and no one would take him seriously.

Contour, on the other hand, had quite a story to tell, but he feared that no one really wanted to hear it. The NSA man had said, "the often automatic act of fetching updates could become a vehicle for delivering the damage." As people tried to prevent infection, they would instead increase that infection.

Indeed, this was a parable for spread of Western civilization itself. Fundamentalist terrorists around the world were trying to beat it back, even resorting to Western technology to beat it back. It was as if they were desperately using as weapons the shovels they would need to dig their own graves. There simply was no escape.

* * *

At first it seemed as if nothing had happened. The power came on, and the Internet was back up on everyone's machine in Vegas looking the same as it always did. The tradeshow computers presented the Media Liberation Front's message, 'Click on This', and many people did. "Why not?" asked a booth bunny. Why not introduce a little mystery into your life?

The virus attacks set up by the MLF were not successful beyond the Vegas networks, but the attacks were monitored diligently by the enforcement agencies by a worm that reported back to a specially encrypted site. The first entity to log on to that site would be the initial suspect. The NSA man was statistically certain of it. But he grunted when he found out that the first log-on was Andy Ames, checking into his Aggregate account with what he thought was a secure password. They secured his log-on location and sent in a team of agents, but the NSA man knew it was the wrong guy — someone

had pranked Ames by diverting his log-on sequence to the MLF site. Aggregate was probably monitoring the situation for security reasons, and the company was probably monitoring the NSA's activities at that moment.

Andy Ames had nearly shit in his pants when he was first handcuffed at Caesar's Palace, but he held on to his reserve. Sure enough, within minutes he realized that the Feds had him for something else. They didn't know about his connection with SWLABR, and how he had consistently fed the assassination organization the logistical information it needed. Andy had dodged a bullet. Within days he would disappear, and even Aggregate Networks would not be able to locate him.

The next person to log on, from his self-sufficient solar-powered mobile van in the desert not far from the enforcement compound, a person who never ran out of power, was Brendan Barcode. Unfortunately for Brendan, this would make him the likely suspect. Swarms of police surrounded his van, and Brendan and Mal Contour stepped out into the cool desert night and had the cuffs slapped on them.

* * *

Rachel Smolder scanned the dark horizon from the control post in the Armagosa Valley ranch, dubbed Ground Decoy, using night-vision binoculars. A column of vehicles was crossing the desert, followed by low-flying blinking helicopters attracted like wasps to a stream of soda water. The FBI team was streaking across the nighttime desert toward them.

Rachel had used an old pay phone at the nearby country store to make a call to a public phone in a café in Jamaica, near Blue Mountain. Perhaps it had been traced. But that was not her worry now. The FBI was closing in. She would happily give them Moaning and any information they needed about Grogan. But she didn't trust their

competence and was afraid they'd track down Charlie. Above all, she needed to get to Charlie, and get away.

She turned to the notebook attached to the makeshift network and printer, and opened a document she'd been keeping for just this moment, a document that would explain a lot of things and divert attention from her. She hit the print key, and left the tent, making eye contact with Gretchen that said, the time is now. She hopped on her motorcycle and took off.

Gretchen got Gooky's attention and commandeered a Jeep. Word spread quickly through the camp, creating enough of a diversion to allow Gretchen and Gooky to escape. By the time the FBI convoy showed up, most of them had fled by Jeep, car, cycle, or on foot, scattering in all directions into the desert that, two decades earlier, had been a home for the Charlie Manson family.

* * *

As far as Peter Moaning knew, the operation had been a failure. He was handcuffed in the passenger seat of Cheney's Jeep, in the midst of a full FBI invasion of the dusty camp. In the glare of headlights, Cheney showed him Rachel's document.

"Sez here, you're the one connected with Grogan," said Cheney.

"That's bullshit. Mort Gill brought him to me," said Moaning.

"Ahh, well, Mort Gill..." laughed Cheney. "We don't know which side he's on, do we?"

"Gill doesn't take sides," said Moaning, then looked up at Cheney. "What do you care? It was a failure. Grogan didn't get his encrypted network."

“And you didn’t get millions from the casinos,” said Cheney. He didn’t mention that his hackers had recovered 90 percent, leaving 10 percent of the revenue, roughly \$50 million, unaccounted for. “But we need to find Eric Mauer, Charlie O’Brien, and Andrew Tinker. And, for good measure, Rachel Smolder, the writer of this letter. Do you think they’re planning an operation on their own?”

