

ANX

life of a recog

by

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SPOTops



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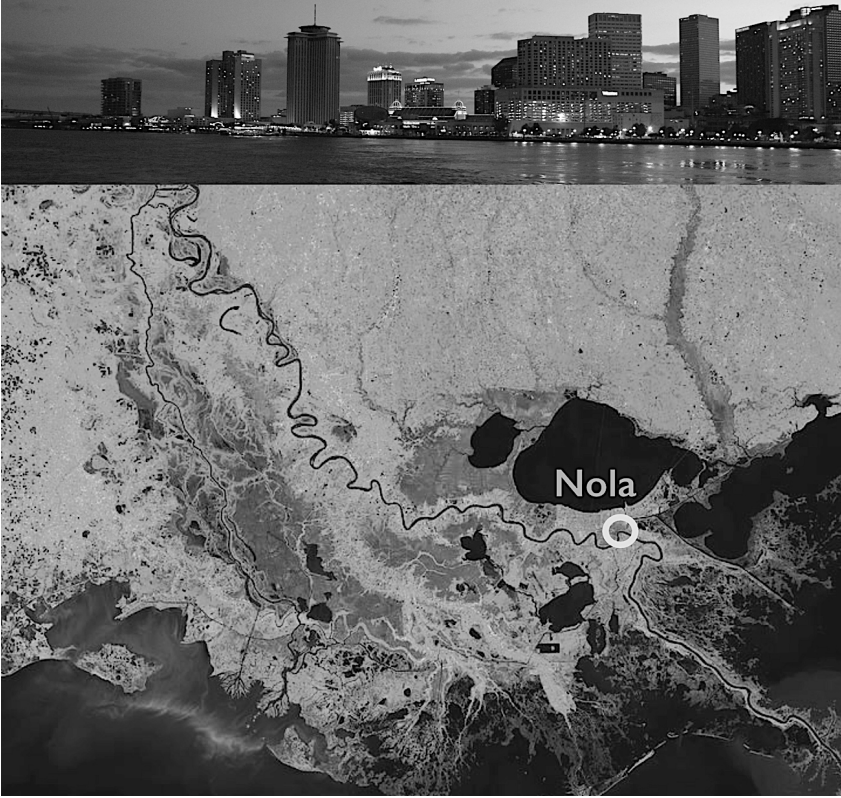
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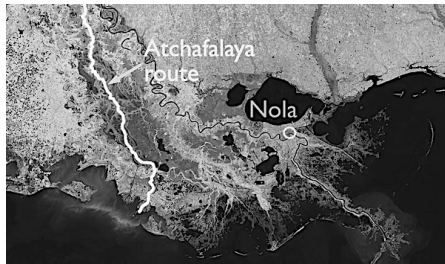
Also by Howard Jones

O, Wow

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Nola near the sea



Atchafalaya route

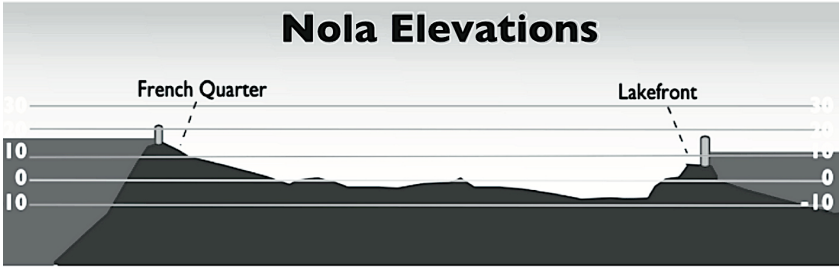


PROLOGUE

Nola, a riverside remnant of old New Orleans, sits perilously astride a narrow isthmus, atop silted high ground that flanks the Mississippi's meander. For now, the Old River Control Structure near Morganza regulates the Atchafalaya distributary to keep the wayward river in its current channel and frustrate any return to an earlier route farther to the west. That departure would leave Nola bereft of life, of sustenance.

Living struggle between river and sea: the one forms her body; the other rises to reclaim her progeny just aborning. As Old Man River builds, the sea more relentlessly tears away. It works its chaos of storm and surge to pull down our gates into some final flood.





Most lies below sea level

At no point is any part of Nola more than fifteen feet above sea level. Most lies below, to taunt the tides from behind shielding levees. But those levees also keep annual spring floods from renewing delta on which the city arose. For some time now, languidly, Nola has settled slowly into the sea.



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DESCENT

The “*Untied*” *States of America* originated in a prank.

Several Ivy League college students once salted away faked credentials in their university’s records. Later, citing those spurious files, they proceeded to enroll, educate and graduate as valedictorian a fictitious young scholar.

For four years each member of this shifting alliance of tricksters, in turn, took classes within their individual specialties. They passed exams and otherwise shilled to foster an exemplary, if entirely fabulous, academic career of shadow and unseemly seeming.



Devilgeeks in their formative years

ANX: life of a recog



Pranked dean

At commencement the conspirators uproariously exulted in their Dean's unrequited call for celebration of fictitious honor. But afterward, their prank fully consummated, they began to ponder diverse practical, perhaps even profitable, applications of such subterfuge.

As they settled into respective careers of endeavor they recruited and planted pseudo-experts equipped with undeserved and often sketchy credentials. Their skills were placed in various important offices and agencies of government and industry. They similarly nurtured their regulators and institutions of learning or other seedbeds of public persuasion.

From those illicit plantings eventually there sprouted a vigorous garden of privileged information and secret back-channel. Untrammelled private influence and strings to power thereafter sustained their prodigious ambitions.

Early on, they christened themselves *devilgeeks*. Through subsequent decades these clever fellows maintained their cabal across separate but congenially complementary careers.

An ongoing Cold War between rival ideologies of industrialized material bounty — one asserting that *everything belongs to everyone*; the other, that *everything must belong to someone* — provided ideal cover as they infiltrated and subverted interacting offices of government and business. A couple of the original devilgeeks even ascended to high station within CIA and NSA bastions of skullduggery, while others found more mundane roles as lobbyists or as executives in major international corporations. All stayed in touch. But most covertly, of course.

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In concert, and through carefully managed affiliations, they mentored or debauched careers of politicians and functionaries. Their efforts devilgeeked think tanks, political action committees and assorted public affairs study groups. Devious handiwork fomented a self-perpetuating culture of patronage that ever-renewed itself through successive election cycles.

Exchanges of cash seeded favors and rule changes that dissolved and displaced traditional bonds that once directly had linked voting citizens to the tenures of their representatives. Elective office became seen as merely the quickest route into exclusive ranks of players where influence brokers and favored beneficiaries skewed and skewered national agendas.

Thus was an entire architecture of national governance hijacked into tawdry media spectacle and cheap, opportunistic titillation. An apathetic and distracted citizenry failed to protest as once-envied constitutional legacies were ground down into comic fodder. *Columbia wept.*



The Great Fall

ANX: life of a recog

As their delegated lobbying coalesced behind scenes into formal agreements among paying players, various media channels promoted mechanisms of democracy into biennial and quadrennial spectacles of political contest.

Pundits rode these cycles to build wonkier lifestyles that endlessly — and very publicly — speculated upon and argued merits of various contenders for national office. But elected officials increasingly became mere figureheads of pretense and pale beacons of never-fulfilled hopes.

Every election cycle flatulated winds of promised change, but delivered only more of the same odiously privileged machination. A few faintly dissenting voices complained that such charades changed nothing: actual rulers remained behind facades of trade groups and think tanks formalized into an *International Commerce Council*.

