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CONSPIRACY!

OR, "HOW MICKEY SMITH MADE IT BIG"

“I found out something I never knew. I found out that my world was not the real world.”

—Robert F. Kennedy

CONSPIRACY!

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Chapter One: Numbers

I was in a disturbed turn of mind when I stumbled into Numbers, the only bastion of humanity I could find at 2:00 AM in this working-class Queens neighborhood that stood only a kiss away from Brooklyn. The layers of alcohol that I had used to anesthetize myself from the horror had begun to fade away earlier in the night, and a familiar agitation started asserting itself. I knew that if I couldn't get a drink to send me off into dreamland in a manner befitting my recent experiences, I would simply be *dead*, dead by my own hand in a manner that would garner me a Darwin Award.

So I choked out a tight thank-you to the Lord when I heard the muffled sound of Mandy Moore warmly garble down the block, and spied the orange light of the window, condensation obscuring the shapes sitting by the bar.

A bell tinkled as I pushed open the door with my forearm. And as I stepped into the bar I remembered the class-consciousness with which I had previously shunned Numbers all these many years.

Actually, it was more like *culture*-consciousness, it had nothing to do with class or money. I was as poor as fuck. As poor as *them*. Not poor as in hungry or divested of the worldly amusements and comforts that make life bearable like videogame consoles. But I'd never own property.

Ah, how I silently shat on my neighbors, how I eyed them as inappropriate for friendship just because they didn't react to the same pop-cultural cues as I did. But this night things were different. *This* night, I clung in an orangutan fashion to a populist vision born Artemis-like from John Lennon's skull—a vision of solidarity amongst humanity in the face of the Apocalypse.

A cursory view of the crowd and the stuttering image of some sort of black & white comedic narrative on the monitor overhead convinced me that news of the plane crash had not reached the pub, and no one saw fit to let them know. Upon closer inspection I realized they were watching a taped episode of *The Honeymooners*. Or not really watching, all of them, just the snow-capped bartender and several relics at the bar.

Relics: plumbers, electricians, handymen, disabled veterans, dressed in clothes that ranged from simple jeans-and-T-shirt combos, cigarette box in rolled up sleeve like a 50s gangster, to vaguely good-ol'boy/Hell's Angel type accents. Arms sticking out of old fringed black leather vests, flesh deflated by age that still gave traces of their former muscular glory. Hair grey like metal, slicked back or hanging limply in greasy clotted locks, the little hard wire-like stubble that jutted from their chins making me aware of my own. (hadn't slept in a week maybe, with all the madness, cleaning out my presidential cabinet of freaks and gods)

Their clothing was marked with a thin, melancholy layer of car exhaust and daily toil, and they smelled like men and they smelled like decades. I peeled off my coat, eased myself on a stool, put the coat on my lap, and started to rub my hands together briskly to warm them up.

The snow-capped barkeep asked me in a friendly tone: "What'll it be, gentleman?" It was the first civil, normal sentence spoken to me in a couple of days. An inflated parrot on a banana hung over the man's head. The parrot wore a sombrero. I felt so *safe*. I felt like everything was going to be OK, and that perhaps I blew everything out of proportion.

"A Corona, please..."

“Would you like a lime?”

“I *would* like one. Yes, please.”

I have always been mocked in more sophisticated circles for being a polite person. They said it made me look like a greenhorn. (The sucking sound of the aluminum cap being pried off, then a respectful moment of silence; a frosty bottle slick with perspiration placed before me softly on a napkin, and I touched the crescent of lime sticking out at the top to my lips before poking it into the bottle with my index finger) This has been Their main criticism—that I was too “nice.”

But I never wanted to succeed in Their circles. I just wanted to be an *artist*. And then maybe that naiveté would be appreciated or overlooked. (I dragged in deep and finished half of it in one gulp) But even when I got to the hallowed halls I was told: too naive, too earnest. That I was a nice gent, but you could read it all over me. *Green*.

However, one person’s green could be another person’s *hero*. So I tried to become a free-thinker, a revolutionary. Opened my mind, took in the seminars. (I killed the bottle and didn’t even have to ask for another, it was psychic. The snow-capped man just nodded at me and I smiled rather too largely in the affirmative: yes, another, with lime). Now I don’t even know if there’s a God anymore. I bought the tapes too. (*That bastard’s fucking tapes...*)

Suddenly, I heard laughter from the old guard at the bar. At first I thought it was directed at me, but instead it came from the 19-inch monitor hanging precariously above us. We had gone from shitty quality black-and-white to shitty quality color, and Ralph Kramden had been replaced by Benny Hill. Benny was dressed in some sort of safari outfit with a white hat and short-pants. He ran in and out of a vertically-placed sarcophagus; the same footage played back over and over, backwards and forwards,

at high speed. I got that helpful buzz again from the alcohol, and started to settle into my surroundings.

I was surprised at how *comfortable* I was at Numbers. I could have smacked myself on the noggin for never thinking about coming here before. I mean, this place was closer to my house than the liquor store. And the people were nice enough—even the relics, the warhammers, who I thought couldn't stand the likes of me. It made me wonder if I had misconstrued the likes of me. Maybe I never was who I was. Or maybe I was around the wrong people all my life. Or maybe I was really drunk and a hair away from lip-synching the Divinyls' "I Touch Myself."

Just around the corner, to the left, this whole other section of the place opened up. This part of the bar was apparently the "hook-up" joint, with actual young females—women repeatedly preening bird-like at tables, or hanging onto their mate's arms like curvy terry-clad drapes of affected boredom. They all seemed like "ands," objects that accompanied their jogging-suited warriors like anime mascots, extras, *scenery*.

Immediately I missed the depth and psychosis of the girl who dumped me.

Then suddenly, to put it bluntly—I smelt *sex*. This is not to say that I don't respect women, or that the energetic little bottle-blond in front of me merited being reduced to the olfactory qualities of her reproductive organs. It's just that I had so often been around women who were obtuse, difficult, unavailable, or who were just plain contemptuous of me for my failure to live up to their standards, that I had completely forgotten what it was like to just be near a woman and feel sexual in a way that didn't involve shadowy underground segments of the government or getting my nads smashed.

She spoke, plump pink shiny lips parting to reveal perfect teeth and broad gums.

“Hi...are you new here?”

“I...no...I’ve been living here for a while.”

"How long have you been living here?"

"All my life."

“I’m Kate.”

“Hey, there. Nice to meet you. I'm Tod. Tod Moriens.”

“Want to dance?”

I felt her hot hand, sticky from the half-eaten plate of buffalo-wings that sat on an abandoned table behind us, touch my left arm.

Now this was a lovely scene and all—but in spite of my alcohol-induced ability to have a normal, unvarnished social interaction with a member of the opposite sex, my innate tendency to paranoia attempted once again to regain supremacy over my psyche. Specifically, I pictured this chick having some young buck of a boyfriend who was gonna come out of the john and just wail on me upside the head with his thick, muscled fingers...the cadence of knuckles thumping upon bone, like a basket of raw potatoes emptied upon a wooden floor.

But before I knew it, I was enthusiastically hoofing it with Kate upon the linoleum-covered 4 foot by 4 foot patch of floor between the telephones and two tables. Despite having to apologize a few times to the man who was parked in front of the payphone with a long list of names with red lines drawn through some of them, I found the whole exercise rather *enjoyable*. Maybe I looked like a rod-puppet on crack—but who cared? Life went on around me and through me and it really didn't matter.

As I watched her body pump to the song, I began to reevaluate matters that had been bothering me lately. Perhaps I really *was* too sensitive. Maybe I really did need the medication to balance me out. Maybe I needed to patronize the local businesses right in my own community instead of complaining and thumbing my nose at everything like I was so cool or something.

And maybe that editor at the con was right—maybe my art truly was stiff and amateurish. Maybe I just needed to take that promotion at the video store and see where it would lead me. Maybe I needed to settle down with a girl like Kate—a Giver, a *nurturer*, who wouldn't care if the best we could do was a characterless walk up on the ass-end of Queens. To her it wouldn't be the ass-end—it would just *be*, that's all. A place to be, to live.

And maybe if I got established as senior manager at VideoDream, I could slowly woo my son back from the clutches of my ex & Mr. Clean. And maybe me and Kate would have some children together. Maybe I'd even start going to church.

And maybe those kooks on that message board were just that—*kooks*, delusional, troubled souls who had to invent these grand conspiracy theories in order to give their lives value. And maybe I had been listening to their drivel for far too long, and it affected me. And maybe the mix of stress at work, stress with my ex, my impending 31st birthday, the disappointment at the comic convention and the problem with the

meds all contributed to a temporary dissociative state that would subside with the right mix of Prozac, therapy, and good deep loving the way that only a down-to-earth local gal like Kate could provide.

And then Kate said,

“Isn’t it terrible what happened with that plane? There’s so many people dead.”

Chapter Two: Ebor

If I had to pinpoint it, I think it all began with Ebor. Certainly, he wasn't *directly* responsible. However it was as if he was an unseen, unconscious, invisible catalyst—what Hyman Lidge liked to refer to as "one of God's secret agents." And if I had to pinpoint an exact moment when my entire life turned on a dime—when my watch, for better or for ill, became reset—it would have to be Ebor's birthday party.

I had been at VideoDream for almost four years and they never celebrated my birthday. Oh, I guess it made sense, almost: first year, I was hired after my birthday. Second year, it was because (supposedly) I never told anyone when my birthday was—only it was right there on all my filed documentation! (How could they have missed it?) Third year, my birthday fell on the weekend. But they could have thrown a party for me anyway and made an effort, as they did for Blanca before *her* vacation.

My fourth and final year at Videodream, there was just no good reason at all for my birthday not to be celebrated and a cake not purchased. I never mentioned it, and they never mentioned it—but the tension was as thick as a knife, you can believe that.

I realize what a petty shit I sound like crying about this stuff—but I'm just being honest. My psychiatrist had said I shouldn't let things bottle up and fester. So I'm just being honest, do I at least get a star for this? I had busted my ass for four whole years at VideoDream—rewinding tapes, dusting the shelves, taking returns, hosing down the pink plastic porno cases in the sink in the back—and meanwhile, I got *nothing* while people were getting their own parties left and right. People like Ebor.

Everybody called Ebor "Mr. Happy"—because the dude was *always* happy. You'd think that would annoy people after a while, but everybody liked Ebor. He was like one of those pocket "laugh machines" you see on sale at a novelty shop—chuckling so hard he would choke and have to brace himself on the marble-finish formica counter. You could play *Faces Of Death* in front of Ebor and I think he'd laugh his ass off.

What was Ebor so damn happy about? This was the \$25,000 question.

He was pushing 50, being manager at VideoDream his highest job position to date. His reclusive unnamed wife ("Wife of Ebor") called 10 times a day to complain that she had trouble swallowing her food or breathing and might need medical attention. Ebor had bad teeth, no savings, was pre-diabetic, and lactose intolerant. He came into work with cat-hair plastering him from head-to-toe and a pair of ratty black Reeboks with soles so worn they flipped-flopped when he walked. And he was a failed artist.

So obviously, with the exception of the hypochondriac wife, Ebor bothered me so much because I was looking into a mirror of my future self. Petty little shit that I am. Only I had an ex-wife, no girlfriend, and a cat dumped on me from a previous relationship. So in some respects, I was even more pathetic than Ebor. And then there was the whole birthday issue.

I took birthdays for granted until I was 28. Then I started to *worry*. It was four years after graduating college and I had nothing to show for it but a string of rejected art submissions to comic book companies. Actually, they never out-and-out rejected me. They just never got back in touch. This, I've come to realize, was worse than if they had ever did officially reject me. Because with the silence came hope.

My ability to wait patiently, dream, and invent stories knew no bounds. My optimism outlasted my marriage, my quick metabolism, but unfortunately not that damn cat.

There was one thing that Ebor *did* help me out with, however, and in retrospect I consider it very important as to the trajectory of my story.

Ebor introduced me to *conspiracy theories*.

Since we were both comic fans, we'd always be swapping pertinent reading material. Then it branched out into obscure media on VHS, non-sports trading cards, some turn-of-the-century fetish porn, and finally anything interesting that struck our fancy. So I was introduced to a slim little pamphlet called "WAKE UP, PEOPLE" by Hyman Lidge. I immediately recognized Lidge's name. He was a shortstop for the Boston Red Sox in the mid-Eighties.

*** **

WAKE UP PEOPLE

A Plea To Understanding The Real Nature Of The Game

by Hyman Lidge, international motivational speaker & well-known sports celebrity

Do YOU understand the REAL nature of the GAME???

What GAME you may ask???

It's a game — THAT EFFECTS YOUR LIFE!!!

It determines how much money you make—

It determines where your children go to school—

It determines the difference between a SLAVE and a FREE MAN—

READ ON—

And REMEMBER—

It's NOT a game!!!!

*** **

Soon I was immersed in tales of the Illuminati, Freemasons, the Anti-Christ, Aliens, and Paul McCartney. At first it was just all a bunch of fun rubbish—but soon I began to have an intuitive, inward feeling that there might be something to all the speculation and Weird History, what Lidge himself described as “the reality of Feeling-Knowingness.”

Feeling-Knowingness was what the cutting edge historians, archaeologists, and other seekers of knowledge were using in the place of actual tools of measurement. It was being guided by one's inner truth, by using Feeling-Knowingness to access the Akashic Records in which the truth of all that ever existed was kept. Yeah, I know you're looking at me pretty funny right now.

But that's only because you haven't had the foundation in the writings that I had.

Ebor's pamphlet was only the beginning.

*** **

It was Ebor's 49th birthday, and I eyed Blanca warily from the corner of my eye as she set up the Styrofoam plates. My quiet unjustifiable anger was suddenly interrupted by the phone ringing.

“Ebor, please.”

Crazy wife. Of Ebor. I idly scratched the back of my head as I spoke.

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Ebor, please.”

“Is this Ebor’s wife?”

“Can I speak to Ebor, please?”

“One moment...”

Of *course* I knew it was Mrs. Ebor, I was just being a dick. I know it sounds rather cruel and pointless, but within that tight, oppressive frame of my life known as “VideoDream,” her frequent calls became a burden. And more than a burden, a *grief* — a banner of sadness and desperation that, in my impotence, I had to respond to by acting like a dick.

It was just something in Mrs. Ebor’s voice—a sort of strained, distant politeness that catty-cornered on the beginnings of sheer animal hysteria. She had been sick and I suppose virtually bed-ridden since I met Ebor. No one had ever seen her, yet through the miracle of second-hand sensory input a portrait emerged of this middle-aged woman in permanent pajamas and dime-store slippers, padding around her apartment to look out windows in longing glances but not *too* longing...Ebor’s poor fairy-tale princess, perpetually ill, pea-soup pallor, invisible and illusive illness.

I just didn't believe she was sick—anybody sick that long would be dead. Perhaps if we had a name: Cancer, Lupus, *something*. But it was always: “not feeling well.” Never feeling well. Imagine not feeling well your whole life.

I stood in the thin, cramped neon-pink and aqua corridor, the colors and geometric patterns artifacts of VideoDream's New Wave past, nostalgia that failed to comfort and hearken to better times but merely brought up how *cheap* the owner was, peeling Neolithic paint job by this late date having soured to vomit green with a Miami Vice twist.

As I looked at the endless rows of clear video boxes, each with a yellowed hand-written label, I remembered what I read in the industry trades, what was screamed and lamented from every headline: the death of VHS, not immanent but already wrought in that secret ceremony of format-death that all bright, twinkling pieces of information technology would have to eventually face. And then I remembered that the name of this dead format was in the title of *my job*, and then I went to thinking about what a loser I was, how the clock was ticking and how I just—to paraphrase Hyman Lidge —“had better wake the fuck up.”

Oh yes, there were always DVDs, but apparently that was a dinosaur-to-be as well, born like a cursed baby of a cybernetic swamp-witch with the stamp of “immanent obsolescence” upon its chromium forehead. Pretty soon we would probably fit all the AFI's 100 Greatest Movies Of All Time on a chip the size as a pin, downloaded from a secret pirating site—and it would be just as well I get those movies for free because by that time I wouldn't have a relevant skill in the world.

“Are you still there? Hello? Hello?”

“Ebor is upstairs in Inventory. Take a message?”

Actually, the boss of VideoDream had pulled me aside one day and told me to just lie to her half the time as to keep Ebor in the clear to do work—which at the same time was duplicitous, practical, and allowed me more opportunity to be a dick.

“I...(ah!)...do you know when he’ll be back?”

“I have no clue—but I can have him call you.”

“Yes, well, I was just wondering if you can let him know...it is a bit *pressing*...I have a...if you can just let him know, I have a lump in the hollow of my elbow that hurts very much, I fear it’s infected...and...just let him know, in case this needs to be followed-up right away with a doctor’s visit...”

Did they still make house calls? I looked at Wings Hauser’s lantern-jawed visage from some direct-to-video promo poster from the early nineties, flames blazing and cash and guns. Where was Mia Sara, I wondered, Nicolette Sheridan *ou est vous?*

Then I saw Ebor headed quickly down the hall, a stack of jumbo-sized porno boxes balanced in his hands. He must have been carrying twelve of them, plastic-wrapped glossy cardboard rattling precariously. I gave him the phone.

The Many Postures Of Ebor: his tribulation in the wilderness of Mrs. Ebor’s mind, first sitting on the counter, then on the seat with his hand cupped to his broad, bony forehead, eyes wincing behind massive glasses. What to do? What to do?

“N-n-no, honey, your arm is not...no, it’s not gangrenous. Does it smell? Smell your arm, honey...”

*** **

We lined up in the corridor. *Ebor’s Birthday*. We had it during the last hour of our shifts, because there was no way in hell you could get hourly workers to stay a penny later. Everything’s a hierarchy based on seniority and experience, except for fanciful shit like birthdays. The Fanciful Shit is based on a certain *je ne sais quoi*, if you will, an intangible, Yves Montand-esque frolic around Paris type quality that I could not possibly or indeed *ever* embody.

We stood around a wide, one-deep platter of Krispy Kremes, a lone candle stuck in the heart of a lemon-jelly. Ebor struck his usual somewhat Gumby-like pose, rounded spine, bowed legs, an arm resting thoughtfully upon his rounded sweater-clad belly. And that smile, so broad it knocked the eyes right off him...

As I watched that tiny, fluted candle dutifully burn, shedding minuscule drops of wax upon the fine glaze of the donut, I thought of two distinct things:

- 1) How much I wished *I* could be the birthday boy, for once.
- 2) Ebor was pre-diabetic and not allowed to have sugar.

The silent wishes made and the candle blown out, and we had our little nosing revelry, cracking jokes and slapping backs. Then I casually popped Ebor the \$25,000 question.

“So Ebor, how do you do it? Why are you so happy all the time?”

“I love my wife!”

Chapter Three: Classcon

On May 1st, 1776 Adam Weishaupt, an obscure professor of law at a Bavarian university, founded one of the most evil and powerful secret organizations of all-time: the Illuminati. The tendrils of that Masonic cabal of elites would effortlessly extend throughout the globe, each decade bringing closer their ultimate goal—the establishment of a fascist, one-world government in which the civil liberties that we hold so dear would be a thing of the past.

The strategies of the Illuminati were manifold:

- 1) Infiltrate every strata of human society: education, media, business, government, religion, medicine.
- 2) Identify those who would make the best “soldiers” for their cause—those of similarly elite bloodline and/or who are pliable & without conscience—and pull strings to make them succeed in the world.
- 3) Identify the mavericks, the outsiders, and/or those who stick by their principles & have a conscience—and keep them down.

The Illuminati is secretly responsible for every major event of the last 1000 years.

*** **

I dreaded my visits with my son. I realize this is a horrible thing to say. But I’m trying to be honest in all I’m telling you, and I realize that honesty is obsolete.

I don't see the point for being honest with you anyway, because you certainly won't believe my story. I suppose I'm being honest for amusement's sake—for *your* amusement.

I dreaded seeing Beowulf because I just didn't think he liked me very much; or rather, I thought he loved me due to imprinting—much like the lab monkey loves the chicken-wire momma covered in felt—but I don't think he *respected* me. He loved me in some primal way but he was ashamed.