Moaning rolled his eyes. The thought had crossed his mind. Eric was certainly capable of it.

“And what does this mean, in this document,” asked Cheney, “‘*Whatever the software encrypts becomes free. You can’t reverse the process.*’ What does that mean?”

“It means,” laughed Moaning, “that you can’t stop it. I think Eric is up to something, but I don’t think Grogan will have any advantage, and neither will you.”

* * *

Charlie had met Tinker at the rendezvous behind the Hilton, near the Sports Book, and they had booked it up Sahara away from the Strip and its traffic jams to Highway 95, which gave them access to the desert road that would take them to Pahrump, where they expected to rendezvous with Eric.

An hour later they were parked along a two-lane blacktop off the main highway, about 200 yards from the hub compound which was surrounded by a chain link fence and barbed wire.

“Charlie, what’s the deal?” Tinker, sitting in the back seat, put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “What’s next?”

“I’ve got to check the perimeter. Stay here. If Eric shows up, give him this.” Charlie handed him a silver CD-R, and dashed off around the side of the fence into the darkness.

Tinker sat in the Jeep for what seemed like an eternity. The CD-R given to him by the FBI was still in his pocket. Tinker was not ready for this. It was like looking at cracks in a windshield about to explode, looking at his world at this moment. How could he be here, sitting in this Jeep like this, involved in some kind of wildly criminal act, involved with *terrorists* for Christ's sake? How could he betray his long-time friend?

Tinker knew that Charlie's alternative plan was not so ambitious as to bring down the world's Internet, and as far as he knew, it was not driven by some foreign terrorist network. But they were in Eric's hands now. Shouldn't he cooperate with the FBI? Maybe Charlie's been duped as well... He sat there, sweating in the cool night air, trying to put it together.

Then Tinker remembered. There was only one person he could really trust. In a panic, he looked around the Jeep and under blankets, looking for a place to hide the FBI's CD-R. Under a blanket on the floor in the back, he discovered the semi-automatic rifle.

* * *

Eric was confident in his moment of clarity. It is the moment when everything falls into place, and nothing is beyond his grasp. When he runs through the finish line ahead of everyone else. When the code he is writing suddenly works. Something akin to a religious ecstasy, a literary epiphany, the crystal clear awareness of his life, in real time. And now it was time to make the journey that had been always been his destiny.

He sat in the bunker, hunched over the main computer console, furiously tapping the keys to install the One True OtherNet from CD into the machine, getting it all in before the world came tumbling down around him. He heard noises outside that almost distracted

him. Is this what it's like? Is this Death, arriving at some inopportune moment while he could still hear life outside, while he could still somehow resist it, and join the others, outside? Does Death come for people like this, wrenching them away from the controls, while they can still hear a world going on outside? He hoped, instead, for an unequivocal moment, a pushing of one side to the other, perfectly binary. Nothing messy to interfere with, to keep him from focusing on the clarity of the moment.

The Eric personality bot was fully developed now. He had fully transmuted a cyberspace avatar into a container for a life's worth of knowledge. His avatar identity could populate the Net, doing things it wanted to do of its own volition, learning as it went, perhaps even improving the system wherever it went.

Now all Eric needed to do was let it go, let his identity flow into the machine, out into the Net. He was prepared to leave his body if he had to; he had studied Eastern meditation and Western monasticism, had worked his life in code, both sacred and programmatic. He believed the cybernetic facets of Earth culture to be something inherited, more or less, from cultures out in space that may have colonized this planet a million years before. He believed his essence, in code, would travel to those far distant worlds.

The noise outside grew louder, distracting him. He put on headphones, still tapping furiously. Not a moment too soon, he clicked the last bit off to the Net, and turned just in time to see a flash of light as the power came on, and the door opened.

"Hey man!" It was Charlie.

Eric sagged in his chair. "Man, you freaked me out."

"So is it done?"

Eric nodded in exhaustion. "Everything but the charges for the explosives," he said, pointing at his pack.

"What about the CD I was supposed to give you? From Grogan? And what about the insider? He didn't have a chance to insert the hooks."

"Forget that. I took care of everything. Now get lost. I'm starting the charges. Don't wait for me. Just take off." Eric turned to his knapsack.

* * *

Outside, Charlie came back to find Tinker standing there with the rifle in his hand.

"I see you found it," Charlie smirked. "Now you finally understand. I mean business."