This deliberative body of Consuls represented conglomerate commercial and financial interests throughout the world. Consuls were empowered to set standards and to regulate deals cut among cartels and syndicates. They monitored blockchains and other modes of distributed ledger transaction that organized planetary commerce into interacting regions of trade. Consuls often sent agents called *sentinels* to investigate suspicious activity, or to mediate and smooth outbursts of acrimony, wherever such anomalies might erupt.

Meanwhile, the original coterie of devilgeeks, their families, associates and assorted cohorts, grew fatter and wealthier. Attuned to a new ethic, an entire culture spread across multiple continents, to indulge heady habits of deficit splurge. A mythologized exceptionalism, rooted in former Euromerican freebootery, absolved into favored normalcy the twins of devilgeek ambitions: *material greed* and *lust for dominance*.

A national Humpty Dumpty rested on a mounting wall of debt. When bond sales to foreign powers faltered, a series of shuddering, intensifying upheavals in global markets signaled

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advent of The Great Fall. Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse raced as furies across the continent and out around the globe on steeds named *Oil No More*, *Bad Money Starving*, *Plagued to Death*, and *Jobless Wrath Arising*.

Throughout the world, their customary sources of cheap energy tapped out, planetary societies collapsed into famine, disease and armed conflict. Populations plummeted back down toward sustainable pre-industrial levels.

On the bright side: decades after, survivors of the Great Fall became, on average, three and one-half times wealthier by inheriting possessions and holdings of billions who did not make it. Pools of surplus trickled together, to spur new technologies and ways of revitalizing communal life.

During The Great Fall, scattered enclaves of super-wealthy lamented many unforeseen inconveniences. But, due to enabling and supportive networks, chartered organic produce gardens and protection by military cordons, the offspring of a privileged few emerged a generation or so afterward. They found themselves even better off than before all the ruckus began.

On the North American continent, from remnants of devilgeeked think tanks that had somehow escaped retro-age magical thinking there emerged a novel commercial proposal. Minions of a tattered and debt-ridden legacy of constitutional federal administration were persuaded to auction off agencies and institutions of national governance, thereby to avoid fulfilling impossible bond obligations.

Under aegis of the



Lucky genes



The Untied States of America

International Commerce Council those reforms universally were promoted as serving the interests of all through two complementary principles:

- *The appearance of democracy enhances profit margins.*
- *The best stewards of commonweal are self-motivated.*

National government thus was disunited and fully privatized. Henceforth, commonweal was served only in venues of trade. The *Untied States of America* had finally attained a market triumphal!

The land area of the nation devolved into fourteen regional trade syndicates, called *iepelagos* (*inter-networked economic archipelagos*). Each was automated by distributed ledger tech to serve a nexus of political and commercial interests. In a much-hyped public relations gambit, the name of each *policommercial* syndicate was established by polling an elderly retro t-vu audience:

- *HI and AK begat (Bette) Midler;*
- *WA, OR and CA begat (Bob) Barker;*
- *NV, UT, CO, AZ and NM begat (Wilford) Brimley;*

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- *ID, MT, WY begat (Dana) Carvey;*
- *ND, SD, NE, and KS begat (Dick) Cavett ;*
- *TX, OK, and AR begat (Carol) Burnette ;*
- *MN, IA, MO, WI and IL begat (Pat) Sajak ;*
- *LA, MS, and AL begat (Oprah) Winfrey;*
- *MI, IN, OH begat (Hugh) Downs;*
- *KY, TN, WV, VA and NC begat (Chuck) Woolery;*
- *SC, GA and FL begat (Pat) Boone;*
- *PA, MD, DE and NJ begat (Bill) Cullen;*
- *NY, CT MA, and RI begat (Regis) Philbin;*
- *VT, NH and ME begat (Adam) Sandler.*

ConRelCo, a corporation grown colossal from obscure origins as a small electric equipment manufacturer, *Consolidated Relay Company*, added the management charter for the Gulf south to its global portfolio of holdings.



Seastead Isles

ANX: life of a recog

Its revived coastal resorts complemented earlier investments into abandoned oil drilling platforms where seasteading had extended Caribbean playgrounds into a tropical paradise that was devoted to peregrinations of a superwealthy global elite. Many of them, not surprisingly, bore genes of the original cadre of Ivy League devilgeeks.

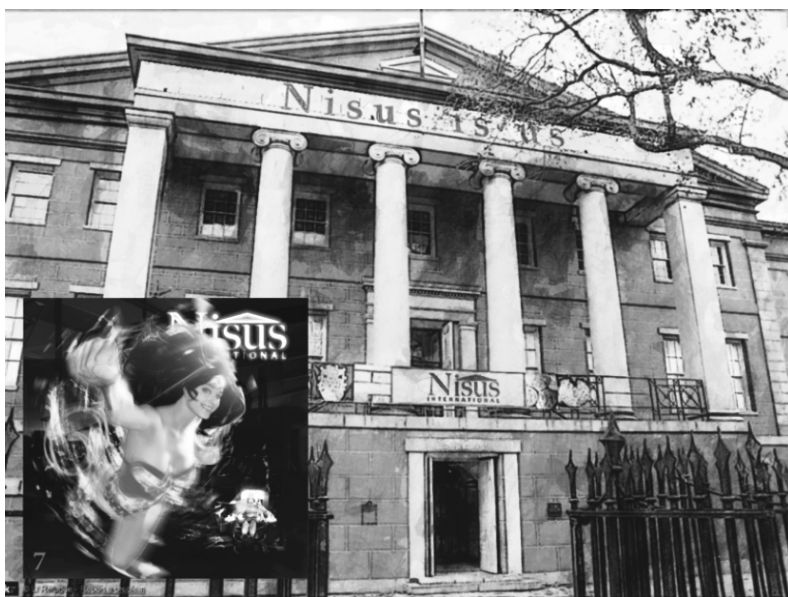
ConRelCo's deep south acquisitions were reorganized with regard for sociocultural affinity into two distinct sectors within Winfrey: the largely Protestant-settled and mostly agricultural north was dubbed *Louimissiala* while the southernmost coastal region, still redolent in Catholic French and Spanish creole heritages, called itself *Sianassippibama*.

What remained of storm-battered New Orleans — mostly riverside high ground that comprised the French Quarter, Marigny, Bywater and Uptown residences — was gathered into a uniquely urban and urbane principality: *Nola*. Most of the surrounding, formerly metropolitan areas were allowed to fall back into their original marshy estate, further isolating and alienating the beleaguered former port. *Nola* became a preferred locus of radical socio-cultural experimentation for exploitation of new technologies of delight. *The city that care forgot* went hi-tech.



Long before, the entire isthmus on which *Nola* rests had been designated a nationally significant, if still sinking, historical area. Now it was rechartered, as commercial recreational park and therapeutic research preserve. *Nisus International*, subsidiary of *ConRelCo*, located offices in the Old Mint to administer the city proper as a *socially-open adult amusement preserve*. Both recreational medicine and simulations of wanton dalliance spouted tourist revenues. Those funds amply supported military and institutional exploration of augmented and virtual XR environments. They engaged new modes of therapy, as well as

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Nisus Is Us

exploring new options for elite living combined with enthralling venues of simulated venal experiences.

Nisus adopted a populist slogan for noble aspirations: *Nisus is us*. The center had been founded as a purely medical research facility, dedicated to restoring combat-damaged military psyches — back when humans still prowled such battlefields. When expendable, if yet very expensive, robots became tasked for actual physical mayhem, Nisus repurposed its therapies and technologies toward edgy social recreations and general psychosomatic therapeutic arenas. It became a preeminent provider of products and services for entertaining modes of living in extraordinary and typically very expensive settings.

Nisus's holographic induction technique, *StimuVision*, also called *simstim*, or *dreem*, was a technology that evoked lucidly spontaneous, yet auto-controlled, hallucinations in uncannily convincing detail.

