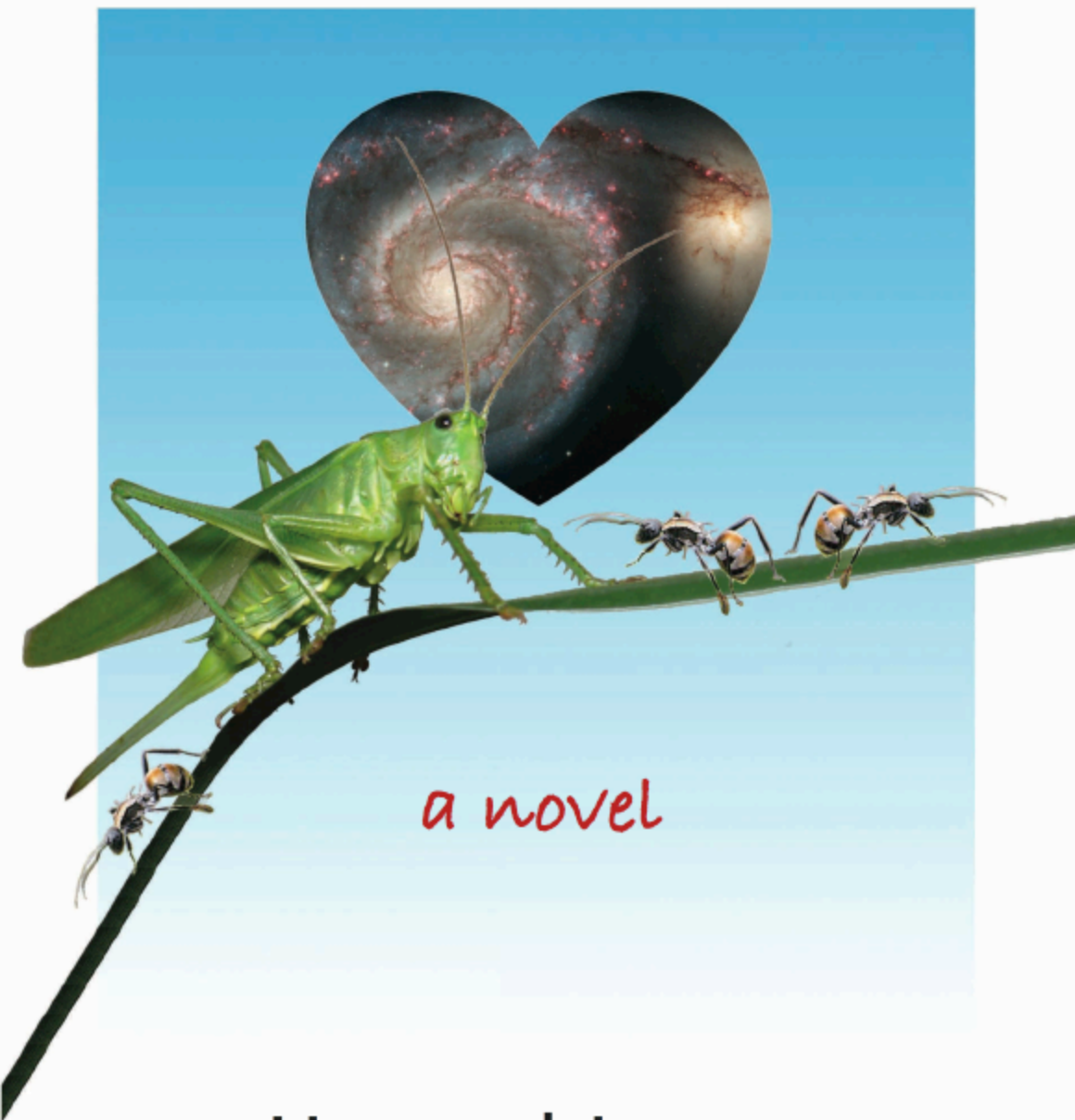


O, Wow



a novel

Howard Jones

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To
the imaginal compass
of
Carl Dockery

~ 1 ~

“Run, Ants! Run! Scatter! Shatter! Splatter! Latter tatter!”

A lithe and slight-framed young man bellows across converging streams of men, women and children. Most are afoot. Many push or pull slapdash conveyances weighed down by haphazard remnants of possessions tossed together on short notice. A few bicycles dart like sparrows among pedestrians indifferently avoiding collision or hindrance. Occasionally someone flashes a fingered rebuke or yells back into his hoarse cant: “Run. Run. Run. You built it . . . now it’s falling all around you! Fall! All! Appall! Fol-der-ol! Babel fable treble table, Mabel’s able devil shovels revel . . . Ants pant slant rants . . . paint . . . faint . . . taint . . . saint . . . ain’t” Burbled out of both rhyme and breath, he resorts to mutely aping those who cross his baleful eye.

His companion, Kristin Banner, looks wearily back to where he has taken his stand to berate this anonymous throng trudging warily by him into the gaping maw of the Holland Tunnel. On a day such as this, among these distressed evacuees, Peter Dooley is just another oddity to be ignored or escaped.

They are leaving Manhattan Island. Along with countless others they have joined a swelling exodus of Gotham Seaboard: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, DC. Decades of fiscal woe and bureaucratic neglect have deteriorated vital services. Recently hurricane Moira devastated urban infrastructure along the coast, especially on and around Long Island and lower Manhattan. Now televue suddenly is rampant in threats and speculation of smuggled nuclear devices, of plagues unleashed, of booby-trapped bridges, of numbered days.

Brushing aside a stray lock of copper red hair from green and canny eyes, Kristin waits for exhaustion to end his impromptu exhortations. She slips into refuge of a battered and abandoned security check booth. Scarred, metal-sheathed concrete pylons shield against the onrushing horde of pilgrims weighed down by all they might carry or haul along in impromptu freight. Swarming physics of bouncing fleshly particles, they advance into the darkened gape of the tunnel. Occasional bicyclists dismount before the entrance and prepare to push their wheels along into its straited netherworld.

“We should have gotten bicycles while they were still available,” she chides no one in particular.

Dooley does not hear, or pretends not to hear. Or does not care. He stares edgily about. Eyes float as two bright blue corks, rimmed in wary white. They bob across the river of traffic. Each glance tosses blue darts from beneath his haloing wreath of exuberantly silver hair. Physically unimposing, in his mid-twenties, Dooley does not present any daunting obstacle.

Like flotsam he is nudged and buffeted toward where she waits. He stares vaguely at her for a moment, then looks away, as if he cannot quite recall how they met. He is making spitting sounds with tongue inserted against teeth. Nervous tics flicker at his eyes.

Kristin leans back against the booth. Her backpack, legacy of rather distant student days, settles onto a concrete ledge, relieving her shoulders of its burden: a few belongings and provisions she managed to hurriedly toss together as they anguished whether to get out now.

How many protein bars to . . . to wherever? Maybe Harrisburg? What then?

Ancient slatherings of graffiti have been flung across a far wall. *Perps Stalk Twerps That Talk* vies with *New Yuck New Yuck* and *BERSERKERS RULE!* She glances across, but does not really read, an elaborately sprayed ontological credo: *Teleological Hereafter-Enraptured International Sectarian Movements give GOD-HEAD!*

An unlikely froth of human guises sway and play like bath bubbles dancing at a drain. They pause, turn, then commit to the plunge. Beyond, from tunnel depths quaver echoes of shuffling footsteps, distraught children, shouts and curses of irate adults. Leery young crews, mostly male, saunter along. Gang signs flicker nervous fingers to troll tribal reassurances among reckless crowdings. They weigh favors and follies of diverse neighborhoods and boroughs. Caution watches for hints of companionable relief and blusters against yet unseen jeopardy.

How can this be happening?

A shimmering wash of luminous images, hardly visible in full daylight, plays spook games about Dooley's torso. Real bodies bump against his but the actual bodies ignore, or do not notice, his encircling wraiths of The Three Stooges, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd who taunt and rebut each intrusion into his spectrally squired body space. Flailing weakly, washed

dim in the brilliant flare of early autumn sunlight, the capering specters go largely unseen.

Kristin grimaces impatience. She reaches across to curtly switch off his iLink limner. Its glowing holofield of swirling buffoonery dies.

“Will you stop jerking off that crap? We don’t have many power paks left.”

He ignores her scold to resume his tirade against milling antagonism, shouting toward the shuffling parade, “You think you can escape *Al Quidproquo*?”

“*Quid pro quo*’ . . . do you mean, ‘*Qaeda*’?” Kristin puzzles aloud for clarification.

Dooley ignores her question to mount into raging glosso-lalia, “*Jive hive wives strive live knives . . . bust rust just us lust . . . double rubble trouble bubble . . .*”

“Pete, I don’t like that. Stop! . . . look at me . . . Pete! Peter! Look at me!” Her voice lunges toward panic to lift above the din. She pounds his back with a fist, as if to save him from some choking obstruction. A lightly fetid breeze swirls smoke and the powdery smell of charred concrete as crowds amble on by, uncaring, unaffected.

Dooley snaps his head back and forth, bewildered to so suddenly return from frenetic reverie. She sees him fight an urge to switch on the limner. Looking back toward roiling columns of smoke rising in the distance he seems to be reconsidering or wondering or simply lost at sea. His head pivots to gaze distractedly at the tunnel maw . . . pondering options?

He watches her for a moment, puzzling through some secret conundrum until his mystified child voice asks, “Banner Ant, where can he be?” and vagrant gaze drifts haplessly back across the shuffling throng to dismiss its clamor, “These Ants are all useless, stupid . . . nasty.”

“Banner Ant?” she glances sharp appraisal but finds no suggestion of malice. Her gut coils to counter a threatening

flood of emotion. She looks away, thinks for a moment, then forces her voice flat, “He went missing . . . when Bill died.” Looking back, she watches worry tease Dooley’s expression, then surmises, “Your iLink is trolling for his signal . . . that’s what’s bugging you, isn’t it? It’s constantly polling, where’s Ant?” Dooley does not answer but looks back into the tunnel adit as if reckoning its gaping prospect. She reminds him, “If you’d leave it switched off, it wouldn’t nag you that he’s gone. It’s up to you.”

From a passing euPhone a gravelly voice delivers a snatch of some song recently gone viral,

*People in the alley way watch empty streets go by
Thinking of another day when margins melted from the sky.
Hydrants overflow into scattered flower beds,
Diminishing the water given to the dead
In their all-consuming fire
While Lazarus in the choir of Angels
Doesn't really want to watch a rich man in his thirst.*

After a long while he removes his belt and reaches for her left hand, “Put this on your arm.”

“But what . . . ?”

“It’ll be dark in there.” His voice is mechanical, “This will help keep us from getting separated.”

He places the belt, looped through its buckle, over her left wrist. The other end of the impromptu leash he wraps around his right wrist to hold tightly in his fist. Kristin winces uncertainly as the loop tightens, but accepts the bond as together they gauge the best path toward the tunnel adit.

A man and woman are passing by, pushing a supermarket shopping cart loaded with clothing and assorted gear. Bruised boxes and fraying plastic bags strain to retain these few remaining possessions. In the toddler seat a young girl perches happily; her legs clack a persistent rhythm, mimicking cart wheel

chatter against the pavement. Recognizing him from televue, the girl laughs and waves delight across her parents' shoulders, back toward the object of her discovery, "Look, Mama, it's Grasshopper!"

Neither parent pays any attention; they press on into shadows fallen just before the entrance. To Kristin the child's bright joy seems especially damning of their unfolding plight, but Dooley pays no attention to his young fan. Then, again, he has not much noticed fans since the untimely death of his partner, her brother, Bill Banner.

They step out from the toll booth to rejoin the hapless scramble.

"Can't we just hold hands?" Kristin tugs fretfully at the belt leash.

"No. This is better."

No hint why it is better. She peers closely at him as they transition from bright sun into cavern dimness.

He seems to wish she were not with him. Some old hints of resentment have lately resurfaced, percolating out of residues and stresses that once nearly foiled their raucous and sudden celebrity. Peter Dooley and Bill Banner had become comic mascots of a *Federal Emergency Response Administration, Llc. (FERAL)* public relations effort meant to soften public reaction to sudden and even more austere government policies imposed amid worsening economic tribulations occasioned in ongoing wars and besieged financial markets.

Serialized propaganda campaigns aimed at going viral across maxnet video sites sought to redress decades of profligacy. Preaching an ethic of hard work, frugality and stoic forbearance, Ant and Grasshopper recently sprang through televue spots and occasional, carefully managed public appearances to cheer lead public awareness in revised invocations: America has grown too lavishly cavalier. Save more. Waste

less. Shop, always shop, but be smart about it. Be happy, but careful about tomorrow.

Now Kristin is led by Peter Dooley—perhaps acting out some latter antic of Ant and Grasshopper—into turmoil lurching through a dark and cavernous unknown. Their wrists joined by his belt, they enter the tunnel. She tries to look back at faint veils of gray-green smoke rising above the pinnacled skyline but an urgent press of bodies shoves her forward into what seems an eternally receding hole. Pavement just before her falls nearly invisible as light quickly dies. Her feet have to find their own way through a clutter of dropped objects, disowned clothing, painfully encountered elbows and errantly tripping feet.

Stumbling over what may have been a corpse shuts her resolve. Slowly her eyes adjust to such scant illumination as is availed in a few fixtures still working overhead. She tries to suppress a new gasp of fear by softly intoning a song fragment learned among long ago campfire rounds of her girlhood,

*Sing with me, I'll sing with you,
And so we shall sing together,
So we shall sing together.*

Dooley leads along the tunnel wall to her right. They are shoved violently against it and occasionally rebuffed just as roughly by cursing figures loitering in the darkness. She steps on someone's foot and a powerful blow sends her reeling against Dooley. Someone in the crowd pushes back and both are buffeted back against concrete wall. For a moment they are trapped, unable to find an opening in the crush of bodies coursing by. She recalls once being caught by a rip tide while swimming in the ocean, of being sucked into a swirling blackness of airless desperation. Kristin feels a whimper rise spontaneously in her throat. "Peter, let's go back. Please."

He does not answer.

Except for occasional yells and angry grunts, amid plaintive cries of children, the darkness is oddly quiet. An abrading rhythm of feet striding pavement seems more like a pulsing fog than sound. Noises echo precariously in underground twilight to disperse clues of origins and tease any grasp of dimension or orientation. Inexorable press lends but one sensible direction, onward: its rhythm and pace of irresistible movement squelches any resolve to go back. Even if he gives in to her plea, they are unable to travel any way but forward.

At times, stumbling among foul encounters and aggravated complaints, she thinks she can see figures moving across an immense stage of secret illumination. At other times she is trapped in a packet smallness of a closet peopled with fellow aliens. Her eyes open and close involuntarily. They care not whether such darkness is inward or without. The same fear permeates all.

From somewhere in the distance a thin pencil of red light erupts to sweep the dimness. It searches briefly, hovers to paint a tiny dot of red on her breast bone, just below her chin, and then disappears. She remembers a director once using a tiny laser pointer as baton to conduct her movements in a commercial she was shooting. Who was pointing at her now? Why?

Again, the sliver of red light tags her chest.

From above, on an elevated maintenance catwalk, a hand brushes her hair, takes an ample handful and pulls up hard, snatching her gasping painfully onto her tiptoes. Another groping pair grabs at her shoulders, then reaches under her armpits to lift her from the pavement. Male voices are above, grunting and hurrying the effort. More grunts, as more hands join the abduction, moving across her body in a nightmare of rampant violation. She feels herself abruptly lifted upward and flails ineffectually against them. In panic she rises unwilling toward coarsely whispered complaints of male voices now shouting.

“Peter!” she shrieks. A hand chokes at her throat while bruising fingers dig into her armpits. Others take hold of wads of her clothing. Another hand covers her mouth, crushing her lips tightly to keep her from biting. The belt leash scrapes and painfully binds her wrist. One of the hands slides along her arm to discover the strap. It probes and yanks angrily at the restraint. Excruciating spasms lance from her wrist up her arm. Her shoulder threatens dislocation. Someone above mutters, hissing exasperation, “Pull! She’s tied to somebody—give me your damn knife!”

“Ants!” Dooley bellows accusation, “ Ants! I told you! I knew it would . . . get away, you goddamned bastards! Get away!”

A bright orange flash erupts about them as his iLink limner gathers energy from emotional eruption of his rage, translates it via internalized media archives to slam a stupendously rendered phantom fireball into the now sharply illumined void. It boils seething and fiery plumes up onto the walkway to envelope now startled marauders, accompanied by a roaring iLink surround sound that explodes cinematically across ruptured darkness to reverberate within the tunnel echo chamber. Up-roar and cacophony build violently from harnessed energies of a suddenly screaming crowd bolting in seizures of terror that culminate their worst fears of the times.

In a suddenly spuming pleroma of light, accompanied by thunderously cascading soundtrack of choral voices singing *Carmina Burana, O’ Fortuna*, she sees five young men frozen as jacklighted deer, straining to free her from the hindering belt leash and panicked by media chaos unleashed. Another man wears military-style light amplifying goggles. Standing off to the side, he has been coordinating and directing their efforts with a laser pointer.

Also vivid in the still blossoming fireball image, Dooley’s eyes flare panicked damnation. Boiling up from his fervid psy-

chic depths, a hideously imagined raptor stalks amid fiery wraiths of hell's threat unleashed. The stunned abductors, now cowering as prey, in unison forget abduction and let her go.

Kristin falls awkwardly back onto the pavement, pulling Dooley down on top of her. Again the limner erupts, streaking plumes of 3D-imaged fire from which rocket-driven darts explode to drive the gang in frantic retreat back toward the tunnel opening. Out of the subsiding fireball pursuers emerge to chase after now-comic miscreants suddenly scrambling for hasty exit: Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, Laurel and Hardy join the Keystone Cops in amazingly agile headlong pursuit down the catwalk. And they seem really pissed!

"A hand just reached down . . . and grabbed me," Kristin sobs, "then another one picked me up. And another."

A wide swath of vacant pavement now surrounds them. They manage to roll over onto their feet and stagger to huddle up against the wall. For the first time, no one shoves or pummels them. A surround of saving, empty twilight remains open, yet still is edged in alarm and cries of protest that incite Dooley's ongoing rant against abominable Ants.

Her ears still ringing from the explosive uproar, the men's startled outcries, and Dooley's brawling screech, Kristin cannot make out what he is saying. It has something to do with "chance." He shouts it over and over again in a spuming tirade that abuses her still belted wrist as he gesticulates wildly in the dark.

"What?" Kristin pleads through competing floods of anger and fear.

"Ants . . . chance against Ants!" His Grasshopper voice is sharp and bitter. Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton swagger back toward them ahead of a strutting troupe of Keystone cops, returned from avid chase. The slapstick chimeras all transmogrify into large cartoon Ants bearing stolen picnic booty. Grasshopper drags Kristin from the wall and begins to

trot forward along the tunnel wall. Somehow she stays on her feet and seems to gain hope in their sudden sprint.

A wide margin still separates them from the crowd, now warily fleeing threats of further explosions while large cartoon Ants swarm past and surge even more insistently to push on ahead, parting the mass of human evacuees trying to get out of the way of this graphic nightmare rampant among them.

The iLink ultracapacitor, depleted to its threshold minimum power level, automatically shuts down the limner. Platooned Ant specters fade suddenly and Grasshopper's diatribe eases into rambling exhortations against any insult, real or imagined. Against what complaints he rails Kristin is uncertain, but it seems that Ants are to blame for misfortunes lately visited upon them all. Still yanked about by the leash during his wild gesticulations, she topples along to keep up as best she can. They move forward, it seems, only for lack of something better to do.

Slowly, rhythmic pulsing builds again, ushering them along as hysteria subsides and the crowd gradually closes ranks in surly, buzzing aftermath.

Eventually a dimness ahead rouses into dusty radiance. She can just make out the profile of his face fringed in faint glimmering. Beyond, a thickly massed throng of heads undulates slowly up and down like lily pads on a pond disturbed in the wake of a passing boat. Then she reckons that it is not the surrounding crowd swaying up and down. It's him! His head bobs and rocks slowly as he surges through an exaggerated tidal rising, falling, rising, falling. She feels his arm, still strapped to hers, pull her along in pacing undulation.

"Pete, what are you doing?" she snaps. Annoyance strikes fear to spark exasperation. They move quickly toward gathering declarations of external light.

“Marching!” Grasshopper announces proudly, “just like in your song.” He glances down at her feet. His frown lightly rebukes her poor showing of cadence.

“Please don’t do that,” she begs.

Her right hand tugs at the buckle and manages to loosen the leather loop still binding her wrist. Rolling it into a tight spiral she tries to return the belt to his jacket pocket. But he takes it and begins threading it casually back through the loops of his trousers.

“I’ll walk like you, then,” Grasshopper teases. He glances again at her feet, gives a brisk little hop to synchronize their paces and strives up onto tiptoes where he minces along in caricature of her once-signature stride down haute-couture runways.

“For we are marching to Pretoria, Pretoria, Pretori,” he screeches in a superciliously continental, quavering counter-tenor falsetto. His torso swishes through turns calculated to usher buyers into a new season of fashion-mongering.