Tinker smiled. The tension of the moment relaxed a few degrees. "There's something I forgot to tell you."

There was a rustling in the darkness, as two people came down the road and into view, one of them dragging their feet. It was Rachel dragged by the FBI agent Tinker had met before.

"Yes there is something he forgot to tell you," the agent said in a commanding voice, pulling a whimpering Rachel by her elbow. "My name is Cheney. And I'm from the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"You mean Incompetence," Rachel hissed at him. "Fraudulent Bureau of Incompetence. You let Grogan escape while you are out here chasing us."

"Now now," Cheney chuckled. "We all make mistakes." He looked over at Tinker. "Now Mr. Tinker, you're not going to make a mistake, are you?"

Tinker held the rifle askew against his hip, like a picture of the revolutionary hero Ché Guevera, his hand on the grip and his finger on the trigger. It felt so light, almost like a toy... such a marvel of engineering, a tool of such immense power but so little weight. Wielding it seemed to carry no responsibility. In this moment of madness, Tinker looked up and grinned. Everyone was looking at him. Suddenly the gun went off.

Everyone dived for cover. "Yo, man!" was all that Charlie could say. Tinker threw the gun in a ditch and also dived for cover.

There was a moment of silence. Then, an explosion rocked the desert, and the bunker was obliterated. Rachel choked at the sight, freeing herself from Cheney and clutching at Charlie. Could Eric have survived? And if he was gone... If he had time to implement his plan... His "entity" would occupy the Net. Eric would be... *in* the Net. Rachel truly wanted to believe this. Eric's very soul embodied in code, adapting to its environment, learning how to evade detection, and continuing to provide new keys to keep encryption safe. A true ghost in the machine.

Cheney dashed over to the rubble that was all that remained of the bunker. Charlie, seeing Cheney go, looked over at Tinker, who was shaking in the ditch, and clutched Rachel harder. "We've got to split now. Right now!"

* * *

Good old-fashioned explosives — they'll work every time. Eric had suffered a sprained ankle and a few bruises, but he was OK, hiding in the underbrush near the bunker, watching Cheney poke through the rubble. Finally Cheney stopped poking and looked around. "Eric!" He shouted. "I know you can hear me! Eric!"

Eric didn't answer.

“Listen Eric, the troops are coming. If you help me, I can help you escape. All I need is the password for the song you sent out, ‘Escape Key’. All I need is the password.”

But Eric wouldn’t answer. He had studied the ways of the jackrabbit in the desert and knew how to survive. The FBI troop convoy arrived, raising a huge cloud of dust, making it quite easy for Eric to make his getaway.

With no more responsibilities and a new identity to assume, Eric had resolved in his mind to go, and keep going, until he found a beautiful woman with the intelligence to leave him be, someone like that Tiffany he had met before. He would head north and west, to Independence California, where he could find a motel, plug in his laptop, and get started with this new identity kit.

Cheney searched the surrounding brush looking for Eric. He really didn’t care that the rest of them had split with the Jeep. The others probably didn’t know the password anyway. Eric was the key. But when he finally reached a clump of tumbleweed with a piece of paper attached to it, he cursed. On it was one word: “swordfish”. Now he had nothing. He’d fallen into the same trap as his brethren in law enforcement, and he had nothing.

* * *

An hour later, as the false dawn streaked the horizon over the high desert, Charlie pulled over at a deserted gas station on Highway 95 south of Beatty. Charlie drove Rachel’s motorcycle with Rachel on back, and Tinker drove the Jeep following him.

Charlie spoke directly to Tinker, who sat in the driver’s seat of the Jeep among the strewn electronics gear and debris, like St. Francis of Assisi presiding over the birds and animals. “They’re gonna keep

following us," said Charlie. "We're gonna have to split up for a while."

Tinker was afraid, the fear suddenly pausing the blood flow in his body. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Charlie was unfazed. "Well, Tink, that gun play was brilliant. Now the FBI will think *we're* terrorists."

"I didn't know the safety was off!" Tinker's blood started to flow again. "Is there a safety on it?" He asked meekly.

"Tink, goddammit, you should have checked first!"

"Enough," interrupted Rachel, frowning at her immature partners. "Let's get down to business."

"Right," said Charlie, regaining his composure. "Tink, we have accounts set up. You have an account too. It won't be traced." He reached out to Tinker, grasping his hand and arm. "This is our chance. This is *our* key... to escape!"