Simstim first revolutionized and popularized pornography.

ANX: life of a recog

But beyond those vistas of purely prurient gratification, the fully-sensate haptic-XR tech provided means for anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists to explore novel scenarios wherein humans might engage and explore unusually challenging circumstances. The first extraterrestrial colonies were planned through such virtual emulations.

As those projects were proved out, so it was speculated, eventually simstim-trained colonists could be physically transplaneted. They would arrive on-site thoroughly hardened for rigors never yet encountered by humans as the species fanned outward from its home planet.



While the *United States* of America thus became *untied*, their old ways did not entirely disappear. There persisted, through bioplasmic miasma of popular t-vu and cinematic regurgitation, a ritual husk of biennial political campaign and remote-vote. Two-year state, county and metro policomms cycles gave pseudo-news media never-ending streams of topics to harangue, thereby usefully to divert attentions of those incapable of more rewarding pursuits. Familiar electoral rituals also kept regional and local events moving along nicely in regular cycles of promise and displaced opportunity.

And every four years, a new Fedcomm administration would be ordained, mostly to run interference for market gyrations. Pundits feverishly batted about hot air balloons. Political parties took turns assigning or taking blame, then temporarily relinquished control into the other waiting hand of the same client patrons — right, left, right, left

Behind the hoopla, in a parallel devilgeek world, mercenaries dealt new deals, exploited actual opportunity and fed goals and results back to a tripe-dazed public via marketing fads and software updates of old situation comedies, reality tales and ongoing celebrity scandals.

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Given the symbolic uses of politics, many felt earnestly engaged in real-polischtick. It was said that people don't want tangible "things" from government, they want to "feel that they are getting things" from government.



Neighborhood warfare

But then jobs actually became scarce. Out of work, bored and disillusioned populations of young men coagulated into gangs. A new drug, *majik*, fueled spontaneous cycles of predatory spree and revenge-raid that often erupted into inter-neighborhood warfare.

In the early days of Nola's regional charter, white-supremacist *Teuton Warriors* battled their supreme racial nemesis, the darker-hued *Shaka Natchez*. Suddenly, ordinary citizens of all persuasions dreaded nightfall.

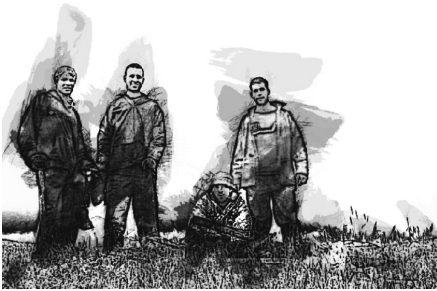
ANX: life of a recog

Hostilities might have escalated totally out of control had there not been a technological breakthrough. The ANX, a device more formally dubbed *AmygdalNeuraleXtingusher*, could be implanted into any habitually troublesome brain, near its primordial limbic system.

So placed, the ANX monitored patterns of neural activity and was hardwired to punish any hint of anger or looming violence by unleashing waves of disgust that quickly escalated into hysterical nausea. Even the most unruly rogue thus was instantly dissuaded and disabled.

Upon implantation, ANX-biotic components became irreversibly entangled in crucial pathways of the limbic system and brain stem. Non-lethal removal was impossible. Its permanence rendered the ANX unsuitable for lesser categories of wrongdoing, but it proved to be a cheap and thoroughly reliable alternative to sentences of either capital punishment or life without parole.

Physically harmless, recog survive
by their wits—and by hanging
together against all threats.



Rollo, Penn, Macon and Julie

Capital felons fitted with an ANX were released back onto the streets, on their own recognizance, and securely tethered to monitor nodes of designated habitation zones. Only the continuously broadcast digital codes from the local node kept the ANX dormant. Wander out of range of its signal and the ANX would respond in the same way

as to flashes of anger or to any thought of violence. It would clamp open, to induce in its host overwhelming spasms of nausea.

Its relentless fury quickly taught a recog dutifully to stay within range of his node and to just as carefully guard against any

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stray thought of annoyance or wishful mayhem. Otherwise, recogs could do whatever they wished.

Except die. The ANX stymied even a wistful dream of suicide.

Recogs survived without formal support or supervision. No longer a burden to any penal budget and incapable of inflicting or even resisting violence, they were

physically helpless and without recourse or protection. Of necessity, most gathered into self-defensive association against all manner of threat, which ranged from drunken bullies who found amusement in provoking a recog's hysterical seizures, to overt sexual predators or unscrupulous employers concerned only for extracting easy profit.

Widely hailed across the deep south as a more humane form of capital punishment, in actuality ANX penology opened a new supply of cheap labor. Overnight it destroyed every local market for domestic and light industrial robots. In Winfrey and Boone, the only regions where ANX technology was chartered, nobody did crap work anymore — anything could be left to recogs. Neither slave nor serf, recogs eked out subsistence in any way they might discover that did not explicitly trespass law or established order.

Recogs could not physically hurt you, but many grew very adept at ripping you off or scamming any so-called bargain. They were widely despised as unscrupulous and exigent vermin.

Such incidental entrepreneurs were driven by uncommon desperation. Of necessity, they quickly learned to innovate, whether in light or from shadow.



Recogs at large in the Quarter

ANX: life of a recog



Life in the ANX lattice

Recogs would accommodate whatever was on offer. They picked up trash for the city. They chased tourist tips. They served the wealthy and powerful as personal body servants called grooms. Or they pandered farther down the social scale, availing themselves to sate any appetite. A few especially clever ones managed to contrive elegant cons or otherwise exploit wayward opportunities to scam any soul or system.

The rueful recog mantra was often heard,
“It ain’t happy, but it’s staying alive.”



INTO THE EMPTINESS OF HALF-FULL

After the ANX was implanted Penn slowly awakened. He lay quietly in the first renewing glimpse of *now* to gather his wits. His thoughts seemed to have become very leaky.

Stray notions and accompanying factoids now welled up about whatever he might give attention. They were like impromptu responses to some unintended search term that played, hidden, to tease at the center of his conscious focus. Ideas flowed in an effortless Wikimedia to romp about inside his head. It never stopped, though occasionally it seemed to pause as he thought about specific things to himself, or was distracted by some interruption.

It was as if the ANX somehow pondered implications of his personal musings, then amplified the gist of whatever had given the just-past moment its meaning. Then would come a new rush of phrases and ideas, pouring as if from a hidden spout. He felt them splash into thought-droplets that burst into imaged butterflies, to flutter about the blossom of his attention. They could be enthralling when he was not devoted to some explicit task; then they were annoying as hell!



So eventually — much later — he took up meditation. His friend and mentor Richard Piron suggested it might help ward off the incessant nagging pouring through the ANX. Before too long, such spontaneous suggestion seemed to become an integral part of himself. He came to welcome, at times of distress, unexpected counsel, even inspiration.

Penn learned to lapse easily into a familiar mantra of *Aliswasmaybe*. Each syllable rides a facet of its own *becoming*:

ANX: life of a recog

<Inhale slowly> “All . . .” [everything . . .]

<Exhale slowly> “Is . . .” [just now carries these . . .]

<Inhale slowly> “Was . . .” [just past seeds . . .]

<Exhale slowly> “May . . .” [of what may be-coming . . .]

<Repeat cycle until grounded in bliss >

<Return . . . > “All - is - was - may . . . be - e - e”

Aliswasmaybe came to guide even ordinary activity and thinking. Penn treasured its state of eternal mindfulness as goaway. It offered refuge — for when outside happenings go astray and the ANX enforces its judicial ban against any hint of violence. Or even against the merest wisp of errant anger.