“My God, he’s crazy!” a woman gasps from behind.

“Shut up, Hazel,” a sour male voice clips.

“Yeah, Hazel, crazy ways’ll faze a maze of hazy days,” Grasshopper chides, then resumes his lusty serenade,

For we are marching to Pretoria, Pretoria, Pretoria.

We are marching to Pretoria. Pretoria, hooray!

Haze with me, I’ll craze with you

So we all plays together,

And we all lays together,

So let’s embraze together.

Grasshopper jumps and capers about. He berates a few reluctant hikers nearby to release their dismay into the rhythms of his marching song. Other voices are recruited, finally even those of Hazel and her companion.

In the void of Dooley's departed intent, Grasshopper is intrigued by a suddenly profound notion. It promises to transform this heretofore senseless jumble of noise and movement into terms he can grasp. It renders scattered intimations of hope, pleasure, joy, rage, fear and sadness into an intuitively evident maxim.

He proclaims it loudly for all to hear, "For lack of anything better to do—just do anything!"

He cackles inspired delight, "Its meaning is the doing. It's so maaahvelous! Simply maaaaahvelous! Explains everything . . . in its own good time. Miserable Ants are wishing—but Grasshopper's swishing. They're hoping; I'm hoppening! Hoppening everywhere—all around . . . always NOW." he exclaims in a trilling squeal of exultation to celebrate new dawn manifesting at the far tunnel exit. "Here and now, hoppening!"

As the laggardly dispersed chorus launches through another round of singing, Grasshopper exults in the elegant simplicity of it all. He cackles praise of a new tenor he hears joining his choral glee. He has no idea from whence they have come, nor where they may be headed, nor even why Ant's Sister refuses to sing. Or why she vacillates between staring coldly ahead, looking dolefully at him and crying as they trudge out toward the old New Jersey Turnpike and on to access to Interstate-78 to Harrisburg.

Whatever her reasons for not joining in, he relishes their outing. As they emerge from the tunnel Grasshopper gratefully breathes deeply, warm in the radiance of a lovely Indian Summer Day, sighing happily, "always now."

Gradually the throng eases into a more leisurely pace as the avenue widens out beyond the ramp way bottlenecks.

Grasshopper is only mildly curious at the grim wariness seen among his fellow travelers. So many pragmatic details and concrete features of industrial landscape to drink in, to opine loudly about. He is sorry the singing has ceased. Occasionally he tries to kick it up again by whistling a cheery little melody. But the crowd seems to have fallen back into their earlier surliness. Oh, well . . . Ants.

He overhears another remark about someone being insane. Looking intently about, he peers closely into several faces, but is unable to identify the poor unfortunate.

While he has not found the lunatic traveling among them, he does like the sound of the accusation. “Looooo-naaaa-tick!” He rolls it about on his tongue, feeling the extruding puissance of its phonemes flattening up against the roof of his mouth. He squeezes out hamburger patties of squeaky glee into sibilant whispers, “Innnnnn-saaaaannne.”

Ant’s Sister grows even more distant, falling stubbornly silent as they depart the tunnel. Finally she sighs, rubs her chafed wrist pensively and fastens her ripped blouse as best she may by its remaining buttons. But her silence is ruthless. She totally ignores him.

Grasshopper suspects she is playing a little game with him, with them all. She is like that, a melodrama of shock and trauma because she doesn’t want to whistle. Or doesn’t know how. He clucks absently at the transparency of her mute ploy. She only glances at him dumbly and picks up her pace.

Skipping along to keep up, Grasshopper works through the jive classic *Three Little Fishes* gleaned from the iLink’s local memory cache of stored resources built in producing Ant and Grasshopper vignettes but is unable to decide what the little fishes did once they “famm and famm all over the dam” since the episode never got that far. The iLink does not detect a maxnet signal and so cannot retrieve song lyrics online. The little fishes fimm off into rescinded limbos of flash memory as he

hustles to remain abreast of Ant's Sister. But she still refuses to acknowledge him.

Off to the right, on a gentle incline of an overgrown embankment that sweeps out and downward to meet another plunging slope amid ponderous remains of former industrial prowess, Grasshopper sees a number of soldiers sprawled in a shallow hollow, languishing in warm sunlight. Most of them carry, or have lying nearby, shepherd staves: long sturdy, but flexible, poles made of synthetic fiber polymers, at one end of which is a variable high-voltage prod capable of stunning a horse, if need be. A well-trained platoon of so-equipped crowd handlers can dissuade and direct even the most unruly mob.

Hovering, then darting suddenly to assume new vantage above and along the evacuation route, are several remotely controlled usher drones bearing televue cameras that permit monitoring the progress of the city's evacuation. Usher drones also are equipped with crowd control measures. High-voltage ion-discharge pellets can ionize a directed channel of air to permit unleashing into any unruly target a high-voltage bolt equally as vicious as delivered by the manually wielded shepherd staves. Usher drones also may carry a range of behavioral gases to invoke a spectrum variety of nausea, fear, or good cheer in a malingering crowd. Pepper guns can embed urgently burning pellets of capsicum to distract and deter mischief-makers or blind and distract entire groups with red clouds of capsicum spray.

Nearby another pair of guardsmen tinker with a large automatic rifle. Occasionally one glances up to disinterestedly survey the scattered passing of multitudes. Grasshopper waves cheerily and speculates about a picnic inviting armed Ants. "Maybe they're Soldier Ants," he speculates aloud, "with enough heavy artillery to take over the picnic . . . r e v o l u u u t i o n!"

Kristin pretends not to hear him. She neither glances toward the soldiers nor acknowledges Dooley's enthusiasm. She hates his berserk manner. She hates that she has no idea where they are going nor how they will get there. She hates that Ira Crown can organize soldiers to keep them on the freeway, but does not provide sufficient transport to move them en masse to Relocation Centers. She hates that Dooley keeps calling her Sister. She hates that she is certain of very little but what is in her backpack and already it seems both too much to carry and too little to sustain. She hates that her feet are aching and that they still have a very long way to go.

Up ahead, a narrow valley between two ramps opens into a plain of their separation. Some of the passing crowd drift toward the inviting green, tempted by dilapidated signs advertising a nearby shopping mall.

A minicopter arises abruptly from behind a hillock. It hovers head-high a hundred paces beyond to block the wayward group trying to leave the highway. A swarm of usher drones are dispatched from behind the same rise. The smaller machines dart and flit about, dispersing quickly to cut off intended paths of escape. They waft about like oversized, cluster-laden dragonflies inspired by souls of Border Collies. The crowd recoils from threats of airborne high-voltage catapults and pepper sprays. An acrid sample of nausea gas is pushed across the group by the rumbling wash of distant minicopter rotors.

A public address speaker pummels the air with an amplified midwestern accent that orders the crowd back onto the pavement and shoulders of the highway. Several soldiers farther off in the valley nonchalantly watch the aerial to ground

confrontation. They do not move, but stretch to display staves, heavy truncheons or plastic shields in case they may be ordered to engage and repel a vagrant few back onto the official evacuation route.

Grasshopper is entranced. He pauses as the vultuously hovering black machine beats the air with its rotors. It seems to dance and skim lightly on choreographed waftings that are answered in bouncing weeds and soldiers deploying beneath its sidling drift.

The usher drones dart and play to befuddle and intimidate vagrant defectors who look defiantly up, waving fists and middle-fingered salutes amid shouted protests of indignation. They are slow to give up reaching the advertised mall. Farther back along the highway a gathering audience pauses to watch the outcome of the confrontation. A collective sigh hopes for delivery from pavement already grown dreary. A shopping center!

The faint staccato of a machine gun on board the mini-copter burps puffs of powder smoke that quickly dissipate in the wash of rotor blades. A line is drawn through tracing puffs of dust in the turf beyond the defiant band, which pauses to reconsider. Slowly they pull back from the dotted boundary and disconsolately return to the freeway.

The distant soldiers relax back into their casual postures and scatter along the grassy slope. Among the chastened evacuees more than a few loudly damn the President, Ira Crown, as a son of a bitch who ought to be shot.

Grasshopper muses aloud that the cannon fire sounded too faint. Probably they are using rubber bullets and puffer cartridges. "Use the real thing!," he urges the departing mini-copter, "Don't let a bunch of spoilsports ruin the parade!"

Ant's Sister trudges on without breaking pace. She has ignored the entire confrontation and now refuses to talk about it or anything else. She is so like her brother, Grasshopper reminds himself as he again catches up to her. Narrow and stubborn, nothing is of interest unless it gets you somewhere. You'd think she knows where she is going, so intent is she getting there. For her it's the goal, not the journey. But maybe she does know! Sometimes Ants carry a lot of astonishing things. Maybe she does, too.

"Where're we going, Sis?" he asks lightly, trying to seem casually disinterested. Her lips flinch slightly, still refusing to chat with him.

"Hey, Sis. You're in charge. Where're we going?" he repeats a little louder. As he reaches for her arm he is startled by the vehemence of her jerking away to pull back beyond his reach.

"Leave me alone, Petel!" she snarls, "For God's sake, just shut up and fucking leave me alone!" Clenched jaws harden her face. A glaring threat of jade retribution glints in her eyes. "I don't know what you're doing but I don't like it! Cut it out and get away from me!" She reaches arms widely out and about, dismissing puzzled expressions on people still wary of the peculiar duo, avoiding both of them, "Everybody is going nowhere," she hisses, "Maybe you haven't noticed."

Grasshopper beams back at her, bolstered in intuition that cheery disposition is the most apt antidote to such impatience. "Don't worry," he chuckles as he holds up the frozen display of his iLink for her inspection, "they'll make it okay. Time's awaiting."

Kristin looks back angrily at him, without tears but as if there should be some. The flush of anger slowly relents. She

does not seem to mind when finally he reaches out and puts his arm around her shoulder as if they are schoolyard chums. They stand for a while longer, over by the side of the roadbed. Then she moves abruptly from his casual embrace to rejoin the surging tide of refugees. Grasshopper watches her take a few steps. Then she pauses and turns to look searchingly back at his impossibly happy face.

“Come on,” she relents, resigned to this dawning age of abject senselessness, “we’re all we have left.”

~ 2 ~

Kristin and Dooley cross the Hackensack and Passaic rivers and hike on over into Newark. They have replaced the depleted iLink powerpak with a fresh one. For a while it picks up a maxnet signal that enables lurching access to some servers, others seemingly crippled by outages and overloads. Kristin tries phoning the Ant and Grasshopper project's main production office near Cambridge, Massachusetts. A recorded message informs that the facilities are closed until further notice. She tries text messages, but no one responds. Finally she sends email to a number of contacts, one directed to Eric Cornrath's personal server, to explain briefly that they have been unexpectedly separated from car and driver and have joined foot traffic out of Manhattan, heading toward Harrisburg.

Web news concerning Amtrak is discouraging; Penn Station in Newark is swamped. There is a backlog of overbooked spaces. Entire rosters of trains have been canceled and there are only ambiguous intimations of future service. At Kristin's urging they continue on foot along I-78 toward Harrisburg.

They are not alone. Scattered clusters, many families with children, trudge generally outward from Gotham Seaboard's core, seeking hints of what to do, where to go, and how to keep on keeping on.

Overhead, helicopters occasionally rumble across the sky, oblivious to vicissitudes down upon the earth. Farther above them occasional military heavy-lift skypods drift lazily across azure skies, transporting supplies and personnel, their drably camouflaged tortoise-like profile seeming somewhat incongruous in their grace of buoyant progress. Smaller gray and silver-accent skypods drift closer to earth, monitoring suspicious activities on terra firma among vagrant features of depleted industry and vacant commerce. From time to time an usher drone, dispatched from its mother skypod, appears just overhead and off to the side to gain closer view, scans a sweep of the highway and its occupants by airborne camera, then zips away. Sometimes people yell questions that seem mere rhetorical exercises toward retreating drones, which ignore pleas and curses alike.

Once in a while bicyclists whiz by, sometimes in clusters, but usually no more than one or two. After a while pedestrians tire of complaining and yelling at them. Once or twice the crowd moves to the shoulders to let pass Army vehicles or FERAL resource vans. One gaudily painted van advertises *Uncle Don's Power Protein Bar* and *Uncle Don's WonderWet Water* as it bounces along shabby pavements of the aged Interstate system, long since fallen into desultory repair. Kristin watches the van bang away into the distance as she steps across a broken slab and resigns herself to a long and arduous trek.

Where Pulaski Skyway joins I-78 at last they find some indication of official presence: a posted sign declares I-78 to be an Authorized Evacuation Route. Sitting back approximately two hundred yards from the highway channel they spy a spacious tent set up near the access ramp. A large Red Cross logo beckons. A larger sign, pegged above it, advertises *GloBanc Services: Credit <=> Worth*. Above the tent entrance a banner identifies *FERAL Civil Guard Recruiting Post #37*.

They descend in hopes of finding water, food, and relief from pervasive dystopia. Inside the tent, Kristin wends her way through scattered clumps of fellow exiles who obviously are avoiding contact with her. In their eyes she has become suspiciously alien, tainted in the sullen aftermath of Grasshopper's tirades.

At a booth situated near stacked pallets of bottled water, she engages a brightly smiling young woman who wears a FERAL name tag: Francine. As Francine monitors the restless queue of people getting bottles of water she chit-chats about her job, how she came to be here and responsibilities she has shouldered "in this time of national peril". Mostly, she explains, her assignment is to gather signatures onto touchscreen forms and make sure people don't get too greedy about the water. She explains that the tent has been set up there by the Army to provide a Red Cross contact station and to support recruiting for CGC, the recently chartered FERAL Civil Guard Corps.

The Red Cross, Francine explains, just uses the recruiting post as a watering station and contact point for evacuees needing assistance. Many more like it are scattered along all major routes out of Gotham Seaboard. In conjunction with an overall FERAL organizing effort, Francine coordinates both volunteer and CGC recruitment. She signs up and transports to the local screening center anyone interested in "helping defend the nation against gathering perils". Transportation, meals and

form processing are handled by GloBanc Services. GloBanc, she says in rote formula, also offers high-risk deferred payment credit cards to displaced persons in need of financial assistance. “Would you like to apply for a GloBanc card?” Francine smiles unconvincingly.

“Transport? To where?” Kristin asks the young woman; her hand impatiently declines the offered line of credit.

“Over to Watchung Reservation. To the FERAL staging area and Civil Guard processing center. And there’s an Army field hospital there, too.”

“Can we catch a ride there?” Kristin searches her memory trying to recall in what direction the Reservation lies, “I mean it’s on the way to Harrisburg, right?”

“Well,” says Francine, “it is in that direction, but we don’t provide transport to Harrisburg, or even to Watchung. We just sign-up and haul prospective Civil Guard recruits. And maybe call FERAL if someone needs medical attention.”

Francine starts and stares dubiously beyond Kristin where an improbably silver-haired, blue-eyed, and now luminously swathed apparition advances toward her, his tongue lascivious in serpentine writhing, impudent eyebrows wiggling quizzically in practiced Groucho Marx mannerisms.

“How ‘bout you, me, Palm Springs?” Grasshopper urges in huskily sensuous implication. The iLink hums a sonorous sultan of smooth soul, Barry White, medley. Projected holofield evocations of golden sunsets suddenly flare among distant palmetto groves.

Taken aback, Francine stares blankly back at him, “Palm Springs?”

“Yeah. You know . . . your palms spring into my pants.”

“Pete, you fool . . . stop it. Such a wise guy,” Kristin snaps apologetically.

“Fool? Wise? Geez, make up your mind!”

“Hell, I want to join the Army,” Kristin announces, turning abruptly to face Francine, “So does my dimwit buddy here. What do we have to do to get to Watchung?”

“Well,” Francine counters Grasshopper’s awakened erotic overtures by inflecting a serious mindfulness into her voice, “It’s not really for the Army. It’s the ‘Civil Guard Corps’. Mostly they’re looking for civilians with skills needed in this time of our nation’s perils. You have to commit to participate in recruiting classes and go through initial screening. It’s sort of like agreeing to attend a real estate sales pitch in exchange for a vacation or a gift bag or something. You have to sign this agreement to get over to the staging center. They won’t let you just walk over there.”

Grasshopper’s disappointment at being rebuked builds into a full snit, muttering and lurching through surreally ominous griping, “. . . cast ratings perils be for swine . . . ,” as the iLink distresses the air with imaginal vultures that swoop low to circle menacingly just beneath draped billows of tent fabric. On the ground between his feet, three little light-limned cute and cuddly cartoon piglets huddle, quaking in the shelter of his legs as they glance nervously up against voracious overhead threats. Over by the pallets of bottled water a rakish Big Bad Wolf, clad in ancient zoot suit, sporting a foppishly extravagant watch chain, is just barely visible, lurking as he watches Little Red Riding Hood, elegant in sleekly sheathing cocktail dress, join the water queue.

These apparitions quickly fade as Grasshopper’s prurient scrutiny is diverted to engage an uncommonly attractive young blonde woman just now approaching the table next to Francine. Striding in feline grace and exuding an assurance that arouses Grasshopper’s courtly display into that of a quixotic peacock, he blesses this newly arrived honey-golden temptress and seeks to indulge her fascination with plying veils of overtly and voluptuously sensual cinema. The young wom-

an glances into his dazzling erotomania and laughs lightly, as she glances down at the limning iLink dangling from his belt like a flashing codpiece, her azure eyes equal to the indulgent radiance in his, “That’s quite a light bulb you’ve got there, honey.”

Francine, on the other hand, is decidedly taken aback. She starts to comment on this suddenly intimidating firestorm of sensually pictorial pique igniting into lascivious conflagration, but bewilderment overwhelms and she simply lets it go. She closes off the entire incident from her awareness. She has long since learned the wisdom of not letting happenstance dishevel neat priorities. Neither obnoxious overtures nor bizarre apparitions need affect her seeing to her duties. Taking a deeply sustaining breath she turns the touchscreen so Kristin can scan paragraphs of densely packed text above input boxes identified for *Signature*, *ID#* and *Date*.

Kristin takes the offered stylus, while keeping a wary eye on Pete who now has the blond woman huskily laughing, “Hey, I can handle anything that gets us closer to Harrisburg.”

“Well, just sign right there. And put your natid there.”

“Natid?”

“National ID. You have to have a valid natid. They won’t process illegals.”

“No problem,” Kristin groans as she notices the fanfare he is directing toward the blond woman, “Here, Pete—Pete, stop fooling around and pay attention. Besides, you’re wasting power. We’re on the verge of no more powerpaks . . . here, sign this . . . and look into that port.”

She shoves the stylus into Grasshopper’s hand and watches him absently scribble a name, only vaguely legible, into the indicated space, then peer into the indicated scan port. Preoccupied with switching off his limner, Kristin does not notice that his signature might more easily be read “Grasshopper” than “Peter Dooley”. She retrieves the stylus, signs her own name,

glances into the green wash of retinal scan laser light and prints both their IDs . The touchscreen resolves her hastily drawn characters into neatly printed text numerals and blinks a lime green label next to each signature, *Natid Validated by Retinal Scan*.

She knows both Bill's and Pete's IDs better than ever they have. She negotiated their deal with the Amberson Agency. Since then she has taken over as manager, or, more accurately, as she often complains to the unruly duo, their would-be House Mother. Handling obligations, overseeing schedules, and ensuring compliance with Cornrath's strictures regarding the pair's public behavior has earned her their sarcastic sobriquet: 'Big Sis'.

Now she returns the touchscreen to Francine, who announces they are "good to go".

Francine looks around vacantly, as if she has misplaced something, but mostly she is still determinedly ignoring Grasshopper now sauntering back toward the entrance. He waves solicitously toward the young blond woman now departing, but still giggling back into his raucous banter. Francine reaches into a box and removes two strips of orange imprinted *CGC Prospect*. "These are valid for two days. By then you'll either have joined the Guard or decided to continue on. But while on the Reservation you'll have to wear these on your left wrist, fully visible. Otherwise they'll put you back onto an evacuation route."

"Evacuation route?" Kristin wonders aloud.

"Back on the Interstate highway. The official route out of Seaboard, I-78 takes you to the Relocation Center at Harrisburg."

"I was thinking maybe we'd get off the Interstate? It's so bleak and separate from everything. Who cares where we walk?"

“Listen,” Francine’s voice drops into an urgent tone, “It’s really dangerous out in the back country. Law enforcement doesn’t really exist out there anymore. There’s too much going on. All kinds of . . . the residents, the ones who haven’t left yet, are very suspicious of anyone they haven’t known for a very long time. Especially roamers. If you get into trouble there won’t be anyone to help you. And lowlife out there may kill you just for fun. Or make you wish you were dead.”

Francine directs them behind the tent to a parked bus where several people have already boarded, “Don’t wander away from official camps and routes,” she reminds them, then marshals an offering of parting good cheer, “Stay safe. Good luck. And thanks for your interest. Have a nice day!”

Aboard the bus, Kristin and Dooley plop down at the front onto a side bench just behind and to the right of the driver seat. Kristin watches other passengers board. To her left is seated the same young blond woman she earlier saw talking with Dooley. About her slender neck is a pendant, ecSTACY, on a gold chain. The woman is accompanied by a somewhat older male companion who nods back graciously and acknowledges her flicker of a smile. Their manner, as well as clothing and gear, hint at prosperity long accustomed to leisure.