"You realize," said Tinker, "if this guy Grogan ever does find us..."

"We're dead." Charlie stared back at Tinker. A chill passed between them. Then Charlie broke the spell, pawing the ground with his foot. "All the more reason to split up. You take the Jeep."

"Alright, let's get it together," said Rachel, organizing the packs. Charlie distributed Identity Kit CDs, created by Gretchen from Eric's original version of ICE, the one that had been encrypted within the song "Escape Key" and dispersed across the Net. "Here's the new identity kit, and here are your account numbers. Ten million dollars in each account." She paused to let that sink in. Tinker let out a low whistle. Rachel smiled at him. "I knew you'd come around."

“Use the numbers only after you’ve established your new identity,” Charlie warned Tinker. “It takes about a day for the kit to do its thing, requesting birth certificates, social security numbers, and so on. And if you screw up your *next* life,” he laughed, “the kit lets you set up at least 20 more identities before any danger of a trace can occur. So you have 20 lives. Use them well.”

Tinker didn’t respond. He just stared at a point out in the wide-open desert.

“You know what’s going on,” Charlie almost pleaded for his respect. “We’re the good guys. We’re a team. We helped establish an uncensored network, and the entire world will benefit from it. We sidestepped the bad guys and took their money. It’s as simple as that.”

“I know it.” Tinker said, then swore into the wind. “But it’s a bad fucking situation for Eric, isn’t it?”

Charlie and Rachel were silent as Tinker brooded. “Look, maybe Eric made it out,” said Charlie after a while. “Maybe he’s already on his way to someplace else.”

“Like Jamaica?” said Rachel, her eyes glittering.

Charlie seemed satisfied with her response and turned back to Tinker. “OK. The plan is to scatter. We won’t meet again — not for a while. Take on your new identity. Don’t try to contact us. Wait for a sign on a Web site dedicated to the Beatles. You know the URL, the one with all the ‘Paul is dead’ clues.”

Tinker took on a sudden interest. “So you are... you know who the Webomber is?”

Charlie shook his head. “I never needed to know. All I know is, whoever it is, he or she, I don’t know and I don’t care. The

Webomber's still watching over us. You'll get a signal, maybe six months, maybe a year."

The wind shivered through them, taking all their secrets away. They didn't look at each other. The desert was calling for them.

Charlie spoke first to Tinker. "Go northwest, toward Death Valley." He paused. "This is it. *We did it*, we hijacked the starship. Now we're on our own planet. You hear me? We really did it."

But Tinker seemed unconvinced. Charlie didn't look back as he walked over to Rachel's motorcycle and hopped on behind her. She looked back, though, with a smile. Then she gunned the motorcycle and took off with Charlie northeast, towards Beatty. Tinker started the Jeep and headed off toward Death Valley.

We are leaving

You don't need us.

— Crosby Stills & Nash, "Wooden Ships" (David Crosby, Paul Kantner, Steve Stills)

* * *

"It's about creating a new Internet, above the current Internet," said Mort Gill to the class of elite software engineers at Stanford University in Palo Alto, the morning after the power outage nearly 500 miles away in Las Vegas. "One that adheres to new standards for encryption. One that permits all types of commerce across all borders of all countries — completely unregulated. As the forces of darkness lay waste to the Internet frontier, we create a new one."

The students were at full attention, and many nodded in agreement.

"It's about flattening all countries into one. It's about floating above the mess of this world, creating a New World Order that is not hemmed in by nationalistic fervor or corrupted by private interests.

It's about creating a resistance movement that recognizes the Earth itself as the only 'country' worth fighting for."

Again, the murmurs of approval, the nodding of heads in agreement.

"And yet, we are human. Once everyone logged onto the OtherNet, they found basically the same things. The stuff that *people* make; that ordinary humans conceive. We haven't yet transcended human nature, human fallibility. We may have reached a new level of security awareness and strong encryption, but there are many more levels to go to reach any sort of nirvana we might recognize. This new level looks the same, and offers the same temptations for corruption."

The students were silent, trying to grasp what this meant.

"But we must keep moving forward," Gill continued, "challenging these people who presume to have power over the flow of information. We must recognize the enemy, and the enemy's propaganda. For example, here's a quote from the president of one of the largest music labels. 'Once consumers can no longer get free music, they will have to buy the music in the formats we choose to put out.' And what happens when consumers revolt? Here's what happens: Those who create the tools to hack these formats will be treated as terrorists. But what the entertainment industry doesn't yet realize is that this reaction is a recipe for its own destruction. Fighting your customers is a sure path toward failure."