He was old enough, but more importantly *aware* enough, to see the writing on the wall, to see what was important and what wasn't, to catch the drift that I was a total loser who couldn't even drive him to school because I didn't have a car. Waiting with him at the bus-stop that would take us on our long, multi-transfer trip to the boonies of Queens County; as we walked back to my rental amidst the anonymous rows of brick and aluminum siding, I could feel the quiet judgement and pity.

Beowulf wasn't always like this, but when he struck ten it hit like something out of a John Wyndham novel. He was reading on the level of a high-school senior in second grade and he never took books out of the children's section of the library and he never read comics, not even "Peanuts" for Christ's sake. I asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, and he said "FBI Agent." This was somewhat comforting, as I had been a big fan of *The X-Files*, but deep in my heart I just knew that wasn't the type of agent he meant.

But I loved him. Of *course* I loved him. I was glad he had a better life than what I could give him. I dutifully paid support every month, until Kim felt sorry for me and refused to take the money any more. But I still bought him things all the time. I remember when he was two and I bought him a copy of the silver Spiderman #1 in the polybag. I gave it to Kim for safe-keeping, for an investment when he was older. Then there was the

slabbed Death Of Superman issue, graded 9.8 which means it was hand-picked from *hundreds* and judged to be virtually perfect. But I could see the judgement and pity in Kim's face, the way she accepted these gifts as if they were a pair of tube socks that I bought off the street for a dollar with two more pairs to spare.

Was it so crazy to believe that my son would have been into comic books? When I was a kid, *all* the boys liked comic books. Am I a "nerd?" Excuse me for being myself. Except nobody really excused me. This talk about "Free To Be You And Me" was a misguided liberal fairy-tale that my generation was inoculated with as a protection against hurt feelings, protection against the white-hot feeling of failure in a sea of affluence.

If you took a walk down Midtown Manhattan around 9:00—well, you know, before the plane hit—and watched all the suited corporates stride past importantly on their way to jobs that effect the entire nation, you'd know what I was talking about. Then go ahead and watch them again around lunchtime, when they stock the restaurants and bars, entertaining clients, slapping backs, a brotherhood of \$1000 suits and hard, well polished shoes. Free to be *them* and *them*.

And the art world isn't any better. And I don't think the comic book world is any better. They're all just corporates who paint. It's all a *sham*. "Free To Be You And Me"—go tell that to the rest of Marlo Thomas' nose.

Kim divorced me because she said I was too "quietly angry." Also because I was holding her back. She said I had no "life skills." She quoted a passage from an Tony Robbins book about how successful people need to be around other successful people in order to be successful. Robbins is a suck-bag. Yeah, I'm sure he makes a lot of money lecturing these sheeple and selling his books and tapes—that's the secret to *his* success. Prey on insecurity. Break up families. *Suck-bag*.

And “quietly angry”—what sort of touchy-feely bourgeois Dr. Phil new age doublespeak was that? I *hated* this culture, hate this culture.

It was 10:00 on a Friday and I was just about finished eating Chinese take-out over my TV tray. For \$5.00 even, you got a set of huge steamed dumplings with a little plastic container of plum sauce. They went great with wine.

In a little over 12 hours I would be in Manhattan, picking up Beowulf.

I went online.

*** **

I was a member of an Internet community called Classified Conspiracy—Classcon, for short. It was a message board for various conspiracy theory & paranormal related topics. Message boards have become pretty ubiquitous nowadays, but Classcon really felt different. It felt like a *family*. The bulk of the members posted almost every day, so you had a real sense of continuity. And in order to make it even more personal, we each had our own avatar depicted in the margin of our postings, to identify who we were.

I suppose the whole concept of avatars started with the idea of using one’s own photo, so there would be more of a human, in-person element to the whole thing, but nobody hardly ever did it that way. We were either movie characters, historical figures, or generic drawings of elves and sorcerers taken from RPG sites. We had three Neos, two Blades, one Jason Bourne, two Mulders, a Gandalf, Steve McQueen, Darth Vader, Indiana Jones, Taxi Driver, Spiderman, Andy Kaufman, Lee Harvey Oswald, Groucho

Marx, James Bond, George Bush with devil horns, Uncle Sam, Freddy Krueger, Eric Cartman, Humphrey Bogart, Aleister Crowley, Edward R. Murrow, Abe Lincoln, Jimi Hendrix, and yours truly, Rick Deckard.

It was really *cool* to have somebody respond to my post and call me “Deckard.” That’s what made the Internet so neat.

The ratio of women-to-men was pretty small, and I found that surprising—why so little women were into conspiracy theories, when more often than not they found themselves at the ass-end of so many of them. Anyway, Classcon was *not* a great place to pick up chicks. I suppose I could have hit on the few ones we had, but I always kind of thought any woman who would be on a conspiracy site would be kind of weird and maybe even *ugly*. Just trying to be honest again.

I climbed a chair and took down my laptop from the narrow space between the top of my wall-unit and the ceiling (the cat sat on the last computer and broke it; this was one fat fucking cat) and set it up on my bed. Logged on, checked my emails, deleted some spam, shut off one automatic pop-up ad, typed in the web address, almost got Classcon but another hijacking virus-ad canceled it out and it turned into a search engine exclusively for vice: porn, meds, and Canadian cigarettes.

I clicked off the window, typed the web address again, got it, typed in my password, and was good to go. Then I got another pop-up that told me that it discovered viruses on my computer and asked if I would like to “stop pop-ups forever.” I clicked off on that window and immediately got *two* more: another anti-pop-up ad that had a crude animated graphic of little round viruses jumping out of the monitor and biting a hole in this guy’s head & his eyes caving into a pool of blood, and a banner that congratulated me on almost winning \$100,000. Then I clicked those off and I was good to go.

Once inside I immediately checked to see if I got any new responses on either my posts or new threads. This was important in order to maintain the sense of continuity—to fail to notice another person’s compliment or question regarding one of your posts was bad form. I also wanted to see if anybody was bad-mouthing me.

I got a high-five (graphic: animated gif of a hand jumping up) for my pointed commentary on “Concentration Camps USA On The Way?” A member called “Devulv” had bashed my position on the true nature of the aliens. My point was that, based on the writings of Strieber & Vallee, it was highly probable that aliens were inter-dimensional rather than extraterrestrial in origin. Mr. Devulv said this was crazy—not that my opinion was crazy specifically, but just the whole notion of aliens in general. Devulv, with his low “posting points” score and his ani-gif of the Aly McBeal dancing baby, was obviously a *troll*.

The Classcon team closed ranks and ganged up on this loser in my absence, and there was not much left for me to do but give my compatriots thanks and add a zinger of my own, telling him what a suck-bag he was. This done, I turned to the newest posts to see if there is anything to add my own two cents to, first clicking off a pop-up for a free trip to Disneyland (using very badly-drawn renderings of Mickey & Donald which seriously disturbed my sensibilities as both an artist and comic lover).

Under the “Paranormal & Occult” subject heading I saw a post by Willow Wiccavamp entitled “X-Men For Real???” and clicked on it. Willow’s posts were usually very interesting, because they always managed to get the hard-line skeptics out of the woodwork and start a row. She usually got very flustered and defensive and would, before the moderators told her attackers to back off, usually drop some cryptic and histrionic hint that she was in touch with “the source” and had the power to “show them what for.”

I found it all hilarious, because she was obviously locked in some episode of *Charmed* or *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*; those sort of “pissed-off looney Wiccans” were a dime-a-dozen on the Net. They had names like Lady Rayvenshollow or Arwen Baggins or Bloody Buddha-Tits and professed to be vampires or psychics or witches or vampiric psychic witches and I should know because I had tried dating a few after Kim. *That’s* how I got the cat.

I realize it was a comment on my own mental state, such a consistent choice of women, but it was mostly for *noble* reasons—I thought maybe I’d be the one to “save” them in some fashion, to spare them a life of \$10 gypsy broomskirts and fake Celtic jewelry and Loreena McKennit CDs and patchouli incense and Robert Smith posters. But it wasn’t worth the agony to domesticate them. And they were always doing spells on me, to make my dick fall off and shit.

Of course, they had no powers and thus my dick stayed on. Though I was a believer in many things, I was an admitted skeptic as far as voodoo and the like.

Still, I had always thought it was a stupid idea to bait someone like Willow Wiccavamp. Not because of any purported powers. I just didn’t like the idea of someone out there *hating* me, seething in their house and starring daggers at my little Harrison Ford avatar and hating me. Besides, I thought of my character “Deckard” as having created a certain unique personality and such rudeness would “taint” it (trolls excepted). I pictured Deckard as a sort of lone, heroic nobleman of the Classcon universe, a traveling knight, a purveyor of justice.

I looked at the little time display on the bottom right of my screen. Ten hours until my son. Seven months before my 31st birthday.

*** **

Welcome To Classified Conspiracy! Your place for NWO, UFOs, Chemtrails, Paul McCartney, and all your Conspiracy needs!

Topic: Super-powers for real???

Willow Wiccavamp: I just saw "X2" today and it made me wonder what if there were people out there who really had these powers??? Not simply psychics like Deanna Troi but people with real powerful powers??? How would be controlled if they wanted to do what they wanted??? Would there have to be new laws on the books??? I think there are people out there like this but they're keeping quiet. They've probably seen movies like "X2" as well & don't want any trouble from the humans. Should they come out??? Or be covert like "X2"???

iambradpittsbowelcancer: Get out of the house more often, "Willow"—IT'S A MOVIE!!!!!! Movies=Not Real Life. Get it? There are no mutants. It's a comic book. Peacccccce-OUT!

Willow Wiccavamp: I know full well what movies are thank you I was just asking a theoretical question.

Agent Chris Carter: I agree with bowel cancer, this question is a waste of bandwidth. This is not a question for a serious discussion board. There is no such thing as ESP, it has never been proven. This discussion should be on an X-Men fan-board, not here.

Willow Wiccavamp: "There is no such thing as ESP" how do you know this??? Are you all-knowing??? And I'm not even talking about ESP. I'm referring to bigger powers.

And how do you know anyway??? It can exist. It can exist and we should have information about it so people know what to do. Or is this too complicated for you???

iambradpittsbowelcancer: Willow—give us PROOF. Back up what you say for once. It's called a discussion — you know, you use facts to back up your argument. Or is THAT too complicated for you? I think so.

Willow Wiccavamp: “Willow—give us PROOF.” Ha ha. You don't want proof.

iambradpittsbowelcancer: Oooh, you're all SCARING us now. Very mysterious. Must make you feel SPECIAL huh? Show us the proof, “Willow Wiccavamp.” Show us your “Wicca.”

Willow Wiccavamp: You're a coward and you can't handle it. You talk about things like you are all-knowing but you aren't??? I was just trying to ask a question but you have to be mean. It shows you're a low coward. I don't have to show you anything.

iambradpittsbowelcancer: “I don't have to show you anything.”—that's what they all say to get out of the argument. LOL.

FreakoSwavay: i think psicics are fake and are just looking money from vixtims. this is like bouel sad stupid thred

Willow Wiccavamp: You show me proof powers are not possible??? Then maybe you have a case for yourself???

Agent Chris Carter: Actually, the burden of proof is on you.

FreakoSwavay: stupidthred suckzass

Willow Wiccavamp: I don't have to prove to you anything. It won't mean anything to me what you believe. You're all the same as your kind.

iambradpittsbowelcancer: "You're all the same as your kind."—you mean, SANE?

Rick Deckard: Hey everybody, just back off Willow, she was just posting a question. You don't need to be rude. She was just posing an idea; that's what we do here. Where are the Moderators? If this bashing continues, I'm sending an email to the mods. You should be ashamed.

Willow Wiccavamp: Thank-you Rick Deckard.

*** **

Later I got an email from Willow Wiccavamp. It read,

"Thank-you Rick Deckard."

I sent one back that said: "You're welcome. Always happy to help out a fellow Classconner."

A second later she sent me another email:

“So what movies are you interested in??? Have you seen X2???”

I didn't respond.

I could picture here in her little wiccavamp house, staring at the computer, hating me.

Chapter Four: The Bad Shmoo

“So what set off this depression?”

“My *son*. Actually, nothing he did. It’s just me. Actually, he did do something. But it’s not his fault.”

“What did he do?”

“He wants to change his name. To *Brendan*.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

“His name is Beowulf.”

*** **

My psychologist was a doughy, pleasant woman in her mid-50s. I always thought of her as a “mom-for-hire”—I mean, she didn’t give hugs or anything, but she had a lot of good advice. Actually, she didn’t really give me too much advice—but she *listened* well. And I liked the idea of once a week going into a totally different environment.

I usually hate yuppies but I didn’t mind this “kindergarten in yuppiesville” environment of soft browns and reds, Swiss educational toys in buckets, stuffed emus and bonobo monkeys, Crayola crayons underfoot, and a chalkboard to express yourself upon. It

was the sort of environment Beowulf was being raised in, and it turned Beowulfs into Brendans, but didn't seem to make them sad.

Ms. Albana was really a child-psychologist, but I knew her through a friend from work. I got a discount. And she really wasn't a *psychologist* per se, she was a "registered social worker."

"It's just that I feel there are limits to how I can help you," she said in her usual soothing voice—a voice that didn't consciously intend to soothe, but was merely expressing itself with the same effortlessness as the automatic phone operator. Her round body was draped in a sea of exotic fabrics, like a walking textiles caravan through the Moorish Quarter of a Renaissance Fair.

"You're helping me fine."

My chair was a little small, since it was made for children, but other than having my knees come up a bit to my chin it was ok. I mean, it was a rocking-chair, so it was kind of fun.

"You seem to have a reoccurring major depression every other session—and I'm *concerned* about that. Usually there are hills and valleys."

"Well...at least that means I'm *not* bipolar."

She looked at bit more studiously at me, shifting her weight on the sofa and sort of tucking her legs under herself.

“I’m not so sure.”

“But I mean: look at my life. How can I *not* be depressed? How is this not a normal human response to a certain environment & life-circumstance? I’d be crazy if I *wasn’t* complaining...”

“Nobody said you’re crazy, Tod. It’s just that...there are many *really great* medications on the market that could help you have a better life—that could make you *happy*.”

Jesus, I thought. Not this again. Ms. Albana had been trying to sell me on the drugs bit ever since she came back from that conference a year ago. She went on vacation for two weeks and then when I came back for my session she had all these post-its and pens with long chemical-sounding names on them. She had a new Effexor tote-bag by her feet, Xanax coasters on her table, and a big white stuffed blob amongst the stuffed animals that I thought was a Shmoo but was really the Zoloft mascot.

I pictured myself as that hated “depressed Shmoo,” the one in the commercials, that unnecessary eyesore “Sad Shmoo,” flower-hater, sun-hater, Shmoo-hater. Video-store worker. Bad artist. Shitty father. Weak chin, cleft notwithstanding.

“Like I said before, I just have a weak tolerance for drugs. I’m too *sensitive*. I mean, even Nutrasweet makes me want to tear off my clothes and run naked through a subway car singing ABBA songs, really.”

Ms. Albana leaned in from her chair, seeking another crack, another moment of hesitation on my part, another exposed patch of soil into which she might drop the notion...

“But this would be completely overseen by a *trained professional*. It’s perfectly safe. And if there is a slight problem, the dosage can simply be adjusted.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said in polite dismissal, my chin on my knees, rocking slightly in the chair.

*** **

“Do you think there’s a conspiracy against you, Tod?”

“No, not really. Not specifically.”

“But you think that some sort of conspiracy exists in the world?”

“Well...I think such a belief is not completely unreasonable or farfetched.”

“You understand that this is *paranoia*.”

“With all due respect, I fail to see how just the mere notion that conspiracies exist is radical, or paranoid.”

“Tod, sometimes there are things in life that don’t seem to make much sense, or might seem like rotten luck, or doesn’t seem fair. A conspiracy theory is a way of making those things more...comforting. More knowable. Sometimes they are used in a manner to avoid dealing directly with a certain problem. And sometimes they are used to deflect blame to other people.”

“So this is all my fault?”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Whose fault is it?”

“It’s...*nobody’s* fault. But it *is* your responsibility.”

“I see. So it’s nobody’s fault, but my responsibility alone.”

“Yes.”

“Why am I a failure?”

“You’re not a failure.”

“*Everybody* thinks I’m a failure.”

“Your *son* doesn’t think you’re a failure.”

“Uh, actually, he *does*.”

“No, you’re just projecting your own opinions onto him. He himself does not think you’re a failure.”

“How do you know? Why do you assume life is so hunkydory like that? Nothing I’ve experienced has borne that hunkydoriness out.”

“That’s because you’re *negative*.”

“How do I stop being negative?”

“By thinking *positive*.”

“How do I think positive?”

“Just stop being negative.”

*** **

I drew on a big, easel-sized piece of paper with markers for the remainder of the session. I was sprawled onto the floor because it was impossible to draw in that chair. To draw at some point during our hour together was not unheard-of, and was in fact encouraged. Ms. Albana was a big supporter of my artistic ambitions.

“I just don’t think I’m ever going to be a published comic book artist, that’s all.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“Why would you think that?”

“Because they never answer me. *Ever*.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“They might have been very busy. Or perhaps your letters got lost.”

“I thought of all those things. But it’s been *ten years* already.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“Sometimes in Entertainment they’re very busy. And have cluttered desks.”

“That’s what I thought.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“Isn’t there any way you could see any of those people in person?”

“Nah, I’m *nobody*, I don’t have any connections. Though there is...”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“Yes? Yes?”

“...*nah*.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“What?”

“No, it’s stupid. I...I could bring my portfolio to the Con.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

“The Con?”

“A comic book convention. Where all the fans & business people get together. Sometimes they have portfolio reviews.”

(scribblescribblescribble)

If this all sounded like deja-vu to my ears, it was because me and Ms. Albana had been doing this little dialogue about the Con ever since I started seeing her. I never knew if she simply forgot about all the previous times we treaded this ground, or whether she was just being gentle with me until I was ready. Probably forgot it. Sometimes I wondered if she really *listened* to me at all. (scribblescribblescribble)

“Well this is a great idea! You should go! When’s the next one?”

“This coming Saturday.”

“Well, perfect! It’s *fate*! You should go!”

Fate!

(scribblescribblescribble)

*** **

I called my bud Stuart when I got home. He was my comic-bud. Not a real *bud*-bud, but an acquaintance with a common interest. Comics is not something you can talk about with just *anybody*. It's one of those arts, much like opera & haiku, that appeal only to a certain sensibility.

"Stu-Dude!"

"*Toddy-Bear!*" a phlegmy voice answered in my receiver.

Stuart wanted to break into comics too, as a writer. We even started our own comic book together, "The Mysterious 8," but it kinda faded out after the character sketches because Stu never actually wrote anything and I never brought it up.

"Doin' it this year, man. Doin' the *Con*. With my 'folio."

"Dude, no doubt, no doubt..."

I wasn't sure why talking with Stu always involved us doing this pseudo-hipster language thing any more than I knew why sessions with Ms. Albana saw me eventually talking like a cowed, monosyllabic 8 year-old. Was I *acting* with all these people? No, at least not *consciously*. I was being myself, or a *part* of myself, or something else completely that at the same time was grafted seamlessly onto my self.

It was just that, depending on who I was with, I *changed*—I fell into some niche and filled up with whatever the person at the time had to offer.

*** **

I guess it bothered me that me and my friends lived in the head-space of someone half our age. I'm not sure how this happened. I could say that I never had a childhood—but I *did*, and my maturity level was pretty weak at that time too.

I mean, I was smart enough, I wasn't stupid. But I was still sleeping with my stuffed animals when I was 15. I wept openly at the end of *Terminator II* when Arnold flashed the thumbs-up sign as he was dropped into the molten lava. And while the other kids were agonizing over what college to go to, I was agonizing over whether to fit all my taped shows on an 8-hour VHS or spring to have it done right on high-speed for posterity.

Now my only child was going to change his name and I hadn't any good counter-argument for him not to, other than the "if you love me" gambit that even I wasn't low enough to go for. Where did I go wrong? And how could I go *right*?

The night before the Con I lay exhausted upon my futon, realizing that a futon mattress really don't give a lot of adequate support for your back. But I also realized that things were going to *change* from now on, starting with boldly and confidently bringing out my art for the world to see. This first act of courage and conviction would be the beginning of a domino effect that would lead to more and more opportunities, more and more *exposure*, contact after contact as slowly a whole new world opened up before my eyes.

Before I was on the *outside*, only able to guess as to what arcane processes made up the mind of the heart of the soul of the comic book industry. But after tomorrow, I would *know*—and with this knowledge my career begun, my resolve strong, my die cast, my fate fixed.