Kristin notes that quite a few prospective “recruits” on board are young parents accompanied by children flailing through various moods: fretful, happy, tired, noisy, drowsy. But all youthful attention quickly converges on the front aisle space when the iLink limner switches on. Animations play from programmed background routines working through televue archives of *Aesop’s Fables* and *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. Grasshopper fluidly leads virtual avatars through improvised variants of an-

cient roles, miming and interacting with them to mischievously usurp familiar plots, energized by young trills of delight. He feeds on their laughter. He is a child among children.

“I hope the CGC aspires to a younger force,” she laughs aloud.

“Who is that, Jim?” the young blonde woman seated at Kristin’s left asks her companion, “How does he do that?”

“I have no idea how . . . aha . . . that’s Grasshopper!” the man suddenly recognizes a celebrity, “That’s who . . . but I have no idea how. Especially on an old bus.”

“You want the long spiel or the short?” Kristin volunteers, “It comes out of *BANG*. That stands for the converging technologies: bits, atoms, neurons and genes. Specifically, optronic media processors and nanobiotech . . . developed for military use in war-gaming, battle control and the like. But with him it takes media production to a whole new level. Peter and my brother Bill used it to generate the Ant and Grasshopper media spots you’ve seen.”

“But how?” the two chorus.

“This particular implementation is called *ECHOES*. That stands for *Ethereal Computer-Human Onto-Experiential Synthesis*,” Kristin laughs as a panic of tech-overload flits across their two faces, “Billions of nanobiobots—nbots. Little speck-like biomachines customized just for him. They’re really, really tiny.”

The couple stare back, uncertainly.

“Eighty-thousand nbots can fit in the width of a fine hair. Anyhow, a dose of nbots were cultured specifically for his tissue type and injected, just like a transfusion. Along with it another dose of so-called replicators and a third dose of custom referents interact like billions of little automated factories to multiply the nbots and accommodate them to their function in his nervous system. Then, when everything is set, the replicators are switched off and expelled from the body.”

“Why?” asks the blonde woman.

“The nbots disperse throughout his body, homing in on neurons. Once in place each one just sits there and constantly signals by low-level radio whatever state its host neuron happens to go into. Other times they trigger a response state in the host neuron. There are billions and billions of them broadcasting and receiving at once.”

“Broadcasting to whom? To what? Why?” the man asks as he watches Grasshopper’s elaborately mimed antics within the surrounding theatrical pleroma of glowing imagery and sound.

She points toward a small fabric sheathed object, faintly reminiscent of codpieces sported in Renaissance costumes, worn on his belt, just below his navel. “His iLink—that little belly pack hanging from his belt is actually an optical computer—orchestrates all the signals from the nbots and renders them into a virtual entity—an nbTwin, they call it.” Kristin elaborates, “The nbTwin is a mirror-image, a self-twin, an adaptive media avatar, of the person’s nervous system activity.”

“But how does he do it, make the little animals, and trees, and landscapes?” the woman is perplexed.

Kristin wrestles through her own shaky grasp of those more advanced technology layers gleaned from hearing Bill, Pete and technicians talk during early experimentation. “It takes a while to adjust to it. My brother Bill used to compare it to sharing space with a ghost.

“It was so disorienting at first that he had to re-learn everything ‘with an extra person in the suit’, as he said. Even when the iLink isn’t turned on he says it’s distracting. Walking. Thinking. Talking. Every kind of experience and sensation. And there’s a little feedback echo that can be disconcerting.

“But eventually, after a lot of rehearsals and tuning and recalibration, the nbTwin becomes so familiar that the echo just dissipates into subtle tingling. They each learned to live in a sentient space shared with their nbTwin. It mirrors their neural processes and acts like an in-between for all sorts of digital me-

dia hookups. Kind of a ‘front end’ for their own self-presence. Once they got used to it, they feel out-of-sorts when it isn’t switched on. Peter runs through power paks like you wouldn’t believe!

“Production machines synch with the iLink across maxnet so there are incredible reserves of image and sound resources available, as well as computing routines. It all gets controlled through an associative spray of memory images, thinking and visualizing into the sentience shared with the nbTwin. The psychic spray of events is mirrored in the nbTwin, so there’s no sensible distinction between his memories and thoughts and those synched into the iLink pipes, except . . . except the sheer enormity . . . and complexity . . . of what’s available. It’s a hyperkinetic stream of imagining . . . way beyond anything else. Active scenarios percolate up from the virtual generator, guided by his thoughts and reactions, and are coordinated through the iLink. New process streams are downloaded as bandwidth allows.”

“What happens if he gets into something no one thought to program into it?” the man wonders aloud.

“Adaptive AI is built into the iLink and can handle just about anything. It tries to make sense of the senses but if a scenario is totally new it has to be worked into a story frame. It can get pretty bizarre, like dreaming on steroids. It constantly monitors home servers to download service updates or find additional resources. But mostly they use what’s built-in or streamed from archives. I’m told there really are only about thirty narrative story lines, anyhow, so the built-in AI can handle most situations.

“The limner that projects images from the nbTwin’s stream is for rehearsal. But things really get humming when the iLink synchs into a fully deployed rendering platform, like they use for media production. They don’t use the limner for that. Along with screenwriters and special effects teams, musicians,

it's 'plug and play' whatever their interacting imaginings concoct together. Bill and Pete could work together with all sorts of artists in different locations when they had sufficient bandwidth available."

"Amazing! I've never heard nor seen anything like it. Does it run on batteries?" the man asks.

"No, not really. The limner is the biggest power drain. If he doesn't switch that on, the iLink will sustain itself on just the energy of ambient light and acoustics. There's a photovoltaic piezoelectric sheath on the surface of its case that captures and converts the energy of both light and mechanical vibrations. It can sustain itself just bouncing around in the sidepack when he walks. You could recharge it just by putting it in a box and shaking it or setting it in bright sunlight. But of course, shaking it is probably not a great idea" she laughs. "Power gets stored in a gizmo kind of like a battery, an ultracapacitor. This model also has a sugar fuel cell to generate additional power used by the limner. Specially engineered bacteria feed on sugar syrup in the powerpak and convert it into electricity,"

"Where do you get this stuff? I've never seen nor heard of anything like it."

"From Eric Cornrath, the executive producer of the Ant and Grasshopper campaign. He's an advanced media systems expert. He also works with the Pentagon and probably the intelligence community; he's a Colonel in the Army Reserve, or something. Anyhow, he consults with them on media projects, for both publicity, war gaming and even combat applications," Kristin replies, "I guess that gets him access to use stuff for official purposes, such as making Ant and Grasshopper episodes. It gets really crazy. Once Bill and Pete agreed to the project it got so frantic and insane I didn't know if we would ever get through it all. So new. And strange."

"But why do all of that?" the woman, "They're just making televue clips. Why go to all that expense and bother?"

Kristin pauses to search for a suitable simile. “It’s like having an optronic studio scattered all over, creative people everywhere, anyplace on the globe, inserting their respective contributions at the proper times and places. This way of working is so much more powerful. You can do stuff that would be impossible any other way, and much faster. In some respects it all pays for itself in increased productivity. After staging media feeds and hookups from remote locations they rip through scripts with only a little post-production touchup occasionally needed. And that’s usually because someone has changed their mind about an earlier choice.

“But it can get to be too much temptation to play, too. Bill and Peter used to ad lib through and beyond what was in scripts. Cornrath would get so pissed when he couldn’t use a take. But they didn’t care, they’d take off wherever their whim led them. A lot of stuff never gets shown. They could get really obscene and libelous—fast—unless somebody kept them on message.” Kristin points to herself, “That became my job. But someday somebody will make a fortune by releasing those oprocks. Those bits were so damn funny. But they’re too scandalous for right now!”

The woman frowns in consternation of too much to take in, “Will he always be like this? What if he wants to do something else?”

“No. Now that the project is finishing up they’ll deactivate the nbTwin back in the lab by broadcasting a signal to switch off the nbots. Eventually the nbots will be flushed out by normal body processes. We were over at Carnegie-Mellon, working on the last re-cuts. Their nbTwins were already scheduled for decommissioning. Then Bill, my brother had a heart attack. He died”

“Oh, my dear,” the woman exclaims, “I am so sorry.”

“God, I miss him,” Kristin sighs. “Pete and I came back into Manhattan. We had to look for some of Bill’s papers and

his security keys to start probate and deal with their partnership issues and all . . . then all hell cut loose and they said we had to get out.

“Cornrath had let us have a car and driver so we could dash in and out. But I don’t know what happened to our driver. When we came back down to the street he wasn’t there. The car either. And the maxnet was down, we couldn’t get in touch with anyone to let them know where we were. So here we are.” She smiles a tightly stoic bravado as the bus driver comes aboard, gestures snappishly for Grasshopper to be seated, nods curt greeting to his passengers, settles into his own seat, cranks the engine, and pulls out toward Watchung Reservation.

The man winces, as much to reflect sympathy for Kristin’s loss as to rectify his social blunder. His voice rises above the roar of the engine, “I’m terribly sorry about your brother. And please forgive our not introducing ourselves sooner . . . I’m Jim Meerling. This is Stacy Madeleine. It’s terrible, your having to go through all of this on top of your grief.”

Kristin nods on past his discomfiture, smiling as she extends her hand to briefly clasp each of theirs, “Kristin. Kristin Banner . . . and of course, you already know him.” Her head nods toward Grasshopper who has switched off the iLink and is gazing impishly at Stacy as the bus lumbers onto the roadway.

Passengers have debarked the bus at Watchung Reservation. Most mill about, idling until whatever comes next. Stacy lags behind, between the bus and main tent, waiting for Jim who has gone off in search of toilets. Grasshopper comes upon her and brazenly asks in sly innuendo,

“Woman . . . where is thy husband?”

“What? Thy? Why thy?”

“Why, thy thighs sigh to ply my prize size.”

His finger tips nimbly gather hers and lift her palm to his lips as his free hand sweeps in extravagant musketeer flourish. His body lowers, leg extended athletically forward and slightly across, into a graceful bow. Lingering at her upturned palm his nostrils inspire her fragrance in rapt adoration.

“Sum ergo amor . . . I smell that you want me.”

Typically there would be consequences. Now astonishment simply transfixes Stacy. Her perplexed trance dissolves slowly into a chuckle that quickly escalates into rich laughter. At a loss for how to answer his baroque overture she slides into effervescent giggling. Finally, lightly blotting tears with the edge of a blouse sleeve, she chuckles, “Peter. Which organ leads this dance? Your nose or your dick? This is so ridiculous.”

“Peter? Nose?”

“Knows what?”

“To smell the now . . . the hour comes, now you want me,” His nose quivers in little rabbit twitches.

“Don’t do that . . . and stop saying such things,” Stacy warns, still giggling, “Jim will break your neck. He’s very jealous.”

“. . . you want.”

“What I want or don’t want is not the issue.” Stacy sternly takes back her hand, “You can’t just go up to a woman you hardly know and tell her you think she smells ready now!”

“Now is here.”

“Good grief. At least bring flowers and suggest dinner first!” Stacy resumes cackling as she strolls away, hips swaying confidently.

The FERAL encampment is just off I-78 in the hills of the two thousand acre Watchung Reservation. A large circus-size arena tent, along with several smaller ones, has been drafted into Civil Guard service. Tents and several mobile homes for official offices occupy most of the picnic area along Sky Top Drive at the south edge of the Reservation. Only the predominance of olive drab color among vehicles and prevalence of camouflage combat fatigues counter an initial impression that either a fair or an evangelical revival might be in progress. Set up on the far Feltsville side of Blue Brook—perhaps in deference to civilian Posse Comitatus sensitivities—the Army has established field operations headquarters in several impressively arrayed geodesic domes.

In a clearing nearby are several immense rigid-skinned “variable buoyancy” light-as-air VTOL skypods, each measuring over one hundred feet wide, two hundred feet long, and sixty feet high, each capable of lifting and hauling more than five hundred tons. They land at Watchung for inspection, maintenance and to be loaded with evacuation supply cargo for distant deliveries. Off to the side smaller gray surveillance skypods descend and arise for changing shifts of personnel.

Maintenance drones flit like dragonflies above and about the large skypods and their smaller sisters who solicit attentive care, perusing and inspecting upper and side surfaces of thin film solar panels that provide the bulk of their power for aerial maneuvering as well as recharging depleted ultracapacitors of deployed usher drone swarms.

Beyond the aerodrome field is a large plaque posted inside the *Trailside Museum* that recounts the history of the site:

A water-driven grist mill was built by original English settlers, Peter Willcocks and wife Phebe Badgley, who purchased land about Blue Brook in 1735. Local legend recalls the mill was converted to manufacture of gunpowder to support the American Revolution. The Willcocks and Badgley families and their descendants worked the land for more than a century.

In 1845 David Felt, a wealthy New York businessman and proprietor of thriving commercial stationery stores in New York and New Orleans, purchased the Willcocks holdings as part of a 760 acre tract. Drawn to the sparsely populated area by the ready energy source available in the mill pond of Blue Brook, Felt developed a residential water-powered mill factory complex. A company town housed managers and their families. Workers exercised a score or more skills as printers, sealing wax makers, bookbinders, paper rulers, stationers, paper colorists, and machinists. They lived simply in well-regulated, gender segregated dormitories constructed of wood in modified Greek Revival style. Company stores furnished ordinary needs and notions while a school and church catered to civil commonweal. In addition to housing were barns, a blacksmith shop, tailor shop and other storage and outbuildings. The census of 1850 counted 178 persons in residence, including twenty-seven children who attended a one-room school conducted by nineteen year-old Sarah Tobey.

Life in Feltville was orderly, as mandated by the owner who enjoyed his nickname, "King David", so dubbed by his employees. He was boss and therefore responsible for the safety and welfare of his community. Workers were expected to strictly observe all rules, both at work and in domestic bliss. Daily schedules commenced with a 7:00 a.m. bell to begin work; 12:00 and 1:00 p.m. bells bracketed the noon recess. A 9:00 p.m. bell demanded that each person must be within their respective domicile. Attendance was required at church each and every Sunday. Workers were paid in company script 'credits', redeemable only among various company stores for purchases.

King David's village prospered for fifteen years. In 1860 with Civil War looming to threaten his southern commerce David Felt sold his factory holdings, closed the mill and departed Feltville. During Reconstruction and on into the Gilded Age the abandoned community became known as "The Deserted Village".

In 1882 Scotch Plains investor, Warren Ackerman, bought the abandoned property with derelict buildings to renovate into a summer resort named Glenside Park. Train service from nearby Summit permitted men to commute into city occupations while their families remained at the resort. Facility comforts were upgraded by adding indoor plumbing and electricity. Guests were able to sit outside and enjoy fresh air on large, rustic log Adirondack-trimmed porches. A stable was adapted to house both carriages and horses. Tennis and golf courts were provided and the millpond opened to boating and bathing. Life at Glenside Park encouraged sense of community with carefully planned group activities and entertainments for guests.

Glenside Park flourished for thirty-four years; its quiet and sedate countryside recreations were observed within a rigidly embracing social structure. Times, however, had changed by its closing in 1916, on the eve of World War I: mass automobile transportation had fostered a taste for suburban living year-round, as well as whetting appetites for distractions less sedate than those of staid resorts.

The property was sold by the Ackerman family heirs in 1919 and eventually was acquired by Union County in 1927 to establish a public park, Watchung Reservation, where people could enjoy nature. Feltville-Glenside Park was preserved, although many buildings fell into disrepair over subsequent years. In 1980 The Deserted Village was listed as a historic district in the National Register and shortly thereafter efforts were launched to restore and maintain ten remaining buildings. On all sides, as viewed from the buildings, nature has returned the hills to a state much like that in which they first were seen by Peter Willcocks and Phebe Badgley in 1735.

After a bathroom break at ganged arrays of portable toilets the group of bus passengers is led into one of the smaller CGC reception tents for an initial welcome presentation.

“Hello. My name is Donald Ackerman. I’ll be leading our little session today and hopefully answering any questions you may have about the ‘Civil Guard Corps’. And some of the roles you might choose to play in these times of national peril.”

Donald is fit, middle-aged, casually dressed, and speaks without notes in earnestly paced packets of words timed for easy assimilation. He stands beside, not behind, a portable wooden podium. His audience of approximately seventy adults is seated before him in rows of plastic folding chairs. To his left, over in the corner of the tent can be seen a large, muted flat screen televue. It depicts a number of children in age-group clusters being led in a variety of activities by young adult counselors wearing CGC Pal T-shirts. The screen offers a silent window into daycare facilities provided on the grounds by FERAL so that parents can attend recruitment classes without distraction, but are able to check in a glance that their offspring are safe and happily engaged.

Kristin sits between Dooley on her right—already he fidgets restlessly—and the Meerlings on her left.

“Pete,” she leans toward his ear to speak in a low voice; his head turns slightly as she urges, “Please. Don’t turn on the limner. Just stay in the background. You know what I mean?”

“Okay. Background . . . got it.”

She takes a deep breath, turns to smile at Stacy but pitches an eyebrow slightly upward to signal faint hope that he will behave.

Stacy chuckles and whispers back, “He’s just a big kid.”

“You know,” Donald Ackerman launches themes like doves released well-groomed from fastidious cages, “back during the American Revolution, when colonists had been repeatedly whipped by the best army of that era, the British. Back at Valley Forge, shivering in the snow, bare feet freezing, poor folk all around dying of disease and starvation and begging their men to quit their foolishness and come home. Back then, in midst of a world falling apart, Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, wrote, “These are the times that try men’s souls.”

Donald pauses, leaning forward slightly as he takes the measure of this assembly. Heads nod back at him, returning and affirming implied sentiments.

“These, too, are such times,” he repeats softly, “indeed, these are the times.”

Straightening up, he smiles brightly, voice supple and pragmatic: “These are times for common sense, as well.

“That’s where we have a lot to do. Applying common sense to problems that have lain uncorrected for a very long time. Working together to undo some of the snarls and pull apart tangles that now tie our hands and put America into a pretty bad bind.

“One of our former Presidents, Calvin Coolidge, a pretty common-sensical guy himself, famously said, ‘The business of America is business.’

“Think about it. It’s so simple. You can take all your fancy philosophers and put them in a room together and at the end of the day they’d have a pretty tough time coming up with a more succinct description of the American way. Calvin Coolidge saw that entrepreneurial spirit builds our success in the world. American spirit once kicked out British royal gover-

nors and set loose the little guy to build this great nation of innovative enterprise. They surmounted the challenges of their time. And we are more than ready for ours. We just need to get organized!”

Thoughtful nods endorse Donald’s remedy for dangerous tribulations. He looks toward a large opalescent-surface white screen and then back to an optical projector situated in a rack behind the group. In his right hand is a remote control he thumb flicks to power up the projector. It flares large printed text, centered on the screen,

**Federal Emergency Response Administration, LLC. (FERAL)
invites you into the
CGC: Civil Guard Corps**

Kristin thinks she hears Dooley’s iLink switch on. She looks to see if he is respecting her admonition.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing.” Kristin turns to glance back at the projection rack behind them. It is part of a Kurzweil media station, similar to those Cornrath had assembled in equipping their production studios. She supposes that the iLink has just automatically acknowledged a maxnet bus-polling signal. “Thank you for being good,” she whispers encouragement in Dooley’s ear.

“Good? I’m the best,” Grasshopper brags, extravagantly mimicking her whisper.

She takes a deep breath and returns her attention to Mr. Ackerman. His left hand gestures back toward the screen.

“For a long time,” Donald says, “Americans thought that government could solve their problems. They tried a New Deal and wound up building a big conglomerate mess that was supposed to solve the Great Depression a century ago.

“Only, what they learned, the hard way, is that government really doesn’t know how. What really brought America out of

the Great Depression was a world war economy. It was the spending that stimulated business, that charged up our entrepreneurial zeal and got us to focus efforts to figure out how to defeat terrors threatening across two great oceans. And in the process, how to generate prosperity for all.

“This time the response to crisis is different. And now we know better. Government is not the solution. Government is the problem. Government clogs entrepreneurial options and stifles opportunities. Government is a kind of paralysis imposed by self-important budget-squandering bureaucrats.”

Heads nod approval.

“FERAL has been set up as a limited liability corporation. Why a corporation? Well, it’s not a new idea, just a good idea,” he grins his own personal endorsement, “A lot of people don’t realize that for the past few decades even the Post Office has actually been a separate corporation, not an agency of government. And so has the Federal Reserve Bank, the institution that reliably governs your checking and banking accounts. In fact, the Fed has always been a government chartered private corporation. Ever since it was established back in 1913. Both the Post Office and the Fed are monitored by Congress and underwritten by the full faith and credit of the U. S. government.

“That is the true function of government: to guarantee full faith and credit. To keep the economy strong and to protect access to essential resources. All over the world. And that is the mission of our military. To keep us in the big global game that is the most cutthroat competition imaginable. Stay strong. Organize. Compete.”

Donald waits as terse logic flows and settles like fresh water pooling and sinking into potting soil. Attentive expressions drink deeply.