Mort Gill waited for all this to sink in, and scanned the back rows of the classroom for the FBI undercover agent he had recognized before. Spotting them was so easy. There, there he is. Gill smiled right at him, and continued his speech.

"And so I quote that famous refrain, sung so long ago for another era but now updated for this time and place..."

Meet the new Net!

Same as the old Net!

* * *

By morning, out in the desert, the Bill clone had grown weary of Tiffany's talk about her lonely, destitute life, so he pulled over in the dusty parking lot in the sagebrush outpost of Olancho, near Death Valley. He stopped the car and just sat there.

"You know, I read somewhere that there are now more than 300 billionaires on the planet," she went on, her voice sticky as if she were chewing cellophane. "Just a decade ago there were only 50." She paused for effect. The Bill clone just stared off into the desert. "I guess that's what happened to the War on Poverty. The rich won it." She smiled at him, fondling the gearshift.

Mark, the Bill clone, looked at her like she was an accessory, a premium with the rental package. Convertible, FM stereo, power steering, cruise control, ample breasts bulging out of a tight dress. "Everything's OK," he said to her. "But I gotta go off by myself now."

"Oh," she caught her breath, looking around, frowning. "But what about me? I thought you were taking me somewhere."

He looked westward toward the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Mt. Whitney dominating the horizon with its snowcap gleaming in the sun.

"You're not gonna leave me out here in the desert, are you?" she asked with a catch in her throat.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked her, a headache starting to peek from behind his words.

“Well I certainly don’t wanna be left here,” she said crisply. “This is Charlie Manson country.”

“Don’t worry,” he reassured her. “I’ll see to it that you get somewhere.”

“C’mon,” she lowered her voice to a catlike purr. “I thought you were rich, the richest guy in America. You can afford to take me with you, can’t you?”

The Bill clone looked eastward, out into the desert. The beauty of it was indescribably lonely, the wind blowing sand cones pirouetting in the bleak sunlight. Yes, he could do anything, or nearly anything. The corporate credit card and driver’s license were fake, but they worked, and the credit limit was high enough to fly them around the world. But he just didn’t want to be with her right now, or with anyone. He needed to get this woman immediately off to her destination, before she could make his life complicated.

He got out, walked over to a phone booth, called United Airlines, and made a reservation for Larry McNealy from Las Vegas to Jamaica. Then he called the limo service Aggregate Networks used in Vegas, and arranged to be picked up at the Olancha Motor Inn later that evening.

“Hey, what’s your last name?” he shouted from the phone booth at her.

“My real name is Rosemary DeSantis,” she shouted back.

He made the Motor Inn reservation in her name, and came back to the car. “It’s simple,” he told her, and she brightened up. “We stay in Olancha tonight, at the Inn. Or at least, that’s where I’m staying until I get picked up tonight. You can stay, or leave, as you wish. With the car, I might add.”

"I can keep the car? It's a rental."

"Well..." he paused. "I might as well tell you. It's rented for an entire week. You don't even need to return it to the same city. In fact, here's a trick. You don't even have to return the car to the rental lot. Just park it in the airport departure zone where the skycaps pick up your bags, and leave the key in it."

"Wow," she said. "Never thought of that. You'll call it in stolen, right?"

"No, it's something Bill — " he caught himself. "Something I do all the time," he said. "And it works. The rental company sends someone to pick it up — that's all. I don't even pay the parking tickets. My secretary calls, and says I would have missed the plane otherwise. They never complain."

"Wow," she repeated.

"No," he laughed. "They never complain about what rich people do."

She smiled and looked down at the gearshift, blushing slightly.

"So... I guess it's goodbye, unless you want to stay awhile," he said, looking off at the desert.

She got out and walked around the car, then looked back at him. She gave him a look up and down. "Billionaire, huh? Well I don't think so. A millionaire's enough for me." Then she made perhaps the smartest decision she had ever made in her life. "Well, I think I'll move on up the road in this here red Chevy convertible. Thanks anyway, mister, but who knows, maybe I'll meet a millionaire in the next town. What is it?" She looked up the highway at the sign. "Next town, Independence."