And I realized that everything I did in my life had a purpose and a reason, all leading up to this *one moment*, and I realized the kindness of Christ and the wisdom of God. Everything leading to *this one moment*, with the accumulated work of ten years of drawing and painting scattered around my room in a riot of color and a celebration of life—the best of which was safely and securely ensconced within the mylar pages of my black leatherette portfolio case.

In the background I could hear the occasional whines and scratches of my cat from inside the bathroom, where I locked her so she wouldn't get in the way during my art selection process. I knew that I had to let her out soon before she started to shit on the rug out of spite. But I was so *comfortable*.

Chapter Five: All About The Future

I had attended other comic book conventions before but never with a *purpose*.

I quickly found having that a purpose made everything less enjoyable.

I wore a navy-blue suit without a tie, hoping that I could both impress others but not make them uncomfortable with my seriousness. It was on the train over there that I noticed the cat-hair on my lower legs and sleeves, stark obvious in the grotesque unnatural light. I immediately thought of Ebor, and then proceeded to give the soles of my patent-leather shoes a quick inspection—worn, slanted heels. Then I regarded my reflection in the opposite window—my posture was horrible. And my *gut*...

This was how it started. This was how *Ebor* started. I could see it coming in the distance, the very crest of it clearly visible over the horizon, but it seemed as if there was nothing I could do.

My hand flexed around the handle of my portfolio and then gripped it tighter. This story was going to end differently. Because I had the *art*. I might have appeared like a Ebor to the untrained eye, but I had Something—that indescribable invisible quality, that I always knew I had since I was a little boy. Call it what you will: a greater sentience, a Calling, a consciousness...you could see it in my work, the pourings of my *soul*, God's fingerprints.

I gingerly licked my palms and used them to furiously brush off the cat hair, cursing that damn cat's name (which was Cat).

The Con took place in the gymnasium of a Catholic School, and the interior had that musty smell of wet granite and parochial school textbooks from the 50s. Tables were set up in a concentric fashion: the one giant circle around the perimeter of the room consisted of dealer's tables; the smaller circle were made up of a half-dozen publishers; and in the middle of the room was the crown jewel of the Con: *John Byrne himself!*

Most of the conventioners were either standing in line for a Byrne autograph or waiting for portfolio reviews with the companies. How I envied the carefree days when I could have simply waited for the autograph, bought a few stacks from the quarter bins, and called it a day. But from this day forward Byrne was a potential rival for jobs, and I could no longer indulge in the simple joys of the comic book because when I looked at one all I could see was business business business. These were the cold facts that I would have to live with if I wanted to be a Professional. Childhood's End.

The Veritas Comics line was the longest for portfolio review, but since they were the biggest company at the Con it was well worth the investment of my time. Regardless, about ten minutes into waiting I regretted not buying some reading material beforehand. All I could do was *observe*, and observing was no good because all it did was spur me on to *think*.

A lot of inconvenience and suffering in this world, in my estimation, could have been avoided by the prevention of excess thought. Take my fellow artists on the line, for instance. To be idle and to observe and to think naturally would lead my mind to comparisons between them and me, Them and Me.

I tried to figure out how good an artist they were just by the mere sight of the creatures, by the hair on their heads and the gait of their walk. A terrible, choking

competitiveness seized me, as I noted the sheer numbers of people on this line and others. Such numbers only created the certainty of *failure*, failure for *somebody*, failure for *most*. Because I knew that Entertainment was not the Great Democracy. And I wondered if the Illuminati would deign to find the comic book industry a worthy enterprise for infiltration.

My line passed directly in front of a publisher of porn comics, and me and the Others could not help but gawk at their wares. The vilest of American-made pseudo-manga, school-girls suspended in the air by multi-pronged demons with Mickey Mouse eyes, big-titted fairies in SS uniforms fucking each other up the ass with dildos in the shape of Kermit the Frog, anthropomorphic ibexes dressed in crotchless Star Trek uniforms 69ing each other in a weightless orgy in space...to think that a rich tradition of graphic storytelling pioneered by the Ancient Mayans and given the breath of life by Al Capp could have sunk to this level of *depravity*!

And by far the worst of it, the most despicable and evil perversion of the four-color medium, had to be the *bondage* comics. What sort of sick fucks could get off on seeing women tied-up and abused, being reduced to buckets for cum-deposit or human chaise lounges, the fodder for their puerile malformed sexual fantasies of domination? I frankly didn't know how Veritas Comics could stand being in close proximity to such an organization, albeit only for a day—A DAY WAS TOO LONG, in my opinion. I was embarrassed for my industry.

“My Industry”—I took stock of the panorama of the Con, warts and all, and said to myself: *my industry*. It was finally happening. I was taking that crucial first step. This was the answer to all my failures in life—I never wanted to take that first step and *commit* myself. The power really *was* in my hands, not in some capricious, mocking God.

Ms. Albana was *right*—I had to stop blaming other people. I never really went out there and *tried*. And even if I *didn't* get that first assignment that day, even if all I managed to do was gain a mere toe-hold in the doorway of the comic book world—it would be something to *build* from.

“Fetish comics, it’s the future,” said a faraway voice. It came from a short, walleyed man in his 50s in a beige overcoat that was standing near me, an overstuffed shopping bag mended with cellophane tape in each hand. At first I thought he was on the portfolio line but he wasn’t.

“Who...*me*? You’re talking to me?” I asked in the polite hopefulness that he was mistaken, gesturing vaguely towards my chest.

“That’s where the money is. Superhero comics, a very limited market. Not like the *war* years. Even *girls* were reading then. But now: it’s just a nostalgia racket, quaint like a repro’ed Munsters lunchbox. You can’t build empires upon such a principle, and you can’t cross oceans. Bring Superman to the Middle East, they’ll think he’s a puppet for the Great Imperialist Satan. I mean, *look* at him: red, white and blue spandex, a total yahoo cheerleader for apple pie and Perry Como. And don’t get me started on Captain America, though at least he’s fucking honest about who he was & what ideology he was fighting for. Superman? *Uberman*. Batman...*Devilman*. They’re think we’re fucking crazy overseas, and all they’re really buying from us is Andy Sidaris movies and cancer. But fetish porn—that’s the *universal language* my friend. Everybody acts so normal and pious in this country but the truth is, most of us are fucked up by our mothers. Even when the mothers are good women and trying not to cut our pecker with safety scissors so we don’t stroke it in public, we still get fucked up, because mothers can never provide us with want we ultimately, primally *need*—which is complete osmosis into the host body. *That’s* what we want. And we’re never going to get it. We’re constantly raising up our eyes to those pendulous, holy tits we never

forgot from our earliest moments on this earth, and we're constantly getting our hands slapped away. Is there no redress in a civilized society for such a consistent frustration of our basic impulses? Yes there is my friend—it's *safe*, it's plentiful, and it's disease-free. *Fetish Porn*. In fact, fetish porn is the foundation of the entire graphic medium. Check out the histories of the major comics publishers—built on the backs of gentleman's magazines and lurid pulps chock full of bondage and the limpid, half-obscured titties of imaginary perfect-looking broads who would never in reality date neither the artist nor reader and thus needed to be taken down a peg or two. Ever read old Wonder Woman stories? They thought that shit was *normal* back then! We were *all* reading it. My dick never got so hard than with those classic comics: *Phantom Lady*, *Black Cat*, *Marvel Mystery Comics*, *Jungle Comics*. There is something so goddamn erotic about pre-PC fetish porn, whether it be Irving Klaw or a Mike Grell *Legion of the Superheroes* cover. But those days are gone forever, I guess. So we've traded our respectability and secret thrills for a multi-million dollar industry. Now I can get anything I want. The choices are *unlimited*. The *demand* is unlimited. The growth is unlimited. Yes indeed: fetish porn is certainly the future—and some might say even *savior*—of the comic book industry.”

“Um...why are you telling me this?”

“You're not Sal Mendoza?”

*** **

The editor doing the review seemed like a jolly, red-faced, friendly-looking sort of heavy-set man, wearing a huge black polo shirt with the Veritas Comics logo and a graphic of their flagship character, The Jumper, tastefully embroidered onto the pocket. I noticed that he spent a long time with each artist, going over each page of

art, making comments, and giving some kind of paper to take back with them—so I could tell it wasn't going to be a rush-job or a gyp or anything.

As I stepped up to the table, barely able to restrain my hands from shaking as I unzipped the portfolio, I tried to cast out halcyon dreams of comic book stardom from my mind and look at things from a realistic perspective. Realistically, I probably wouldn't get an immediate assignment from this. He might even think that I needed work on a couple of areas before he could hire me, and send me back with instructions to work on my drapery or hair textures or something. Yes, that was the more *realistic* thing.

“Hi, I-I'm Tod Moriens...a big fan of your company. I buy The Jumper and all the comics in the Jumper family every month...”

The portly man smiled and looked back at two twenty-somethings that were sitting further back within the bowels of the booth, amongst stacks of comics and empty pizza boxes. They both wore black polo shirts with the Veritas Comics logo and a graphic of their flagship character The Jumper tastefully embroidered on the pocket.

“You hear that? We got a Jumper fan here...gimmie a button.”

One of the twenty-somethings looked up sleepily from a comic book he was reading, took a quick sip out of a giant soft-drink container, fished something out from the big plastic bag he had between his legs, and tossed it at the man.

“Heads-up, chief!”

The man tried to catch the metal disc between his meaty palms but it skidded off the tops of his fingers and made a bee-line for the bridge of my nose.

“Agh!”

“You ok there, kid?”

I pressed my hand against my nose and quickly brought my fingers back into my vision so I could see if I had bled. It smarted like a motherfucker but there was only a very thin, watered-down sheen of blood.

“I-I’m going to be fine...”

“*Kee-fuckin-Rist,*” the man bellowed at the assistant in such a loud tone it made the muscles on my nose involuntarily spasm, “do you know what you just did? You almost took this guy’s eye out! Gimmie some ice!”

The twenty-something turned pale and stumbled off of his seat, running towards his boss with the soft-drink container.

“Uh, we got nothing left in the cooler...”

The man rolled his eyes at the assistant’s feeble attempt to hand him the container, made a grab for it just as the young man pulled it away, then became angrier and let out a growl as he grabbed the wet cardboard cylinder away from him, tore off the top, gingerly grabbed the ice with his big fingers, and dropped them in a mylar comic bag. He folded down the top of the bag and handed it to me.

“Here, it’ll stop the swelling.”

“T-there’s *swelling*?” I asked nervously, suddenly becoming very self-conscious of my appearance.

“What? No...no, there’s *hardly* any swelling...no, you’re fine...”

“Well, I-I just wanted to show you some *drawings* I did...”

“Yeah, just—just wait a minute, alright? Calm down for a second, I gotta do the Protocol...”

I pressed the bag against my nose and looked at the table where my portfolio lay, unopened. Near it was the button, a black metal button with the Veritas Comics logo and a graphic of their flagship character The Jumper tastefully lithographed upon its surface. The man was furiously punching tiny keys on his cellphone, his neck looking like a sinewy chunk of beef with a timebomb lodged in it.

“Yes, give me Legal...yeah, hi, I have a *situation* here...one of my assistants accidentally beaned a fan on the nose with a button...yes...yes...no he looks ok...a little blood...yes...yes...no, he doesn’t seem angry...no, I don’t think he would....no...*right*...yeah, I don’t think he would, doesn’t seem the type...yeah, uh-uh...uh-uh...ok...ugh, really (shit!), ok. OK. The *yellow* form? OK. OK. (Fuck!) OK. OK. *Gotcha*. OK. All right. All right. OK. Bye.”

The man's face achieved a color of purple that I only saw on corpses on A&E's *Cold Case Files*. He clicked off the phone and called out to his assistants: "I need the yellow form! And a *nice book*! Do we got a nice book for this gentleman?"

Soon I was facing a legal-sized yellow document with a pink carbon behind it. It smelt good like those carbony papers usually did. It was entitled, "Liability and Silence." It said basically that I wouldn't sue Veritas Comics because of the incident with the button, no matter what injuries unforeseen may emerge as a result of said incident down the line. Further, I would agree to never mention the incident to any media organization, comic industry employee, retailer, fan, or other member of the classification homo sapiens-sapiens that I might have the chance to have a meaningful relationship with.

It just didn't seem an auspicious start to my comic book penciling career to sue the company I wanted to work for. Besides, the idea of bringing a lawsuit against the home of "America's Most Beloved and Familiar Superhero," The Jumper, seemed downright rude. And I didn't see the fuss anyway, I got hit by falling debris all the time. I was sure some asshole out there would have jumped on the chance to suck that company dry. I mean, that's how people get successful all the time, by being assholes and taking advantage of a situation.

However, I was no asshole—I was a man of *integrity*. And I was sure that was a quality that would be duly noted and perhaps even benefit my career in some way. Like the remover of the thorn from the lion's paw.

The assistant handed me a signed and numbered leather-bound edition of "The Jumper: Straight Off The Golden Gate Bridge." The cover was black and had the Veritas Comics logo and a graphic of their flagship character The Jumper tastefully embossed in the dead cow-hide.

I signed the Liability document in my neatly-delineated cursive: “Tod Moriens.”

Then the editor boomed: “Next!”

*** **

After straightening out a little misunderstanding whereby the editor thought he had already seen my portfolio, he started to see my portfolio. And what a pro! The way he expertly looked at each page, running his hairy, cigar-like finger over certain points, counting off certain unknown, arcane elements with his head. I racked my brains trying to figure out his poker face—here a smile, there a frown. Following each page, I felt as if I was being given a quick refresher course in all the events of my adult life. Every pin-up and story fragment contained within it the feel and flavor of the time in which it was written: meeting Kim, knocking Kim up, marrying Kim, Kim giving birth to Beowulf, divorcing Kim, Kim dating other men, Kim going steady, Kim getting remarried, Googling Kim, accidentally bumping into Kim at a “Garden Of Eat-In” near her apartment and her not recognizing me even though she was looking *right* in my face...

Yes, it was all there.

*** **

“You have quite a portfolio here.”

“Thanks.”

“What are your plans?”

“My plans? Well...I’m pretty much open right now. I’m up for *anything*.”

“Do you have a job?”

“A day job? Yeah, it’s just something I’m doing in the meantime, you know, *until*.”

“Well...some editors take like 30 seconds to look at a portfolio, give a fan a bullshit story, and send them blissfully on their way. But *I* don’t do that. I look at everything that’s given to me. And I judge things in a rational, objective manner. I feel you deserve it—it’s how I give back to the community.”

“Ok, no problem...I like honesty. I myself am a very honest person.”

“That’s good. It’s a good trait to have. Some people don’t *like* honesty. You’re honest with them and next thing you know they’re all up about your ass, talking trash, calling you ‘the meanest guy in comics’ and all that.”

“I can truly say that you’ll find nothing like that from me...you can be as blunt as you want. Whatever criticisms you have—I’m honored to hear. It’s going to make me a better artist.”

“Tab,”

“Tod.”

“Ted, you will *never* be a better artist than you are now.”

“Oh...*thanks!*”

“No, no, what I mean to say is: you’ve reached a certain level of development as an artist. I’ve seen this all the time. Some artists, you look at their stuff when they’re young and you can see—literally *see*—the potential lying there. You say to yourself: ‘damn, imagine this guy when he’s got a year’s worth of regular sequential art behind him.’ Other artists, you can just tell that this is the *best* they can do. It goes beyond ‘working on’ certain inadequacies in the art, taking a class, studying a book. Some people just have ‘it,’ the mysterious undefinable It—and It can’t be taught or studied or achieved without ‘It’ being there all along. Your art is *passable*—I’m sure among your group of friends or in high-school you were considered talented. Your art teacher in eighth-grade thought that you were wonderful and you were the only one among your school buddies to be able to draw Wolverine. Maybe you even did a few neat cover repros, some short stories featuring characters you made up yourself. And so you thought you would become a professional comic book artist—you thought this because you hadn’t the benefit of anybody with any tangible link to the industry whatsoever look at your work and tell you otherwise. And so you might have spent...how old are you? *Thirty-five?*”

“I turn 31 this year,” I croaked.

“So let’s say you’ve spent ten years, your adult life, thinking *this* was going to be your career. And so you didn’t plan anything else out for your life—never pursued seriously any subjects other than art in school, never even got training in computers, a *skill*, a trade...you live the life of ‘an artist,’ an artist-to-be, looking for his big break. What you need to do now, you need to find a *skill*. Because the competition in comics is hard enough as it is, even for the really talented. Too few companies, too few comics, too

few sales—and tons of ‘artists-to-be.’ *Everybody* wants to be a comic book artist. I never met a comic fan yet who didn’t want to be an artist or writer. And only the best get a shot, that’s how it works in a democracy. And then even *then*—you have to have connections. *You have to have connections!* There, I’ve *said* it. You need to *network*, to *hustle*, to be a real *go-getter*. If you have all this, *maybe*, if there’s an opening, you get a shot. And even if you get a shot, it don’t mean *nothing*, you could be unemployed the next month. And even if you get a regular gig—unless you’re really a *superstar*, you’re not going to make a tremendous amount of money. And you are *nowhere near* the level of any of this, to even do a *fill-in*, because you just don’t have ‘it.’ You can see it in the hands you drew, a tell-tale sign. Your hands look like *dead birds*. You just don’t ‘get’ hands. Hands can’t be taught. So my advice to you is: choose another career. Draw in your spare moments as a hobby, as a *lark*, impress your friends—*but do not make this your career*. Your artistic talent is not enough to support a career in Comics. It’s that simple. Now, I know this all sounds harsh, but I’m doing you the biggest favor anybody has ever done for you.”

And so the course of my life was set.

*** **

I don’t remember much else about the Con. I was sort of in an altered state after the portfolio review. I just let myself drift into a very long line and be swept up in the crush and flow. We were like a queue of loinclothed servants & soldiers in an ancient Egyptian painting, just a repetition of arms and legs, an infinity of figures. At some point I ended up in front of John Byrne. I never did find out if he was charging for the sketches or not, but if he was he gave me a free one anyway. I guess I must have looked pretty pathetic—my nose was swollen like a golfball and I had some dried saliva glued to the side of my chin.

He asked me what character I wanted and I sort of blurted out "Machine Man." I could hear a couple of snickers around me and Byrne himself was a little taken aback. I had apparently committed a faux-pas in coolness. But Byrne dutifully drew the awkward-looking character, skillfully rendering his chromed skull, permanently startled eyes, frozen box of a mouth.

Chapter Six: Interlude

When I got home, I kicked the cat. I know that sounds rather heartless, but she was just rubbing my calves, and rubbing them rubbing them, rubbing them with her swollen football-shaped body, rubbing them and depositing hair and hair and depositing hair all over my pants—and I was suddenly struck with the notion that these were the signs by which the Coolness, the cognoscenti, judge losers and greenhorns, by the animal hair thoughtlessly clinging to their clothes. Wrinkled fabric, white socks with black pants, and *anything* with a comic book character on it—unless it was a tasteful rendering of Veritas Comic’s flagship character The Jumper, I supposed. On a black background.

But the rubbing and the hair wasn’t what made me kick this cat. Nor my self-hatred. Not yet. No, initially I was somewhat comforted and...flattered. I just felt so damn *alone* in the world, and the world seemed so cold, so evil. Yes, *evil*. Yes, I know, only Nazis and Satan are supposed to be evil, truly evil. But it’s a perceptual thing, the comprehension of evil—and a temporal thing, and perhaps also a temporary thing.

*** **

Initially I had picked up my cat and held her to my chest, no easy feat considering her size. My arm sunk downward through all the fat until it rested flat against her gut, hairy cat-girth on either side of my limb. She let out a soft groan of discomfort, then fell into a steady purr.

“Just you and me, Toto. I won’t let that mean old Mrs. Gulch get you and turn you into tennis rackets. Just you and me against the world, *right* girl?”

I held her up a little more so I could search her eyes and perhaps discern a grain of consciousness. She blinked twice, then yawned. I could see every tooth she owned when he yawned, and that grey one in the back didn't look too good.

“Poor little gal.”

She looked at me rather pointedly at this point, then cocked her head slightly. Suddenly, a big furry paw swooshed towards me and hooked its claws into my injured nose, ripping the bridge open.

I could hear my mother's voice somewhere mistily in the background of my mind.