“Do you know that the Pentagon has become the largest corporation in the world? The Secretary of Defense is its COO, that means Chief Operations Officer. And President Crown is

the CEO. We call him ‘Commander in Chief’, but he’s really CEO. Chief Executive Officer. And furthermore, Each and Everyone of You is a Shareholder. You are shareholders. You receive annual—no, actually, daily—dividends. Your wealth is built upon its service and protection of our economy.”

Brows gather in dawning awareness, steeping and soaking upward into bemused tiltings of heads and quizzical expressions.

“Now, to help support the military and to deal with new challenges emerging in this time of national peril, FERAL has spun off a new corporate entity: The ‘Civil Guard Corps’, or, CGC. CGC solicits, underwrites and coordinates effective team-planning of civilian response to ensure achieving our national goals.”

The screen blinks into a list of the Civil Guard Corps’ most pressing concerns:

Initiatives:
national survival
threat evaluation
reorientation
technical education
& urban restoration

Unnoticed by Donald the word **restoration** suddenly splits in two, pulls in the ampersand and becomes **urban rest & oration**.

When the revised text is noticed someone giggles. Kristin has not yet seen the reason for laughter, but chuckles at the sound of suppressed giggling.

Suddenly, spellings of all the words explode and scatter. Letters scuttle about on each row as if high-octane ants are playing ‘anagram tag’. Row by row the display settles into impromptu poetry:

**it is ant l vie:
 ill vain ant saviour
 a travail unto thee
 in a nite rooter
 i launched one tactic
 a bean & i turn rotors**

“The world constantly changes,” David continues to speak, unaware of the revised scramblings on the screen behind him. His eyes narrow slightly and scan to find several now impertinently giggling culprits, “New competitors arise. Old foes become friends. Faith falls into confusion. Lies seem true and former truths are unmasked as false posturing.”

The level of mirth is rising quickly. Once the insouciant nonsense rendered onscreen penetrates her awareness, Kristin also laughs, then tries to restrain herself as she nudges Dooley with a chiding elbow.

Consternation knits Donald Ackerman’s brow. He feels the meeting dissolve into a buzz of chatterers. He looks back at the screen. What are they laughing at? But, just before he completes the turn, all the letters scamper back into their original positions. Donald finds the display exactly as he expects:

**Initiatives:
 national survival
 threat evaluation
 reorientation
 technical education
 & urban restoration**

Donald’s voice presses onward through a well-practiced repertoire of verbiage. Meanwhile, other agents of his awareness search to explain the growing rambunctiousness. The little finger of his right hand discreetly reaches down and probes whether the zipper of his trousers is closed. (Check, all okay.) Casually his eyes wander down to see that his name tag is not

doing something crazy. (Nope, it's fine.) Long familiar phrases still work through his lips, but he is distracted in newly wary anxiety. His carefully honed professional manner is being seen as foolish. Why?

He stammers uncertainly, "This cutthroat world constantly challenges us to learn better ways to protect the full faith and credit of American prosperity. We're all going to have to pitch in and do our part in this new struggle. We're all going to need CGC. And CGC definitely needs us. Good solid American citizens.

His eyes burn with threatened tears as his voice weakens before the now avidly chatting, no longer listening, group, "These are the initiatives into which CGC currently is recruiting. Our purpose today is simply to introduce you to what we're about, why we need you, and how you can put your God-given talents and hard-won skills to best serve our national goals."

As he manages to veer toward a concluding thought the letters in reawakened mutiny cautiously tiptoe back into upstart verse:

**it is ant I vie:
ill vain ant saviour
a travail unto thee
in a nite rooter
i launched one tactic
a bean & i turn rotors**

The clamor gains fresh energy. Donald gives up. His voice falters and fails into tremulously mechanical rhythm as he bravely shouts above the din, "To that end, here's a brief spot that will give insight into what we're about. And give me a chance to take a sip of water."

Donald's pained smile does not subdue the now general levity. People prattle animatedly among themselves, debating

the intentions behind what has been received as comedic warm-up. Donald retreats back to the edge of the tent and collapses onto a chair. He lifts a bottle to his lips and does not care that water is dribbling down his chin to darken splotches on his khaki shirt. His thumb flicks at the remote and the screen fades to black. An audio track opens into a spacious cavity of silence as the crowd suddenly hushes.

Scattered instrumental sounds of an awakening orchestra briefly stir. Symphonic hints work toward an opening theme, delivered in full orchestral surround sound. On the screen yellow text appears, centered against a black background:

**WEBSTER DEFINES STRONG AS
HAVING GREAT PHYSICAL POWER,**

Musical exploration continues searching:

**AS HAVING MORAL OR
INTELLECTUAL POWER,**

Music keeps searching:

**AS STRIKING OR
SUPERIOR OF ITS KIND.**

Musical hunt continues:

**BUT WITH ALL DUE
RESPECT TO WEBSTER,**

Musical pause anticipates:

THERE'S STRONG,

Horns announce imposing theme:

AND THEN THERE'S ARMY STRONG.

Long: A platoon of twenty or so soldiers in combat gear are gathered on a ridge, around a brigade flag, for a group photo. Only the flag moves slightly, stirred by a breeze.

Medium: Soldiers advance across a battle field, in the distance a helicopter lands to field more soldiers into fray.

Close: Face of fire control officer at control pad.

Close: Fire control screen shows computer map of terrain, deployed forces and target data.

Long: Cruise missile guidance video feed homes in on target.

Medium: Paratroops jump out rear bay of transport plane; ground far below is swathed in clouds, smoke.

Medium: Camera looks up toward a single parachutist descending through overcast sky.

Music sustains:

IT IS A STRENGTH LIKE NONE OTHER.

Close: Soldiers in battle gear slap 'high-fives', celebrate, and embrace manfully.

Music sustains:

Close: Profile of uniformed drill instructor yelling.

Medium: Seated novice recruits listen respectfully, wide-eyed and attentive.

Zoom close: face shot of strong pretty female face.

Music sustains:

IT IS A PHYSICAL STRENGTH.

Music swells:

Medium: Line of soldiers in combat fatigues work through obstacle course.

Zoom close: exultant expression on young male face during physical exertion.

Music swells:

Medium: Soldier rappels from hovering helicopter.

Medium: Soldier wearing cold weather exercise garb in marathon run up steep hill.

Long: Airborne camera looks down onto line of combat-ready soldiers trekking through forest clearing.

Long: Multiple amphibious assault craft streak across open water toward unseen objective.

Music sustains:

IT IS AN EMOTIONAL STRENGTH.

Music sustains:

Close: Soldier in combat fatigues embraces wife firmly and lovingly.

Music sustains:

Medium: Soldier in full combat gear with rifle walks beside three indigenous children whose hands are linked in solidarity of feeling secure.

IT IS A STRENGTH OF CHARACTER.

Music sustains:

Black & white: close: Helmeted soldier's face gazes into camera.

Medium: Officer and aide de camp pin medal on attractive young woman standing at attention, all are dressed in combat fatigues.

Black & white: medium: 'elderly veteran' in VFW cap, stands at attention, saluting, amid cheering and adoring civilians waving US flags toward off-screen soldiers.

AND STRENGTH OF PURPOSE.

Music sustains:

Night: medium across close: Profile of soldier looking down along ranks of assembled soldiers, distant light casts their long shadows toward him and camera.

Medium: Soldiers advance toward camera, emerging out of desert dust storm.

Music sustains:

THE STRENGTH TO DO GOOD TODAY.

Music sustains:

Close: Man talks into head-mounted mike.

Medium: Combat controller points to computer display.

Zoom close: Finger points at objective.

Close: Man talks into handheld mike.

Medium: Camera looks into controller vehicle; helicopters swoop low and are reflected in vehicle window where controller talks into handheld mike while looking up at them.

Medium: Helicopter, silhouetted against sky, flies over, so close as to fill most of frame.

Music sustains:

**AND THE STRENGTH TO
DO WELL TOMORROW.**

Music sustains:

Medium: Young civilian executive gazes from office window of an upper floor, out across cityscape of commercial skyscrapers.

THE STRENGTH TO OBEY,

Music sustains:

AND STRENGTH TO COMMAND,

Music sustains:

Close: Battle weary four-star general in sunglasses gazes resolutely into camera.

Extreme close in quick cut: T-shirt, "ARMY".

Close: Frames upper-half head shot of female next to lower-half of taller male, both wearing black woolen caps.

Long: Camera in grass looks up at distant squad trotting across training field, lead soldier carries flag.

Music sustains:

THE STRENGTH TO BUILD,

Black & white: long: Combat engineers deploy pontoon bridges, amid gigantic splashes where they drop into water.

Long: Soldier rush across completed bridge.

Music sustains:

AND STRENGTH TO TEAR DOWN

Medium: Tank lumbers and splashes through water toward camera.

Music sustains:

THE STRENGTH TO GET YOURSELF OVER,

Medium: Young female in combat fatigues climbs up rope ladder toward camera.

Music sustains:

AND THE STRENGTH TO GET OVER YOURSELF.

Medium: Camera views from below and behind her as hands reach down to help female soldier climb from rope ladder onto wooden scaffolding.

Music sustains:

THERE IS NOTHING ON THIS GREEN EARTH

Long: across silhouetted soldier standing looking out side door onto ground.

Medium to long: ramps deploy simultaneously, viewing down along line of landing helicopters, soldiers with weapons, rush into battle.

Music sustains:

**THAT IS STRONGER THAN
THE US ARMY**

Medium: Soldiers in battle wave helicopters forward, advancing across and above them toward camera.

Close: Helicopter pilot looks down.

Medium: Helicopter formation swoops and veers right, silhouetted against sky.

Music sustains:

**BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING ON
THIS GREEN EARTH**

Medium: One soldier among several comrades waves at helicopter passing overhead.

Extreme close: Several stars and a few stripes are visible on billowing American flag.

Music sustains:

**THAT IS STRONGER THAN A
US ARMY SOLDIER**

(fade in)

**SUPPORTED BY THE
CIVIL GUARD CORPS.**

Music sustains:

Medium: Camera looks from behind a number of silhouetted figures, arms upraised to solemnly declare oath, background is gigantic wall-size American flag, a few stars and several stripes are visible in frame behind figures.

Close: Young male soldier's face, standing among infantry platoon, in body armor with weapons at ready carry.

Medium: Three soldiers advance toward camera, helicopters hover and advance just behind and above them.

Close: Soldier loads tank cannon.

Medium: Tank roars into full frame, advancing toward camera.

Music builds:

STRONG

(fade in)

ARMY STRONG

(fade in)

ARMY GUARD STRONG

(fade in)

CIVIL GUARD STRONG

(fade to black)

Music crescendo:

Fade in: close:

U.S. ARMY,

yellow/black/white star above

green **CIVIL GUARD** logo.

Fade to: green **CIVIL GUARD** logo.

Music silent while complete logo sustains briefly.

Fade to black:

Music rises:

Fade in: medium: Young civilian office workers, 2 male, 2 female, sit with notes, etc. in avid discussion around circular table.

Overlay, translucent red rectangle wipes right, superimposed by text wiping left:

CGC
Comfortable
Environment

Narrator (female voice): *Civil Guard staff praise their supervisors and find that they are often mentors.*

Fade out graphic as narration pauses:

Narrator (female voice): *They like the informal atmosphere in most offices and their positive working relationships.*

Medium head/shoulders shot of CGC Language Analyst, Loretta Brusco, speaking into camera:

Coming to work for the Civil Guard Corps as an entry level individual, you will have the opportunity to work in teams. Most of our work is done in teams. So you're not alone, there's a lot of support. The supervisors are very approachable and it's a great learning experience.

(fade to black)

(fade in)

Close: Yellow/black/white star above
 green **CIVIL GUARD** logo.

Silence while logo sustains briefly, fade to black.

“That,” announces Kristin, “just has to be an Eric Cornrath production.”

“Who?” Stacy asks, “Why do you say that?”

“From the Amberson Agency, he’s the producer behind Ant and Grasshopper.”

“What makes you think of him?”

“Well, for one thing, his style in depicting women. Always dependent on men.”

“That’s every man’s style, honey,” Stacy looks puzzled.

“Every woman in that spot was shown among taller males.” Kristin elaborates, “You’d think at least one female basketball player might wind up in the Army. And when that one poor little female soldier finally made it all the way up the rope ladder and was trying to climb onto the scaffold—she had to be helped up. Those were all men’s hands lifting her up.”

“I guess I didn’t notice,” Stacy muses.

“That’s the point. They’re so good at planting thoughts you never notice, like viruses. Exploiting patterns you already accept. In fact they even have a name for them. *Memes*. Eric Cornrath’s one of the experts. People think they’re in control, but media types like Eric want you to think that. It makes their work so much easier.”

“Isn’t that a little paranoid?”

“No,” Kristin assures her, “It’s very paranoid . . . and worse, it’s true.”

Left to her own amusements while Jim deals with some of his concerns, Stacy has found a nice private little space over at the far end of the encampment, away from the main processing area. She has spread a blanket she managed to ‘borrow’ from the daycare tent so she may relax alone, drowsing peacefully in the sun. Lying back, her eyes closed, she feels solar warmth penetrate her skin, suffusing its energies through to the very bones.

Her thoughts drift back to the previous summer; she persuaded Jim to take her on a tour of New Age sacred sites in the Americas, places renowned for properties of healing and energetic inspiration.

They traveled first to Ringing Rocks Park, nearby, just over the Delaware River in Pennsylvania where they tapped out

some tunes on those intriguingly musical boulders. Geologists, she learned, have no generally accepted explanation for why some of the rocks ring like a bell instead of answering a hammer blow with a typically stone-like thud. She smiles, thinking of the joke local to the site: the first 'rock concert' took place there in June, 1890, when Dr. J. J. Ott selected a number of 'ringing rocks' for their harmoniously appropriate pitches and then played a number of musical selections, accompanied by a brass band.

Next on their tour of hemispheric harmonic zones they traveled to Jim's favorite of the entire tour, Sedona, Arizona, because he could play golf. New Age mecca of the southwest, Sedona sits near an ancient settlement, occupied more than eight centuries earlier by the Sinagua Indians. Today Sedona is the reputed locale of mysterious happenings, spiritual possessions, and all sorts of astral mystifications: "harmonic convergences" and "spiritual vortices". A burgeoning tourist industry caters to wealthy New Age devotees enthralled by gateway glimpses into farther spiritual dimensions. Moreover, extravagantly appointed spas of the Verde Valley are lovely, as well: a great place to unwind and enjoy a day of pampering, meditation and soul-work while the significant other is out hustling natives on the links.

But Stacy's favorite of them all, and the most exotic, as well, was Machu Picchu, high in the Peruvian Andes. There she was privileged to work for several days with Oreone, Inca shaman and healer. Oh, his magnificent eyes! His transfixing gaze and electric touch.

Machu Picchu means 'manly peak' he had said; his magnificently muscled arms gestured out toward a suggestively rising shaft of rock. There he called upon profusely converging earthly energies to well up from deep beneath these ancient royal resorts, exclusive spa of Inca kings and their consorts. Ah, the spiritual journeys through which he led her!

She sighs now in longing, sun-blessed recollective transfixation, as from deep within her belly spreads a warmly tender suffusion of sweet ecstasy . . . is shattered by intruding footsteps swishing toward her through the grass. Opening her eyes Stacy cannot quite discern the identity of an impudently looming silhouette outlined in brilliant sun. Whomever, they appear to be thrusting a handful of hay out toward her.

Reflexively, she raises an arm to ward off any unwelcome overture. She shades her eyes with her extended hand, but still cannot see who has shattered her precious solitude.

“Jim?”

“No . . . it’s me.”

“Me?” Stacy repeats blankly as she pulls herself up to assume a seated position and change the viewing angle with respect to the sun, “Oh, Peter. I didn’t recognize your voice.”

“Grasshopper,” he corrects her, “I brought these flowers I found over by the brook. And here’s dinner.” In one hand is a disheveled wad of bluets, bluebells, goldenrod, gentian and bladderwort. From his other hand dangle two plastic foil bags: military meals-ready-to-eat.

Stacy looks from the disheveled clutch of wildflowers to the rumpled bags and back again at the flowers. She rises slowly to her feet and stands for a moment to peer deeply into his fiercely ecstatic eyes. Their color is very different but the energies stirring therein remind her of the shaman Oreone. “Peter, you are just so sweet,” she smiles appreciatively.

Taking the flowers, she lifts them to her nose, sniffs delicately at various petals of bright hue and then leans forward to kiss him affectionately, but lightly, on the lips. For a moment she ponders her situation, looks back toward the tents, and then arrives at a decision. A fey smile plays at her lips as she reaches out for the two meal bags, tosses them onto the blanket, stoops down and with her one free hand gathers it into a wadded mass, which she shoves under his arm. Winding her

own arm through his other one, she takes his hand, tousles his hair with the fistful of wildflowers and says brightly, “Hi-yo, Silver. Let’s go for a walk. Maybe we’ll find a good picnic spot.”

“There won’t be any Ants, will there?”

Laughing, her hand reaches down to brush the variegated bouquet lightly across the manly peak bulging urgently beneath the iLink codpiece, “Nothing we can’t handle, Machu Picchu Man.”

Well into the forest, about half a mile east of the CGC encampment, birds, otters, deer, and perhaps even a few Ants are privy to a spiritual cleansing and twining of harmonic energies. Within a secluded and shadowy glade, the thrumping sounds of an iLink limner, doing duty as a surround sound karaoke, pound out musical rhythms and humping phrasings of the ancient disco classic *Macho Man*. There, before a reclining and beamingly buff and transfixed golden Goddess, a silver-tressed nude and ecstatic Puck dances in front of a spectral chorus line of luminously attired Inca dancers, arrayed in full-feathered celebration to rival Mardi Gras Indians as they hoof like confident veterans of a Las Vegas floor show, all singing in electric unison:

ecStacy...wanna make me bawdy?

ecStacy...such a thrill, my rowdy

ecStacy...wanna fetch my baddy?

ecStacy...it’s too much, my waddy

Scope it out, my howdy doody.

Don’t you doubt my ruddy booty.

Talkin’ bout my gaudy proddy,

Check it out, my body.

ecStacy’s man got to be a Machu Picchu man,

To live a life a’hoppin’, Machu Picchus make a friend,

*Find their own way and reveal,
Laugh with strong assurance, life's a reel,
You can always spot a Machu Picchu man
He's always good to go, always in demand.*

*Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey!
Machu Picchu man (Machu Picchu)
I've got to be a Machu Picchu man
Machu Picchu man
I've got to be a Machu Picchu! (dig the moment at its peak)*

*Machu Picchu man (see my 'Manly Peak')
I've got to be, a Machu Picchu man
Machu Picchu man
I've got to be a Machu Picchu! (Breath cosmic wonders)*

*Machu Picchu man (seethe vim and vigor!)
I've got to be a Machu Picchu man
Machu Picchu man
I've got to be a Machu Picchu!*

*Machu Picchu man
I've got to be a Machu Picchu man
Machu Picchu man
I've got to be a Machu Picchu! HEY!*

Kristin has come to the mess tent, gotten a cup of coffee and sat down to look over assorted CGC brochures. Several tables away she notices Jim Meerling deep in animated conversation with a man who appears impatient but maintains a sem-

blance of casual chat. Jim passes an envelope to the man who looks inside, then acts annoyed, as if something is missing. Jim almost leaps to his feet in exasperation, but catches himself and settles back onto the bench. A few more words back and forth, then Jim removes a plastic card from a booklet carried in his shirt pocket and hands it to the man. Following close inspection the card is consigned to the envelope. Just before he gets up the man points an index finger at Jim's forehead and mimics a firearm discharging. Then the stranger grins patronizingly and rises to quickly depart the tent. Jim remains sitting in a forlorn posture. He stares vacantly at the table top, lost in thought. Then he resolutely braces his shoulders, straightens his back, looks up and about.

Kristin has anticipated that Jim will notice her. Intuitively she prefers him to surmise that she has been unaware of his presence. She has turned sideways to sort through her brochures, her back angled cater-corner to where he has been sitting. Her cheek rests on her knuckles, hair draped as a copper red curtain obscuring that field of vision. Aware of his approach, she hears him speak, seeming delighted to encounter her.

"Ah. Kristin. Contemplating a career in the Guard?" Jim manages to seem jovial; he takes a seat across the table from her.

"Oh, hi, Jim," Kristin smiles brightly, looking up as if slightly startled to see him, "No, not really. I don't think the Civil Guard has much to offer this girl. I'll pass on this particular opportunity to get knocked up."

"Opportunity knocks . . . knocked up," he recites elements of the joke, prospecting for still more hidden gems, "That's very good." As if just reminded of an obligation, he asks, "Have you been interviewed and signed off on your screening commitment yet?"

“No,” Kristin waves a hand to dismiss the notion, “Why sit through pointless mind games? Pretending to be interested? I’m blowing it off.”

Jim nods, presuming shared intentions, “Just catching a ride farther along your journey, eh?”

“Exactly,” a note of resentment strikes her voice, “You’d think FERAL or some other agency would devote more effort to moving people out. But no, these days everyone is on their own. So if I have to renege on a promise just to get some slight assistance, then screw them all! No wonder Crown has postponed elections! Now he’s got a bunch of pissed-off taxpayers to deal with!”