And without any further word or even a look back, Tiffany drove off to Independence. About twenty miles up the road she saw a hitchhiker, and was startled to recognize him. It was Eric, a bit weathered, smiling at his good fortune.

* * *

The MLF had scattered, leaving behind enough incriminating evidence to jail the entire Northwest chapter of Earth First along with them. But they had adopted new identities and disappeared, leaving the Earth First members to deal with the long arm of the law.

Ray Cheney, promoted to bureau chief for Northern California, continued to file reports on ongoing hacker activities that needed to be pursued and characters that needed to be brought to justice. He had weathered the storms created around his unorthodox procedures in Las Vegas and had paid off the hackers who were threatening to expose his smoking habit.

Ted Anson emerged unscathed, still in charge of the Smolder Foundation (which had recently received a huge grant from Aggregate Networks). He continued as an investor in Silicon Valley, this whole episode ending up as nothing more than a blip in his life.

Aggregate Networks beefed up its espionage unit, despite its horrendous failure at security. Never again would the company outsource its most important surveillance work. Andy Ames had exposed the company, and his audio specialist, Dan Rose, had disappeared with valuable recordings. Rose had dropped out entirely, not even bothering to pick up any personal belongings from his Menlo Park cottage. The only proof that he survived was an email he sent to Andy a few days later, just a quick note: "Give in... to the grin!"

Mort Gill continued to give speeches around the country about the need for freedom to use personal encryption software. His

company's stock quadrupled in value in six months as sales skyrocketed. Meanwhile, thousands of gambling and porn sites were deployed on OtherNet servers around the world, financed by anonymous investors through Cayman Island bank accounts.

Rumors circulated about an electronic version of Eric roaming the Internet, with copies of the source code for the One True OtherNet stashed in secret locations, including one embedded in the music stream for the song "Escape Key", which reached number 10 on the Web radio Top 40 and stayed there for three weeks. With a bullet.

No more reason for strife...

It's just a blip in the life.

— Flying Other Brothers, "Blip in the Life" (T.Bove / G.E. Smith)

* * *

"Boss, don't go down 'dere today." Ben the rastaman was squatting by the hut entrance, the canyons of Blue Mountain behind him misting in the morning Jamaican sun, handing the aging white bearded hippie a large spliff. "Bumba clot! The Man, he is everywhere. Maybe he go away real soon, but not now boss."

The aging hippie took a huge hit off the spliff, coughed, and handed it back. "It's not a problem, my friend. I don't need to make any more phone calls. Take my laptop and these discs and destroy them. I have no need for them anymore."

"You gone! Laptop's worth *money*, mon. Can I-mon keep it?"

"No, Ben. It's evidence. *Incriminating* evidence. You must destroy the discs *and* the laptop."

Ben thought about this for awhile, then took another hit off the spliff. "No more calls from your woman?"

“She’s got a new life now,” said the aging hippie, smiling back. “She will carry on without me. The transition, my friend,” he beckoned for another hit off the spliff, “it worked. Everybody’s happy. Everybody ‘cept the Man.”

“Bumba clot! The Man is never happy.”

How true. The aging hippie sat and smoked with his friend. But he couldn’t resist one more showing of his most creative project. “Ben, my friend,” he grinned wildly, the grin he always used when he gave demonstrations to corporate sponsors. “Did you ever see my best work? Let me show you.” He slipped one of the discs, a DVD-R, into the laptop and started the movie.

The soundtrack was Pink Floyd’s “Astronomy Domine” (Syd Barrett) from the live album *Ummagumma*. There was Rob and Rachel Smolder preparing a dummy. “We used water-soluble clothing and lead weights,” he interjected. As the sound effects in the song reached a crescendo, the scene changed to Rob driving his car south on 101 through the Waldo Grade Tunnel and onto the Golden Gate Bridge. Then it panned to another car, pulling into the vista point parking lot on the Marin side. Dan Rose, their friend from Menlo Park, got out of the car and carried a large sack over to the bridge’s pedestrian walkway.

The soundtrack moved on to “Careful With That Axe, Eugene” (Waters, Wright, Mason, and Gilmour) from the same album. During the musical buildup, Rob walked from the San Francisco side to the bridge and up the pedestrian walkway to the halfway point. The camera panned, then, to Dan Rose, carrying the sack and then pulling out the dummy, dressed to look like Smolder. As the screeching part of the song reached its climax (during which, presumably, Eugene wasn’t careful with that axe), the two threw the dummy over the railing, and the camera angle changed to show the body falling into the raging waters of the Golden Gate.