*** **

I reeled back and let the cat go, where her claws proceeded to skid against my left arm before he landed. Blood ran down my face and started to bead up on the skin of my arm. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked cat. I kicked the cat. I kicked the cat.

I kicked the cat.

Chapter Seven: Pacifax

“So you kicked the cat,” Ms. Albana said.

“Yes.”

“Did you *kill* the cat, Tod?”

I leaped out of the fetal position I was in on the rug.

“What sort of person do you think I am?! Of *course* I didn’t kill her! What sort of question is that? With all due respect, Ms. Albana, but I get the distinct feeling you are trying to *entrap* me.”

“Why would I want to entrap you, Tod?”

“I don’t know...”

“Why would you *think* that?”

“I...guess because...you’re *part* of it all.”

She started leaning forward in her chair again. I was taking her bait. Taking her bait.

“Part of *what*, Tod?”

“Part of...*it*. It. The whole thing. The status quo.”

“*Authority?* Part of authority, Tod?”

“Authority is only part of it.”

“Tod, the “status quo”—by which I assume you mean the successful, the businesspeople, the politicians, decision-makers, thinkers, and those in authority—is *not* your enemy. They’re working to *help* you. To help you. With your best interests at heart.”

“I guess so...”

“Do you think there is a *conspiracy* against you, Tod?”

“I don’t know...”

“Think *rationally*, Tod—why would anybody launch a conspiracy against you. *You?* One person out of a *million?* A person most people on this Earth hardly even *know*. A person of no consequence concerning world events, power, money, or public opinion. Why would this shadowy band of conspirators waste their time with *you?*”

I slowly found myself back into the fetal position. Around me sat various stuffed animals—here an alpaca, there a wallaby. An anatomically-correct rag doll for the molestation cases.

“The Matrix,” I muttered softly under my breath.

“*The Matrix?* The science-fiction movie?”

“It’s more than a movie...it’s a whole *philosophy*. It’s about...how this world that we live in isn’t really real, but it’s a prison, created by people who benefit from keeping us from knowing the truth of things. The keepers of the Matrix are like these robotic, computerized brain things, hardly existing at all outside the Mainframe, and they don’t know how to feel or be real and that’s why they hate human beings. And most humans walk around in a daze, experiencing this fake life, worrying about fake problems, never able to see above the grass and gaze upon the beauty that is real life un-obscured by the Matrix. And the Keepers of the Matrix—the Mr. Smiths—they can sense who in the crowd is dissatisfied, who among the humans suspects that everything is not as it appears to be. And the Mr. Smiths try to *destroy* them. They try to destroy them in a thousand little ways at first, and if *that* doesn’t work, they try bigger and bigger things. Disinformation. Harassment. Being locked out of the reindeer games. And the goal is to push those rogue humans into compliance with the Matrix—or *suicide*. But with the help of a small, rag-tag band of likeminded individuals, it is possible to break through the Matrix. And in so breaking-through, weakening it and leading it to its eventual collapse.”

Things grew very quiet in the room after I spoke. I could hear the steady, electric hum of the digital clock that rested upon a small circular coffee-table of marble. The skin on my nose itched under the big white bandage the hospital gave me. They said I didn’t even need to come over there. They said they’d give me a couple of stitches, but not because I really needed it, but just to *reassure* me. The \$400 bill would arrive several months later.

Ms. Albana fished a powdery French hard-candy out of a thin metal case and popped it in her mouth. She looked like she was going to say something a couple times, but each time she wasn't quite ready. Apparently she was trying to suck as much out of the candy as possible before she began speaking.

"Is this something you made up?" she finally asked, her usual soothing operator's tone tempered with an edge I had never heard before.

"No, I just read about it in a couple of places...this message board I belong to, it's discussed sometimes. Hyman Lidge also talks about it. He was a shortstop for the Boston Red Sox in the 80s."

"Do you...believe this 'Matrix' theory? Do you see yourself playing any role within this theory—as some sort of *hero*, perhaps? Or even savior or messiah?"

"Hero, *me*? Hardly. Perish the thought. It's just a *theory*, it's not like I believe in it or anything. Theories are *meaningless*."

"It's just that you sounded like you really believed it, just now."

"I was just telling it to you, that's all."

"Do you believe that society is 'out to get you,' Tod?"

"I'm already gotten."

*** **

Ms. Albana decided to shift gears and focus upon my failure at the Con. We did this for awhile until I was sobbing and cradling the stuffed alpaca in my arms, and then she brought up the subject of medication again.

“Tod, you do see a pattern here, right? A pattern of *failure*?”

I was sitting cross-legged on the floor, trying to draw with the markers. Every time I tried to draw a figure, I remembered the ten years I had wasted under the delusion that I was an artist. I ended up with a bunch of cubes & spirals, and a Smurf that started with a hat and nose and then just sort of died.

“I guess so. It’s rather *obvious*, I guess.”

“You’re stuck on a merry-go-round, Tod, and you try and try and nothing can get you off. This is because the merry-go-round is in your own *brain*, Tod—you have certain imbalances in the chemistry of your brain. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. It’s a completely *physical* thing, a roll of the genetic dice. But you have to understand that your brain has a *disorder*, a physical disorder that you have *no control* over, and that the only thing that will ever help you is medication. You *need* to be medicated, Tod. You need to be on medication for the rest of your life.”

“It’s just that I feel *funny* about it...you know, I never took drugs in school.”

“I’m not talking about drugs, Tod—I’m talking about *medication*. Completely safe. Trust me on this, Tod. Take a step through the door. I’ve seen so many patients make a complete turnaround. There’s no reason to suffer any longer.”

It was that last line that broke me. It was so *reasonable*. It cut past all the extraneous shit we wade through as we search for a little happiness in our lives. It was *that* simple.

“O-OK, I’ll *try* it.”

“Wonderful! And I have *just* the psychiatrist for you, this sweet old man who lives in the neighborhood. He’s real ‘listener,’ as they say.”

She fished in the back of her Filofax for a business card and handed it to me.

The name was Dr. J. Mengele.

*** **

The old man laughed off my carefully-worded question.

“Mr Moriens! Tod! 'Mengele' is a very *common* German surname. There were at least *twenty* in my county alone! But do not worry, I’ve had this question posed to me before. Not a problem!”

Dr. Jerry Mengele was a pink, clean-shaven, amicable man in his late 70s. His white hair was cropped short and still had some streaks of black running through. He talked in an energetic, clipped Teutonic accent and his teeth gleamed white and perfect as he spoke. You could see he was very excited about his craft.

“Psychopharmacology is the *future*, Mr. Moriens!” he continued, brilliant light-blue eyes blazing through his wire-rimmed glasses. “Prozac should be in the *drinking water*! Why subject people to the needless suffering that comes from a hazard of the mind, an imperfection of the brain unreachable by means of logic? By means of logic: it is a *beautiful world*! I wake up every morning and look into that magnificent day and I just cannot understand how there could be *one person*—from the loftiest dignitary to the lowest of janitorial personnel—who could think otherwise! The world itself is a *gift*, a *marvel* of perfection—if only we can get through the wilderness of our own disordered thoughts. Do you not *agree*, Mr. Moriens?”

The room had that fake wood-paneling and mallard duck decoy quality common in the decor of the elderly male retiree. An antique globe upon a footed base stood in the corner, rows of bookshelves teemed with distinguished leather volumes on medicine and world history, and some sort of medal or knife with a bird on it surrounded by cotton balls in a Lucite case hung on the wall amongst his diplomas. Nothing to play with but the ducks.

“Yeah...that sounds great. So when do I start?”

He walked over quickly to a mahogany cabinet and opened the door. There was a palpable excitement in the air, as if we were on *The Price Is Right*.

“You are in *luck*, my friend Mr. Moriens—I just happen to have a few free starter kits from the company right here.” He braced himself against the tide of promotional hats, notepads, clipboards, pens, sample packs, and Shmoos that threatened to spill out of the cabinet.

“Here we are,” he said, once the cabinet was shut, “Pacifax.”

The doctor handed me a little green-and-white cardboard packet. Inside was a foil sheet with a couple dozen tiny blue pills—it reminded me of Kim’s birth control pills. There was also something that looked like a tiny comic book and also a thin, white piece of paper that seemed to be folded over a hundred times.

“Mr Moriens, listen carefully. You take the pills once a day, each day, at the same exact time every day. Be sure to take it with a light meal, as it might give you a little tummy upset if you don’t. Do you have any questions?”

I racked my mind for pertinent questions.

“Can I still drink beer?”

“No alcohol, Mr. Moriens. It will interfere with the progress of the Pacifax. Besides, once the Pacifax reaches full effect, there will be no longer any need for you to engage in such destructive behavior. Once the drug kicks in—you will feel an energy and a calm I believe you have *never* experienced in your life before—am I correct, Mr. Moriens?”

“Huh,” I asked, momentarily distracted by the thick conglomeration of Lilliputian text on the partially unfolded thin white paper. “You mean my *life*? Yeah, it sucks.”

“Ha ha, yes, Mr. Moriens, *splendid*! Yes! Well, be sure to call me if you have any questions at all—*anything*! Best of luck to you! Yes! Take care!”

*** **

As I stood in the granite vestibule of Dr. Mengele's uptown apartment building I had the sudden impulse to take the Pacifax—to start my treatment right away. I'll admit it, I was pretty excited. To me, there were no more distinctions between "home" or "somewhere else," or between "now" or "sometime in the future"—the reality of my diseased, hopelessly inadequate mental function finally sunk in, and I didn't see the point in going on unless I was on my meds. So I walked across the street to a hotdog stand, bought a pretzel & a Poland Spring, and discretely took my first Pacifax.

That shit was great!!!

It didn't hit me until about 5 minutes or so. Then, somewhere between Roy Rogers and The Gap, I started walking with rhythm: knees bending, arms swinging, all in time with the heartbeat of the universe. So, it seemed, was everybody else—walking like me, smiling, I was smiling, they were smiling, I looked at people and they were smiling at me, I was smiling back at them, knees bent and springy, arms relaxed and swinging. It was like looking at the world for the first time. People were dancing, the mailboxes were singing, cars were undulating with the beat. Flowers were talking, the pavement was whispering, the bricks were rotating. The next thing I remember, I was in my basement rental in Queens, my bed frame up against the door, my cat hiding behind the stove. I sat on the bottom of my fiberglass shower stall in my underpants, the flat end of a butcher knife resting cold against my cheek. Decisions, decisions. I was sure my upstairs neighbors were going to *kill* me that night—unless I chopped off my nipples and fed them to the dog. Where *was* that pesky dog? Why wasn't I seeing him around lately? Why did he have to die? Where do the ducks go in the winter, Mommy?

I looked past my crotch to the circular drain. It began to sprout eyes. Little, viscous, *blue* eyes. I poked at them with my finger, and the poking helped, but they only grew

back. And far past the eyes, deep within the recesses of the drain, I could see a tentacle slowly making its way to the surface. I decided to call Dr. Mengele.

“Mr. Moriens! How *are* you? Long time no talk, haha.”

“Um...I just wanted to check in...took the first pill...”

“Ah! Proactivity! I like this in a man, Mr. Moriens! How is it proceeding?”

“Oh, well, you know, I guess I’m having a little bit of trouble of *adjusting* to it...”

“Oh? Did you remember to have a little snack before taking it? Do you have a tummy-ache?”

“N-no,” I said, my voice quavering slightly, as I poked at some new eyes growing in the drain, “my stomach is fine...it’s just that I think the Pacifax might be making me a little...*irrational*.”

“This is to be expected, Mr. Moriens, and do not worry! It is quite natural—your brain cells are merely adjusting to the dosage. It will *pass*.”

I could hear a dull, metallic rattle through my apartment as the tentacle pushed against the grill over the drain. I hoped those screws would hold.

“Oh...OK, it’s just that I was a little *worried*, that’s all.”

“Get some sleep, Mr. Moriens—in a few days the adjustment will be complete and you will be as right as rain.”

The tentacle managed to pop one of the screws and was engaged in the arduous task of squeezing out between the semi-fastened grill and the drain-hole. I struck the tentacle with my cleaver, and the writhing form of its severed tip oozed a purple substance. A part of me that was still lucid hoped to God it was not really my dick.

“Oh...OK. Good night, Dr. Mengele.”

Chapter Eight: Hyman's Struggle

Welcome To Classified Conspiracy! Your place for NWO, UFOs, Chemtrails, Paul McCartney, and all your Conspiracy needs!

Topic: I have several bottle-nosed demons lying dead on my living-room floor

Rick Deckard: Hi, I was wondering if anybody had some advice. I woke up this morning and a demon that looked like a chupachabra was sitting on my chest & trying to strangle me to death. Apparently there was a whole fleet of them (demons I mean, not necessarily chupachabras) were coming out of my ceiling & filling my bedroom. I finally managed to beat them back with these golden pentagrams that I shot out astrally through my abdomen. But when I finally got out of bed, there were dead demons all over my floor, everywhere. I had to step around them to get to my kitchen. They're still here, sort of, and I'm afraid to touch them because I fear they might wake. Does anybody have any suggestions? I would appreciate it, thank-you.

Willow Wiccavamp: I believe you, Rick Deckard I know things like this can happen!!! Be brave!!! If you need any help let me know???

Freakosuavay: fuck

Saint Of Light: You need to pray, my son...the fulfillment of the Revelation is close at hand! When Belarion & Babalon fornicate in the county of the King the end will be near!

Rick Deckard: Hi again, please disregard my last message. I kind of misinterpreted things. Sorry.

Freakosuavay: tool

*** **

“Hello, Dr. Mengele?”

“Mr Moriens! We speak again!”

“Yeah, hi...um...I don’t know if this whole medication thing is going to work out...I’m getting some really bad *side-effects*, I think...”

“What side-effects? Pacifax is one of the *safest* drugs on the market, my boy!”

“Yeah...it’s just that...I’ve been getting these hallucinations...weird thoughts...I’m getting paranoid...*manic*...”

“Perhaps you were *always* paranoid and manic, my boy! Medications don’t cause mental disorders—they *treat* them!”

“Well, I might have been a little paranoid before...but I mean now, I’m way...way...WAY out there with the paranoia. And I’m seeing things and hearing things...”

“Visual and auditory hallucinations, of course. That’s why you need to be on the Pacifax, my friend Mr. Moriens! You’re *seeing* things!”

“Look, I was not seeing things *before* I took Pacifax—are you even *listening* to me?! I...need to get off this drug, now!”

The doctor let out a throaty laugh. I kept one eye on the phone and one on the demon that was still partially materialized in my doorway. He had grey, mossy skin that was partially damaged by my pentagram blasts, revealing a black, tar-like sticky flesh. It was one of the bottle-nosed demons, with those obscene trunks coming out of their face. I hated and feared those the most.

“My dear Mr. Moriens, I’m afraid stopping Pacifax is very near impossible!”

“W-what do you mean?”

“The effects from the withdrawal are quite...*unpleasant*, my boy. Believe me when I say that you are better off staying on the medication.”

I was standing in the middle of my kitchen in only my underwear, pale flesh clammy and shivering. I started counting and fingering the magnets on my refrigerator—familiar images of tourist spots I had visited, some miniature beer cans and jalapenos made out of resin, an unlicensed *The Prisoner* magnet I had gotten from a convention, my cat’s vet info on handy paw-shaped vinyl. Then I remembered that the little furry alien grey who was peeping at me while I was on the toilet the night before, the one I beheaded with a butter-knife, was still in my freezer. I backed away from the fridge and vowed to track down my cat as soon as the call was over.

“I HAVE TO GET OFF OF THIS DRUG, DOCTOR! I just...*have* to. I’m going mad...”

“I know you are going mad, my boy. That’s why you are on the medication.”

*** **

I would have liked to discuss the phyla and genus of the demons I had fought with that morning with the doctor, or any some such knowledgeable person, but decided against it. I knew on some level that the demons and the aliens and the tentacles in my shower drain were all *hallucinations*...but one can have such sober assessments regarding the creatures that bedevil one’s mind and *still* see them. After locating my cat, who had managed to climb atop my idle ceiling fan and wrap her claws around the edge of the blade out of sheer terror, I vowed right then and there to stop the Pacifax —damn the consequences.

Within first few hours after skipping my dose I was able to recover enough of my sense of reality to go check my phone messages. It was in so doing that I found out from a quite apologetic Ebor that I was fired from VideoDream after failing to show with no explanation for five days in a row. I also got a pissy call from Kim inquiring about why I failed to pick up Beowulf. Based on her call I was able to coast on a couple of delightful daydreams in which Kim secretly missed me herself, and realized by my absence what a terrible mistake she made by listening to Tony Robbins and leaving me.

Soon my perception of the world squashed into two dimensions, and I felt like I was caught in a wind-tunnel. A searing, ripping pain shot through both of my temples at the same time. While the demons were indeed gone and I was no longer hallucinating, a terrible, irrational, uncontrollable, animal rage seized me. It was a rage without benefit of intellectual processes. It was a rage both immediate and unable to be expressed, a

roaring in my ears of a thousand unfortunates from a Munch painting. Me and my cat locked eyes. She ran away and jumped from a pile of dirty clothes to my bureau to the top of the television set to back on my ceiling fan.

*** **

Excerpt from Hyman Lidge: A Life

by Hyman Lidge, motivational speaker, activist, and former professional baseball player

I think the doctor could have grafted my arm back on if he really wanted to. But I could tell he sensed it: my silent, unconscious calling as one of God's Secret Agents. It was obvious that the Demons wanted to get rid of me, using their human puppets to do so, falsely accusing me of driving under the influence of some sort of beverage or another.

My arm - - my pitching arm - - was reduced to an armpit. I just could not pitch with an armpit. It was time to face facts: my career as a professional baseball player was over.

Those were Dark Days, my Friend - - dark, dark days. I remember trying to shoot myself with only my left arm, how awkward that felt. Then I tried to scoop up a baseball with my right armpit, crying, tears streaming down my face. Life was so unfair! I had nothing to live for. I was better off dead - - but I was too mutilated to do even that. And drinking with my left hand was tiring.

Then a disc of light appeared before my eyes. It was the size of a salad bowl, and shimmered like a flame. Within that disc of light, I saw a fairy. And that fairy, I knew, was really God. I knew this with a sudden certainty, like information was directly downloaded into my cerebral cortex. And this knowing, I knew, was Feeling-Knowingness. I now had the ability to peer into the Akashic records and know every single thing there was to know. But of course, I had this ability all the time. It just needed to be coaxed out of me. The accident had a silver lining.

Isn't God great?

*** **

"Mommy says I can't go to McDonalds anymore."

Beowulf—sorry, *Brandon*—stopped one block shy of McDonalds. I wondered why he didn't tell me earlier. I guess there no good moment to really spring it on me. I pictured Brandon quietly suffering, sweating, pitying me, knowing in his heart that we couldn't go to Mickey-Ds, that his mom forbid it. Not knowing how to break it to me.

Understanding intimately that I couldn't afford a better restaurant, that the best I could provide for him was good ol' fashioned American corn-fed beef on a bun made of white flour. And fries.

We stood there in silence, the boy a good five feet away from me; thin arms thrust into pockets of a pair of khaki shorts that were paradoxically too grown-up, golf shorts,

polo shirt. I wondered if he picked out those clothes himself, or if Kim was taking an active part in his demasculinization. Then it *hit* me: the rate Brandon was going, at least he could provide for his children when he became an adult. I guess *that* was sort of manly. Not that this made me—on the opposite end of the spectrum—*womanly*. No. I *knew* what it made me.

I swallowed deep and tried to smile, tried to act as if it was all cool. My face was a colon, period, and end-parentheses.

"Where would you like to go instead, buddy? I mean—where *can* you go?"

Brandon's serious, freckled face looked grave. He said:

"I can only eat organic."

"Did your mommy say that?"

"No, *I* said it."

"Why?"

"Because I want to be *healthy*, Daddy."

He then reached into his pocket and took out a thick beige leather wallet. I never saw such a thick leather in all my life. It was like a steer. His long, reasonably tanned fingers ducked into the folds and produced a couple of twenties.

"You can pay me back. It will be healthy for you too, Daddy. It would be good for you to purge the toxins. Mommy told me about the drugs. She almost didn't let me see you."