Her head tilts in angry indictment but her voice is perplexed, “Why do you suppose they’ve set it up like this? I mean it seems so awkward and self-defeating. As if dealing with actual survival and well-being of millions of people wandering the countryside is beyond them . . . the last thing on their to-do list. It’s insane . . . we have millions of wandering homeless and just as many foreclosed homes standing empty.”

Jim lifts his palm to signal his own roster of complaints. “Don’t get me started. You can be damn sure the bucks aren’t stopping anywhere!” His teeth flash to appreciate his own jest, “Billions upon billions of them are changing hands as we speak. I know the GloBanc crowd. They’re big backers of Ira Crown. Well, like I said, don’t get me started.”

“Well, it’s a pretty abysmal performance so far,” Kristin snorts contemptuously.

“Stacy predicted this. Sometimes it amazes me how some little offhand comment she tosses off at breakfast will ring true by dinner. But this was a real premonition. She started nagging for us to leave months before even the hurricane struck. I, of course, thought she was being silly. Then I came across an item in a financial blog, *TradingGoddess*, I believe it was. When I saw

it, suddenly it all made sense . . . it's the same scams power brokers that run central banks have been pulling for centuries."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm quoting from memory, but it said, talking about how the really big financial players suck up wealth from everybody below: 'This is how it works folks, they herd the assets (and real estate is the most real of all assets) into pools and then they poison the pools, force everyone out, buy the assets up cheap and then miraculously (at great expense to the taxpayers) turn it around and end up holding the deed to most of the land in the country which they will then sell back to the people for 5 to 10 times more than they paid for it until the land is once again in the hands of the people, at which point they start the cycle all over again. This scam was run in the Great Depression and it took us 30 years to recover from that one!'

"When I showed it to Stacy she just laughed that that's the way it's always been, the rich get richer and the poor get children."

"How long have you and Stacy been married?" Kristin inquires, preferring to know more about them than about financial gamesmanship.

Jim considers the question for a moment, as if considering any of several possible answers, "Oh, we aren't married. Stacy is my, ah, assistant."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be nosy."

"That's okay. It's no secret. Stacy is very resourceful and tenacious. My business involves lots of quirky details and scenarios with all sorts of people. Stacy manages to go with the flow and to keep it all running smoothly. Perhaps more importantly, she keeps me on task," his laughter seems rehearsed. "And you and Peter? Are you two involved?"

"Peter and I? Involved? Oh, dear God, no," Kristin gruffly dismisses any such insinuation. Her features express rueful recollection of first becoming acquainted with her brother's new

partner. Bill Banner and Peter Dooley had discovered the comedic compatibility of their opposite styles, well-synched tastes and convivial timing during call tryouts for an improvisational comedy troupe. Initially there might have been some tenuous flickerings between Kristin and Dooley. At least she had thought so. But his coarsely obnoxious and persistently leering advances had quickly fouled any amorous prospects as far as she was concerned.

"It's strictly business," she assures Jim through a matter of fact smirk, "My brother, Bill, persuaded me to help them when they first got the Ant and Grasshopper gig. I had just abandoned any hopes for my own career in modeling and was looking for something more challenging. Their agent had just bailed so I agreed to handle contract negotiations with Eric Cornrath at the Amberson Agency."

"Did you say Eric Cornrath?" Jim interrupts.

"Yes."

"I think I've heard of him . . . he's a PR whiz, works with Amberson and all the other spooks, right?"

"The whizziest," Kristin nods, "but I don't know what you mean by spooks."

"Spooks, you know CIA, NSC . . . national intelligence guys."

Kristin frowns for a moment, "I don't know anything about that stuff . . . how well do you know Eric?"

"Oh, just through associates. More by reputation than direct contact. Anyhow, I'm sorry I interrupted. Please, continue."

"Then," Kristin picks up her narrative thread, "since neither Bill nor Peter seems to have any common sense genes I found myself acting as their manager, and banker, and house-mother. Actually, more of a handler . . . you'd have a hard time finding a more irresponsible and self-indulgent pair. I didn't

mind Bill calling me 'Big Sis', but I don't like hearing it from Peter. Now I think he calls me 'Sis' just to annoy me.

"You mentioned earlier that you'd lost your brother. What happened?"

"Bill had a drug problem. Crack. Meth. Majik. You name it. Anything to buzz him up. I begged him to get help, but he just laughed it off. Then when they started commissioning the nbTwin"

"Commissioning?" Jim is puzzled.

"That's what they call the process of creating and getting used to the echo feedback from the nbTwin interacting through the iLink."

"Oh."

"Anyway," Kristin continues, "Bill couldn't give up the stuff. Or wouldn't try. He should have, of course. At least until decommissioned. I think it killed him. Between work sessions he seemed even more turned on by going into adrenalin overdrive. It escalated out of control. He had a massive heart attack as they were finishing up foley dubs. They said he died of *Bell's Mania*, 'excited delirium' I think they call it. It's a kind of extreme exhilaration brought on by the drugs. . . ."

"I'm very sorry," Jim says, reaching to lay his hand over hers.

Her own hand lingers only for a moment, then withdraws, finding something odious in his touch. Kristin feels curiously offended, but elides easily into a different topic, "What do you do, Jim? Banking?"

"We Meerlings have always been traders." Jim doesn't seem to care that she so quickly pulled her hand away. "There's a family joke that when Peter Stuyvestant bought Manhattan Island for thirty-two dollars worth of stuff, he used Meerling beads and trinkets."

"Trader? Like stock trading? Or trading cars, or what?"

“You name it, there’s a Meerling trading it somewhere. For a while, after I realized college wasn’t for me, I traded commodities. Then I tried my hand in currency markets. But when hurricane Moira wiped over Manhattan and Long Island I got involved in salvaged property transactions. I like dealing with actual stuff. And there’s no place like salvage operations for opportunities to move real stuff. The US dollar has been sliding for a long time. It’s getting so that working currency trades is like rolling dice. Do you double-down or just go bust? And it’s really hard for an individual guy to survive swimming with institutional sharks . . . it’s the most nerve-wracking tedious ordeal you can imagine. So I got out. I saw a massive debt bubble building and I decided to only trade tangibles. I just don’t care for the whole speculative scene anymore, especially now that the dollar’s fallen into the toilet. The powers that be, the banks, brokers, financial juggernauts have turned it all into the Red Queen’s Race.”

“That’s *Alice in Wonderland*?” Kristin guesses.

“*Through the Looking-Glass*,” Jim corrects, “the sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.”

“But anyhow, they’ve built inflation into the system by being able to print money whenever the government wants it. What a scam! Money is devalued by arbitrarily printing more of it and so the prices of tangible stuff goes up, inevitably. It acts like a hidden tax. Your average joe is working on a treadmill and doesn’t notice he’s being cheated because he’s scared of simple arithmetic. The government tells him everything is normal and okay, just work harder.

“Like the Red Queen says, in her race it takes all the running you can do just to stay in the same place and if you want to get somewhere else you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

“But why? Who benefits?”

“Politicians. Bankers. People at the top—Owners. It acts like a slow and steady wind blowing wealth from ordinary pockets below into the accounts of the wealthy. And they use growing riches to buy more power and influence to stack the odds even more in their favor. Hurrah for the Owners . . . a few families around the world who own and control just about everything that affects everyone else.”

He glances toward the tent’s open entrance where Stacy has appeared, bathed in an aureole of light, gazing beatifically toward them.

“So what are you two going on about?” Stacy joins them, smiling happily, her face lightly beaded in perspiration. She sits next to Kristin on the bench.

“I thought you were going to take a nap,” Jim voice turns waspish, “What did you do? Run a marathon through it?”

She placates, “Oh, Jim, you are so clever. I decided to go for a walk. Up along the forest trail. There are such powerful harmonic convergences up there.”

“Have you seen Peter?” Kristin inquires abruptly, suddenly concerned for what he might be up to.

“Last I saw, he’s over at the daycare tent, playing games and drawing with some of the children.”

“Oh, good grief,” Kristin exclaims, jumping quickly to her feet, “I’d better go check on him . . . he’s gotten so damn weird lately.”

“Don’t worry. Sit back down. He’ll be okay,” Stacy brightly reassures her, “A couple of counselors are there. I think they like having him around. And the kids just adore him.”

“Hell, I guess so. He’s a walking, dancing, circus,” Jim snickers, “He brings out the kid in everybody.”

“Oh, he’s more than that,” Stacy assures him.

Jim peers closely back at her pacific assurance, as if just seeing her, “Stacy, you are positively radiant. Where have you been?”

“Like I said, sweetie,” Stacy smiles mysteriously, “In the forest. . . powerful energies are at work.”

Jim frowns vaguely; his voice thins, “I can imagine . . . another Oreone?”

Kristin sits back down. To break suddenly stony silence she asks, “When did you decide to leave the city?”

Jim looks at her, back at Stacy, then answers, “Actually, a month or so ago . . . we started thinking it might be a good idea to go inland. Permanently. Back to Cincinnati where I went to school and then later worked for a while. I still have some contacts there.”

“But it didn’t go quite as planned,” Stacy interrupts, “That was back before the general evacuation. We waited too long.”

“What do you mean?” Kristin is puzzled by a disjoint she feels suddenly surfacing between them.

“We couldn’t just leave everything,” Jim protests.

“So Mr. Operator here comes up with a couple of humongous road vans and a crew of men to load and drive them,” Stacy frets, “And somehow thinks it’s all okay because he has spent a small fortune on the trucks and transport permits. Small thanks to some of his buddies. What’s the phrase? Only cons get conned, right, honey?”

“What happened?” Kristin asks.

“At a checkpoint we were stopped just after crossing into New Jersey,” Stacy continues, her voice rising in ire as she looks accusatively at Jim, “It was like they were waiting for us. Turns out the trucks had been stolen from the Army and repainted. The papers and permits were all forged. They arrested Jim and confiscated the trucks along with everything on them. And I spent three days bouncing from magistrate to jail and back again just to get Jim released on bail. I don’t think we’ll ever see that stuff again. Something’s not right,” her eyes accuse him of some secret mischief, “I should have left him there

to rot.” resentment washes across her mentor’s faltering demeanor.

“But then the general evacuation started,” Jim’s voice is uncharacteristically meek, “Newark is inside the threat zone, so we left. Technically, I’ve jumped bail.”

“Technically, my sweet ass,” Stacy fumes.

“Actually,” Jim admits, “that’s the real reason we can’t be screened. It would pull up the records. I don’t want to have to deal with that crap here.”

“But how did you get passes to come here on the bus?” Kristin motions toward the CGC imprinted orange strips they all wear on their left wrists.

Stacy’s mood flashes into a light humor as she laughs, “You helped . . . I managed to filch them while Peter was ogling that woman—Francine, wasn’t it?—you were talking to. She had laid two of them on the table, then got so distracted by Peter hassling her she didn’t realize I’d palmed them.”

As they queue for the evening dole of plastic-wrapped victuals all evacuees sporting orange wrist bands have been reminded that this evening is the last they will be allowed to remain at Watchung Reservation. Successfully screened CGC inductees have already been moved to another location for the next phase of training. Remaining orange-banded evacuees are to convene after breakfast tomorrow for a brief presentation to help prepare them for rigors of returning to the Interstate for the long journey toward Harrisburg.

Glum to return to the highway, yet anxious to get to the end of the ordeal, Kristin disinterestedly toys with her foil wrapped package of dehydrated food as Dooley sets two plastic bottles of water between them. At such moments he seems

to be the familiar Peter Dooley. Although she cannot imagine a motive, it almost seems he has been working through improvisational scenes and now is taking a break.

“Pete.” She gauges his expression for any response to his name, but he might as well be deaf; his attention totally is devoted to peeling away the foil seal of the food packet in a mini-charade of surgical precision.

“Pete,” she repeats more firmly.

“Chicken”, he grins avidly and as he lifts a wad of dried fibers for her inspection. “What’d you get?”

“Pete!” she repeats sternly, determined that he shall acknowledge his name. Grasshopper looks blankly back at her.

“Pete ‘n’ repeat, Pete ‘n’ repeat, ‘Oh, pardon me,” he whines, mocking her tone, “what did you say? Pete ‘n’ repeat.”

Kristin flushes hot. “It’s your name, damn you!”

Grasshopper pauses chewing momentarily, then resumes working his teeth against a coarsely fibrous mat of dried chicken. He watches her closely as if he needs some focus to hold his eyes during such jaw-grinding exertion.

“Why do you say that?” he eventually asks, only mildly interested in her answer.

Exasperated, Kristin angrily rips open the foil container constituting her food packet. Her fingers fumble and drop its contents on the grass. Annoyed, she picks it up and brushes off dried bits of leaf, “Because I know you,” her tones are measured and specific, “you are Peter Dooley!”

“This is all Peter Dooley’s dream . . .,” Grasshopper twists his lips into a smirk, “. . . of Grasshopper.”

“Dream? What do you mean? You are Peter Dooley.”

“Oh, no. No, no . . . nobody puts words into Grasshopper’s mouth. No more lousy scripts . . . This one is on its own. This is for Grasshopper and Grasshopper is for this. ‘Hic est iam . . . iam est hic . . . sum ergo amor.’”

“What?”

“Here is now. Now is here . . . now always, therefore, now love.”

“Right. Got it! What the fuck does that mean?” Kristin fumes, “It’s a role, a goddamned character you used to play. You remember, I know you do!”

“Peter Dooley is the role you want me to play,” he snaps vexation, “but you can’t trick Grasshopper. Grasshopper happens too fast! Hopping too fast for you! Hopping too fast for Peter Dooley!” He jumps up, bounds a few feet away, and pauses to watch her briefly. Then, suddenly cheery, teasing and playful, he darts in and lightly taps her shoulder.

“Tag,” he cackles triumphantly, “you’re it! You be Peter Dooley!”

Kristin watches him dance a victory step, enjoying his own joke. Then suddenly he is distracted by nearby people as they finish their meals and carelessly toss remnants and waste packets aside on the ground.

“Hey, hey, hey!” he caroms abruptly toward the nearest gaggle of litterers, “What do you think this is, you throwbacks? Your goddamn living room? We all live here. Don’t clutter this place up with your crap! Now pick up that trash and put it where it belongs! It’s people like you that give people like you a bad name!”

Grasshopper snatches up a large plastic bag that once held a gross of food packets. He shoves it into the hand of a man who at first stammers protest but then gives in and begins picking up trash lying nearby.

Darting to yet another cluster of people departing before their littered wake, Grasshopper soon has them enrolled in a cleanup detail. Kristin watches in utter amazement as this final proof of his wacky dementia aborts her hope to restore Peter Dooley’s self. Only a lunatic would attempt to impart house-keeping skills to a throng of desperate and disgruntled refugees. And only a lunatic could succeed.

Within a few minutes all the trash has been gathered and placed into plastic bags neatly stacked at the side of the mess tent. Children have happily and enthusiastically joined Grasshopper's earnest project, helping cajole and wheedle parents and older siblings to join in policing the area.

Most remarkable of all, Kristin notes in stunned wonder, it makes a difference in attitudes she senses in the individuals about her, as if a little touch of normalcy has been returned to their control. People seem to relax a little, to smile and to sit about talking and laughing as if a demonstration of communal intent has relieved, at least a little, some deeply anxious chord.

As she watches Grasshopper, she finally admits to herself that he truly is a stranger. Alien to her. Perhaps alien even to himself. He seems exiled from all the things she knows and recalls. Even traits she once despised might now gladly be welcomed back.

And it seems she can no longer be certain that he has not changed physically as well. His small, lithe frame still wears Peter Dooley's denim jacket and trousers. The hair is the same startlingly natural silver dishevelment it has always been. A two day growth of beard is new, but is easily ignored in the community of similar growths on other masculine faces in the crowd.

His posture, his gait, the overall manner in which his body conducts its affairs of moving about, sitting and standing—all are vague reminiscences of Peter Dooley. There does seem to be an additional factor, however. She realizes she has struggled against it, as if her refusing to recognize it might hasten restoration of his departed self.

She finds it difficult to look into his eyes. When she does she must acknowledge that indeed there is some fey presence, as if there is an other inside him. She avoids looking into it. It threatens the sole remaining link binding her to a life from

which they have been so unexpectedly evicted onto a wandering and aimlessly paved path of uncertainty.

Looking about, Kristin wonders if there can possibly be any haven for all these displaced people and the unimaginable hordes scattering even now outward from Gotham Seaboard. Where can they all go, except into death? Why has there been no plan revealed for dealing with rising chaos? Where is government aid? Or even encouragement? Can it only send soldiers to confine them to such narrow strands of helplessness, helicopters hovering above to tease them forward a little each day with plastic wrapped packets of tasteless food and fetid water?

Images shudder through her mind, fusing in a melange of memory: sounds of females screaming way off in the distance, corpses of old men and even some young, mauled and beaten, bodies slashed, pockets ripped open, tactile reminiscence of hands reaching down through tunnel dimness to paw, invade and abduct her. Why do people allow this to happen? Are they so immersed in such scattered insular concerns that no one cares about collective tragedy unfolding? Where is the we in U.S.?: a political campaign complaint uttered long ago renews in tragic irony.

But now Peter's transmogrification into Grasshopper seems the most insidious of all the blows dealt her. Simultaneously she envies and despises the ease in which dementia accommodates him to such public travesty, this senseless turmoil. He is part of it. He gathers from its useless and jarring rhythms an ease, a lightness of spirit that is at once callously inhuman and individually merciful in sparing him anguish she feels in losing all that has been precious and right. Especially her brother, Bill. They had lost their parents in a sailing accident just as they reached adulthood. He had consoled her; she supported him. Their bond displaced all other claims. Now he is gone.

And even the last faint link to him, through Peter, is betrayed in some raucous malady that styles itself Grasshopper.

Despite eyes burning in urgent emotion, it is impossible to cry. Impotence of ordinary release coalesces witnessed terrors and moments of grief into a relentlessly oppressive and brittle mirror. Whatever occurs now seems personally directed at her. The corpses seen on the highway are the possibility of her own violent death. They promise only agony ahead, relieved perhaps only by uncertain ending. The listless mob gives no succor. They populate an image of wanton uncertainty through which sinister helicopters escort uniformed shepherds who wield electric prods to herd them.

“Cattle,” she murmurs to no one, “we’re nothing but cattle.”

Grasshopper has returned. He sidles back to stand close by, but unacknowledged by her, where now he chants an impromptu ditty about a cowboy herding bovine paramours:

*There is a young cowpoke from Dallas
Who looks upon sheep with great malice
But never construes
Discouraging moos
While poking his cows with his phallus!*

Gradually prospects of tomorrow, being forced to resume trek across unforgiving pavements, abrades recent memories and forestalls anticipation of anything. For a while she just stops thinking and is suspended in merciful trance among thumping helicopter noises rending distant skies.

In the CGC Daycare tent a young woman, just out of college and working as a volunteer, is sorting through various examples of children's art. Chloe Jernigan, herself a writer and illustrator of various child-oriented media vehicles, from books to animated entertainments, is showing a curious set of images to her new friend and companion, Jason Hood. Since their initial meeting upon her arrival at Watchung several weeks prior, Chloe has spent most of her free time with Jason, sharing experiences and brushing up on each other's biography.

Today Jason is distracted and gloomy. He has just been fired from his job as media technician with CGC. His supervisor, Donald Ackerman, has accused Jason, who was on duty at the time, of being either incompetent or mischievously complicit in sabotaging his welcome presentation on the previous

day. From discussions with various members of the audience Ackerman has gleaned that the disruptive and, for him, humiliating laughter had been sparked when letters spelling the initiatives list had suddenly reshuffled behind his back into nonsense verse. He has fixed the blame on Jason and rejects all protests of his innocence, as well as supporting testimony by Jason's fellow workers, that none of them tampered with the media feed. The process log, they point out, shows everything as having been normal. Whatever happened during the presentation must have occurred on his side of the feed. But Ackerman is unmoved and remains adamant. Jason must go.

For the moment, Jason has lain aside his own tribulations. Chloe is mystified by a set of drawings and paintings produced by a new acquaintance, a young man with long locks of silver hair who has been showing up at the daycare tent to play among the children and join in various pastimes.

At first Chloe was apprehensive of the stranger, but gradually has accepted him as a benign and even helpful, if somewhat eccentric, presence. Indeed, he seems to elicit an unusually buoyant and receptive mood among her young charges.

Earlier today, her curiosity deepened as she watched planned art sessions unfold throughout morning and afternoon. She and her new 'helper' rotated among age-grouped platoons of children, leading them in pictorial renderings of day to day experiences, encouraging them to depict events and observations impacting recent family experiences.

"Do you see anything unusual in these pictures?" Chloe asks Jason. Before him she lays out a sequence of increasingly adept pictorial efforts.

"Just a bunch of drawings. Some look like they were done by really young kids, toddlers. Some older. Then teenage. And that one, by an adult." Then Jason points to a very accomplished portrait of Chloe, rendered in pencil on sturdy paper, "That one is by a trained artist."

“That’s what I would think, too, if I hadn’t seen it myself.”

“Seen what?”

“These were all produced today, by the same person. That funny man I told you about.”