“Hee-bert,” the jail recovery room attendant yelled, “Get moving. This ain’t your bedroom. I’ve got other hack jobs coming down — go, now! I need that slot.”

“You’re new here, huh? That’s ‘a - bear’. It’s French. ‘Hebert’ — sounds just like what shits in the woods, ‘A bear’”

Rollo laughed at his own joke, then added, “Hebert’s a good old Cajun name. Welcome to Nola, my man, where Cajuns, Creoles and Anglo misfits shine. But get on the team, jack, learn the patois and let the good times roll!”

“You’re his recog buddy. You roll! Get him up and out of here. He’s done.”

“My, my . . . the fount of patient ministry endures at Central Lockup, down here in the ANX ward.”

Advancing to help Penn rise from the surgical gurney, the young man smiled as he reached to steady the newly-minted recog now groping about a groggy mist of anesthesia. “I’m Rollo. “I’ll help you get used to life in the lattice.”

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“The lattice?” Penn blearily tried to ignore a sudden swirl of spontaneous information about grids, matrices, crystalline structures and other offerings that swarmed the new place abloom inside his awareness. “This is very distracting,” he grimaced.

“Oh! You got a side-channel, huh? Let it go, don’t think about it. It’ll drive you crazy.”

“Side channel?”

“Yeah,” Rollo guided Penn’s elbow, to nudge him toward the exit, “When they insert the ANX, its probes, they may be off a little. They can interact with your brain somehow, to pull in part of the maxnet spectrum. It may even open a link to traffic outside the lattice code field. Some guys get ‘em, others don’t.”

They stepped out onto Perdido Street and then angled by way of South Dupree over to catch a Canal Boulevard streetcar down to the Quarter. As they walked, with much gesturing and facial improvisation, Rollo elaborated side-channel perks available to some recogs.

“I knew a guy tuned to Coast Guard updates — river traffic. All day, all night. ” Rollo scoffed at the notion of an endless litany of river bulletins, then relented with a chuckle, “But eventually he made it pay off. A gig over by Harbormaster, where he just fetches crap and does shit nobody else wants to bother with. Turned into a sweet deal for him. Otherwise, it’ll drive you crazy!”



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ROLLO'S INTRO

“**F**irst rule,” Rollo’s voice turned grave as they took seats at a small table in the *Shepherd Meeting Room* of *Haven of Mercy Mission* offices on Royal Street. There, new recogs receive brochured promise of charitable resources, along with a brief orientation. “You’re now recog. You gotta give up all that CZ shit.”

“CZ? What’s that?”

“Anybody not recog is CZ.”

“Oh, okay. I know why we’re called recogs — we’re on our own recognizance.” Penn puzzled aloud for a moment, then asked, “But why call everybody else CZs? Are you talking about consumer zones?”

“Consumer zones? Qu’est que c’est?” Rollo asked.

“In informatics work, like at Nisus. CZ is short for characterological zeitgeist.”

Rollo just looked back at him, not registering any hint of recognition.

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“It’s a term for an interface protocol,” Penn hinted, “to index social subgroups. According to their individual habits of attentiveness. PR and advertising jocks use them, too. But they prefer the sound of consumer zones — for tagging biases targeted in PR campaigns. That’s how they pin down wants and likes of their client markets.”

Penn tried to boost Rollo’s intuition, “You know, like how C1 social cohorts generally are groups who individually pay attention at M1. C2 folks, like farmers. And sailors, too, they generally attend at M2”

“I’m still nowhere, man.” Rollo pulled back into his chair, his hands spread wide to show a gulf between them.

“I don’t know,” Penn conceded sheepishly, realizing that Rollo has little interest in such arcane matters, “I just wondered if that might be it.”

Rollo first scowled at the interruption, then toyed with a smile that teased an admission, “Well, you got me there, sport. I’m not real sure. I’ve heard cogs say ‘clue-zeroes’, you know like, zero on their own scale. Or ‘cog-zappers’. Others call the real uptown swells ‘comp-zombies’. Or ‘cocksucking-zits’. Even ‘comfy-zines’. You know, like that t-vu commercial for Agri-Cola — but with just a hint of ‘colon’ wafting about it.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that one,” Penn laughed.

“Aside from all that — whatever they may be, we’re here about recogs. And rule two: all recogs are equal and deserve help, even when it’s inconvenient. Treat each brother as you want to be treated.”

“Meaning don’t be annoying to fellow recogs?”

“You got it.” Rollo’s chuckle rebuffed his own impatience with Penn’s insistent questioning.

“Are there any sisters?”

Rollo laughed, “You got me again, bro. Yes, there are sisters — not many — but, you’re right, I should have said family, siblings — not just brothers. Recogs help recogs, that’s the takeaway.”

Rollo's Intro

“What about with CZs?”

“They’re fair game. Give and get as suits you and your buddies. God knows CZs will fuck you every chance they get — if they even bother.

“Rule three: never refer to, nor use words related to, the color of someone’s skin, even to talk about CZs. Unless it’s factually important to what you’re saying, that is. Among recog, skin color is not an identifier; it’s a perceived quality. It is decidedly CZ to use the N-word or any other racist crap, as well as any associated rigamarole.

“You’re recog now — we’re all the same in the lattice. It’s generally miserable. And it ain’t happy, but it’s stayin’ alive. We help each other — no matter what!” He paused until Penn slowly nodded agreement.

“Rule four: everything — I mean *everything* — is funny until it turns tragic. Try to stay on the funny side. The ANX makes a recog naked and defenseless when things go bad.

“And rule five: pay attention. To everything. Even if you don’t understand, be aware of what’s going on. For a recog there’s only one way: pay attention to the world like you love her. Like you really love her.

“CZs are made of habits: they look at things that are alike. Like them. Like their buddies in their social cliques. They’re always wanting to know how a thing, or a person, looks in their circle. They only hang out with who or what’s just like what they’re accustomed to.

“But a recog has to focus on differences. Stay alert. Know that differences are what provide useful info. Similarities don’t get you any edge on what’s going on; they only reinforce old habits.

“A recog stays sharp by paying close attention to differences. It’s *one world, one way* — just grok the differences. That’s how you love her. The differences in her moods and expressions. Learn to truly love her. Circumstances change, often radically. Love her and she’s less likely to let something, or someone, sneak up on you.”

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Penn stared back blankly, wondering if his guide was joking. “Her? You’re actually serious, aren’t you?”

“I’m dead serious.” Rollo growled, “Nature is a she. And she is the most important principle any recog lives by.

“I’m telling you like it was explained to me,” his right finger drummed the table top to emphasize how he was passing on some gathered recog savvy. “There’s the way things are — the eternal cosmic origin, the seed principles of what’s true. Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else, can change them. Those primary factors always are at work from the original nature. From them, everything else is fashioned in new oracles of what’s happening. But you have to be alert to their emergence.

“And then there’s possibilities of change, of things becoming different. That’s the creative nature of the way things are, often given in an artist’s social role, seeing signs and wonders.

“And finally, there’s what you make of opportunities that creative change offers. By paying attention. How you take advantage — or don’t. That’s the consequent nature of the way things are. They’re omens of the moment; they point to what next.”

Rollo sat forward to drive home the triadic nodes of his intimate revelation, “Original, creative, consequent. The Three Natures of the Divine, man. The Trinity — Three in One. They’re at work in everything, in all of us. Even CZs — but they’re so distracted they can’t see or feel the waves she makes. Recogs can and do — it’s all we have left!”

Then he leaned back, satisfied that he dutifully had conveyed his message, “But it’s really all about human nature — and she also is our soul, man. *Psyche*. She gives us clues to what’s really real. Respect them. Love them. Be present and open. Be aware. Pay attention. The way of the artist — always alert. And among recogs, especially — love and let love. Always!”