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Excerpt from Hyman Lidge: A Life

by Hyman Lidge, motivational speaker, activist, and former professional baseball player

Oh, I know they laugh at me. They laughed at me the first time I was interviewed after the accident, after I saw God and reclaimed my Feeling-Knowingness. They laughed at me when I ran for Governor of Massachusetts. But I was always above all of that. Because I knew. I KNEW!!!

And now you know, and now we're friends. Just the fact that you have stuck this long with me, with this book, means something. Something brought you to me, don't you see? God's secret agents. You're one of them! And I'm getting a feeling, a bad feeling, about this world. The accounts are closing, my friend. We've run all out of credit, and we've gotta pay in cash now. You dig it, right? Are you feeling this? You wouldn't be reading this now if you didn't.

Are things hard for you right now? If you're one of God's secret agents, they probably are. That's because of the Devil. Oh, I don't mean the red guy with the horns - - that's Saturday

morning cartoon stuff. No, I'm talking about Reptilians. Demons. Hybrids. You know what I'm talking about, right? You've probably seen them, either in their human or actual form. But you were too scared to tell anyone.

Understand: you have a friend in me. I believe you. And together, we can beat these lizards at their own game.

And you can start by purchasing my introductory tape set, "I Believe In You: How To Beat The Lizards At Their Own Game," for only \$99.99.

*** **

I had downloaded all of the Hyman Lidge audio from the Internet. I could almost picture Lidge's Feeling-Knowingness perceiving my crime as I did it. I pictured meeting him one day and him wordlessly acknowledging that he knew I pirated his tapes. I pictured my aura darkening, my Feeling-Knowingness faulty and skipping.

When I first got into Hyman Lidge and Feeling-Knowingness, I was way way into it. I was more into it than Ebor even, who introduced me to his work. At one point, I even felt that I might have understood the process of Feeling-Knowingness —and, by extension, *Hyman*—than did any other person on the face of the Earth. And I know that sounds crazy—but I really, really *felt* it, in a deep way. If there was only one thing I took from Hyman's philosophy and teachings, it was that: if you really really *feel* it, it's probably *true*.

Trust your instinct. Go with your gut.

And so when I found out through my fellow Classconners that Hyman Lidge was appearing in New York for a lecture, I withdrew what was left of my savings and bought the \$350 ticket.

No credit, only cash.

Chapter Nine: Our Agenda

The "Aquarius Mind-Body-Soul Expo" proper only cost \$15 a day to attend; it was from the seminars that they seemed to bring in the *big* bucks. The Hotel Viscount was one of the more obscure on the Manhattan landscape, another ass-end destination: past the retail stores, past the warehouses, past where even the taxis normally tread. At the time, I thought it was for the best that the Expo was so out-of-the-way, as to escape the ever-present eyes of the Illuminati police. And I still think they are watching me to this day, though now with damn good (though ultimately futile) reason.

On the way to the Expo I decided to stop at a Chinese buffet, grab a nosh, and review my itinerary. If Chinese take-out was considered fast food, what I heaped on my tray was slow food, nearly comatose. Congealed sauce, dappled with eddies of hardened fat and grease, covered my beef and broccoli, and the dumplings were just about inedible. I ate the best I could, starting with the soft lukewarm middle of the gray dumpling and proceeding outward as far as I could before reaching the overcooked rubbery extremities. In my lap, I felt my relatively thin but protruding and flaccid belly—gray like the dumpling, sagging like an old threadbare pillow.

Staring out the 2nd-story window onto the congested Midtown throng below, it struck me how *unsustainable* this city was, and how similarly unsustainable my lifestyle. We were *killing* ourselves, we were truly living off of cash/no credit these days—only *they* didn't know it. On a whim, I wondered what would happen if some unforeseen occurrence deigned to drive its oversized thumb in the middle of all their travel, shopping, and commerce. And yet, I already *knew* what would happen.

I was working at VideoDream when 9/11 happened, I felt the rumble under our feet, witnessed the cast-off pairs of somber onlookers crumbled into their own personal tragedies. I owned my share of paranoia, of clawing animal terror. I got off the train at Marcy when the nervous-looking Middle-Eastern man wielding a deathgrip on his briefcase sat down; it took me two stops, but I broke and bolted. And I won't apologize for it, even though he was probably just crapping his pants and hoping the train didn't blow up, same as I was.

But two years later, it felt as if we were *done* with all that, as if we had just gotten over cancer and no way in hell were we going to get hit with lightning too. We *did* our stretch of suffering and inconvenience. As Stuart commented, it felt as if he had missed out on the Big One, the once-in-a-lifetime clusterfuck of all clusterfucks; further, that he was almost disappointed. "If there ever was a time and place to go, it was *that*," Stuart said ruefully. "All other deaths are pathetic and anticlimactic in comparison. I *missed* it." Stuart also liked to pose shirtless with his gun collection and post the pics on MySpace. But I sort of understood what he was getting at.

Outside of Stuart and my buddies on Classcon, nobody wanted to discuss stuff like this—to discuss *possibilities*, the possibility of disaster. And it frustrated me, because...because I knew I was a nut, a *loser*, but still these were valid concerns.

There were so many variables out there that could spoil our little metropolitan paradise. *Human* variables, the variables of *nature*. I understood the reluctance to even *acknowledge* such variables, when one had so much invested in the paradise. But for a failure like me, entertaining such possibilities, doing the Las Vegas odds on the Apocalypse—it wasn't that hard. Oh *sure*, I subscribed to basic notions of the reverence for life and love thy neighbor. But the only bright shining thing in my world was my son. And even *that* love was tempered by the insistent notion that he was better off without me, which led me back to my eschatological odds-making.

I think the problem was, I needed to stop masturbating and just have some actual *penetration*. I think that would have cleared it up a long time ago, distracted me, straightened me right out. But I looked at myself sitting at that sticky Formica table, looked at the near-rancid pork (or whatever) leaking out of the gray dumpling, and who would really *want* me anyhow? To touch me naked?

Perhaps, like the religious men of old, I needed to have my mind on *higher* things.

*** **

Hyman put his left hand on his forehead and inhaled deeply.

"I'm getting something..."

It was capacity seating at the Turner Ballroom in the Hotel Viscount, and though it was crowded I felt *great* about the turnout. It heartened me to see so many people, many of which I presumed lived in the five boroughs, who thought the way I did.

Hyman alluded often to The Silent Army, but I never really believed they existed until I sat in that room. *The Silent Army*. The ones who Knew. And I was a *part* of it, part of a bonafide movement of freethinkers and concerned citizens. Kim always said I was apolitical, apathetic—but that was never true. We just had different politics, different passions and concerns. Kim with her organic vegetables and money-market accounts —and *me* with the fate of the *entire world*.

Hyman Lidge! I was finally in the presence of Hyman Lidge!

"I think it's...the Mother Goddess. The Goddess, she's trying to get through."

Hyman Lidge, dressed in a bright yellow Velour jogging suit, was far shorter in person than the pics on his websites and books indicated—but his charisma was thick like sour cream heaped on a chalupa. And I'll admit it—it was *damn tasty*. His words, though inflected with a nasal twang that seemed to miss his mouth entirely and instead reverberated through his hawkish nose, were like food.

Hyman lifted his left arm up, palm out, in a salute, his short dark spiky hair already glistening with sweat after only ten minutes, wetness snaking down his neck and past the black microphone headset. His right arm was rigid; I tried to fight the morbid curiosity and not stare at the motionless hand that was presumably carved out of wood or, conversely, fashioned from a lightweight plastic. There was no space between the fingers.

"*Babalon!* The Goddess welcomes you. She smiles on you this day."

I had the second-tier "Golden" seats; the \$1500 VIP seating was a bit outside my budget, which, when the Expo was over, would be \$52. My hope was that the seminar would jumpstart my karma enough to quickly acquire more cash. I had heard stories that this had *indeed* happened to people.

But was I close enough to Hyman to be the recipient of his karmic essence? There must have been at least 12 rows of chairs in front of me. *Dammit!* I couldn't afford to screw this up, for this to just be another random and ultimately meaningless occurrence in my life, like watching a movie. Time, patience, planning—I just couldn't afford it. I yearned to be positioned within the proximity of miracle.

Hyman continued,

"You will know the end of the age is near when the Scarlet Woman reasserts herself. Now, this woman has been unfairly painted with the brush of whoredom by the Illuminati overlords—the Jesuits, the Papists, the Zionists. They painted her as a whore to keep you away from Her, to discredit her power, the endless life-giving qualities of her breasts, womb, and va-gi-na."

Hyman looked over the crowd for emphasis, then repeated,

"Va-gi-na."

Suddenly, a moment of intense Feeling-Knowingness hit me. I heard very clearly a female voice say, "Hyman likes to eat pussy." I didn't know what it meant, or why I heard that; the reasons were inconsequential. But I *clearly* heard a voice say it. That was the key—I was hearing a voice *outside* myself, something was getting through.

"The Bible says that we must subjugate Mother Earth, Mother Goddess. A typical Illuminati tactic is to equate Nature with evil and the Devil. That if we don't tame Nature, Nature will seduce, tame, and kill us. And you know what? They're *right*."

The little man fell silent and soaked himself in the longing murmur of his audience. It was during this brief pause that I felt a sharp tap on my shoulder, followed by breath in my ear. A woman's voice, definitely feminine but with a gently-serrated nicotine edge:

"Can you be a dear and move a little to the right, please?"

I turned around to face a strikingly beautiful brunette who was dressed as if she stepped out of a 1940s movie; lips angular and bright red, eyes draped in a smoky shade and framed with dramatically arched eyebrows. Hair pinned back sleek and high—with *real* hairpins, not barrettes, scrunchies, banana clips, or anything else. Not even bobby pins with rubber tips. No—plain hairpins. I don't know why that detail impressed me so much. I still remember it; the hard surface and unforgiving matte finish of that bent pin.

"Oh, *sorry*," I said quickly, averting my eyes from their instinctive glance at her ample breasts and scooting over in my chair.

Hyman, nasal but captivating:

"Here is a secret for you: *Nature is out to kill you. To kill humans. We are the foreign body, we have been rejected and rejected and now soon to be e-jected. Because the good book got one thing right—we are not of this world.*" He pointed at himself and us in a loop, tucking us intimately into a circle with him. "We are not of this world. *We...are angels.* Spirits in material form. And Nature is going to *break* us. It has *always* broken us—just simply in smaller parcels, and in earlier times. But what I'm talking about is a *mass-breaking*, right in our own backyards. *We are spoiled, and we are in denial, and we are amnesiacs.* The only cure is Feeling-Knowingness, to gain our wisdom from the Source, dropping free like a babe from the labia of the Goddess. Yes, my friends: Nature is out to kill us. So I recommend we cut a deal."

Then I saw the leg of the woman behind me, draped in a thick but no less sexy maroon netted stocking, snake into my view; it drew into my vision slow and easy, catching me unawares, leaving me still soft and trusting but ultimately confused. I turned around again, and that was when I noticed her video camera nestled small and

inconspicuous in her arms like a baby. When the lecture was over two hours later, she —Edith Snider—invited me to Sbarro.

*** **

"As soon as I get home I'm making a torrent and getting this up there," she explained, motioning with her uncommonly large yet beautiful head at the mini DVD camera by her food tray. "I've got no problem with it. I *paid* my ticket. It's *my* experience. And as my experience, I have the right to share it."

"But don't you feel...like you're *swindling* Hyman somehow? I'm sure he's going to make his own video of the seminar."

"I could give a *flying fuck* what Hyman Lidge thinks about the torrenting. He's *disinfo* anyway." She said it like she was dead certain what she was talking about. Disinfo. She said it like she *knew* people, had access to all sorts of sources that I probably never even heard of.

"If he's disinfo, why do you go to the seminar? Don't you feel you're being *lied to*?"

She never touched her food. A gorgeous plate of manicotti and she never touched it, barely ingested her bottle of water. I knew she would throw it all out.

"**The key to successful disinformation is to present it within half-truths.** Couch lies within truths, and truths within lies. It's a *shell* game." She leaned in closer, her breasts full and pendulous from within the plunging neckline of her crimson faux-velvet dress. Her voice dropped in volume, almost in sync with her breasts. "The stuff with the reptiles? Pure *garbage*, and Lidge knows it. It's a *distraction*, a comedy. The stuff

with the Jews is the same thing. He's being outrageous for the sake of being *outrageous*—to cover his own ass. He *knows* the masses won't take him seriously on it. That protects him and furthers his agenda. And his agenda isn't anything like *our* agenda." And when she said "our agenda," her looping finger brought me into her circle.

I tried to contain my excitement, leaning on one arm and attempting to look bored. And failing miserably, my heart beating so hard it was plainly audible.

"And...what's *our* agenda?"

"*Worldwide liberation.*"

"Who are you?" I asked in a low voice, not so much speaking it as breathing it.

She said:

"I am a daughter of liberty."

THE ZAIUS PROJECT

"OR"

NEW AMSTERDAM

BY HANSEL VAN HALEN

WITH ASSISTANCE FROM

EDITH ARGYLE SNIDER

Introduction:

WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE
ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE
DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE
DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE
DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE—

Chapter Ten: Girls Who Were Capable Of Doing Things

"New Amsterdam," Edith said purposefully.

"Your organization wants to change the name of New York to New Amsterdam?"

"It's *symbolic*, sure. But as I'm sure you well know, They like to use symbols all the time. The symbols are *magic*, are a magic ritual."

This was *true*. The dollar bill. The death of Princess Diana in the Pont d'Alma tunnel. Tupac. *All* symbols. Think of all the symbology that predicted 9/11, for instance. *The Lone Gunmen* episode about the plot to crash a plane into the World Trade Center. Aired in March of 2001. I mean, as far as I was concerned, that's all I needed to know, *there* was my validation. It couldn't *all* be a coincidence. That's what They wanted you to think. They wanted you to believe that all this—this maya, illusion—was *real*. They wanted me to believe that the crappy dumpling I ate that morning was real, that it constituted reality. And yet it *wasn't* real.

Follow me, here: that dumpling wasn't real nourishment. It wasn't real food. It was *Matrix* food. So was McDonalds. Brandon was right. He knew—he had a natural gift for Feeling-Knowingness.

My *boy*. One of God's secret agents and didn't even know it. And he would probably live a better life than me.

Then again, he might turn out to be a Mr. Smith.

I baited Edith slightly with my next question. She was *exquisite*, one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen.

"If symbolism is a tool of the Illuminati, why use it yourself? Isn't that like accessing the Devil's toolbox?"

"There *is* no Devil, Tod. Even *Hyman* knows that."

"Then what is there?"

"*Over-population.*"

*** **

I felt so energized after that late lunch with Edith that I bopped in my bus seat, skipped past the sausage factories, 99-cent stores, and fruit stands on the way to my third-story walk-up. I felt as if I wanted to immediately call my friends and family and inform them that I just met this wonderful, mysterious, *smart* woman: EDITH. But I wouldn't call them, because I knew what they would say.

Nobody could spoil this moment for me. This was *fate*. And as much as I had cherished Hyman Lidge, I couldn't ignore what Edith was telling me. She opened my eyes.

Hyman was a big fat *joker*. A liar. Disinfo. Reptiles and Zionists, that was sci-fi jargon, comic books, Colorforms kits. But over-population: *that* was scientific. Even the most stringent anti-conspiracy crusader would have to admit that we had a serious case of over-population, dwindling food resources. Peak oil. Water shortage. Why didn't Hyman talk about *that* stuff? *Practical* stuff? His new age jargon and obtuse mystical references were as bad as the Bible he often bashed.

How soon I had turned on Hyman. *Et tu, Tod?*

*** **

Welcome To Classified Conspiracy! Your place for NWO, UFOs, Chemtrails, Paul McCartney, and all your Conspiracy needs!

Topic: H Lidge = disinformation?

Rick Deckard: Anybody here hear about Hyman Lidge possibly being an Illuminati disinfo agent? Because I have a source, who I can't reveal, who told me that he was.

Willow Wiccavamp: Hyman Lidge a disinfo agent??? Really??? But he's so legitimate???

Rick Deckard: But how do you really know that, Willow? What if we have been just sold a bill of goods? Thrown off the trail by placating us with what we want to hear?

Willow Wiccavamp: Who told you this???

Rich Deckard: Like I said, I have my sources ;-)

FreakoSwavay: anus

*** **

Willow's continual defense of Hyman Lidge unnerved me. Perhaps it was just plain old egotism: I broke ranks with Hyman, and now I figured every else would too. Like I was some sort of *leader* on Classcon, some authority figure. When I was *nothing*.

But the whole *site* was kind of nothing. We had been spoon-fed on the likes of Lidge, Jones, Icke, ol' Bill Cooper. But it was very likely they were all disinfo. That's why They allowed them a microphone and a soap box. That's why they mixed the Vitals of what we had to learn with sci-fi dreck. To *confuse* us.

Further: I began to suspect dear Willow of disinformation herself. What if she was a *spy*? What if she wasn't who she said she was? What if she was a parody of every flaky gothic pseudo-witch suicide girl who ever lived, some freaky amalgam put together by a bunch of government spooks just to manipulate and entrap fools like myself? What if she was putting us all on?

I suddenly noticed that the little red rectangular light on my answering machine was flickering. The machine was my mother's, from the 1980s; it had a wood-tone finish. Everything back then had a wood-tone finish. My parents had painted the walls to look like wood-tone. We even had a vinyl wood-tone toilet seat.

Fuck. I forgot to pick up my son.

*** **

"Agghhh!"

My head jerked straight off the pillow as I awoke, tendrils of cold spit hanging from my mouth. I had a *nightmare*: My local subway station was a staging area for some sort of disaster. There were people lying on the platforms below in rows with sheets over them. A strange type of police like I had never seen before were in the token booth. There was so much equipment in that booth, devices that were not supposed to be there. And *I* wasn't supposed to be there, either. Not unless I was *sick*. I was just a bystander.

One of the strange policemen screamed:

"What are you doing here?! Do you want to get sick?!"

Edith fell silent on the phone as I recounted the dream to her. We were talking every day now, ever since I observed the three-day-rule and then took the initiative of dialing the number she scrawled on a copy of her organization's Xeroxed leaflet. I was lying on my back on the futon, head upside-down, cell phone wedged between my head and shoulder. Green Lantern shirt and white briefs.

"So what do you think of that dream, Edith?"

"It's exactly as I was *telling* you. Nature has a way of cutting down the excess. It's Nature's way. Viruses are Nature's back-up system so we don't end up eating and shitting every last bit of arable patch on the globe."

My right hand drifted to the trapdoor on the front of my briefs. Don't get me wrong: pandemics are *awful*. But she was so damn SMART. And it turned me on. Smart girls turned me on, girls who *knew* things. Girls who were capable of doing things.

"Do you think it was my Feeling-Knowingness? Do you think it actually *tapped into* something that was really going to happen?"

"I thought we went over this," Edith said, her voice steeped in smoky annoyance. "Feeling-Knowingness is *bullshit*."

"So you don't even believe in the concept of *intuition*?"

"I believe in results and progress. Everything else is distraction."

The Zaius Project had, according to Edith, 79 members worldwide. Which I know doesn't sound like a lot, but they were supposedly very tight and very committed, and had connections with dozens of other organizations that supported their cause. Their cause, as outlined in their primary leaflet, had something to do with building gardens where Starbucks used to stand, and I couldn't argue with that. They were big on expanding our oxygen supply via natural means, buying locally grown produce, and ending world hunger.

"Imagine a pasture filled with lambs in the middle of Union Square," Edith said to me in my dreams as she fucked me, the two of us rolling naked in a field of raw wool.

"Imagine waking up in the morning and choosing the eggs you want to eat *directly* from the hen house," she said in my dreams right before she went down on me, her

thick yet sexy netted stockings in a nylon pool by her ankles. I plucked a hairpin, plain and matte, from Edith's head and shuddered as her soft dark hair fell upon my cock.

"And how should we accomplish these objectives?" I asked her in my dreams, as she pulled the length of her naked body up over mine by gripping my shoulders, as her dusky eyes/halo of smeared makeup met mine.

"WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE DOOMED. FOLLOW ME. WE ARE--"

*** **

"Agghhh!"