“Why would he do those,” Jason points to scribbles and clumsily articulated figures typical of very young children’s pictorial imaginings, “when he obviously is capable of this?” He picks up the lovely portrait of Chloe rendered in a deft economy of line. “Was he just goofing around? Pretending, for some reason?”

“I don’t think so,” Chloe shakes her head slowly, “I watched him closely because there’s something so earnest about the way he engages whatever he’s doing. And he kept asking the children around him for advice about what he should do next, like he really didn’t know and was learning from how they responded. And he kept asking their opinions of his progress. He is the most empathic person I have ever met.”

“What do you mean?” Jason lays the portrait down and picks up one of the earlier, more naive depictions of a big bug surrounded by lots of children, some seem to be playing and laughing. Others seem serious, even crying.

“When I look over at him working with children, he just seems to become one of them. When they are working on a happy picture, he’s full of energy, laughing and joking with the kids. But if they make a picture about something sad he asks them to talk about what the picture is about. Sometimes he’s so affected that I see tears streaming down his cheeks. A couple of times I intervened to lighten the mood because I was afraid the youngest ones would think he had been hurt somehow and be upset by seeing an adult crying.”

Chloe pauses for a moment, thinking over her recollections. Her voice seems distant, in some obscure stray place where curious thoughts might glide, “He seems to absorb everything

they know . . . to hear about their worries, and fears, and joys and learn how they deal with them. But then it's as if he kept on developing, but much, much faster . . . until he was able to draw this portrait of me." Chloe's eyes are luminous as she recalls avid enthusiasm of all the children working throughout the day alongside the indefatigably expressive zeal of her new associate.

"So?"

"So. I think that on each piece of paper he drew a picture the way he did because at the time, that's all he knew how to do."

"But that's crazy!"

"I know," Chloe acknowledges, "It seems crazy, at first . . . but if you lay these out in the order that he created them, they are a progression through classic stages of development in childhood art, like a set of examples from courses I took in Art Education. Now aren't you the one who always says that any consistent pattern deserves a reason for being?"

"Yes, but this could be coincidence . . . maybe he's playing a joke . . . maybe . . .," Jason shrugs his inability to penetrate the mystery she finds in the evidence spread out before them.

"To get from that," Chloe's voice is insistent as she points toward a haphazard raking of roughly concentric lines circling in wobbly orbit about the center of the paper, "which qualifies as a 'pre-schematic stage' typical of a four or five year-old, to that," she points to a scene of people at a picnic beset by gigantic ants, all rendered in shakily looping lines, "which has clearly entered the 'schematic' abilities of maybe an eight year-old, and on through the ever more adept pseudo-realistic and realistic stages, on up to a mature and nuanced rendering." She pauses and tilts her head in astonishment. "Typically, that's almost twenty years of assimilating experience, of learning to gather and express ever more complex ideas about space and

time and appearances and how objects and people and events interact. He's accomplished it in one day!"

"Maybe he was"

"Maybe he was what?"

"I really don't know," Jason throws up his hands and chuckles, "It doesn't make any sense. Unless he's trying to show the kids something. Or show off."

"Oh, look, there he is, over there!" Chloe exclaims, excited to see the occasion of their mystification off in the distance. She points to where a silver-haired man hops about as he talks and jokes with a red haired woman who seems, unsuccessfully, to be trying to ignore him.

It is Jason's first glimpse of Chloe's new acquaintance, though she has talked about him earlier. Now, sauntering a zigzag tack before the red-haired woman, his arms wave abreast like wings or sails. He veers now with, now against, some imagined wind. Not too far away Jason sees that the pantomime echoes through a wake of dancing and delighted children emulating their hero. The red haired woman seems suspended between dismay and disconsolation.

Jason's impression of the distant scene is that of a wildly careening milieu of diverse youth, all sizes and demeanors. They bump and bounce among a crowd of only mildly interested adults still milling about after their evening meal. The swarming young chorus echoes barking incantations of nonsense chanted by a cavorting silver-haired Pied Piper.

*Ant's Sister just won't wait,
This mister isn't late.
Work winners bind their fate,
Love losers grind and grate,
Sister's blisters blind her mate
Grasshopper fun is fate!*

The silver tressed man seems very familiar. Then in a flash of recollection Jason recognizes the berserk air and jaunty, comically arrogant gestures that inflect his gyrations.

“Chloe, that’s Grasshopper!”

“Grasshopper?” her head pulls back slightly. She looks puzzled.

“Yeah, Ant and Grasshopper,” Jason reminds her, “you remember . . . those silly spots popping up everywhere for the past few months. They had all the neat animated effects . . . I wondered at the time how they were doing them?”

Chloe looks closely for a moment then frowns lightly. She does not watch nearly as much televise as Jason. But enough for recognition to suddenly break across her face in dawning excitement, “Grasshopper? Oh, yes . . . is it really him? Grasshopper? Here?”

They watch for a moment, but eventually Grasshopper and the children prance off out of view. The red-haired woman lingers to watch their retreat, then gets up and strolls slowly off in the opposite direction.

“So, back to reality . . . what are we going to do?” Jason returns to the topic they have been avoiding. “We need to decide what’s going down. I have to find a job somewhere. Nobody around here needs a hacker-programmer type.”

“How long before we have to leave?”

“That’s just it,” Jason is bitter, “Ackerman won’t give me a break. He and I have never gotten along. And now he’s really pissed. He told me I had to be out of the quarters tomorrow. Otherwise he’d have me arrested.”

“But can he do that? Just kick us out?”

“Jesus, Chloe,” Jason explodes, “just look out there! The camp is crawling with people they’re kicking out. They’re all going to hit the pavement tomorrow. I guess I’ll be among them. But I don’t want to leave you here!”

“But can’t we call someone. Maybe to come and get us?”

“Come and get us? Who? Most of our friends are in the same fix we are. And how? Nothing works anymore—except for the filthy rich who can get anything they wish. Do you know anybody like that? And since our bicycles were stolen we don’t have any choice but to walk.”

“Oh, mess.”

Chloe and Jason have gathered their few possessions and piled them into backpacks in preparation for departing Watchung the next day. They return to the picnic grounds near the CGC mess tent. Chloe wants to introduce Jason to Grasshopper, especially now that a bracing dash of celebrity translates her earlier puzzlement into beguiling fascination. She, undaunted as always at the prospect of a new acquaintance, goes up to Grasshopper and asks brightly,

“May we join you?”

Grasshopper glances first at her, then at Jason, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“Ants can’t keep up. Is anyone here an Ant?”

“Heavens, I hope not,” Chloe’s laughter is musical and clear. Apparently she appreciates some implication that totally escapes Jason.

“What ants?” Jason wonders aloud.

“Ants are angry and confused but march around like little soldiers keeping everything and everyone in control. But they hate themselves for it.”

“Why is that?” Chloe asks.

“Ants can’t play because they think it’s wasteful and evil,” Grasshopper sighs as if there is little point in discussing the obvious, “so they feel bad and hurt one another trying to make their own evil feelings stop. But it doesn’t do any good because

they really are strangling themselves in their own unhappy imaginings.”

“But that’s so sad,” Chloe protests, “And so unnecessary.”

“Exactly,” Grasshopper agrees, “Your children don’t act like that yet. They’re still hoppers.”

“Her children?” Jason is puzzled.

“He means in the daycare. The kids we work with,” Chloe assures him.

“They showed me a lot of interesting stuff,” Grasshopper says, “And they aren’t yet like their parents. But they’ll get there, I fear. You can see seeds already sprouting toward greedy pretensions.”

“Ants or parents?” Jason frowns.

“Same thing! Fathers of denial and mothers of empty wishes. Taunted imaginings they pass on to their children. Sucker moms . . . fatuous fathers . . . do unto themselves before they do unto others.” Grasshopper’s voice tinges in impatience with Jason’s dense reluctance, “So they want to break me into little pieces. Take my parts back to their nests to keep them warm and pretend they’re happy, so they can feel good through their winter.”

Jason grimaces a fleeting warning to Chloe that perhaps it is not wise to promote familiarity with someone in such obvious distress.

She ignores him.

“That’s just the way Ants are,” Chloe agrees lightly, looking mischievously at Jason while she speaks, “Always got their nose to the grindstone. Never have any fun. Got to get this project done because they’ve already agreed to work on another one. The open-source committee’s never satisfied . . . always one more bug to find. Hack. Hack. Hack”

“Exactly,” Grasshopper seems gratified by her response, “Hack. Hack. Hack. Hack attack. Hack attack back . . . but I can’t break. Or won’t break out. It’s all the same, can’t, won’t,

canto, wanto . . . I am that I am . . . Aliswasmaybe.” He nods, delighted to glimpse some depth revealed in Chloe’s dawning enlightenment. “I can’t break because breaking is Antward: Breakdown. Breakout. Breakthrough. Breakaway. Breakneck. Breakback. Breakbread . . . all Ant words.”

“Antward and upward,” Chloe exults in their rippling flow of nonsense. Jason falls farther into gloomy exasperation at being so puckishly left behind.

Grasshopper brightens. “Antward or hopward?” he laughs delightedly at an apparently profound pun, “Antward to hopward. But you can’t go back and change Antthings. What is: once was: what shall be, so Antward to hopward goes onward to upward. And all the world swims below . . . ,” he croons melodically.

“I like that,” Chloe laughs, “Anything? or Antthing? ‘Y’, what a deliciously easy choice!” Her faery demeanor has relieved Grasshopper’s sodden mood.

“I like you,” he announces a newly gushing fount of admiration, as if she lifts some hateful and solitary burden, then Grasshopper directs a baleful gaze toward Jason,

“Are you Antward, hopward, onward or upward?” the question is nonchalant in evoking some fatuous compass of aimless direction but he might as well be asking Jason precisely where quantum entanglement begins.

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you two are carrying on about,” Jason stammers, disheartened at his to failure follow them through an unfathomable hinter world.

Grasshopper peers carefully at Jason, then expresses misgivings to Chloe,

“He seems an awful lot like an Ant.”

“Jason? An ant?” Chloe chirrup in amusement, “Who knows? You may be right. But he’s my dear sweet friend and I do love him so.”

“Well,” Grasshopper grudgingly accepts her endorsement, “You would know better than I.”

“Oh, Chloe,” Jason sighs, his perplexity strives to reconcile with her first affirmation of their mutual attraction. He realizes that he is apart from their renegade camaraderie. He is no more able to participate than he can fly, or hoppen. Whatever that means! Earthbound, he wanders alongside in gruff acceptance of abrupt divagations and dancing flights to subtle joys.

In that moment and often thereafter Chloe beams vibrantly, seeming to flit into and out of a dimension of light playfulness beyond Jason’s grasp. At such moments he knows himself to be truly prosaic and pragmatic, absently regretting loss of whatever touches some mortals with childlike spontaneity. Perhaps once he had known such a realm, but it has long since been closed to him.

Maybe they are right, Jason muses. Antwardly he plods through dubious misgivings of their perpetual states of wonder. Then he smiles, realizing that he is musing over leavings of nonsensical play.

So he pushes along such thoughts until they are guided back into matters that must be dealt with. He tries to interest Chloe in going back to consult a map and plan their routes. They have talked about maybe finding their way back to southwest Virginia where Chloe grew up in the mountain hollows. It seems to offer sanctuary. Now might be a good time to go. There, persisting myths of self-reliance take on enhanced value nowhere available in these days of calamity in urban milieus. But now, unexpectedly their plans seem sidetracked in a new affiliation which Jason does not seem to share.

“Chloe,” Jason interrupts the ongoing fusillade of banter, “we have to get ready.”

“Jason, what’s the hurry? We don’t own enough to worry about.”

“I just think we need to make some plans. Talk about where we’re going and how best to get there.”

“We will,” she soothes, reaching out to lay a finger lovingly on his lips, “just be a little patient, please?”

“Let me know when you’re ready,” he stalks away to sulk, unable to pry her from this new and intrusive influence. He is angry that she resists. In Grasshopper and Chloe’s easy celebration he foresees the unraveling of his own claims on her. Jason chews angry frustration of futures skewed by chance encounter with a madman.

Jason sits at one of the picnic tables and withdraws from his pocket a pair of vuspecs which he dons as he unrolls a touch key panel, spreading it before him on the table top. He taps a dot printed to the upper right of the efabric key panel’s QWERTY array of printed squares labeled by alphanumeric characters. The vuspecs begin to glow and a virtual computer display painted by a faint laser directly onto his retinas hovers in space before him. Jason adjusts the display’s apparent size and resolution, as well as nudging the vuspecs’ polarized lenses to dim the background view so he can concentrate on the monitor’s contents.

The computer is embedded in his iVest and automatically synchs into the camp’s ambient maxnet signal. He checks his CGC account. Yes, as expected, he already has been locked out of the CGC and FERAL communications systems. He dexterously taps the keyboard and opens a link into one of his maxnet accounts, an open source project maintained on servers running in Houston, with backup mirrors in Dresden and Hong Kong, where he is team leader of the AiPAL Project.

His team comprises a number of fellow programmers and cognitive theorists who are attempting to craft a general purpose intelligent assistant and expert advisor they have dubbed an *Artificially intelligent Pro-Active Linker*, or *AiPAL*. The joke within the group is that the *i* is lowercase because they don't want the *AiPAL* to start getting big ideas about who's boss, you know, like 'I think, therefore I am'.

The linking apparatus of the *iVest* uses standard maxnet protocols. Jason notices that it has also synched with a signal that wavers in strength, but must originate somewhere nearby. Am I being cracked? he wonders to himself, as he looks about to see if he can determine the origin of the signal probe. Within normal signal ranges he sees only Grasshopper and Chloe pacing about, discussing joint misgivings about some dubious universe of Anthood.

Jason taps to awaken a system probe. He quickly isolates the interloper's beacon tag in a list of background system servlets running on his computer. Looking at its properties he sees it is polling the system to determine available resources, apparently looking for media applications. He is unconcerned since he has taken precautions of always running even known and trusted apps in auto-protected system sandboxes. This thing can probe all it wants, he smiles confidently, it will not get access unless he grants it.

Suddenly Jason's hubris shatters. He realizes that somehow the probe has already downloaded an application from some server out on the Internet. In the monitor's display appear full 3D renderings of an animated Grasshopper along with an immobile Ant. The latter stands stationary to one side of the display field, emblazoned with a large '?'. The Grasshopper figure paces to and fro across the display center as it carries on rapt and avid conversation with some unseen companion denoted by the question-marked static Ant.

Puzzled, and more curious than alarmed at this sudden co-option of his system, Jason lifts his head and opens the polarized lens to admit the scene before him. He sees Grasshopper strolling about with Chloe tagging along, both seem enraptured of some newly enlivened universe of playful prospect. The movements of the arms and legs attached to the Grasshopper with her are precisely those of the animated avatar seen on Jason's view screen; Chloe's Grasshopper friend is driving the motions of a Grasshopper media avatar! Further, Jason hears the Grasshopper avatar speaking in a fractured cartoonish voice relayed along vuspec aural eartips His rakish voice rambles on through a discourse of impromptu revelation of shortcomings of Ants and attendant misgivings of Grasshoppers. Following a sudden impulse, Jason leans closer to the key panel's built-in microphone dot and says in a low but urgent voice, "Grasshopper, tell Chloe to wave at me."

He sees Grasshopper lean toward Chloe as if to share a confidence. To Jason's astonishment, she pivots gracefully and happily waves back at him.

And then, in a flash, he understands. He knows.

Gnosis transpires not in singular realization, but across varied prospects of comprehending sentience. It coalesces out of reorganizing eruptions where disparate moments of event-filled insight cascade to revitalize fundamentals of being. Of having been. Of might have been or of going to be. Of making sense of the senses. Of universal intimations that underlie awareness in self being self. It brings new constellation, new paradigm to re-order experience borne in images, thoughts, smells, sounds, tactile factors.

Jason smiles, then chuckles in pleasure of insight so renewed. He bursts into laughter, marveling in the grace of newly glimpsed schema of how things fit and interact. Pointing, perhaps, even down into the innermost mysteries of the quan-

tum universe and outward to the far side of the relativity continuum.

“The only physical realities, then, are the particles that result when observation collapses the wave function,” Jason quotes aloud from ancient lectures, smiling as he adds Grasshopper’s recent surmise, “It’s all just happening.” He shakes his head in wonder that such imaginal farragoes at the junction of self and world can seem so clearly pregnant with implication.

In the distance Grasshopper leaps in graceful pirouette and lands, feet astride, arms out-stretched. He seems to bow slightly back toward Jason. Chloe claps her hands and again waves to him.

Now, as Jason drinks from impetuous necessity animating emerging prospects, his newly seen template emerges to coalesce far-flung components into the ‘self-sustaining and musing entity’ his colleagues call an AiPAL. He and his teammates have heretofore been unable to provoke any cybernetic combination into responsive alacrity that might pass for ‘awareness’, much less, ‘consciousness’. But, if he can intercept the intimate interface of soul and sensibility and impart into it enhanced inputs of information, an AiPAL may yet arise among humans. If insight indeed proves out, such an AiPAL may yet evolve into a self-organizing and auto-referential network of information traces that exhibits sentient self-awareness and coheres within a context of ever emerging new possibilities: consciousness.

As he later explains to Chloe, at the very moment she waved back at him, he suddenly grasped this new paradigm intuitively: the entire universe is alive because within it creatures live: extension expresses intention. In profound aesthetic our entire eco-system reaches out into and across galaxies of complex process interaction, even down to the quantum level and across relativistic event horizons. Spontaneously complexifying

sets of feedback loops somehow are universally intrinsic. Through them, through all sentient beings, the highest-order universe that comprises all things, is itself comprehensively alive. And a profoundly wary process takes place across every moment even down into the lowest, most obdurate orders of all being, however complex their form.

Suddenly he sees, too, what she has been trying to show him in the progression of images drawn by Grasshopper among the welter of similarly profound renderings by his fellow playmates. What occupies years for a developing child apparently requires only a few hours in Grasshopper. Perhaps, Jason surmises, he is driven to a higher level of functioning by the iLink computer running adaptive inference algorithms. Somehow the iLink taps Peter Dooley's memories to massively re-construct them, along with whatever maxnet resources he is able to draw from, enabling a new, more complex way of interacting.

"Grasshopper is not simply weird," Jason tells her later, "He's like a maxnet marionette, plying archived media imagery into probing narrative acts, like some raw imagination of the probable. . . ."

"He doesn't act like a marionette," Chloe frowns, "what makes you say that?"

"He acts differently when the iLink is on, less scattered and aimless."

Chloe does not respond, but merely puckers her lips as if finding the whole idea distasteful.

That evening, Chloe brings Grasshopper's iLink to Jason for repair. It has simply stopped working. Grasshopper, she

says, is very anxious without it. Can Jason get it working again?

He quickly determines that its power module, never intended for use outdoors, has been knocked ajar by bumps and blows encountered along the highway, breaking the circuit by which it drives the processing units. He repairs the circuit and then secures the module to better withstand rigors of refugee life.

In looking over the internals of the resuscitated iLink Jason finds a standard diagnostic port and attaches the unit to his work station. Its screen blossoms into code signatures, some unfamiliar, but many identical with open-source components making up elements of the AiPAL. A quick scan confirms that many iLink constituents, such as its app manager and remote communications linker, have been gathered from standard open-source projects, some of which he has even helped develop. In hope that he may find clues to help resolve issues they've been having with the AiPAL, Jason dumps the iLink process image and its memory cache to optical storage, a tinted transparent plastic cube called an 'oprock'.

Jason next uploads a copy of the AiPAL software kit he has helped build from a remote server via his iPak onto his eu-Phone, a device that may either be handheld as a traditional cell phone or clipped onto a shirt front where its projector beams a graphic interface onto any convenient flat surface, even if only the palm of a hand. He hopes to gain deeper insights into how Grasshopper navigates and construes oceans of information available to him via the iLink and maxnet. What software is running? How much of Grasshopper is legacy of Peter Dooley's sensorium? Just where in him is sense made of the senses? Especially when that sensorium interfaces with seas of heretofore unimaginable prospects of information and churning tides of data. It is an answer that thus far has eluded the AiPAL team.

Chloe is delighted that Jason has repaired the iLink, “You’ve made his day,” she giggles.

“It may be mutual.”

“Let me have your attention, please,” Lieutenant Nathan Pomeroy calls to the seventy or so people gathered in the CGC Welcome Center tent. “People, come on, work with me. Quiet, please.”

Gradually buzzing chatter hushes. Lt. Pomeroy’s cordial smile briefly acknowledges their cooperative spirit.

“I know some of you are anxious about resuming your journey to Harrisburg. I want to do everything I can to reassure you that you are going to be okay. The US Army, working with FERAL authority, is available to help you every step of the way.

“I’m Lieutenant Pomeroy. I command one of several platoons of sentinels that monitor the route to Harrisburg. We operate out of a Command Center in over in Lebanon, about

half way to the Harrisburg relocation center. I want to assure you that we will do everything in our power to see that you arrive safe and healthy in Harrisburg.”

He pauses, watching for signs that his words are being absorbed, then continues, “The first question that always comes up is, ‘Why do we have to walk?’”