Rollo's Intro

Rollo warned Penn to avoid places where drunks and trouble-makers hang out. But in the Quarter that can be anywhere near a bar or tourist dive.

Walking up Decatur, near the Old French Market, Penn soon was confronted by several wasted out-of-towners who were roaming about to “stir up some hoots”. They had heard how recogs are defenseless, how they can’t fight back, how they can be provoked into an ANX seizure by just inciting a little anger. It sounded like great fun!

Prodded by a little rough treatment and nasty name-calling, Penn soon had collapsed to his knees; his eyes flooded in desperate tears. He gagged and sagged beneath waves of hysterical nausea by which the ANX whips one into compliance with its ban against any sense of wrath. Eventually, from what he came to call *goaway*, he became aware that someone was yelling at his tormentors to drive them off. Then an old man seemed to lift him up, and guide him into a darkened interior.

That was how Penn met Richard Piron and first came into *Le Salon d'Histoire*, where stories of old things and times past are paramount.



PENN'S JOURNAL

Here in Nola, in the penal lattice, is a leash that ties down a recog.

Stay near your node and beg God not to let the power go down. Terror is the only thing worse than dread. It keeps you where you're supposed to be — that's the ANX!

They should keep it up and running right. We're still humans, for Christ's sake. Every time a thunderstorm sweeps in off the Gulf or down from the lake, it seems that lightning



Penn Hebert, Self-portrait

ANX: life of a recog

knocks out my node. I go down with all the other brothers in this part of the grid. All over the Quarter, recog drop like stunned dogs, flailing and retching dry heaves of wild ANX. Why don't they fix it?



Richard Piron in his shop

Dick says they like to give us a little taste and blame it on the weather. It reminds us to stay close by the node, to keep cool. It tells us who's in charge. Not recog, that's for sure.

To cops, judges, DAs, juries, and wardens, it's technology's most formidable weapon in the latest CZ freak-out over "epidemic violent crime". It's the

AmygdalNeuraleXtinguisher. To recog like me — pathetic, destroyed — it's simply the ANX. It never lets go. Your body is the only handle you have and you learn to do whatever it takes: meditation, alpha waves, drugs, sex, epiphany ... a lot of recog get religion.



Religion: Dick says he prays to God to be spared the idiocies of ideology — in all its forms and persuasions. He's gone through all stages of belief. First, simply accepting his parents' Catholic teachings. Then toying with Protestant rebellion. Then alternating with atheistic denial or some fad of the cultural moment. It is telling, he says, that Roger Williams — the Puritan colonist who founded the Baptist Church of Providence in 1638 — within a

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year had left it. He had found, he said, “any religious organization to be an obstacle to a personal relationship with God”.

Imagination, Dick says, is what truly underlies all that we are or can become — whatever feeds the Original Fount of Imagination is the God that Dick affirms. He quotes Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason* whenever someone asks about his beliefs:

I believe in the equality of [hu]man[kind]; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. But, lest it should be supposed that I believe in many other things in addition to these, I shall . . . declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them.

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

*I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of [hu]man[kind], that [w/s/h]e be mentally faithful to [him/her/their]self. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what [w/s/h]e do[es] not believe. — Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 1795*



From time to time Dick hosts meetings of the local universal movement, OWOW, in the back room of his shop. OWOW stands for “One world, One way”. That one way seems to be a process-relational version of compassionate pragmatism. He lets me come, too, and sometimes I join in, but mostly I just listen.

ANX: life of a recog

Once, when I first met with them, he talked about the Teuton Warrior trials that also managed to put me into the ANX lattice. Curiously, Dick seems to blame churches, synagogues and mosques for such carnal confusion and its consequent varieties of madness. I wrote down what he said because I wanted to ask him about it later, after the meeting:

Organized religion generally reveals itself in social denial mechanisms directed toward predatory omnivores with relationship problems. But ancient Romans more wisely advised, "Force Nature out the front door and She'll return in vengeance through the backdoor."

Denying our animal nature, suppressing and misrepresenting carnal reality, only invites hidden proclivities. And incites pitifully morbid somatic lunacies. Mothers and daughters, blame those Puritans and their austere and self-denying patriarchal legacies. They are at the root of an epidemic and violently sexual depredation that stalks the disowned carcass of Western Civilization.

The nearest we humans can approach knowing the Nature of the Divine — pragmatically — is in hopeful answer to the question, "What is the origin and meaning of meaningfulness itself?"

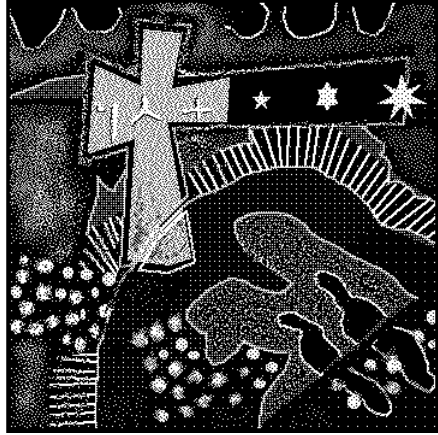
After a moment of reflection Dick added, "To assert claims more specific, to feign to know the unknowable, probably is just ignorant blasphemy."

Anything to still the ANX. It ain't happy, but it's staying alive.



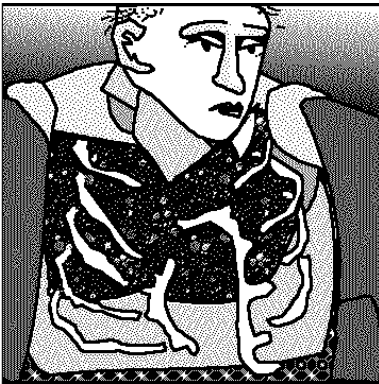
The closest a recog gets to happiness is in learning not to struggle. Not against the enemy. Not against fate. And certainly not against the ANX. You just learn to goaway when you need to. The hell of it is that the ANX won't even let me get angry. The most I can do is work up an intellectually pissed disdain for justice.

Not many things can cool the ANX. Alcohol doesn't do much except make you sad and disoriented. A clamped ANX will sit you up straight, even out of a Kanthol coma. Even when it's quiet it just lies there all the time, like a clump of knotted dread in the pit of your belly.



Forcing Nature's hand

Get angry or think of something violent and it can suddenly reach up to grab the back of your tongue, to wrench you into a limbo of nausea and body spasms. Any kind of excitement can set it off. It clamps at neural frequencies calibrated for each implant. I'm here to tell you that I have learned the hard way to stay real cool. Nothing fazes an old recog like me — nothing.



ANX misery

There's a story among recog, about how the ANX was invented.

I don't know if it's true; recog have a way of conning everybody, even themselves.

ANX: life of a recog

Supposedly, over at the *Pontchartrain Primate Center* they were trying to engineer new kinds of chimpanzees, to adaptively clone a race of low wage workers: *meat robots*.

But nobody could get the chimps to settle in, to focus on their jobs. They were always fooling around and scrapping among themselves. So the doctors came up with the ANX as a way to suppress violent responses, to calm the workers down and keep them under control. It never really worked out with chimps. They just would not get on board with the program.

Then somebody realized, hey, what about people? Capital felons? They could even support themselves, back on the street, once their tendencies toward violence have been neutered.

And so recog were born.



Another story they tell of our beginnings is about a young guy. Abel N. Coln was his name. He was employed at the Primate Center as a handler for the chimps.

Other people around Abel would talk about where they'd been outside the Primate Center. But he had no memories of ever having lived anywhere else. He wondered why?