The song dissolved into “Saucerful of Secrets” from the same album, with its stately finale resolving all paradoxes. An edit of the previous scenes appeared, with filters added to make the picture more like the result of a handheld camera. Rob Smolder was on the bridge walkway, looking over the edge of the railing, as seen from the San Francisco parking lot. One of his legs appeared to be going over the railing, then his entire body turned so that only his back was visible. The rest was the footage of the dummy falling.

“Bumba clot! That’s you, mon!”

“Ben,” he chuckled, “Listen, I want you to do something with this. Don’t destroy this disc.” He took it out of the laptop. “Instead, mail it to this address. I think this guy would appreciate it. I want to give it to him, a kind of reward for his efforts.” He wrote the address of Mal Contour, care of the *Bay Radical*, on a manila envelope.

“Yah mon, I take it for you.” Ben was very happy with his new assignment. “We are part of the revolution, mon. The revolution is happening! And we play a big part, right mon?”

“Yes mon,” chuckled Rob Smolder, the aging hippie, leaning back into his hammock. “*Big part!*”

“Now what you gonna do man?”

“Don’t you know, Ben?” Smolder took a long drag of the spliff. “Of course you know. Why do you think that yacht is waiting for me, down in Negril?”

“Boss, dat boat goin’ out tomorrow night!”

“That’s right, my friend,” Rob sighed. “I’m gonna be on that boat. I’m going back to my island, my kingdom. Where I’ll be completely safe, and so will the biggest library in the world, the only uncensored

one. My lush paradise, just off the Florida Keys, outside American territory, in the Caribbean Sea halfway to Cuba.”

“Yah mon, I know dat island.”

“Yes, and we have a new name for it: Escape Key.”

* * *

Tinker stepped on the accelerator. The Jeep seemed uncomfortable on this paved asphalt, unable to flex its muscles. Its gyration-prone wheels seemed bored on the highway through Death Valley, which offered no more than a few bumps. The Jeep seemed depressed, even, with the need to be restrained for this drive. It needed to venture out into the rough and tumble desert.

He stopped at Zabriskie Point, not far from Furnace Creek in Death Valley, one of Charlotte’s favorite places. A Sixties exploitation movie of little consequence had been filmed there, and Charlotte had bought three copies for some reason. There was no point to it, just like there was no point in filming a movie about the Sixties at Zabriskie Point. It was a spur of the moment thing. It's amazing what people will do in any given moment, given the uncertainty of the messages we receive from the world.

Tinker drove the Jeep up a steep incline until it could go no further. He got out and carried a canteen and some candy bars up a steep canyon to a crumbling ledge overlooking the valley. And sat down. The world shimmered before him, alive but unmoving, changing but staying the same. The desert looked a bit like Silicon Valley except that everyone had escaped and the buildings had crumbled and dissolved into caked, dried mud. There were no black clouds following him. Stocks, schemes, technology — all meaningless out here. He had finally escaped. Into what he had escaped, he couldn’t decide. According to Charlie he was rich, yes, but that fantasy had yet to gain market share of his mind. The relentless tragic desert wind

scalloped his thoughts, leaving a blank canvas, and as his eyes followed a dust devil his mind spiraled down into a catatonic state, reaching some point of meditation that few in his world of family and friends knew about, perhaps only his great-uncle Adam, the closet catatonic who'd lived through the most interesting century of the human race without ever learning its messages, encrypted as they were in stuff we've come to call reality.

And Tinker stared at the desert for hours, and the hours became days.

* * *

Charlotte and the kids had grown weary in San Diego at her mother's house creating a new kind of chaos her mother could only frown at, waiting for word from Tinker. She had put aside the scorecard of his indiscretions. If he never called back, well... wasn't it obvious? Maybe he had found himself another life, and that's just what she should do. As she moved quickly through decisions and took out the credit card that was about to expire, she felt smart. Confident. For once in her life. And she went out and put a down payment on a brand new Winnebago. She loaded up the kids and they set out for the desert beyond the Sierra Nevada range with a burning desire to visit Zabriskie Point, one of her favorite places in Death Valley.

*Everybody had a good year
Everybody let their hair down
Everybody pull their socks up
Everybody put the foot down*

— John Lennon, "Everyone Had a Hard Year" demo, eventually used in "I've Got a Feeling" (Lennon/McCartney)

[THE END]