My head jerked straight off the pillow as I awoke, tendrils of cold spit hanging from my mouth. I had a nightmare. I was lying directly on my mattress, the fitted sheet, shrunken by age and the dryer, having popped off and fell under the bed a long time ago. My apartment was a *shambles*, but in a different way than when I was sick with the Pacifax. At least now I had control, I *owned* my decisions. If I didn't wash the dishes, if I was eating cereal out of used plastic Chinese food lids, it was because I had made a *conscious decision* to do so. The cereal, the fast food, the plastic—they were all *unnatural*, all cancers on this planet. The only reason I was momentarily indulging in them was because I was in the planning phases for a better life, and was still trying to make do with cheap calories until I finally found my way out of the Matrix.

Oh, I said "Matrix"—Edith wouldn't have liked that. It was a *Lidgism*. Comic book stuff. Impractical philosophy, mental masturbation. Of course, the code name of her

organization's mission, "The Zaius Project," was also rather pop-cultural. But the difference, as Edith explained it, was that they consciously knew what they were doing when they made the Planet of the Apes reference. They *owned* that reference, and the kitsch behind it. They were *better* than the reference.

The concept of "owning" one's intentions and actions was the keystone to Edith Snider's view on life. It fell in sharp contrast with Hyman's teachings, which were a bit more passive and generally left the reader open mentally and ready for a psychic gang-rape by whatever god or goddess or discarnate entity that happened to drop by. Watching him on stage that day in the Turner Ballroom, my Feeling-Knowingness could almost seem him get flipped over and sodomized by the Goddess, whoever this "goddess" was—whispering in his ear, cutting "deals" with Mother Nature.

Edith didn't cotton to that bullshit. She believed in Science.

The combined aromas of my unwashed dishes, neglected toilet, and the overflowing litterbox assaulted my senses. Part of me really wanted to just roll up my sleeves and finally clean the damn things—or at least bag up the trash and cat shit—but ever since I met Edith I had the distinct feeling that I would be leaving this all behind without a moment's notice. She said that the Zaius Project had recently purchased a small property in Florida; it was for the moment undeveloped swampland, but as soon as more funds came into the Project they would start building a self-sustaining ecosystem from which to build their new society.

A Sustainable Society. And a few of the Brave Ones, the specially selected, would stay behind in New York to recruit others and help turn the metropolitan nightmare into New Amsterdam.

"And how should we accomplish these objectives?" I asked Edith the next time we met, at the Virgin Megastore cafe in Union Square. Virgin Megastore, in all its bombastic materialist Brit-pop glory, was everything I knew Edith *hated*; and I also knew that this was exactly the reason she picked the location to meet in the first place. She always told me that she needed her rationale to continue her work, the Zaius Project, in her face at all times; she needed to be spurred on, constantly reminded, her focus perennially sharp. It was the same reason she casually burned herself with cigarettes in the inside of her left arm, creating a neat little path of shiny, dark, rough circles.

Maybe that was also why, when I met her that day, she had the black eye. Even with Edith's usual stark movie-heroine makeup the bruise was visible, a deep violet infused with patches of red and blue. The first thought I had when I saw the shiner was: she had punched herself out.

"*Science*," she answered purposefully, never acknowledging the injury to her face. "We use science to jump-start the ecosystem, to wake Nature out of her self-induced hysterical fugue state."

"But *how* exactly?"

"That's for *Hansel* to explain to you. He will explain it to you if and when he feels you are ready."

"Do you think I'm ready?"

Edith patted me on the hand; her skin was soft and cold, and the touch sent a pleasurable shock down my body, like swallowing ice-cream.

"Yes. I do. But there is protocol."

"*God*. This is really serious."

"Fuck *yes* it's serious."

I wouldn't necessarily say that me and Edith were going out, but I also wouldn't say that we weren't.

Chapter Eleven: The Last Bottle

Before we finished our meeting, Edith asked me if I knew any other likeminded individuals who might be good recruits to the Zaius Project; that not to invite anyone willy-nilly, but only if I felt the person was qualified and in tune with our goals.

Classcon immediately came to mind, but unfortunately I had alienated my online friends there as of late. They were all Lidgeheads, far more than I had ever expected; part of me believed they had clung all the tighter to his teachings just because I was pushing Zaius. Sheep. Their Pavlovian reactions, cutting off their nose to spite their face. They didn't *want* solutions. They didn't want to work to attain the Utopia they've been bitching about in countless posts. It was all just another alternate fandom to them, something with the veneer of reality, fan-fiction, Lord of the Rings RPG. *The Matrix*.

Sure. It all made fucking sense. Hyman had been pushing fucking fan-fiction for them to whack off to.

Then I thought of my bud, Stuart Waxman. Stuart had his issues, sure. But he tacitly proved he was capable of responsibility, working as a computer programmer and making over 60K a year. It's just that he never put all that money to any use—travel, real-estate, a car—other than buying his comic books. But he didn't *need* to, really. His mother paid for the house, cooked him food. He took the same express bus out of Middle Village every morning, and back again at 6:00. And he was able to buy all the guns he wanted over the Internet.

But despite Stuart's cushy life, I know something was missing. He craved *adventure*. The guns, the knives, the handcuff collection—these were only symptoms. He needed *direction*. And Zaius could provide that direction.

*** **

"Hey, Toddy-bear!"

Stuart quickly led me from the porch through the rooms and up the stairs, never looking back, never engaging in small talk, his only acknowledgment of me his extended arm behind him. I always had to call Stuart right before I arrived, so he could hustle his mom out of the way and answer the door himself. Stuart liked his family life and friend life separate, like the food on his plate and the publishers of his comic books on his shelves. The Jumper would never be near Iron Man, for instance. He just didn't believe in full-on *alphabetical*.

I assumed that somewhere in the house—maybe the dining room, maybe the bathroom, maybe the den—Stuart's mother waited, unseen. She would hear a door shutting, a lock turning, and she'd know it was her time to get out, to help keep her son's world *separate*, to prevent his brain from short-circuiting.

I had no idea what she looked like, or even sounded, but her personal effects were *everywhere*. There was nothing in the house that indicated a 38-year-old comic book fan, computer programmer, and gun enthusiast lived in that house; nothing on Stuart's door gave any indication that the room was his.

He ushered me in with an elaborate waving of his pudgy, freckled arms, closed the door, and slid a small latch in place. Stuart suddenly became alive, in his element. An

open Priority Mail box rested on his floor, packing peanuts trailing out of it. On top of his immaculately made bed rested a dark gray gun; its weight made it sink slightly into the mattress. A wiry orange-and-black cat delicately walked past my feet, stepping over my sneakers; then it doubled back and aggressively rubbed itself on my legs.

"Sheila!" Stuart scolded, scooping the cat up. He regarded the mass of flossy orange fur his pet deposited on the bottom of my pants. "Sorry 'bout that, bro."

"Don't worry about it." I was way past worrying about natural animal deposits. The lighter fluid in my Chicken McNuggets gave me far more pause these days.

Stuart took a stack of comic books out of a folded-over brown bag, I had a seat on his navy blue desk chair, and we discussed the week's offerings. It was so rote, so *predictable*, our conversation; our stated dissatisfaction with the state of the comic book industry, our belief that the publishers had left us behind, that our tastes and interests and even values were not being taken into consideration anymore.

We asked the same question we always asked: "Where were the *real* heroes?" We were sick of being force-fed stories starring scumbags and assholes, as if their amoral adventures, their fucked-up rationales, their wretched personalities were worth any sort of narrative whatsoever.

Despite all this, Stuart kept dropping about sixty dollars a week at the comic book store; over a hundred if he decided to purchase peripheral items. I could have borrowed his comics if I really wanted to, if I promised to be very careful with them. But years previous I had reached a point where the *only* stories I wanted to read were the ones I created *myself*.

Our ritual comic book bitching over, I began to talk to Stuart about Zaius. More than Zaius: I gave my friend a rounded picture of *everything* I went through over the last month. I told him things in detail that I had only glossed over before. I went into detail about Dr. Mengele and the Pacifax. I gave him a recap on Hyman Lidge, and how my eyes were opened to his folly by sweet Edith Snider. I explained to Stuart about over-population, about how things would never be what we would consider "normal" in twenty years, no matter *what* we did; that the best we could expect was food shortages, excess solar rays irradiating our skin. That cancer would be more and more *certain*, if not from the unabating sun then from the poisoned water. That our only hope was Science; not the science of Monsanto and Microsoft, but *natural* science. That we had to wake Nature fully up, so She could run on her own the way she used to, the way She did before we fucked it all up.

I told Stuart that I had reached the point where I could no longer go on "as usual." That I was throwing my support fully behind the Zaius Project, behind New Amsterdam. That I acknowledged there might be risks, but that I was willing to take them, because I found something *bigger* than me, something I was willing to sacrifice for. And then I told him that I respected him, and invited him to accompany me. That we could save ourselves.

Stuart was very silent as I told him all this. The only other sound in the room other than my voice was the cat rummaging through a Taco Bell bag on his computer desk. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, one leg propped up on the other, looking serious but not angry. Sometimes he fidgeted with his bedsheet. I had no idea what he thought. I was baring my soul to him.

He was still silent for a good five minutes after I spoke. The air was thick, I could hear a gentle ringing after awhile. No, not a ringing. A buzzing. I wasn't sure if that sound was in the room itself, outside, or just in my cochlea.

Then Stuart said,

"I *believe* you."

And then he said,

"But I can't go."

*** **

"I mean honestly, some of the stuff you're telling me is pretty far out there," Stuart continued, "but this world is so shitty that I don't doubt what you're saying. It makes sense to me. It *explains* things. It explains a *lot*. And anything that can bring a radical change to this world—I mean a radical, *profound* change—is fine with me. And I mean *anything*. I do *not* care. 'Cause we're *due*, and I've felt that way for a long time. But I can't leave. It's impossible. I'm glued here, and I know it. It's a mental sickness, I'll be the first to admit it. When I stop and really think how I'm glued here, how I can't leave, I pretty much want to eat the hot end of a rifle, you know what I'm saying? My dysfunction—I'm aware of it, it *tortures* me. But it's too late."

"That's *not true*, Stuart..."

"No, it sure as *fuck* is. I'm doing my best to tolerate life. It's really the best I can do. But I'm *glued*, Toddy-Bear. I'm glued here. I don't like it. But at least I *know* it."

"But you were talking about moving out like what, six months ago? You sounded so excited. You had a plan. You had the newspaper with the listings."

"Naw, I'm glued. I'm *glued*."

Silence. Then,

"But I'm sure as shit excited that *you're* finally getting out. I mean seriously, this really cheers me the fuck up." And: "But I just can't fight the feeling that you are potentially in some deep shit." And: "I feel like, you know, *emotional*. Like you're going away."

Stuart grabbed the gun.

*** **

"Nobody will ever think to look in here," Stuart said as he folded a fajita wrapper over the gun and placed it in the brown Taco Bell bag. "They'll think it's just garbage."

The gesture touched me greatly, but also filled me with sudden dread, a dread that I had not experienced during my entire involvement with Edith and Zaius. *Why would I need a gun*, my mind rather forcefully inquired. And yet it made perfect sense. I was a *revolutionary*. The goals of New Amsterdam ran completely counter to what the Illuminati hierarchy had established for us. Were they going to loosen their grip on our lives without a fight? My God. This was happening. *This was really happening*.

But most dread-inducing of all was Stuart's behavior. He was absolutely mournful. He was sniffing. He pattered around his room like an Alzheimer's patient, starting out with

some sort of purpose but then forgetting; walking around in circles. And all the time I sat on his chair, gripping the Taco Bell bag with the gun in it in my right hand, my fingers tight and sweaty around the rough brown paper. It was like Stuart was processing something, and all I could do was wait until he was through. There was nothing I could say, nothing I hadn't said hundreds of times before. No more reassurances, no more supportive words for his impending escape from that house, from Middle Village. It had all been an elaborate script, words spoken out of *kindness*, because it sounded like the right thing to say. I felt an incredible finality in that moment, and I knew Stuart felt it too.

"I always knew you'd get out, Toddy-Bear," Stuart said, finally stopping his pacing and wiping his red nose with the meaty part of his hand below the thumb. Then he knelt, unzipped my pants, and went down on me.

I didn't know what to do. So I let him finish.

*** **

There had been a particular bottle of alcohol at the back of my cabinet; a tall plastic bottle with a picture of a beach scene on it, perhaps a fourth full of a blue liquid. Could I drink it by itself or was it a mixer? And exactly how *old* was it? I didn't know any of these things. I inherited the bottle, along with several others, from a friend who had moved to Wisconsin. It was my friend's left-overs, and I slowly made my way through bottle after bottle as the years went by. Whiskey. Vermouth. Gin. Vodka.

But *never* the blue stuff; the thought of drinking the blue stuff made me feel ill. And yet I would never throw it out—because I knew that one day, I would have no alcohol left in my cabinet, and yet have a strong urge to drink. And when that day came, the blue stuff would be waiting for me.

I sat in front of my computer, the blue stuff poured out into one tall glass. Edith had sent me some links to current news stories of interest, as well as a general email to touch base. I wrote back that everything was fine, and that I was all set to meet Hansel tomorrow. I never mentioned whether I found any recruits or not; I would rather explain that to Edith in person. So much can be misinterpreted via email; robbed of the standard visual cues that facilitate human interaction, Internet conversations could become awkward and misleading. And I just hated disappointing Edith.

Then I logged into Classcon.

I had 4 direct messages in my Classcon mail folder, all from Willow WiccaVamp.

To: Rick Deckard

From: Willow WiccaVamp

Subject: Hi

Hi!!! How are you doing??? You have been on my mind and I hope you are well. I needed to communicate with you a particular Feeling-Knowingness insight that has been plaguing me??? I'm worrying about you??? Please contact me???

To: Rick Deckard

From: Willow WiccaVamp

Subject: Please contact me!

Hi again??? Are you mad at me??? I know you must be mad at me because I'm still friends with Hyman. But I want you to know that I still think you're smart??? It's just that I worry about you. We've chatted on Classified Conspiracy for so long, and it's like you are a friend??? You have always stood by me, and I feel I owe you??? So I just

wanted to talk to you, and let you know that I'm always there??? You can contact me here, or call at 212-555-2900. Just check in and let me know that you are okay???

To Rick Deckard

From: Willow WiccaVamp

Subject: LET ME KNOW YOU'RE OKAY???

I can be contacted through here, but also you can call me at 212-555-2900. I will be home for most of the night, almost all of it??? I don't have an answering machine, but I will be here. Very concerned, Willow. :-)

To: Rick Deckard

From: Willow WiccaVamp

No Subject

HELLO???!!!

*** **

"H-hello???"

"Hi. Is this Willow?"

"Hello???"

"I'm sorry, does Willow...I mean, is that your name?"

"*Rick Deckard???*"

Chapter Twelve: Crackle

There was never any question as to whether I should recruit Willow for the Zaius Project. No way in hell; she was just too fucking *crazy*.

But Crazy wasn't even the biggest issue for me, it was the all-too-obvious painful fact of her inherent fragility. You could hear it in her voice, the way it trembled. She spoke as if a woman under siege; out of breath, an octave too loud, and vibrating with insecurity. Say we got into a battle situation during Zaius (I was eyeing the Taco Bell bag on my kitchen counter). Say we had to run away, or we had to *fight*, or just lift heavy objects, *anything*: Willow would have just been a liability.

Talking to her, I could understand why she was so enamored of Hyman Lidge: he offered her the illusion of *activism*. He indulged her fantasies of real-life superpowers, of high fangirl adventure. **She was a conspiracy groupie.**

And yet, I did feel a sort of *responsibility* regarding her, a protectiveness. Maybe it was also a fear of what she could do to herself, left to her own devices and feeling low and alone.

I regretted making that phone call to her for the rest of my life.

"*You did what?!*"

"I emailed Hyman."

"What? *Fuck!* Wh-why? Do you even *know* him?!"

"It's just that I..."

"You don't even know him, do you?!"

"It wasn't just about you."

"What, you mentioned *me*?! And *Zaius*?!"

"B-briefly..."

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

"Are you fucking *high*?! Shit!"

I had started the phone conversation with Willow standing up and leaning against my refrigerator. By this point, however, I had managed to work my way into a corner by the bathroom, crouched down, the palm of my left hand draped over my forehead and eyes. That low to the ground he scent of old cat urine hovered gently.

(If you're wondering about my cat, she had left my life a while ago, when I had opened up the door to throw away the trash. Calmly walked out the door and down the stairs. I followed her as she nonchalantly left the building, as a tenant opened the door to get in. I followed the cat down the block; she never looked back, never ran. And I never ran to keep up with her, to catch her. Our parting was so anti-climatic.)

"Rick??? I didn't mean to make you angry??? Please don't hate me, Rick???"

"MY NAME IS NOT RICK!!!"

"Whuh...whuhhhhhh..."

"Oh, Jesus..."

To make things even worse, the reception started to break up on the phone, so her cries—which were giant, heaving, choking sobs, actually—stuttered and stopped and started like it was a rap song. I was tired of hearing grown adults cry that day, and shrunk from the responsibility that it was most probably all my fault that they were driven to such a pathetic condition.

"Willow...listen...Willow! Willow, calm down! I'm not angry!"

"Whuhh_uhhhhh(CRACKLE)whuh_uh_uh_uh(CRACKLE)uh--"

"Willow, you're my friend."

"Uhhh—"

(CRACKLE)

*** **

"Rick, I only wanted to help you??? Because my Feeling-Knowingness is going off real strong that this Zaius might be bad...maybe even *disinfo!*"

"Willow, I truly appreciate your concern. *Honestly*. But my Feeling-Knowingness is telling me that Zaius is really a good thing that's going to help humanity and is awesome."

"B-but how can that be if my Feeling-Knowingness is telling me otherwise??? I-if Feeling-Knowingness is *really* the Akashic Record and the voice of Universal Truth, h-how can it be telling us *two different things???*"

"Maybe your Feeling-Knowingness is *broken*."

*** **

"I-if you ever need help, Rick—let me know??? I can help??? I—can!"

"Sure."

*** **

If Hyman was an Illuminati spook, if he was truly disinformation, then I was sure that the Zaius Project was *screwed*. Not that I thought Hyman would have had any sort of first-hand contact with Willow's email. No, I imagined he had a nice little empire set up, with assistants to protect his beautiful mind from the freaks who bought his tapes and attended his seminars. And when the freaks got their shit together, when they got

organized and ready and capable of actually dealing the Illuminati a hint of damage, Hyman probably caught them (via his army of assistants and acolytes) like flies and had that info sent straight to Spook Central.

Hyman—was *bait!*

I dragged a chair up to my kitchen table, its metal legs shuddering against the surface of the worn and stained wooden floor beneath. I sat and gingerly extracted Stuart's gun from the Taco Bell bag. Was it *loaded*? It must have been. How could I check? What secret compartment did I need to flip?

*** **

Kim's message on my wood-tone early 1980s answering machine:

"You're a fucking *asshole*, do you know that? Just when I thought you couldn't possibly outdo yourself in being completely inconsiderate and immature, you prove me wrong. Don't you realize you live in this world with *other people*? You know—other people who *don't* read comic books? Do they *count*, Tod? If they don't buy timeshares in your self-interest, if they don't dazzle you with some intriguing bit of fantasy or witticism, do they rate a scintilla of your *precious* attention? Oh, you decided a long long long ago, Tod—you decided that your precious little world trumped everything else. YOU LEFT YOUR SON WAITING FOR YOU IN FRONT HIS SCHOOL!!!! Now, if you were a *normal* person, I might have worried about you—did Tod get hurt? Was Tod *dead*? What happened to Tod? But I *knew* what happened to Tod. Tod was too caught up in his precious little world to bother picking up his son. And calling and letting me know is just *so hard*! Oh, the effort! Mundane life-tasks...so *beneath* you. So beneath Tod. Because Tod is looking out for *Tod*, and wants to make sure Tod is happy and his attention span engaged. You wanted visitation, *why*? Just so you could keep around

this cute little mini-Tod, that you gave a cute little name to, another character in the comic book of your life. If I had access to your brain, to your *soul*, would it be parceled out in little panels? Is the space within those little panels the only one you have to spare for us Outsiders, us ugly boring *mundanes* who only have to offer you some basic human contact?

Fuck you, you fucking dickhole."

*** **

Hansel Van Halen lived at the edge of Chinatown, the edge of Manhattan, a block away from the bridge on the 4th floor of a thin row of apartments that were flanked on either side by boarded-up commercial space. The sound of traffic was urgent and interminable, as multiple veins fed into the bridge and pumped exhaust and leaked gasoline, the weight and pressure of those mighty vehicles making the trash rattle and my teeth vibrate.