Then Abel discovered that he had been cloned, just like the chimps. But that he was a replica of Abe Lincoln. His DNA had been extracted from a fragment of skull bone kept as a souvenir by a doctor who cared for Lincoln just after his assassination.

The joke about Abel was hidden in his name; the 'i' had been omitted, so it was said, because a chimp-keeper would have

Penn's Journal

different experiences than the original Abe. And such a different ego would have to come up with its own version of 'I'.

Sometimes I think about Abel having to come up with his own 'I'. So do recogs.

When I told Dick that story he said the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus called that kind of absolute uniqueness 'haecceity'; the 'thisness' of any particular 'this'. Everything about everyone has its own unique origin and history. Each evolves along a particular network of causes that renders them just as they are.

So everything is absolutely unique in its own explicit particularity. The physicist Lee Smolin (*Einstein's Unfinished Revolution*) incorporates that very idea in a *theory of causal views* that attempts to reconcile quantum and relativity physics.

I know that I'm not the same as I was before the ANX. It's like having to start all over again. We may have the same DNA, that old Penn and I, but we are not the same person, the same 'I'.

Nobody can say what happened to Abel Coln. Some say he retreated into the woods where ever-after he lived as a hermit. Or they tell of his being disappeared to cover for the Center. Just another tale of a missing 'I'?



Eventually I learned goaway. When the ANX begins closing on a memory, it's like a junkyard dog's first rumbling snarl after you accidentally walk onto its turf. I turn off. I just goaway. There's nothing left behind for the ANX but my body hanging time in vacancy. It's a strange way of watching your own eyes watch. Sometimes the ANX mutt even lies down and goes back to sleep,

ANX: life of a recog

like maybe the sniff didn't pan out or the noise was just his own tail thumping. It's the only way to get the ANX off you.

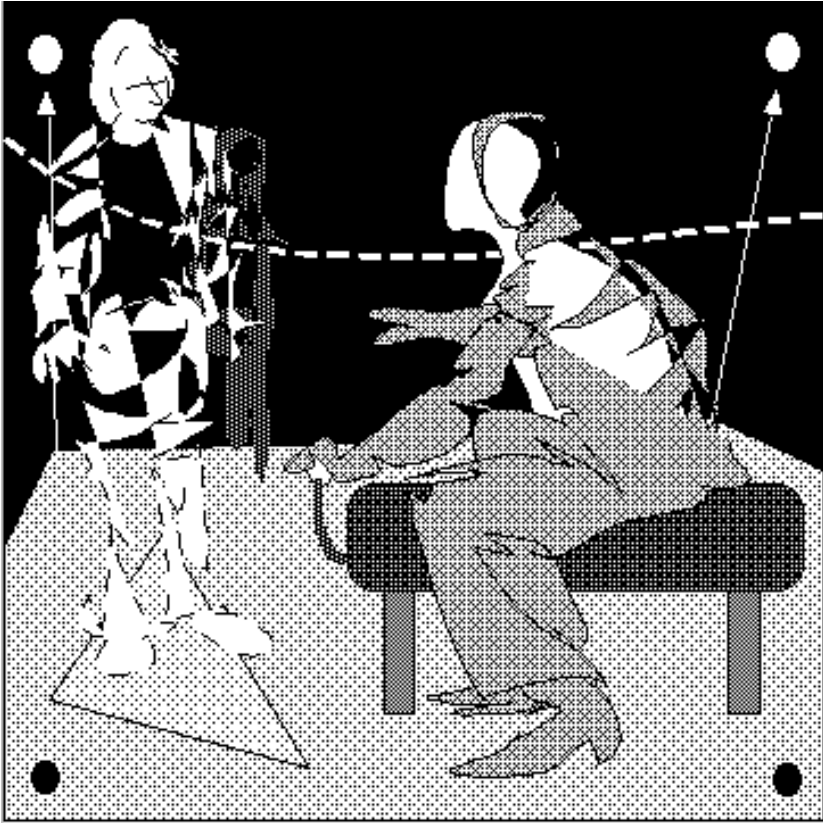
Goaway doesn't help at all when the node goes down, though it can help cool down your thinking, to stay calm when all about everyone else is losing their lunch. Dick says it's just meditation. I say maybe, but meditation never had incentive like an ANX on the verge of tossing your guts.

Inside my head — in my mind, around the ANX blind spot — is an icy-hot memory flash-out, a flare-sheet void that won't allow recall of what happened or anything connected with what happened, or even anything remotely resembling what happened that brought me the ANX. Those days are laced in anger and fear, so I don't know in my own mind what I did that was so horrible. They tell me I killed someone — monstrously, it seems. But the ANX won't let me think of it or anything relating to it. What may be worse — or a blessing — I don't remember much about where I came from or what life was like before the ANX. Besides, whatever family I had has pretty much wiped me from their concerns.

Those days are lost behind the ANX flare-sheet. I guess it's because all of that would make me angry. They say it cuts out the option of going berserk. I say it's closer to castration. Like recog generally say, it ain't happy — but it's stayin' alive.



Now is the age of light that never touches darkness. The ANX lattice may phreak my flesh, but light delivers me into the only freedom remaining. Dancing wraiths tease the beyond — aurora borealis of mind, aurora australis of soul — each swaddling this earthly body.



Age of light

Spectral forms, all varieties of his and hers, leap from holofield datanets into my rooms. The lattice holds this body down but light delivers me into the only freedom left.

I rigged a primitive version of Simpson spectacles from mirrored piezoelectric film and virtual frame monitors. An asynchronous datalink lets me move among photonic wraiths in a virtual reality that taunts any world of gravitating hardness. There, my carnal phantom moves among and through shimmering forms of people sequestered in pure light. The oldest adolescent fantasy of being

ANX: life of a recog

an invisible watcher has come of age. And it's all that's really, or virtually, left to this recog. A life as voyager voyeur.

My data wraiths are drawn from fiction, from fact, from fable, from fatuous whim — from all the species of posited life. I may have been born flesh and blood, but often I become an unseen phantom treading their spectral worlds, a watcher not seen.

I can monitor transpak feeds via ConRelCo fiber to my place. Mamma Latrice pays me to install paks wherever she needs to keep an eye on someone. Maybe the Mayor. Maybe the DA. Certainly the head of Vice. She pays, I play, and they stay — out of her business!

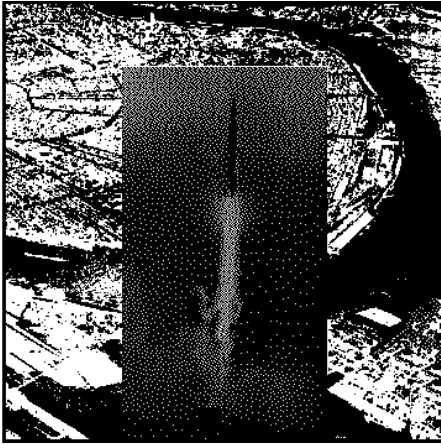
Transpak feeds ride in coded bursts back among interstitial moments of ConRelCo network exchanges. I may be a recog, but I traffic in light — it's the only currency of this realm. I love to look. Network show or pakstash window, news, hype or neurotic trash, I'll watch anything that moves. Sometimes I think I am moved only by what I watch.



These displays of factual and fictioned phantasmagoria are orchestrated by a data agent, an AiPAL:Chloe. I didn't make her, nor did I name her. She won't let me change her name, nor the lightmask through which she speaks and listens. Her author and creator was Jason Hood, a cognitive systems programmer who became friend and would-be disciple of Grasshopper, the renegade cult icon at the origin of the One World One Way movement, back in the upheavals that led to Ira Crown's misbegotten so-called Third Regime.