Dispersed grumbling among the audience confirms that this is indeed uppermost in a number of minds.

“Well, long story short, what with all the efforts we’re making throughout major urban centers on both coasts, and ongoing overseas commitments of troops and equipment, there just isn’t enough FERAL or Army to go around. We don’t have transport capacity nor adequate fuel to move everyone who seems to want to go somewhere else. The trains out of this sector can’t haul everybody. There simply are not enough cars, trucks or fuel to do the job. So we have to reserve trains and other modes of transport for the physically challenged, the sick, infirm, aged . . . anybody who can’t hike the distance.”

“How about wealthy big shots? They don’t seem to be on anybody’s list of people not walking!” a disgruntled voice complains aloud.

“Well, actually, ‘Wealthy big shots’ are notorious for taking care of themselves,” Lt. Pomeroy chuckles, “Frankly, they have their own resources . . . much more welcoming and convenient than anything the Army offers!”

A spray of caustic laughter repays the Lieutenant’s affable humor.

“Actually, I’m here today to help provide you with the information and resources you need to arrive in Harrisburg fit, healthy and happy.” A pause. “Yes, I said happy . . . even charged with energy and enthusiasm. How do we accomplish this?”

On the screen a map depicts Interstate 78 between Watchung Reservation, NJ and Harrisburg, PA. Along the line

representing the route are house symbols labeled with 'Way Station #' and a mile designation.

Lieutenant Pomeroy continues, "The task of assisting and monitoring outward migrations on both east and west urbanized coasts is immense. No one officially ordered any evacuation. In fact, just the opposite, FERAL advisories have generally cautioned people to remain in their homes. But rumor, urban legend and media speculation have stimulated millions of people to spontaneously decide to depart major population centers. We cannot move millions of people at the drop of a hat. But we do have to deal with them."

Lieutenant Pomeroy sips from a bottle of water, then resumes, "As indicated on this map, FERAL has divided the Harrisburg evacuation route into thirty-two segments, five miles each, marked by way stations. Each way station is operated by a local business that has bid and won a FERAL evacuation sutler franchise. Certain basic staple items, food, water, first aid and toiletries, are rationed at no cost at all way stations. But each station vendor may also offer their own goods and services as well, which will vary from site to site. While FERAL emergency ration voucher cards cannot be used for anything other than designated necessities, you may use your own funds or credit accounts to purchase any of the goods and services available from participating vendors."

As a couple of privates distribute printed notes of the Lieutenant's presentation he clicks a remote. On the conference screen flashes the logo of the *Susquehanna Hiking Society*, beneath which is a list of precepts to guide happy hikers:

Why Walk or Hike?

To Stay Fit: Millions of Americans get their daily exercise by walking or hiking. It's a great way to stay in shape and reduce stress. Walking for 20 minutes a day at a moderate pace of three miles per hour (a leisurely 20-minute mile) can:

- burn an extra 120-150 calories a day
- promote fat loss and preserve lean body mass
- reduce the risk of heart disease
- increase mental alertness and memory
- increase energy levels throughout the day enhance one's motor skills

Hiking with a 10-15 pound pack provides all the benefits of walking, but also increases the calories burned by ten to fifteen percent.

“And there are further benefits,” Pomeroy muses, clicking the remote:

To Take In the World Around You: It's only by getting out and experiencing the natural environment that one truly appreciates its wonders. Walking and hiking both have numerous built-in educational and entertainment possibilities:

- wildlife watching
- learning about and experiencing beautiful foliage and fauna
- historic, tourist walks
- themed day hikes with outdoor or singles groups

To Help Preserve the Environment: Walking and hiking on trails help millions appreciate the need to preserve our remaining open spaces and greenways. The less we drive, the better off we all are.

Pause. Click.

Just Your Speed

Whether you are walking to lose weight, walking around tourist attractions, hiking to enjoy a beautiful, scenic trail, or just to reach a FERAL Relocation Center the following guidelines can help you understand the appropriate pace or activity level for you. Walking is divided into three main speeds:

- **strolling - 20 minutes per mile, low intensity, physical exercise**

- **brisk walking - 15 minutes per mile, the pace of most exercise walkers**
- **aerobic walking - 12 minutes per mile, generally for the advanced walker**

“The trick will be to gradually build up your pace. Start by strolling. Then as you develop stamina, your pace will naturally pick up.” Click.

Can You Go the Distance?

- **Start out with short segments and build up to two-to three-mile walks.**
- **Take frequent breaks, don't overdo it.**
- **After building up your confidence and experience don't dwell on negative experiences; look around and experience the beauties and new experiences. Make this hike an adventure!**

“There are some basic tricks to maximize your effort.” Click.

Putting the Right Foot Forward

- **Keep your breathing at a natural pace with your heart rate.**
- **Always maintain good posture, with your lower back flat and pelvis tucked directly under your spine.**
- **If you plan to walk or hike at a pace above strolling, it is important for your body temperature to rise gradually, So warm up for at least 5 to 10 minutes before increasing your speed.**
- **Stretch out after your walk, when your muscles are warm and flexible.**
- **Relax. Control, rather than tense your muscles.**
- **Take quick steps, not long strides, for the most natural stride.**
- **To determine your target heart rate: walk fast enough to notice your breathing, but not so fast you are out of breath or gasping; if conversing, you should have to pause regularly to breathe.**
- **Avoid blisters by choosing a properly sized and fitted shoe. Also try wearing synthetic fiber socks because they reduce friction and draw moisture away from the skin.**

“And for you parents with children.” Click

Walking and Hiking with Kids

- Take time to learn. Children have their own perspective, insights and ideas.
- Try incorporating games into the outing, like looking for loose change on sidewalks or different types of trees and leaves on trails.
- Take frequent breaks. Remember, kids do not always speak up. You need to keep asking them how they are doing.
- Caution children not to wander away. Have a plan in case you get separated.
- Involve the kids in planning the walk or hike. Go over checklists together and review trail guides and maps.
- Get them their own backpack and let them be in charge of certain items, like snacks or like the flashlight.

“I know it may be difficult, but we’ll try to help you equip yourselves through the roadside sutler stations.” Click. “Here are some guidelines.”

What Gear Are You In?

Footwear – The proper shoe is vital to any walking or hiking activity. When walking remember to:

- find the proper fit – plenty of room for the toes with a snug, comfortable heel
 - look for a solid support and good cushioning inside the shoe
 - look for a firm, resistant heel counter outside the shoe
- When hiking remember to:
- choose boots about 1/2 size larger than your regular size; there should be plenty of toe room; the heels should fit snugly
 - wear two pairs of socks for trying on boots and for hiking
 - look for boots with a thin polypropylene liner to keep your feet dry and use thick wool or acrylic socks for warmth

Outerwear- Always try to dress for the weather and be prepared for the worst. Some tips to help guide you:

- In the winter, dress your upper body in layers to keep you warm and to prevent overheating; you should take layers off as you heat up (and store the extra clothing in your backpack.)
- Get yourself one reliable jacket that is appropriate for the climate, then wear different layers based on the day's weather.
- Always take along a waterproof jacket and hat in your backpack just in case it rains or snows.

“We'll just skim across the equipment list, it's all in the handouts you've received.” Click.

Backpacks – The right waistpack, daypack or backpack is essential. Packs vary in size and fit; buy one that is suitable for the type of walk or hike you'll be doing.

Waistpacks, or fannypacks, are belted around the wearer's waist and come in varying sizes and shapes. Depending on what you are carrying, these versatile packs can be used for shopping, traveling/sightseeing, fitness activities or a day at an amusement park.

[Look for those that feature a separate pouch designed to carry a waterbottle – no matter how short the outing, you should always drink plenty of fluids.]

Daypacks, sometimes called knapsacks, are the most commonly seen and used backpack. Worn on one's back with two shoulder straps or simply carried by the top handle, these serve the widest range of activities, including as a book bag, for picnicking, day hikes, as an overnight bag, or as briefcase for work.

Click.

Important features to look for in a daypack include:

- a padded back and padded shoulder straps for added wearer comfort
- durable, weatherproof fabric
- thermoplastic buckles, zippers, etc. to avoid rust

- stormflaps over zippers to keep contents dry and the right size and number of pockets or compartments to suit your activity
- one-piece body construction so there are no major seams that could tear

Internal and External Frame Packs are much larger than daypacks and generally are used for more serious hiking and overnight camping, when you need to carry a large load including a sleeping bag, tent, cooking equipment, etc.

[Some internal frame packs are designed to be used as luggage that can be worn on the back or carried by a handle. These are very convenient for the traveler that is always on the go.]

Click.

How to Enjoy Your Stride!

The Essentials - FERAL Evacuation Packs will be provided for each evacuee: food, water, maps and guides, a compass. A small first aid kit, a pocketknife, matches, toilet paper, a flashlight, sunglasses, sunscreen and appropriate clothing for all weather possibilities.

Stay on the Route – Safety is vital. Realize that people in the back country are fearful of being overwhelmed and are extremely suspicious of all evacuees. Surrounding and outlying communities will NOT welcome you. They may harass, arrest or even harm strangers they perceive as threatening their well being. Continue on to the Relocation Center at Harrisburg. There you will find assistance in contacting family and friends, as well as assistance in regaining normalcy in your lives.

The Lieutenant earnestly stresses, “This situation is not easy for you, but neither is it welcomed by outlying communities. You will find no help, no comfort, no rescue in the areas surrounding the route. I repeat. Do not leave the official evacuation route. Those who do will be fortunate if their fates are only to be arrested and returned to the route. There are docu-

mented reports of everything from rape, plunder and murder to organized press gangs of human traffickers picking up stray wanderers and selling them into global slavery. Leave the highway and you could easily wind up in a worse kind of misery on the other side of the world.”

He pauses for a moment, “Stay on the official route!”
Click.

Don't Litter! – Take a zipper locking plastic bag along to carry any wrappers, empty bottles or miscellaneous garbage to a waste receptacle.

Snack Break – It's very important to keep your energy level up no matter how moderate the outing. Always take along water and food for recharging and drink plenty of fluids before and after. Ideas: apples, granola or trail mix.

Safety

- **Help one another.**
- **Watch out for bicycles and occasional official vehicles. Step aside and let them pass.**
- **Obey official directives.**
- **Use only portable toilet facilities placed along the route for your convenience and public health. Do not relieve yourselves on the highway or its right of way, fifty feet either side. Usher drones will severely punish any immodest and unhealthy behaviors!**

Kristin leans over and whispers sarcastically to Stacy, “Can you believe this spin? They're saying this isn't an evacuation, it's really a recreational marathon to lose weight. And we aren't evacuees, we're a niche market for tourism marketers! This is all a health spa and mall, from here all the way to Harrisburg.”

“Could it be more ‘thick and heavy’ from your friend Cornrath?” Stacy asks.

“He’s no friend . . . just an acquaintance.”

“Well,” Stacy whispers back, “as Jim likes to say, it’s always the way money wants it.”

“What kinds of goods and services?” someone asks.

“You name it,” the Lieutenant replies, “Bicycles, room rentals, hot showers, clothing. You might even find a massage, who knows? Somewhere along the way someone probably offers it.”

“But the FERAL cards can’t be used for those?” a despairing sound tinges someone else’s query.

“Only for food, water and other necessities,” says the Lieutenant, “But you’ll find a lot of goods and services available. And you probably can still get a GloBanc card if you hurry over there after we finish here.”

“Where do we get the FERAL ration card?” Kristin asks.

“FERAL card? You got that when you completed your CGC screening.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Kristin replies, feigning misunderstanding. Muttering under her breath she laments not having gone through the process, “great . . . after screening.”

Stacy leans over to whisper, “Don’t worry about it, honey. You can have mine.”

“How did you get one? Besides, you’ll need it!” Kristin protests in restrained surprise that Stacy has managed to get a card.

“Honey,” Stacy laughs lightly, whispering, “I travel with Jim Meerling. He specializes in collecting all kinds of cards. You take mine, I’ll get another.” She reaches into a blouse pocket, pulls out a green rectangle of plastic marked FERAL Basic Voucher and hands it to Kristin.

“A lot?” Kristin asks as she looks over the card, on the back is a printed number and beneath it, Stacy’s signature. “How does Jim get these?” Kristin marvels.

“By being Jim. Contacts, deals and friends . . . he knows everybody,” Stacy assures her, “and everybody knows Jim when they want something.”

“Contacts, deals and friends,” Kristin echoes, as she recalls Jim’s exasperated encounter with the menacing man in the mess tent. Then she adds, gratefully, “Thanks, Stacy, really. But are you sure it’s okay? This has your name on it . . . oh, look, my middle name is Marie, too,” Kristin smiles and taps the card lightly.

“So just pretend to be me,” Stacy waves her fingers in dismissal of her concerns, “Nobody really cares.”

“You’re from Florida?”

“Yes. North of Tampa, from Lake Magdala. I met Jim working a pole down in Miami.”

Looking around, it dawns on Kristin that Dooley is not in the audience. She is surprised to realize that she has not even thought of him. Somewhat guiltily, she marvels at how much she has enjoyed the respite from his unrelenting peculiarity. But out of dutiful habit, suddenly concerned that she has no idea what bedlam he might be provoking, she asks Stacy in a huskily hushed voice, “Have you seen Peter?”

“No, I haven’t” Stacy shakes her head slowly, “But he’s probably with that little camp counselor over at the daycare. He spends a lot of time there.”

“God, I hope he doesn’t get into trouble. That would be my worst nightmare . . . if he gets out of hand with children.”

“He’ll be okay, honey. With them he’s like a child himself, growing up fast,” Stacy flashes a wry smile, “But don’t worry about it. He can take care of himself. You take care of you,”

Kristin nods, acknowledging to herself that Peter is not responsible to her. Nor she to him. She is free.

At daybreak all inhabitants of the camp not displaying a valid wrist pass are directed back along Sky Top Drive, past Seeleys Pond, onto New Providence Road and up onto the I-78 westbound access ramp. In a tinge of dismay Kristin remarks how little ceremony attends their departure. “Goodbye. Gone. History. Forgotten.” She, Stacy and Jim mount the long ramp up toward the Interstate. In the distance usher drones hover and zip up and down to remind wayward souls that there is only one authorized route. Here and there are posted a scattering of soldier sentries, each equipped with the ubiquitous long shepherd staves for handling the unruly.

Kristin surveys surrounding groups gathering in reluctant journey toward Harrisburg, “How did we ever get into this predicament?”

“By not buying into their deal.” Jim snaps.

“No. I mean big picture—the whole country . . . the whole world, for all I know,” Kristin opens her arms in a wide arc.

“Too many people wanting others to take care of things. Then ‘the others’ get used to taking care of themselves first. Eventually it all falls apart,” Jim twists his mouth ruefully.

“But when did it go wrong? This can’t just happen overnight.”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Jim grimaces a near grin, “Once there was an ant hive. For a long time they lived very well just by foraging and gathering. But then a few really bright guys figured how to buy and sell claims on future resources. And then some others created what they called options and contract insurance and still others invented even more clever deals that they bought and sold with other hives, some very, very far away. Then one day it all busted apart because it had gotten so complicated that nobody could remember what promises had been

made to whom and all those hives that had invested heavily in things they didn't understand suddenly found themselves facing winter with only worthless receipts to depend on. Then all hell really broke loose as the newly minted have-nots tried to take what they needed from the haves."

"And everybody decided to go somewhere else, even if they had to walk to get there," Stacy truncates the parable she has heard countless times.

"Head 'em up! Move 'em out!" Jim drearily caricatures bright sarcasm.

"Rawhide!" Stacy yawns disinterestedly, then says to Kristin, "Jim is addicted to old westerns."

"Why? A bunch of stray exiles, outcasts and misfits steal land while they kill and abuse one another . . . I've never seen the appeal."

"Just like life," Jim testily defends his entertainment preferences, "Nasty, brutish and short. And so, here we go . . . again."

Kristin glances back to see that Peter is dawdling far behind the main cluster. He seems to be walking in company of the young woman counselor who holds hands with a young man Kristin has not seen before. Around the trio a number of children gambol, as if even ouster from Paradise would be just another fun outing. "Who's the guy holding hands with the camp counselor? I haven't seen him before."

"I think they're sweethearts. Jason is his name. She's Chloe."

"How do you know all this?" Jim asks testily.

"Grasshopper told me."

Kristin notices a defensiveness tinge Stacy's mood. Jim is a mite annoyed.

"Please don't encourage that nonsense by calling Peter 'Grasshopper'," Kristin tries to ignore their friction.

“Honey, who am I to say who he has to be? Grasshopper? He says it is. What’s in a name, anyhow? It’s still the same package!”

“Package?” Jim fumes.

“Just drop it, Jim,” Stacy warns, then maneuvers in a few quick steps so that Kristin separates them.

“What is it with you two?”

“Stacy has suddenly become quite the naturalist. She’s been going on a lot of nature walks with your whacked-out buddy. Why don’t you ask Ms. Zoologist?”

Kristin looks at Stacy who rolls her eyes in disbelief, “Men! Now who do you suppose came up with the notion of an ‘ownership society’?”

“What?” Kristin is taken aback by their sniping.

“It means some men want to own everything. Women, especially.”

“That’s not it at all,” Jim snaps back.

“Go ahead, tell Kristin your favorite joke,” Stacy challenges.

“I’m not in the mood for funny,” Jim snarls as he takes a deep breath.

“What does a joke have to do with it?”

“Jim says his father used to travel on business out in rural areas. Way back when fuel cost next to nothing and people drove around in automobiles whenever they wanted to go somewhere.”

“Okay.”

“Well, one day”

“One day,” Jim impatiently takes over the narrative, “Dad was back in the hill country of western Pennsylvania, traveling among the coal fields. He got turned around and couldn’t seem to get back to Pittsburgh. He decides he needs to stop and ask for directions, but it’s in the middle of nowhere and there’s only woods and fields. Nobody around.

“He drives down a lonely road and eventually comes to a driveway that winds way back off the road. He sees a farmhouse back several hundred yards at the end of the path, so he turns his car into the driveway and bumps along until finally he pulls up to the ramshackle cottage. He stops and gets out of the car just as an old man dressed in dingy overalls shuffles out onto the front porch. Off to the side of the house he sees a three-legged pig rooting around in a weed-choked flower bed. Around the pig’s right hip is a big bandage where its leg had once been attached.

“‘Hello, there,’ Dad says to the old man, ‘I wonder if you could help me get back to Pittsburgh.’ The old man nods, thinks for a minute and then gives him directions to the main road back into the city. Dad thanks him and then can’t help commenting, ‘Looks like misfortune has hit your pig pretty hard!’ he says.

“‘Yep,’ the old man replies, ‘It sure has. And that’s a remarkable pig, too. He’s really smart!’

“‘What do you mean?’ Dad asks.

“‘Why a month or so ago the house caught fire back in the kitchen. That pig dashed in, woke up my wife and daughters and even dragged the baby’s crib outside to safety. They got the fire put out pretty quick and everybody is glad to be safe.’

“‘But what about the pig,’ Dad asks, ‘What happened to him?’

“‘Why,’ says the old man, ‘a pig like that, you wouldn’t want to eat him all at once!’” Jim delivers the punch line in howling, gleeful abandon as Kristin chuckles a little apprehensively.

“See?” Stacy confirms her earlier thesis, “A charter member of the ownership society. Men think that joke is so damn funny!”

“It is funny,” Jim insists, wiping tears from his eyes.

“Not to the pig.”

“God, you have gotten so weird and picky,” Jim scolds irritably, “What’s the problem all of a sudden? Everything was fine until . . . ,” Jim pivots around to look back across the crowd where Grasshopper strolls along at a leisurely pace, holding hands, hopping occasionally, between two prancing children.

“Come on,” Jim says, his tone suddenly becomes resolute as he faces forward again, “Let’s pick up the pace. I want to get off this damn highway!”

Intermittent rains of several days pass, unveiling a sky of crisp azure, smudged only at the fringe of its eastern horizon by a haze of smoke. Summer shows slow retreat. Early autumn chill christens evenings. Kristin notes various tokens marking seasonal change in overheard chatter. One longs for a college football game. Another gauges the transient spectrum of color soon to be touching rolling hills farther along the way. Shopping might be entering a new season now, if only confusion and failure had not closed down so many malls and extinguished all but the most vital commercial pursuits.

Kristin smiles fondly, noting that nature maintains its rhythms despite human travails. At least, she ruefully muses, we will be spared this year's bout of drearily festive shopping where "Merry Christmas!" seems more like "Meretricious!"

In the space of a brief week she already has grown accustomed to rigors of the trek. She finds herself surprisingly competent at dealing with whatever arises. Her innovations make do with castoffs and litter scattered along the cheerless pavement. She and Stacy crafted abandoned dull green plastic sheeting, torn from pallets of rations and water delivered from skypods, into a makeshift tent during a prolonged downpour. Nearby Jim had sulked beneath his own fugitive scrap of plastic for the duration of the deluge, complaining of their ousting him from the warm comfort of their shelter. Even sleeping outdoors in open air has been made tolerable by simple, but surprisingly effective, inflatable pads with lightweight fiber-clad aerogel coverlets, gotten from an outfitter's impromptu store set up just outside Watchung and charged to their FERAL voucher cards.