I had carefully picked out the clothing I wore that day; a pair of my black dress pants and a black turtleneck, both clean, pressed, and free of lint. An old messenger bag, which I had first purchased in my early twenties, was slung over my shoulder; it was silver and vinyl and the stickers that graced its surface wore off long ago, leaving nothing but dirty off-white torn-up paper.

Inside the messenger bag was the Taco Bell bag, where my gun was, still wrapped in the fajita paper, bits of red sauce and spices no doubt rubbing off on the weapon's dark gray surface. I had ran a scenario in my head where Hansel frisked me upon entering his apartment, what I would say about the gun. I would say I carried it because I was *damn serious* about his cause. That's what I would say, if he found it at all.

Hansel lived in a shitbox, but it made sense. *True* revolutionaries didn't do things like rent out the Turner Ballroom during a New Age convention and wear yellow velour jogging suits. They lived in *shitboxes*, places that the relentless flow of progress—even in such a heavily processed area as Manhattan—forgot. *True* revolutions were not created on trendy granola-fed campuses by trust-fund babies and the second-generation spawn of cantankerous socialists who have long since moved south to be where it's not quite so cold in the winter. *True* revolutions were created in shitboxes by desperate people who had nothing else to lose, nowhere else to go but up; or, if not exactly up, at least *outward*.

I reached a scratched-up wooden door, the windows painted over in the same dirty white as the rest of it, and checked the address against my printout of Edith's email. To the left were a series of small red buttons, some with names hand-written below them, some taped-over. Hansel's button was taped over. I wasn't sure what to do. I peeled the black electrical tape away and pressed the button. I could hear a faint buzzing coming from inside the building, followed by a loud rippling drone. I pushed the door open with a bit too much effort, and almost fell into the tiled vestibule beyond. A tall stack of Yellow Pages, nearly my height, fell on me and knocked my body down as I made my way to the staircase. I pushed the books off of me, noting the date on one of them: 1996. They were *all* from 1996.

The stairs were steep and irregularly-sized, some as narrow as three inches. I swore to God I saw original Keith Haring graffiti in the poorly-lit peeling halls, stick-figure demons piling cash to a pyramid, and pregnant women in unisex bald heads with "Xs" on their fat bellies.

I finally reached Hansel's apartment, huffing and puffing, my body out-of-shape and still shaken by the phonebook avalanche. A range of stickers graced his metal door

but had been painted over in brown; I could still see a "I love Puerto Rico" decal through the paint. Black electrical tape covered his door buzzer. I knocked hesitantly. When minutes passed and nobody answered, I knocked again a bit louder and put my ear to the cool brown metal surface.

Suddenly the door swung open, and a large muscular man grabbed me by the collar and dragged me inside the dark apartment. The aroma of cigarette smoke hit my nostrils, and I was spun around to meet a giant fist to my forehead.

The last thing I heard was:

"Motherfucker! Motherfucker!"

Chapter Thirteen: The Jar In The File Cabinet

I had reached a point in my life—on the floor, handcuffed to a large file-cabinet and apparently bleeding from my ears—where I realized quite clearly that I had made several grave *errors* in judgment. The errors I recognized were not just those I had committed recently, but had been peppered throughout the whole of my adult life.

I noticed through my brain haze that my left arm was bent back in an unnatural position, resting against a small metal bar that had cut off my circulation. My manacled hands felt like pork chops: alien, pale.

I twisted my head around to face the flat chipped surface of a metal file cabinet. There was a label on the cabinet; on the label was, printed neatly in pen, the word "FGHJGJT."

Despite how shitty I felt, within minutes of waking my mind had cleared up enough to take reasonable stock of my surroundings. In fact, I would say that despite the beating to my skull I had not been of such a clear mind for months.

Before me, sweet Edith Snider was dancing, Batman-style, to the Rolling Stones with a large shirtless man. It was obvious to me that Edith was quite familiar with this person, familiar in the *sexual* sense; and further, that she was quite devoted to him and not devoted to me at *all*. This tall, tanned, mulleted man—this man with a tattoo on his back of a crying Hulk Hogan rising spectre-like over the burning Twin Towers—was none other than Hansel Van Halen, leader of the Zaius Project.

Lying there in a small pool of my own blood, I wondered how long the two would dance, and if I should try to get their attention somehow by perhaps clearing my throat. But no, they continued to dance to a good number of other songs in their dark and dirty apartment, the air thick with nicotine and pot. And no, I did not clear my throat to get their attention.

I shifted the weight of my body as to get some of the feeling back in my hands, and waited patiently for them to notice me; knowing that, no matter what Hansel had to say to me, it was going to be pretty goddamn *entertaining*.

*** **

"WHO SENT YOU?!"

Hansel was squatting down to my level, screaming in my face, his breath reeking of tuna fish and what smelled like paint-stripper. His demeanor had pulled a complete 180-degree turn from the happy-go-lucky and somewhat lascivious-looking fellow who was dancing ass-to-ass with my former potential love-interest, Miss Edith Snider. Hansel's skin up-close was not so much tanned as weathered, rubbed raw by a native sunshine that I was sure this depressed and industrial enclave at the terminus of the island of Manhattan could not provide.

And that's when I had a flash of Hansel knee-deep in his Florida swampwater enclave, building the temporary shelter for His People, all 79 of them. *Hansel Van Halen*, the George Washington of the Zaius Project, architect and presumed first ruler of New Amsterdam.

"*Nobody* sent me..."

"WHO SENT YOU?!"

"Look, you can ask *Edith*..."

But sweet Edith Snider merely put up her hands as if this was not her problem, and turned away to light a joint.

Hansel's teeth were like Chiclets nestled into sagging pink-gray diapers.

"Motherfucker, I will NOT be played. So you'd best tell me everything now. I *know* about the van."

"The van?"

"The black van, been shadowing this block for weeks. First parked across the street, then two blocks down, then perpendicular, then in 34th Street next to the Popeye's."

"I don't even have a car..."

Hansel punched the file cabinet next to my head, leaving a fist-sized dent.

"I WILL NOT RETREAT," he screamed. "I CANNOT BE BROKEN! You can chase me, harass me, send beams into my head, fuck my girl, park right next to Popeye's—but I will NOT be intimidated!"

And as Hansel said these things, screamed these things, he pointed to his cerebellum, pointed at the end of each item on his list of persecutions.

A thought suddenly occurred to me—*had he discovered the gun?* I strained to look over his thick muscle-rounded shoulder for my silver vinyl messenger bag.

Hansel chuckled darkly.

"It's too *late*, anyhow."

"For what?"

"Perhaps *you* should tell *me*."

"What, you mean Zaius?"

And he punched me in the mouth.

*** **

And this, as I remembered from over two decades of reading comic books, was the part of the show where the super-villain stepped back and explained his *entire* plan. Implicit in this act was the fact that the villain in question was going to shoot the hero in the head, put him in a large blue container, and float him out over the Hudson.

Hansel snapped his fingers, and Edith approached the file cabinet upon which I was attached with a set of keys. She unlocked the top cabinet and pulled out a jar swaddled in a filmy tissue-like paper and sawdust. It was the type of jar you'd find eggs in at a bar, only this one was half filled with nothing but what looked like water.

Edith ceremoniously handed the jar to Hansel, who wrapped his large bicep around it like a school-kid would with his books.

"I'm sure you must know what this is, fucker! I'm sure you've heard the *tapes*."

I was now bleeding from both my ears and my mouth, and, despite my normally passive nature, was starting to get *really* annoyed. And as much as I disliked this Hansel fellow, my true and rising enmity was reserved exclusively for Edith.

She attended Hansel with her eyes the way a First Lady would regard her husband during his speech. Complete and *total* devotion. I wondered if I would be the first man to *die* from trusting her, from believing that a random hook-up online or at a convention could lead to some sort of epic true love story.

If I had to compare the two, I would say that I wanted her dead just a *little* bit more.

*** **

"This jar contains grade-A good ol' American monkey virus."

"Monkey virus?"

"Monkey virus."

"*Monkey virus?!?*"

"Yes. Monkey virus."

"W-where—where would you get monkey virus?"

"The Internet."

*** **

"It's only a matter of time until They send out their own virus to thin out the herd anyway," Hansel continued. "It's not a matter of good or bad, but elementary science and mathematics."

My worst subjects.

"If you forgive me saying so, I have a hard time believing that our own government would..."

Hansel's eyes bulged in his head.

"THEY'RE NOT OUR GOVERNMENT! They're their own entity, their own virtual island of contacts with shared bloodlines and interests! New World Order, one-world system? Already here! And *we're* not invited."

I spoke without even thinking; perhaps I was delirious from the blood loss.

"So the crackheads are not invited?"

*** **

At this point, I think I was deaf in one ear as the result of being repeatedly kicked in the head. It was a dumb thing to say to him, I'll admit.

Further: I'll admit that even though I really I did not like this guy—even though I thought he was a crackhead and an idiot—he probably wasn't a full 100% *wrong*, either. Because if a meteor was about to hit Earth, I knew my name would not be on Battlestar Galactica spaceship guest-list. I was *expendable*: a 31-year-old comic book fan and former prescription drug casualty who drew hands like birds and couldn't even keep a planned-obsolescence job.

But more than all that, my hate for Edith Snider was steady and rising. As I lost my dignity and my dreams, primal desires for revenge and restitution asserted themselves. It was so *intense*, this need to get back at Edith and the way she totally boned me, that it took a while to sink in the concept that Hansel Van Halen was essentially talking to me about planned genocide.

I don't know why it was so hard to grasp the full nail-biting horror of that fact. Sure, part of me might have been scared of dying by Hansel's own hands, my torso melting down in his bathtub as he and Edith jitterbugged to "Beast of Burden." It's just that when I pictured that ultimate button-presser, the hangman of humanity, the Doctor Doom-like mastermind that brought the world to his knees—I did *not* picture a

mulleted man with bad breath and a Hulk Hogan tattoo. I pictured Frank Langella or somebody like that.

What did Batman once say on that 1960s TV show? When he was strapped to a giant sno-cone and left to die? "It wasn't supposed to happen that way." Of course, I'm paraphrasing.

"This is *mass murder*," I announced bravely to Hansel. "You'll never get away with it!"

Another snap of Hansel's fingers, and Edith produced a box of disposable face-masks, like the ones Michael Jackson wore to FAO Schwarz. Edith dug her long, beautiful, somewhat nicotine-stained fingers into the box and pulled them out, letting the masks dangle luxuriously from her digits. She was the Vanna White of the Apocalypse.

"You...you *know* that's not really going to protect you two from the virus, right?"

"Fuck that shit," Hansel replied, lifting an army-grade gas mask out of a pile of plastic shopping bags. "We're just gonna sell that shit when people start freaking out."

"Five dollars a mask," Edith chimed in.

"Fuck that shit, girl— *twenty-five!*"

"I love you so *much*, baby..."

"I love you too."

And they went off to a side-room to fuck. Every once in a while I could hear what sounded like a punch, Edith yelping, and then Edith laughing.

I stared at the empty mask that Hansel had left on the floor.

Chapter Fourteen: Six Years Later

Post from 2012: *The Glory Road*

by Nestor Planchette, professional blogger

EXCLUSIVE! HANSEL VAN HALEN'S LAST STAND? MY CONTACT "MICKEY SMITH" TELLS ALL!

If you are still reading this, you must be one of the Chosen.

Just kidding!

But here's another cool story.

Two years ago, I ran into a pornographer at a comic book convention that was held in a church. The man was lit like a torch, barely standing by 6:00 when the exhibitors started packing.

Now, as a matter of full disclosure: *I* was a customer of said pornographer. I'm being very upfront about this, because I know these are the sorts of details that come out on the Internet and are used to discredit you (even though said details have diddly to do with your point). Further, I purchased a very special type of pornography—made-to-order—from said pornographer. *Soft-core fetish porn*. Believe me, the stuff I asked for was *tame* compared to some of his clients.

Anyway, this guy—who I'll henceforth refer to as Mickey Smith, *not* his real name—was very inebriated, and was actually searching me out to talk to specifically. He said he had something to tell me that might be relevant to my non-porn interests. So I helped him pack up his table and roll the whole kit-and-kaboodle down to Dunkin Donuts. I thought the lack of alcohol and a surplus of coffee might be *good* for him. Seriously, I thought if we ended up at one bar or another and started a tab, the guy would be dead.

And, not to be crassly utilitarian about all this, if Mickey Smith died, he'd leave a *lot* of disappointed fans in his wake. The guy drew like a Michelangelo of porn. Such an intuitive grasp of the subject matter and what the client wanted. Knew all the standard comic book superheroines. You could ask him, "draw Halo from *Batman and the Outsiders* handcuffed to a radiator pipe." He *instantly* knew who were talking about, even though that was a relatively obscure character. Sometimes, reference wasn't even necessary. (I never asked for Halo and a radiator pipe, by the way, that was just an example that I saw).

But it wasn't just that Mickey knew the logistics. He really made you *feel* for these figures on the page. I don't know what it was, how he did that. The eyes, maybe?

Mickey Smith even had a best-selling underground book of his art that he was selling at the con featuring nothing but unauthorized pinups of superhero chicks in bondage. The book brought him some legal trouble here and there, but I think he got this group of lawyers familiar with that stuff to rep him pro bono. It was shame that Mickey wasn't getting work from the pros, but when I told him so he just sneered and said to me, "what do I need that bucketful of misery for?"

Anyway, he said that he made so much money from his art that he didn't have to worry about legit gigs anyhow. International clients, deals with porn websites... There was even going to be a little videogame in Flash coming out. He should have been a happy man.

But, just to cut you Moralists off at the pass—I don't think the subject matter of his illustrations was what was dogging Mickey Smith. A \$50 8x11-incher with some naked lady on it ain't the most important thing, it's not the thing it all hinges on. It's *not* what's going to end Society.

I mean *literally* end it.

Mickey asked me at Dunkin Donuts,

"You've ever heard of Hansel Van Halen?"

*** **

Okay, so my ears picked up at the mention of that name. And I'm sure *yours* did too. A minor god in the realm of post-Cold War conspiracy theory. I had several original Van Halens and a few Xeroxes—all scored at conspiracy-cons. Typed on a goddamn manual typewriter, with smeary fingerprints, assorted stains, a squashed cockroach here and there. Realer than *shit*. *Amazing* stuff. You really pictured that this guy was going to end up assassinated somewhere, and when the rumors started that the CIA blew his head off in a Manhattan tenement, it didn't surprise you any.

So I told Mickey "yes," I heard of him. "Why?"

Before my companion would tell me anything, he made a very pointed preface. And he stressed the preface with a pointy finger, a grim preface like those anti-defamation Italians before the TV showing of *The Godfather*. He said,

"I might be totally off-base on a lot I'm going to tell you. Partially, as you might have surmised, because I have a pretty bad drinking problem. And partially, because I really think I might be disinformation."

"Disinfo?"

"*Disinfo.*"

"And you're not sure if you are disinfo or not?"

"I think...I think I might have *assassinated* Hansel Van Halen."

I almost shit my pants. Thus the public portion of my conversation with Mickey Smith endeth.

*** **

If Mickey Smith was a MKULTRA experiment who could go off at the sound of an as-of-yet undiscovered trigger word, perhaps accompanying him to his Ditmas Park

apartment wasn't the smartest thing I've ever done. But though I had my contacts here and there, I was never *this* close to anything worth a damn. Most of what I knew and wrote—including the stuff here—has been the result of book and Internet research. I never did much footwork, though God knows I always *wanted* to.

Together me and Mickey Smith rolled his large wheeled cart through streets that upon first glance appeared industrial, blank brick-face. But if you squinted in the right way, a number of slim shops, restaurants, and galleries opened up to view, two dimensions sliding into three like origami. It was way into the evening at this point, maybe 11 or 12, and a moon hung in the sky that looked too large.

Mickey spoke to me in his usually quiet, soft voice as we reached his apartment:

"You like this neighborhood, Planchette?"

"It's okay."

"People say it's a real up-and-comer."

And then he took out this big chain full of keys from his pocket, and methodically counted off each key until he found the right one.

*** **

Mickey's apartment was almost completely unfurnished and unadorned, utterly utilitarian in appearance. Nothing but a drawing table, art supplies, a futon, a

bureau, a stack of comics and books, and a large coffee can on the floor with some sort of dark liquid and cigarettes floating in it. No posters, no pictures, no masks or carvings from an overseas trip. No toys, no trinkets, no postcards. The apartment was definitely *stale*, but it wasn't dirty. It was like nobody lived there, ate there, shit there, or fucked there. I would have guessed that it was just a studio, and that Mickey really didn't live there at all, but for the fact that he constantly referred to it as "my apartment."

Mickey rolled his cart to the far end of the main room, at the exact midpoint between his two uncurtained windows. Then he went to his bureau, rummaged through the top drawer, and produced from under a mound of plaid underwear and white socks a journal. This journal, a standard marble-patterned school-boy notebook, was stained a deep, hard brown. And that deep, hard brown, Mickey told me, was Hansel's *blood*.

"When I got there in the bedroom, his head was completely gone," Mickey told me as I stood there in that wide, white room. "Just part of a lower jawbone that was flipped around on impact. That was all that was left."

"And you think *you* did that?"

"I think...*Willow* did."

"Was Willow an assassin, you think?"

"No. No...Willow wasn't an assassin. Willow was just *crazy*."

"Was she your *girlfriend*?"

"She was my Internet-friend."

"She shot him?"

"She exploded his head."

"With a gun?"

"No. With her eyes."

*** **

And then he said:

"She can look at people...and explode them with her eyes. Pick them up like dolls using her mind and twist them in two different directions and make their insides spill out."

*** **

And then Mickey, apparently sobering up and deeply regretting what he told me, rushed me out of his apartment. Literally pushed me out, not in a mean way. But pushed me, so a little Mexican rug by the front door got bunched up at my feet.

"Keep the book," I heard him say as he shut the door. And that was when I realized that I had the book. And I thought: "Sweet!"

*** **

These are the facts, as best as I can piece together through the journal and my standard research:

Franky Garcia Marquez was born to a middle-class family in Los Angeles in 1971. Desperate to give Franky the type of life they never had, his parents homeschool the boy and forbid him to play with the neighborhood children. He was shipped out to the suburbs for scheduled playdates, his only contact with kids his age. Franky called these playmates "The Devil's Children." He wrote,

"The ten years from birth to adolescence are like *centuries*. You are brought into the world in the 1970s and then here you are, fully conscious, in a brand new decade. The Devil's Decade, surrounded by the Devil's Children."

All this talk of devils landed Franky in a child psychiatrist's office, of a "Dr. J." Franky was put on a series of *medications*, with limited and sporadic success. Upon graduating high school, he immediately enlisted in the army—also with limited and sporadic success, his tour of duty in Iraq terminated early with a medical discharge.

He tries Scientology for a season, as well as Mormonism, Jehovah's Witness, and the Unarians. He refers to these forays into alternate belief systems cryptically as "school." He expresses a desire to start some sort of organization or religion of his own, but laments his lack of a consistent cosmology.

When we next hear of Franky, he has changed his name to Hansel Van Halen and is writing the conspiracy-laden tracts with which we are so familiar. Some of these tracts are co-authored by an Edith Snider, his live-in girlfriend.

According to Hansel Van Halen's journal, he was hired by a large unnamed organization to spread a substance he refers to as "monkey virus" across Manhattan. And whether Mickey pulled the trigger or even his fantasy super-chick with the freaky eyes did it, one thing was perfectly clear: this organization wanted to get rid of the evidence. But they did it too quickly. Because New York City was never hit with monkey virus.

But it was hit by a series of terrorist attacks along the same timeframe. Exploding cars and mailboxes. Electrical malfunctions and isolated blackouts. And, as I'm sure you all remember, the *coup de gras*: a plane falling out of the sky like a stone, smack into Midtown. The mainstream news reported that a Islamic terrorist organization took responsibility for the attack. But.

Wasn't it *weird* that these so-called terrorist incidents—more than 60 reported separate incidents over a 12-hour period—happened on the same day Hansel Van Halen was set to release monkey virus into the populace?

Who hired Hansel Van Halen?

*** **

Hansel Van Halen, the man formerly known as Franky Garcia Marquez, was quite taken with a comic book called *Watchmen*. Franky first read it in his teens. He wrote later,

"It was as if this book saw me *naked*."