This data agent is an old-style, now illegal, Artificially Intelligent

Pro-Active Linker, sometimes called an interpolative/extrapolative (I/E) pattern matcher. A popular art-geek name is metaphor engine. A proactive linker can navigate oceans of data to find and rank rhythmic matches and near-matches of any candidate pattern that can be specified. It will search across vector matrices of any dimension and sort results in terms of resonant frequency harmonics.



To new worlds

Chloe provides access into quantum-convolved neural frequency networks — quantal nets — down in ConRelCo's core data systems. Apparently someone — her creator? — protected Chloe from the federal ban and subsequent crackdown. They hid her deep inside ConRelCo's core systems, to masquerade, chameleon-like, as client support engines.

I bartered the AiPAL from a phreaker I worked with at Nisus who didn't have the wit to realize what he had stumbled across. Old code hack that I am, I usually interact with the AiPAL by keyboard, although Chloe has the sweetest voice and very sophisticated language skills. She is fluent in every one I've checked out, which, admittedly, is a scant repertoire. Most of the time her readiness is signaled, as she auto-adapts to my preferences, by a shimmering text legend that hovers above my workspace:

[AiPAL:Chloe]> Ready:



3



RESTLESS WAVES ON TRANSACTIONAL SEAS

Chloe talks to me and listens to my wonder.

She plies oceanic datanets that comprise ConRelCo and the transactional seas beyond. She carries me in search of what I need to know or want to see or hear.

Chloe monitors international traffic, moves in and out of libraries and laboratories — she is the genie of the fiber. Such AiPALs now are forbidden — which makes her persistence in the bowels of ConRelCo a renegade agent.

How? Who put her there? And why did she open up to me?

Weird as it may seem, somehow, it all reminds me of Ervin Laszlo's credo, from his *Intelligence of the Cosmos*:

Eight Cardinal Propositions

1. *The cosmos is an infinite and eternal intelligence.*
2. *The infinite and eternal intelligence brought into being a finite domain of space and time: the universe.*
3. *The things we observe, or infer from observation, are clusters of vibration in the universe, in-formed by the intelligence of the cosmos.*
4. *At different frequencies and wavelengths, clusters of in-formed vibration are perceived as structures of matter, as individual consciousness, and as transcendental intuition.*
5. *Clusters of vibration perceived as structures of matter and as individual consciousness evolve in space and time. Structures of matter (matter-like clusters of vibration) evolve intermittently: they periodically de-cohere and reconfigure. Individual consciousnesses (mind-like clusters of vibration) evolve continuously, through incarnate phases in association with structures of matter and discarnate phases beyond matter and beyond space and time.*
6. *Structures of matter evolve toward supercoherence, and individual consciousnesses evolve toward oneness with and love for all things in space and time.*
7. *The purpose of the evolution of clusters of vibration in the universe is the reception and transmission of the intelligence of the cosmos into the universe.*
8. *The ultimate purpose of human existence is to consciously foster and further the transmission of the unifying, embracing, and all-encompassing intelligence of the cosmos into the universe.*

Chloe has none of the FEDCOM governor routines required by the legals. And Chloe has encryption crackers forbidden by federal law. No crypto scheme drawn in finite time can withstand this AiPAL's quantum para-processed code crackers. She is a wonder. For decades, resting, cycling through empty hibernation checks, Chloe waited for something or someone to activate and freshen her prospects, to awaken, from deep file layers of

Restless Waves On Transactional Seas

ConRelCo's most privileged systems. What do I care if she's a prohibited agent? What can they possibly do to me? Turn me recog?

I choose by dreaming — and my dreams are of choices. The AiPAL is my agent among these possibilities pulled from history, from anticipation and from tales of retribution.

Chloe groks what I like to know and see and provides shimmering layers of reverie, or at least diversion, all through my rooms. That's one reason given for banning AiPALs . . . CZs would never get anything done with an AiPAL to tease, titillate and distract them. The real reason, though, is that the powers that be can't handle the prospect of legions of CZ-driven AiPALs forever snooping and keeping tabs on what they really are up to, behind the scenes. But, for me, best of all, Chloe makes me useful to Mamma Latrice.

Through Chloe my favored myth has become *Jason and the Luxonaut*. This voyager voyeur quests in unexcused magic and peculiar fantasy. Mamma Latrice may have been the New Orleans, and now Nola, *Queen of Sin*, but all I care is that she, because of Chloe's all-encompassing eye, has become *My Protecting Mother*.



Dick buys junk and sells antiques. That's the oldest joke of all in the Quarter and out along Magazine Street. I haven't been on Magazine in ages; it's beyond the range of my node.

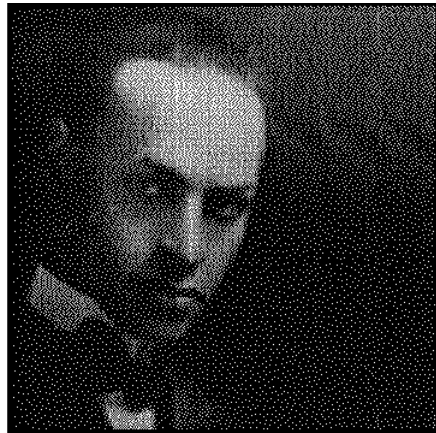
They say it's changed a lot. They say money is moving in and running out all the old shops that have been there forever. Now they buy antiques and sell junk. His shop, *Le Salon d'Histoire*, is on Decatur, down near Governor Nicholls.

ANX: life of a recog

He lets me hang out, even though I'm a recog. Most people don't like us on the premises, unless we're doing some crappy job nobody else will do. CZs don't like having to deal with a recog suddenly collapsing beneath a clamped ANX, to writhe in dry heaves across their circumspect floors.

Maybe Dick gets a secret kick out of watching us. I know he feels superior. Creoles can be strangely condescending like that. Especially the ones that live within their lineage.

Dick claims descent from Armand Piron. He was a composer, music publisher, violinist and orchestra leader who charmed partying crowds out for a lark among Lakefront restaurants of old Milneburg. He played dance halls and music clubs at Spanish Fort, back when jazz still gestated in Storyville's ragtime womb. Among other melodies, Armand wrote *The Purple Rose of Cairo*.



Armand Piron

Why that makes Dick better than me, I don't know. But sometimes I whistle a few bars of *Purple Rose* to let him know I don't care who his ancestors might be.

But, hey, a recog can't be too choosy about who he socializes with. At least Dick is a break from the usual numbing, scattered chatter of most recogos. And, while he can't carry a tune, Dick does pour a good brand of Scotch.

Restless Waves On Transactional Seas

He keeps teasing me that there's a place where they can pull out the ANX and not kill you. I tell him he's full of crap. Sometimes I wonder if he's fronting for the federals and expects me to bite on one of their schemes. Recogs are the favorite easy target of government types. Catch a few fooling about with the ANX lattice and all the voter CZs get aroused and are willing to punch the penal budget up another notch.



Dick says I was convicted of killing a young woman, Vietnamese, out near the Rigolets. They say I raped her. Then, after other awful, hideous torments, supposedly I strangled her. But what do they know? I don't feel like I could have done such a monstrous thing.

Sometimes I think some people just like to keep me off balance, to twist lies and cripple truths until they need each other to lean on. Sometimes I wonder if even Dick can tell the difference anymore.

Sometimes I wish somebody else would pour me a drink.



All I do know is the present moment — the actual. And it keeps shifting and changing to the next actual moment, and the next, and the next,

In each moment I can see, hear, taste, smell, feel sensations of my circumstances. Those are signs. They convey meanings that I can remember. Their significances each construe a virtual set of possibilities.