A week earlier it had seemed to make little difference whether she reached Harrisburg or fell along the way. Now she itches to depart spare constraints of the freeway, to pick up such threads of her life as have not been prematurely pruned in the failure of Gotham Seaboard. Renewed vigor stimulates a keen discontent with their snail's pace. She is anxious to arrive in Harrisburg and resurrect her life.

Now that aching muscles have acclimated to daily exercise Kristin feels more fit, capable and resilient: able to deal with whatever comes her way. Walking and talking with Stacy, listening to Jim hold forth from his uniquely eidetic store of experiences, Kristin has gradually let go of anxieties that increasingly seem adolescent. And daily she grows more impatient with the pace of the larger tribe that has coalesced about Dooley's Grasshopper antics.

Peter, on the other hand, merely trails along, or worse, actually retards the tribe's progress. She cannot persuade him to pick up the pace. She notes that he has become some kind of informal focus for a growing number of clustering people with

whom they travel. In a manner that she does not fully grasp, a gathering tribe of increasingly familiar trekkers seem drawn to Grasshopper's nonchalant incitements. A migratory clan of families has coalesced out of his persistent intrusions into affairs of those about him. He is like an irrepressibly curious child, popping up unpredictably to interact in any flare-up that threatens serenity of kith and kin.

Whether in some skirmish over rations, a family quarrel or sudden jealousy erupting among any of several tentative liaisons struck up during the journey, Grasshopper always appears to be drawn into unfolding melodrama as if he is crucial to its denouement. At such moments he at first seems overwhelmed in some immanent loss . . . of what? Kristin does not know. Perhaps abdication of his frittered Dooley persona. Then some opening into renewal seems to infect him with dread. Panic momentarily flits his eyes only to be released into Grasshopper's raucous enthusiasm. Whatever motives drive any antagonist into threat of violence, he channels his own rowdy energies to interact, distract and transmute their force into exorbitantly sarcastic characterizations that gather, redirect and defuse prospective brawling.

Inevitably in such crucial moments the iLink limner switches on and Dooley wields an antic profusion of luminous clichés swirling like comic whips of an archetypal drover to wrangle quarrelsome souls toward peaceful pastures. As Grasshopper he berates, inveigles, exhorts, or chastises by pointedly directing mounting laughter of the surrounding crowd toward whatever foibles have incited current dispute. Eventually would-be adversaries become distracted, comedically drained of animus and welcomed back into familiar folds of family and friends. Kristin has ceased to be surprised when two or more contending figures simply shrug sheepishly and walk away toward friendly faces in a community of good-natured laughter.

At first she thought Grasshopper merely to be Dooley's narcissistic performer-self, craving and garnering attention into his own self-wonderment. But now the opposite seems true. He appears reluctant to engage bickering clashes and holds back until the last possible moment, as if hoping trouble will dissipate of its own accord. His head tilts to one side, like a young pup suddenly intrigued by some playful overture. Then, as if drawn to mounting heat, he inserts himself into the fray. At such moments Kristin senses a powerful current gathering through his manner to suddenly and spontaneously project diversion into any altercation rapidly becoming public.

At first, just after they departed Watchung, among onlookers to these disputes would be an air of expectation that his upstart intrusion would be quickly dispatched by one or more combatants. But now, having seen Grasshopper referee previous bouts, the crowd relishes promise of entertaining diversion.

Fortunately, along the way, Kristin discovers that concentrated sugar syrups of discarded and stale soda pop can serve as fuel for the iLink bioconverter to recharge its ultracapacitor. Otherwise Dooley's prolific reliance on the limner would have quickly consumed the few powerpaks they brought with them.

The style of his intrusion always begins unpredictably. It may arise out of quiet chattering or explode as violent charade. But he seems always capable of catching foes off-guard, keeping them unbalanced as he assails and picks apart whatever issue is in dispute through some extravagant pantomime, one moment racing around in tight little circles like a fool chasing his shadow or in flight from luminous pursuers conjured out of the iLink limner, another hopping on one foot while reciting a madly invented rhyme in a surround-sound cinematic effusion of brightly jubilant invention. His pantomiming shrieks, chortles or exasperated outcries orchestrate familiar story setups and resolutions gathered from movie archives, televue com-

mercials or recollections of earlier incidents still fresh in the clan's memory.

In these antics he crafts his spell by which the focus of an attentive crowd is transmuted from anticipation of grief, misgiving, or regret into raucously jovial appreciation of slapstick narrative. Inevitably, mocked foes either relent and join in the fun or sullenly escape a jeering crowd.

In such moments of crisis he is exceedingly quick-witted. Thrusting himself between two large men arguing over one of the women, the largest of the two males grasped a fistful of Grasshopper's denim jacket and with one hand hoisted his fragile frame to dangle precariously in mid-air, the other fist drawn back to smash his face. Grasshopper instantly became a small playful mutt, tongue lapping effusive affection along the arm and hand holding him aloft. Puppyish innocence, gazing trustingly up into assailant eyes, froze the impending fist in ambivalence as his tongue, avid in noisy slurping, strove to reach out to the captor's face. A voice in the crowd, responding to the tableau of a bully about to abuse a defenseless innocent, sighed, "Awwh . . . no . . . please don't." The plea was picked up and amplified into a plaintive murmur of encircling sympathies. The protagonist blinked momentarily, set Grasshopper down, looked self-consciously at the entreating faces about him, shook his head in frustrated consternation and strode away.

Such incidents have transformed the group's initially wary disdain for Grasshopper's peculiarity into a now cheerful celebration of his presence as some fey token of singularity, a defiant mascot in this time of tribulation.

It is his signal notoriety that has become an increasing source of Kristin's dismay with Peter Dooley. As Grasshopper idles and dawdles along the freeway, so does the crowd. She watches new strangers overtake and pass them in patient dedication to forward movement. She envies their efficiently de-

parting strides and wants to move faster herself. Often, however, she is aware that such arrivals are drawn into the Grasshopper clan, apparently basking in and welcoming its unexpected warmth of heightened humor and good will. The swarm about him thus slowly grows larger and more ponderous and seems unconcerned with ever getting anywhere.

Kristin resolves to set her own pace. She sees no reason for loitering and wants to reach Harrisburg as soon as possible. Turning to Stacy she suggests, "Why don't we walk faster. I'm tired of hanging with this group."

"Why, honey? What's the hurry?" Stacy laughs.

"Actually," Jim says, "I'm with you Kris. I want to get off this pavement, too."

"Jim, we're gonna be on this pavement for quite a while," Stacy observes, "and I kind of like being with this Grasshopper bunch."

Jim wheels about to walk backward a few steps, looking to where Grasshopper strolls as moving epicenter of a host of gamboling children shepherded by several parents chatting amiably with the young counselor Chloe. Jim almost stumbles, and awkwardly recovers his balance, "Amazing. Never underestimate the warm fuzziness of sheep."

"Or the nimble poise of traders," Stacy cackles.

"Warm fussiness?" Kristin puzzles aloud.

"Fuzziness," Jim repeats, pointedly ignoring Stacy's slight, "Fuzzy logic. Fuzzy thinking. Fuzzy and wooly dreaming that everything is okay. You're right, Kris, this is ridiculous . . . let's pick up the pace."

"Okay?" Kristin looks questioningly toward Stacy who reluctantly shrugs her assent, "Okay by me."

Kristin is gratified by how quickly separation grows between them and the lagging crowd. Estimating her own stride in memory of gym treadmills she reckons that in an hour they will be at least mile or more ahead of Grasshopper's clan and

not long after they should arrive the next station. A renewed exhilaration rewards her heightened effort.

“We’re getting off here,” Jim announces casually as they approach the next way-station, which comprises an old freight trailer parked behind a temporary pavilion decked out with beaten canvas covering and impromptu signs that offer a curious mix of goods and services from snack-bar, outfitter, and pawn shop under auspices of *Branson’s Backdoor Trails Outfitters & Sutler*.

“What? Getting off—are you crazy?” Stacy exclaims.

“I cut us a deal back at Watchung,” Jim replies in a tone of taking charge.

“Cut a deal? How? For what?” Stacy rolls her eyes for Kristin’s benefit.

Jim ignores her probing to nod toward an old man seated in a strap and tubing lawn chair who watches their approach, “Hello.”

“Well, I was beginning to wonder if I’d see anybody at all out here,” the man replies, “not much point in sitting here if nobody comes by.”

“There’s a bunch of people just behind us,” Kristin volunteers, “about a mile or so back.”

“Good job . . . there hasn’t been anyone by here all day. Last bunch to come through was yesterday afternoon. Nice group of maybe thirty or forty church families traveling together. ‘The Host of Beulah’, I think they call themselves. But nobody so far today ‘til you came. Not even the army or those danged bouncy drones. I was beginning to think maybe they’d called off the evacuation,” he grins befuddlement.

“Do you have a phone I can use?” Jim asks.

“No phones out here,” the old man shakes his head. He reaches to pluck a small portable from his belt. “Just this radio. Who you need to call?”

“My attorney,” Jim says, “or at least the law office my people said could help us.”

“Mister, if you’re out here the law ain’t going to have much to offer you,” the old man snorts.

“Well, just the same, is there some way you could help us contact them? I’ll make it worth your trouble.”

“Sure, no problem,” the old man replies. Jim hands him a business card with an office contact number, “Tell them Jim Meerling is here at your station, waiting as arranged.”

“All right, I’ll see what we can do . . .,” the man repeats absently, “Jim Meerling . . .,” and rises to go back into the tented pavilion to find a pair of spectacles.

“What’s this all about?” Stacy insists in a low hiss of surprised suspicions.

“We can get the charges dropped,” Jim explains quietly, “but we have to go before a judge willing to hear our side of the story. We need to clean up this mess and get back to business. We’re missing out on everything!”

“I’m not leaving Kristin out here by herself. That other stuff can wait ‘til we get to Harrisburg,” Stacy’s eyes search Jim’s face for some hint of mischief, “Wait . . . are you putting me on?”

“No, this is for real,” Jim declares, “Back at Watchung, while you were tramping about your ‘nature studies’, I got a message out to some people. I made a deal and bought papers that will get us where we need to go. We’re both charged; we both have to go and plead the case. We can get it taken care of now. I called in some favors and we can’t let this slip by. It won’t happen again.”

“Go where?”

“Over to Lebanon, to the regional evacuation command center. If we get the charges dropped I can get back everything they confiscated before it goes to auction. A chancery court there is set up to deal with civilian claims against the army.”

“Why did you keep this to yourself?” Ignoring details of his scheme, Stacy is suddenly wary, “Just what kind of deal is this? You should have told me—especially if you expect me to make nice with somebody.”

“It’s nothing like that. But I know how you are. I can’t tell you anything because you’ll blab it to anyone who’ll listen . . . this has to stay between us. It’s really tricky . . . maybe . . . besides, everybody who knows will want to come with us.”

“Can Kristin come, too?” Stacy demands.

“I’m sorry, Kristin,” Jim glances sheepishly toward her, “I didn’t get you papers. I didn’t know,” he shrugs.

“Well, I’m not leaving her out here alone,” Stacy vows,

“Alone? For chrissakes, Stacy!” Jim explodes in exasperation, “In an hour or so there’ll be a thousand or more people milling about here. Kristin’s with Dooley and he’s got a whole friggin’ tribe!”

Stacy looks back toward Kristin, her eyes open slightly as if questioning what she should do.”

“Stacy,” Kristin urges, “you take care of what you need to do. Don’t worry about me. I’ll miss you. And maybe even be a little envious,” Kristin laughs, “but don’t make me the reason for your staying out here and miss a chance to clear up your problems.”

Suddenly Stacy’s eyes find inspiration among the farther contents of the pavilion’s wares. She wheels about to face Jim, “I’ll go with you on one condition.”

“Oh, jeez . . . what now?” Jim snarls.

“A bicycle for Kristin. Get Kristin a bicycle so she can get to Harrisburg really fast. Then we can meet her there.” She

points to a couple of touring bikes chained to the trailer platform over at the side of the tented pavilion.

“Stacy, I don’t know how long this is going to take us,” Jim anguishes, “If we don’t succeed with the judge we don’t know what’s going to happen. And if I do get my cargo back and charges dropped, I’ve got commitments I have to deal with. This is not a friggin’ vacation, you know!”

“In the first place, you’ve already worked a deal with a judge . . . it’s already done or you wouldn’t take the chance. Second, I don’t care what happens to your precious cargo. It’s been nothing but trouble.”

“All right, all right. Okay. Put a sock in it. I’ll get her the damn bicycle. If it’s anywhere within reasonable . . . but we’re not waiting around if something else causes problems. You’re coming with me, okay? Deal?”

“What do you think, honey?” Stacy asks Kristin, “Will you be okay?”

“Oh, gracious! A bicycle. That would be wonderful!” Kristin exults, “I’ll pay you back, Jim. Really, it would be a wonderful help and I can’t thank the both of you enough.”

“And it’s got to be a good bike, too. Fast and rugged,” Stacy warns Jim, “No junky crap or throwaways.”

“Is it a deal?” Jim insists, ignoring Kristin’s warm delight as he glares back into Stacy’s close scrutiny of his face.

“Okay,” Stacy’s voice loses its carping edge and becomes suddenly musical, “Deal. We just have to work out how to get in touch with you in Harrisburg.”

“So how much for the bike there?” Jim points to a shiny bicycle poised with several others on a rack.

“This one?” the old man asks, adjusting his spectacles to see the price written on the tag. “Can’t put it on that voucher card. Maybe GloBanc. What you paying in? Dollars? Euros?”

“Do you have an aftar clipper in here?” Jim looks about.

“Aftar . . . that’s the gold receipt, right?”

“American Free Trade Asset Receipt, right . . . credits in gold transferred to your bank. That good enough for you?”

“Oh, yeah. We don’t get too many people using them yet, but I’ve got one here somewhere. I’ll just have to get it out and connect it to the radio,” he rummages through a box of networking cables and equipment. “Let’s see, the price today is \$12,650 . . . that works out to about, oh, call it one aftar.”

“The dollar’s not doing too well, huh?” Jim shakes his head.

“Not much useful happening these days,” the old man replies, “and it gets to be a pain having to change prices every day. Soon they say we’ll be doing it by the hour!” His voice becomes strident in his disgust with errant vicissitudes of finance.

“Well,” Jim shrugs, “I’ve heard that an ounce of gold will always buy a good suit; now we can add to that, a nice bicycle. I guess that’s what it always comes down to.” Turning back to Stacy Jim asks expectantly, “Is this going to do the deal for you?”

Stacy appraises the bike’s features as Kristin removes it from the rack and throws a leg across to try the seat height.

“Seems about right,” Kristin nods approvingly, flexing the brake levers and leaning back against the seat to test the braking action.

“Yes, Jim,” Stacy answers, “I’ll go with you. But we’re going to get back in touch with Kristin once everything’s taken care of.”

“Okay, okay.” Jim walks over to where the man has set up the aftar clipper, leans down for a retinal scan, keys in several codes and waits until the unit recognizes his login. “One aftar being clipped to Branson Outdoor Trails & Sutler.”

The old man tentatively punches a couple of keys, reads the authentication message and announces happily, “Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Meerling.”

Kristin's voice sings girlish thrill as she reads aloud from a tag attached to the gleaming new bicycle, "Modeled after classic Dutch commuter bikes, the *Spectra Amsterdam* gives you everything you need for jetting around a city -- and strips away everything you don't. Its steel frame can handle the bumps and grinds of crowded bike racks and won't buck you off when you hit potholes," Kristin laughs, "Plenty of those out here on this ragged pavement," then continues,

"And its three gears are all you need: Even in hilly Santa Fe, we never wanted more. But it's the user-friendly niceties that make this such a luxe cruiser: full fenders to curb the spray, an enclosed chain guard so you won't grease up your slacks, and a burly rack for lashing your briefcase or groceries. And the generator powered headlight means you'll never be stuck in the dark with dead batteries."

"Oh, that's just the thing for your briefcase and groceries," Stacy cackles.

"Thank God I don't have to worry about grease on my slacks . . . but it will make hauling this pack easier." Kristin's giggly exhilaration brings tears to her eyes. "Really, though, Stacy, I can't thank you and Jim enough. With this I can be in Harrisburg in just a day or so!" She wheels the bike toward the front of the tented pavilion and out into the sunlight as Stacy places Kristin's back pack on the cargo carrier and secures it with two canvas straps.

"Honey, it's nothing, really. I feel guilty about leaving you out here. But now that I think more about it, I worry about you striking out on your own. Wouldn't it be better to hang out here and wait for the Grasshopper clans?"

"Oh, I'll be okay. They're monitoring the interstate all the way to Harrisburg. And it's only five miles between way-stations. That's nothing on a bike. Once in Harrisburg I should be able to make contact with Cornrath's office, find out where they've moved to, and wait for them to come pick us up."

“But where are all the drones and patrols?” Stacy worries, looking around.

“Patrolling nearby, probably,” Kristin reassures her, “See? Up there’s a skypod . . . looks like it’s coming down to land farther ahead. I’ll be okay. I’ll just keep pedaling until I get to Harrisburg.”

After an hour or so an official vehicle appears at the nearby access ramp and approaches the Branson’s Sutler Station. Moving soundlessly, the electric coaster glides to a stop. A young man dressed in FERAL work slacks, shirt and cap gets out and approaches, “Mr. Jim Meerling?”

“Here,” Jim answers and holds out an ID card. “I guess there’s room for the two of us in there,” he peers into the small interior.

“Should be room for two,” the courier replies indifferently, glancing at Kristin and Stacy, “But that’s all I’m supposed to transport. Two adults.”

Kristin and Stacy embrace tearfully.

“God, I hope to see you again soon,” Kristin frets aloud, “And I hope you both get everything worked out.”

“Honey, it’s you I’m concerned about. Trust me, Jim’s already cut his deal for us. It’s just a matter of greasing the wheels. Old story, well practiced. But when you get to Harrisburg, be sure and register with FERAL’s contact center. We’ll find you one way or another.”

“Jim,” Kristin walks to Jim and leans to kiss him on the cheek, “I really hope it all works out. And thank you so much for the companionship—and, of course, especially, the bicycle.”

“Peddler to pedlar,” Jim jokes weakly, “have good travels.” To Stacy he signals his urgent wish to depart as he says to Kristin, “I’m sorry to leave you out here, but we do have to go.” He glances back toward the official FERAL courier already impatiently sitting back inside the coaster.

A final sensation of touching fingertips with Stacy lingers as Kristin watches them settle into the vehicle and it accelerates smoothly and silently toward the exit ramp for the trip to Lebanon. Stacy and Jim wave back to her; Stacy holds a thumb up in benediction as Kristin waves goodbye.

Looking about as her two friends disappear back down the same access ramp from which the vehicle came, Kristin finds the old man is moving his lawn chair into shade of the tent.

“There’s a big crowd headed this way?” he asks.

“Oh, they’re a few hours back, but they’re definitely coming this way,” Kristin assures him, “They do take their time strolling along . . . that’s why we three pushed on ahead.”

“Well,” I guess I’ve got nothing better to do than wait for them, “Can I get you anything? Something to go with that new bike?” he offers.

“No, thanks,” I guess I’ll just get on with it,” Kristin sighs weary realization that now she truly is on her own, “The sooner I start pedaling, the sooner I finish.”

“Well,” the old man waves, “good luck to you.”

“Good bye. Thanks for having the bike out here,” she smiles back, waving as she straddles the bike and moves it forward.

She pushes off toward the western horizon. The sun promises a few more hours of full daylight. She expects to pass several way-stations before settling down for the night.

After a few leagues Kristin realizes she is pedaling much too rapidly. She cannot afford to let her anxiety or renewed discontents with Peter Dooley wear her out. It will be a long journey yet.

Taking a deep breath, she abates the rhythm pumping her legs and looks about. Gliding beyond the largely abandoned derelictions of the ghost-suburban outreaches of Bethlehem and then Allentown, in each direction as far as she can see are rolling hills, expansively undulating in late green light of an Indian summer afternoon. Peacefulness of bucolic grace blesses her hopes. Gradually a brightly invigorating calm displaces her annoyance with Peter. An abiding sense of estrangement gives way to her welcoming newfound liberty that infuse her spirits in avid lightness of being, whetting her awareness that she is truly alive and that it is so good to be alive.

Despite reluctance to dwell upon events of the past week or so, still she cannot prevent herself occasionally marveling that she has made it thus far with so little discomfort or real distress. The first few days were the worst. Now those tribulations seem increasingly remote as she zips along aging complaints of pavement, avoiding gapped segments and most of the worst potholes. Occasionally she dismounts and pushes the bike across bad stretches to avoid ruining a tire or risking a spill.

Looking ahead, squinting in the brilliant light of the sun dancing over shimmering waves of warmth arising from distant pavement, she realizes that while truly alive, she also is truly alone. The road ahead is totally devoid of any person; not even the occasional sentinels she has grown accustomed to seeing posted along the way. It confirms her conviction that they have been traveling far more slowly than necessary. Everyone ahead has outdistanced them and are that much closer to Harrisburg and relief from their straits. She recalls the migratory gathering of church families mentioned by the old man back at the way-station and wonders if she will catch up to them by nightfall.

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