Just another crazy comic book nerd, right? But his handler, from the large unnamed organization, referred to himself as "Ozymandias." Hansel took this as proof-positive that the organization was somehow "reading his wavelength," synced to the comic book he so loved. Thus Hansel—normally not the most trusting lad in the world—put his full confidence in said organization. But how did the organization know that Hansel/Franky had such a hard-on for *Watchmen*?

Hansel writes,

"I guess Dr. J had his hands full with me. I wouldn't look at him when he spoke. He was obviously the devil—I *felt* that. The *very* devil. Then he tried to butter me up by giving me comics to read. But they were just devil comics, from a devil culture that even at that age I knew was corrupt and undermining our race. Then one day he gave me this weird comic book. It didn't have superheroes like they are commonly shown. And I actually took it home and *read* it. And I realized that this wasn't really a comic book. It was a *blueprint*. It was written just for *me*. The doctor confirmed this. And that day I realized I would fulfill my destiny, and I also knew how I would be *destroyed*. And how I would live on."

There was so much blood on that journal, on that little notebook, I had momentary fantasies that I would catch hepatitis from it.

Chapter Fifteen: ...And We're Back.

I had managed to free one of my hands from the cuffs, though the metal scratched my wrist up so bad I thought I had slashed it. I maneuvered and twisted my body so as to be in a position to drag the file-cabinet with me as I slowly crawled across the room—crawled to my bag on a counter-top with some of its contents sprawled on the floor beneath it. After moving a few feet, awkwardly holding onto the wall's baseboard for leverage, breaking and splintering off the tips of my nails, it was clear to me that if I went on I'd either break my wrist or arouse the attention of Hansel and Edith.

The pain was *excruciating*. I was aware, in a queerly dissociated way, that I was choking back sobs—from the pain, and for the fact that I found myself an unwitting accessory to an urban Apocalypse.

I couldn't reach the bag, but the cell phone was close enough on the floor for me to graze it with my fingertips. I felt my skin break around my remaining handcuff as I stretched to hook that phone with my hand. My tongue stuck out of my mouth in concentration and distress, bent and curved like a question mark.

*** **

I called Stuart.

No, I didn't call 911. You must understand, I was in *terror*. I didn't want to end up in Guantanamo for some dumb shit I didn't even do. I thought I could fix things before it got to that point. I thought there had to be some way I could *extricate* myself. I could

extricate myself, stop the monkey virus, not got shot, life back to normal. Get a new job, straighten out my life, not get shot, not go to jail, stop monkey virus. Live to be 80, looking back at this, laughing.

I was sobbing.

"Can I talk to Stuart please?"

"Who is this?"

"Can I talk to Stuart?"

"This is Stuart's mom. Are you a friend of his?"

"Please, could I talk to Stuart?"

"Could I pass a message on to him?"

"*Stuart*, please."

*** **

Failing to reach Stuart, I made a mental inventory of the rest of my friends and family; both lists being stale and unrefreshed over these many years. I was shocked at how many connections I just let *die*, the number of casual acquaintances made in this casual, shallow set of islands far outnumbering anything that would survive possible

monkey virus involvement. I next considered calling Kim and telling her to take Brendan out of the city, that they were in danger of the virus; but I knew Kim wouldn't believe me. I knew the boy would be as good as dead anyway, *infected*, dead in a pile somewhere.

I had no credibility to stop any of this.

*** **

"Hello???"

"Willow, listen to me carefully and don't hang up."

"Rick??? Your voice is so faint??? Are you ill???"

"You were right about everything. We're all in big trouble now."

"But I don't want to be right if it means you're so sad???"

*** **

Willow continued,

"You sound so sad, Rick. Have you been crying???"

*** **

And then, after I explained everything to her, gave her the Reader's Digest version of the impending doom that even at this late date I simply refused to swallow my pride and fear about and call 911 and fucking prevent, Willow said purposefully:

"I can take care of this. But I will probably have to leave the house to do so???"

"D-do you have any weapons?"

"Yes???"

*** **

And so I slumped back on the floor in the knowledge that I probably sent this friend, this fake Internet friend, to her death. My head hot and puffy-feeling from the sobbing and the stress, I fell asleep.

*** **

When I awoke, I found the slightly elongated head of a pretty long-haired albino, part of her white head and hair looking like it had been cast in an unmovable shadow, greeting me, smiling at me. She had small chunks of something caught in her long white eyelashes, slightly larger chunks sliding down that static shadow on her skin; her white cotton overall-dress, oddly antiquated in design, was dappled in that same wet shadow.

I then heard the click of my handcuff, so loud I thought it would wake Hansel and send him raging into the room with one of those hunting knives with the compass-balls on the handle tip.

I was *free*. The handcuff opened by itself, that much I know. I do not know the mechanism by which this happened—other than, in retrospect, to assume that Willow Wiccavamp performed the act. Performed it by little waves emanating from that elongated white head.

She brushed a tiny globule of Hansel Van Halen's brain matter away from her eyelashes with the back of her long, pale, limp hand. She brushed that spongy granule away from her face the way a little kid would do, when awakened from a long dreamy sleep.

I could hear the steady choking moans of Edith in the next room. Edith didn't cry like any person I've heard before, it was more like a growl of discomfort from deep within a cat's throat—hitting a crack in the record, then repeating. But she was *bereft*, I knew that much, robbed of her soulmate not by the phalanx of SWAT team members or police that she had always envisioned, but by an odd-looking stranger.

She felt *robbed*, I knew, and it was no surprise when she emerged from the room with a large thin knife, aimed straight at Willow's back, the growl wider and higher.

My friend Willow Wiccavamp, my fake Internet friend whom I had met in a chatroom for nutjobs, barely turned around to face her would-be attacker; just glanced at her and froze her by lifting her up in the air via those little invisible brainwaves. Edith bobbed up and down like a boat on the emissions from that long pale head, maybe a foot away from the ceiling, sometimes turning slightly left, slightly right. And then the two halves of Edith Snider, the top and the bottom, they began to turn in opposite

directions, turn and not stop, not stop though I could hear myself screaming to Willow to stop.

And Edith burst, never having a last word, too speechless to process the unanticipated details of her ending.

*** **

It was so easy, and so anticlimactic, the path from calling Willow to the carnage in that smelly, smoky tenement apartment. So *fast*—what, within an hour-and-a-half?

Dear Willow Wiccavamp, she explained to me that she was relatively *local*, having inherited a Greenwich Village flat that had been in her family for three generations. And she was the last one of her kind, the last Wiccavamp, and she lived oh-so-alone in that house full of antiques, quietly exploring her abilities in a vacuum, sending out for books to entertain her.

She described the early days of Willow Wiccavamp's burgeoning adolescence, how she started her book collection with just *one* paperback, and how that paperback had a list in the back of *other* books to purchase, and she just mailed away and mailed away for book after book, creating a virtual catalog of publications from the carefully torn-out lists from other books.

"I took these lists and lined them up??? You know, and cut them down using the smallest as a template???"

Oh yes, and then she taped the pages together, taped each page to each, each to each, until she had her catalog. And then came the Internet:

"It was just like my *catalog*, you know???"

And she continued, as the smell of fresh meat permeated the apartment, soaked ever deeper into her hair (I had ventured on my shaky legs to Hansel's bedroom, stepping over the piles of Edith that covered my path in irregular mounds).

"What an amazing world it was! A catalog of nothing but *books*, all the books of the world??? A catalog of news, and a catalog of motion pictures, and a catalog of people??? I dreamed of combining it all into just one portal, just one book—"

"WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO?!"

*** **

To the casual observer (assuming any observer to such a scene of abject carnage could possibly be casual), it appeared as if somebody had blown Hansel's head off with a powerful rifle or automatic weapon. His body lay on the floor, in the midst of a shag rug, a halo of blood and pulverized flesh streaming upward and outward from his neck. I heard Willow's voice sneak up from behind me:

"Are you mad??? He was going to hurt you???"

I barked vomit, simply barked it up from my abdomen.

And then:

"Rick??? Tell me you're not *mad*???"

And then, the lights flickering in the apartment:

"Just tell me you're not mad, Rick??? Just tell me now *please*???"

I only had one brief, shining moment of clarity, of anything *close* to resembling the right thing to do. I said to her, without even looking at her:

"There is a jar in the top file-cabinet. It's full of *virus*. I need you to *kill* the virus. No—no dear Willow, don't open the lid. You can kill them. I *know* you can. You can kill them without ever lifting a finger, kill them with your mind, burst their little hearts, all billions of them. Picture they are *Edith*—picture they are the woman you just killed. That you just *killed*, precious Willow, killed with your *mind*. Kill the virus, Willow."

And as she did so, I tossed my phone in my bag and ran like hell out of the apartment.

*** **

As I heard Willow's feet follow me down the staircase, as I felt the stairs vibrate and buckle, I screamed so loud. And she called after to me, hurt:

"BUT I LEFT THE HOUSE FOR YOU!!! I LEFT THE HOUSE FOR YOUUUU!!!!"

*** **

Willow, Willow you loved me and I hurt you so bad. I couldn't even imagine what you had gone through, in that great interior drama that rattled in your long head. No girlfriends to confide in, no girlfriends to gain any sort of perspective with. You called out to me that you loved me, that you were *sorry*, that if only you had some sort of direction in your life, you'd grow up to be a fine person.

In your eyes, I was like a minor god. You were in love with me but you never even saw me before that day. You were in love with a tiny picture of Harrison Ford, marrying that image with my kind words.

But they were only patronizing words. I felt *sorry* for you, Willow. And there was no bridge from my pity to my terror and disgust for the unnaturalness of your condition and existence. There was no *wonder*, no *awe* for the true and terrible goddess before my eyes. As the skies darkened, as I ran through the streets, never looking back, a streetlamp exploding over my head, I felt nothing but *terror* for you, Willow.

But *love*? Never. And not to this very day. You were and are an abomination.

Chapter Sixteen: Tod's Massive Fuck-Up, Part One

The world was literally *ending*, at least north of Harlem and west of Queens and Brooklyn. Using my Feeling-Knowingness—which had miraculously snapped back into action following the betrayal and subsequent expiration of sweet Edith—I could see in my mind Willow staggering in the streets, her long hair covering her face, arms out like a zombie, a long whine sounding from crooked lips.

Her pink eyes were barely visible from between her long eyelashes as she squinted in the tear-streaked agony of heartbreak, and these eyes were continually bombarding the world—our material world, *maya*, slow-vibrating molecules—with her invisible beams of pure power. Not the power of boardrooms, not the personal power self-help gurus tout to a gullible public hungry for some semblance of control in their miserable lives. **This was the power of an impersonal deity who thought to store all the destructive potential of existence inside an emotionally-arrested lesser being.**

I worked my way Uptown, still running, the sounds and smells of a number of small thoughtless explosions flickering and twinkling all around me. People ran out of restaurants and shops, and people ran into them.

Everywhere, a desire on the increasingly hysterical populace to find a comforting end-point where they were finally safe and well-informed. But they would stay off-kilter for quite some time, insisting to each other that this couldn't *possibly* be happening, because they paid their dues already with 9/11 in New York City and that was it no more disasters and offensive attacks on familiar landmarks for them.

Familiar landmarks: they didn't even need to be tourist destinations, they could have been your mailbox, even those ugly little plastic houses on the curbs that held the real-estate listings. Familiar services taken for granted: *electricity*. The electric was going out, in waves. You should have seen it in Times Square, it went in and out in chunks, actual squares of light and darkness cutting through layers of overlapping signage. It was so random, yet so finely-sculpted, like modern art, the temper tantrum of the Goddess.

And as I passed the 40s, aimless, the world and the police cars and the ambulances and the TV news vans and the fluttering masses of people going in and out of buildings, lights going in and out in squares—as I passed the 40s, I heard the boom.

The impact knocked me onto the concrete. My phone rang. It was Willow's number.

"I'm home now, Rick. I'm so tired. Hyman is coming over. He *believes* me now. He asked me to prove it, and I *did*. I proved it to him. He's coming over right now."

I watched the huge plume of blackness and fire rise up over the skyscrapers and said to her in a voice not angry or panicking but calm and almost lyrical:

"He'll *never* get there, Willow. They'll close everything off."

"I'm going to hold it all *open* for him, Rick."

I fantasized that Hyman was going over there to kill Willow, to prevent her from doing any more damage to a world that admittedly was shitty but didn't deserve all this. But I knew he wasn't going to do that. I knew / was going to have to do that.

That's why Stuart gave me the gun, the gun in the Taco Bell bag that Hansel never found. And it wasn't my fault, *any* of this. The glass raining down in the distance, the shrieking mania of the scene. Willow was going to go off anyhow, it was just a matter of time. It might have been as she trolled the nutjob message boards upon which I met her. It might have been as she passed a particularly painful turd. It could have happened at *any* time. The important thing was, I knew my destiny. I was meant to stop her and save the world.

But, unlike presumably Hyman Lidge, I couldn't get through. The cops, they waved me away like the cockroach I was, pushing me further and further Uptown. And so, with no place left to go, I decided to visit my ex-wife and son.

*** **

The first words Brandon uttered as he saw me at the door was,

"*Mooooommmmm...*"

Kim and Mr. Clean were watching the continuing disaster on the large flat-screen livingroom TV set when my son brought me in. The apartment, across the street from Central Park, was like a small house; not a single concession to fact of urban living.

How did Kim bag somebody like Mr. Clean? When I met her, she was on the same level as me: our education, socio-economic markers, dreams, outlook. She even borrowed my comic books. I lent her my trade of *Watchmen*, and she loved it.

What the fuck happened?

Kim turned to me from the plush beige couch, her hand brushing a tear away from her face.

“Isn’t it terrible what happened with that plane? There’s so many people dead.”

*** **

Attempting to explain to Kim and Mr Clean what had really happened turned out to be a mistake, a miscalculation that converged *perfectly* with Clean finding the gun in the Taco Bell bag, pulling it out of my silver vinyl messenger bag effortlessly like a child. He restrained me, knee in the small of my back, tying my hands as Kim called the police. Kim, endlessly parroting over my head:

"The terrorists already *admitted* to it! They already already admitted to it on CNN!"

"How do you know for *sure*? Were you *there*, Kim? *Were you fucking there?!* Tell me!"

*** **

"Tell me, you bitch— *were you fucking there?!* Tell meeeeeeeee!!!!!"

*** **

Kim and Mr. Clean left me tied up alone in the kitchen, the two presumably huddling in some other wing of the apartment, trying to process the ugly assault my damaged soul had on their beautiful minds. I was surprised the police hadn't arrived yet. I was so *tired*, and part of me wanted to just surrender. The TV was still playing, and I heard the president promise he would bomb some villain into the stone age for the attacks on New York.

Mr. Clean, who always took such effort to be nice to me, who always took such effort to show Brendan and Kim that he was awesome, said: "You're just tired and scared, Tod. We *all* are. It's *okay*. You just need some *meds* to chill out. You just need to get on some Pacifax."

*** **

Brendan entered the room. It was plain to see he was a little hesitant. Even *scared*. The exhaustion in his face mirrored mine. He had Stuart's gun in his hand and my messenger bag over his shoulder.

He put the gun on the kitchen table and started untying me.

"Does this mean you *believe* me, son?"

"It means I *love* you."

Chapter Seventeen: Tod's Massive Fuck-Up, Part Two

Post from 2012: *The Glory Road*

by Nestor Planchette, professional blogger

EXCLUSIVE! MICKEY SMITH CONFIRMS THE HANSEL VAN HALEN AND HYMAN LIDGE CONNECTION!

The next time I saw Mickey Smith, was at a show in Philly. It was crazy how this guy took over the con, considering how theoretically *illegal* his whole trade was. But his patrons didn't care, they weren't hung up on the whole "official" thing.

By this time, Mickey had drawn a whole 8-page comic story featuring *The Jumper*, with everybody naked and fucking. *Published* the goddamn thing, too. I didn't know if Mickey did it just for the *balls* of the stunt, or just out of some legal "deathwish," daring Veritas Comics to sue him. If you asked Mickey, I think he would plainly tell you he did it for the money.

Did pornographers ever get turned on by their own work? Mickey told me he hadn't had an orgasm in *years*, not after he caught his acquaintance fucking Hyman Lidge. Yes, *Senator* Hyman Lidge.

"Nobody laughs at Hyman Lidge anymore," Mickey lamented as he gulped another shot down at the bar, his art-cart wrapped up and parked beside us. "Nobody laughs, because they're afraid his wife will explode their head. He uses her, and frankly *she* uses *him*. They're mutual bastards who found the secret of life."

"And what's the secret of life?"

"Finding someone whose dysfunction perfectly matches yours, so that you can both function in this shitty shitty world. It is *truly* a chemical reaction, molecules bonding upon sight, upon proximity with each other's aura. And that is what happened to Hyman and Willow, the rest of the world be damned. And it was."

"So what are you *telling* me, Mickey?"

"Willow contacted Hyman Lidge and insisted to him that she had some sort of freaky superpowers. Hyman told Willow—thinking she was just another of his tinfoil hat legion of schizophrenics and paranoids—to prove that she really *had* those powers. And to do something BIG. And so she did. And so she did, with those little waves from her head. And Hyman looked at the destruction in her wake and pronounced it— MAGNIFICENT. It was like *art* to him, an abstract; void of human emotion."

Mickey ordered another drink with a flick of his hand to the bartender and continued.

"Now *I*, I sort of saw it all as art too. But like the *Inferno*. Like Revelations. Something massive and full of a horror that strikes you mute. But to people like Hyman, it boils down to *opportunities*, because that's how he lives. That's his reference point to the universe. Opportunities."

"And your friend Willow?"

"It boiled down to love. But not a *normal* love. And the only love Hyman was capable of giving was not normal. So it all worked out. Except for all the dead people. And the ones to come. Because they think they can *control* Willow. Hyman thinks he can control her. But it's not *like* that. They're *underestimating* her."

"You went over her house that day to *shoot* her?"

"I thought that was my Purpose. But I was wrong."

"And what *is* your purpose, Mickey?"

"I draw soft-core fetish porn. And sometimes hard-core."

Chapter Eighteen: Acceptance

I had failed to *kill* Willow, opting instead to stand awkwardly in her doorway as Hyman —who had just fucked the albino young woman and was standing there one-armed and naked—laughed at me and told me I was crazy. He told me that he heard from her that I was a former *drug addict*, and surmised that I was probably hallucinating from “time-lapsed withdrawal syndrome.”

And he let me onto a little secret: **he said there was no conspiracy.** And that I misinterpreted pretty much *everything* he wrote and said. And that he loved Willow very much; so much so, in fact, that they were getting married as *soon* as possible.

And I called him a *liar*, and a *cheat*, and a *Judas*, and he just kept laughing. In pictures he never smiled so big, nor looked so radiantly happy, as he did in front of me that day.

And Willow looked so happy too. And I hollered:

"There's so many people dead! Don't you fucking care?!"

And they just continued to *smile*, and in my peripheral vision I could see they had linked hands.

I left Willow's apartment and decided to kill myself. And I went to an area off of St. Mark's Place, a side-street, where people neither saw me nor cared if they did see

me, and I took the gun to my chest and planned to shoot it through my heart. Because I had not only failed in a material aspect, I had failed as a *human being*.

I was *not* a pleasant person.

Even in the face of terrible tragedy and loss, I was *still* filled with the same petty anger and jealousy I had before. I didn't learn to hate my ex-wife less. I still harbored a disgusting sense of *satisfaction* seeing Edith die. And I still hadn't a clue what to do with my life. I felt no sense of meaning. Not even a sense of *God*. At least when I was younger I sort of had *that*, even if it was somewhat inconsistent.

Now, it was all *dark*: no money, no job, no meaning, in a thuggish universe where people died horrible deaths for no reason, at the whim of the cruel, insane, greedy, or merely banal.

And that was when I saw the fetish porn guy.

It was that man from that comic convention, from so many months ago. The man in the trenchcoat with the shopping bags full of porn. He was walking across the street. I don't even think he saw me. But I saw *him*! What a coincidence, I thought.

And the man, he still had the bags of porn one in each hand. And I felt so...*energized*. Like I was having a religious experience.

Suddenly, it *all* made sense. And I heard a voice inside of me say,

"Draw fetish porn. Do this, and your life will change forever."

And you know? That's *exactly* what I did.

THE END