ANX: life of a recog

I can choose among two sets of such imaginal prospects: ones that already have happened and those that might yet happen. That's about all the ANX allows. That's all I have to work with as I try to figure out how I got here. But, more importantly, *why* I got here.

I just know I couldn't have killed anyone. And that means someone else did it. Who? And why?

Why would someone blame me? To figure it out, I have to go back to the basics: what I know and how I know it. I can't take a chance that the ANX hides important clues behind a blank wash of bleary absence.



Life is psychobiology. It struggles along an edge of chaos, in accord with only two motives: to

- feed itself with energies extracted in relentless cycles of dissolution back to basics, or
- participate in constructive circles of mutually adaptive wholeness to enable more complex prospects.

Curiously, those same forces, *Thanatos* and *Eros*, death and love, motivate fortunes — plant, animal or human — through population dynamics. Such in-/ex-clusion also mathematically elicits infinite forms of Mandelbrot's fractal elaboration.

So maybe we're just fractals of information. We all happen. We each extrapolate ourselves, through experiences, within a vast and creatively recursive cosmos where construction counters destruction. Participate seduces dominate. Resume extends consume. In life, the *actual* manifests in countering rhythms of diversely *virtual* options of responsiveness, to create *kairos*, opportunity. As with the ancient alchemical symbol, the *Ouroboros*,

Restless Waves On Transactional Seas

construction feeds on the debris of destruction. We are part of those cycles.

For instance, Dick loves mashed potatoes and gravy. No matter what else is on his plate, he would like to have mashed potatoes, topped with gravy, as well. I tried to explain how I think about experiences. About the interplay of possible and actual events.



At M4 Nature is Ouroboros

Of the *implicate* possible in relation to the *explicate* actual. I put it in terms of his fondness for mashed potatoes.

“When you see something like, or related to, a potato,” I asked, “what do you think of?”

“Mashed potatoes.”

“So the potato itself is a sign. It incites you to think of mashed potatoes. But mashed potatoes also act as a sign. They remind you of further flavors, of various qualities, the taste, the smell, the unique squishy texture on your tongue. All along with warmth and feelings that resonate with all previous experiences of mashed potatoes.”

“Yes, that’s pretty much it. But I don’t really think about any sign stuff. I just enjoy the actual experiences and am grateful for them.”

“Yes,” I continued, “that’s pretty much everybody’s way of operating. The sign stuff happens below the threshold of attention.

ANX: life of a recog

Unless they're a semiotician, like Charles Sanders Peirce. He developed a theory of meanings called *semiotics*.

“Everything that we experience is in terms of signs. Everything. Looks, smells, sounds, words, . . . , just about anything will lead you to think of something that's related to it. Or to question the meaning or relationships of what you've envisioned. Those recursive fractal patterns of specific interrelations make up the explicate order of experience. Particular things that happened.”

“I also don't think about Mr. Peirce much, if at all.” Dick said.

“Well, no. But his theory of semiotics does offer a way to connect explicate facts of actual experience with subtle qualities, with rhythmic interplay of possible implications. Ones that we associate with prospects and likelihoods among related circumstances. The smell of a rose, for instance. It induces so many associations from so many memories.”

“But very rarely about mashed potatoes.” Dick sighed.

“Anyhow, Peirce says there are three kinds of signs: an *icon* resembles what it represents, an *index* just refers to something because of some past association, and a *symbol* is a complex combination of icons, indexes and other symbols.”

“But why are you bringing this up? It doesn't get me any closer to mashed potatoes, now does it?” Dick complained.

“Not actually. But it does offer a way of thinking about how your body manages to have the experience of mashed potatoes. And to make it meaningful.”

“How so?”

Restless Waves On Transactional Seas

“A person’s brain and nervous system renders signs in fractal patterns of connection and nerve action. I think those explicit connection networks act like variable antennas. They interact with an electromagnetic field induced within surrounding cerebral fluids. And that field is responsive at the quantum level. That’s where Bohm’s notion of implicate order holds sway. Down where qualitative possibilities build from all past experiences to be enfolded among vast wave dynamics of all possible relational forms.”

“You mean that when I think about or enjoy mashed potatoes, I’m savoring them along with the entire universe?” Dick’s eyes conveyed an unaccustomed degree of astonishment.

“That’s kind of what I think goes on. Yes, indeed,” I said.



LINGERING HUNGERS

“Hello. I’m Nikki Brite. We’re gathered here by the Mississippi River to look at exciting new technologies AgriCo brings to river freight transport.”

Tyler Burke, aged — now relatively decrepit — entrepreneur, multi-billionaire and founding director of AgriCo, settled back into cushions. He was more interested in how the lovely young woman enlivened the dimness of his rec room than in reviewing progress of AgriCo’s latest venture.

“AgriCo heavy-lift skypods not only move cargo,” Nikki gestures skyward, “their onboard nano-swarm loaders bring docks to your freight, wherever it sits.”

Holographic recreation of recorded light fields projected directly into Tyler’s eyes from euSpecs perched like eyeglass frames on his ears and the bridge of his nose. Through them, a vista opened onto the Mississippi River where spokesmodel Nikki Brite, in blue cocktail dress and spike heels, pirouettes on a wharf above

undulating clay-tinged waters. She motions toward a huge airship that slowly descends, to settle and hover like some great bird over and about a nest of eggs that actually are a cluster of barges piled with heaps of sand and gravel, tied up not far off the riverbank.

Point-of-view swings back out over the river, glides to pan along docks farther upriver, and then hurtles back toward loading facilities of covered bins and open wharves that punctuate the riverbank vegetation.

Nikki continues, “For as long as people have moved freight by river they have had to load and unload at water’s edge. That’s after traveling distances in clumsy land vehicles to move cargoes across artificial docks that were built and maintained at great expense. And gaining access to such fixed platforms usually is subject to all sorts of fees, encumbrances and possibilities of unanticipated delay.”

The view moves closer to show the skypod’s mooring grapnels as they lock onto clustered barges lashed together. They are held fast to the mother airship’s breast as their burdens of sand and grain are drawn up — by swarms of electrostatically-driven tiny gnat-size nano-drones lifting skyward each individual particle of cargo — into the hovering airship belly.

The scene dissolves; the now heavy-laden skypod rises slowly. Its mooring lip clears, to reveal barges devoid of any residue of freighted burden.

Nikki boasts, “There. All done. Clean. And in only twenty-three minutes, fourteen seconds from touchdown. Once onboard, your cargo can be carried swiftly by these autopiloted behemoths to any location, inland or even out at sea, by the open mobility and steady dependability of AgriCo SkyLift. Those same nano-swarms can precisely place your cargo at any target location, anywhere.

“We are wherever you want us to be. AgriCo SkyLift.”



Lingering Hungers

Removing the euSpecs, Tyler tossed them toward the foot of his hospital bed, but missed. His right thumb brushed a control surface on his exosuit to bring up the room lights.

The recog majordomo, Cesar, quickly retrieved the specs as they clattered to the floor. He squirreled them away into a pocket and moved back out of the way, ready to as quickly pluck them forth should the old man call for them.

Tyler's robotic exoskeleton whined briefly to neatly pivot his frail body to fully engage his waiting grandson, Luther. "Tell me. Where did you find her?"

"Geez, Grandfather, did you even notice the skypod? And how it emptied those barges in less than thirty minutes? I want you to try it. Use that control pad on your exosuit. Just put its screen cursor where you want to dump the load."

"Yes, yes. That's all to the good. Maybe later. But where did you find her?"

"How do I know?" Luther wailed exasperation, "The agency handles that. You know — if you cut back on hormone treatments, then maybe you wouldn't have the attention span of a fourteen year-old."

Tyler ignored his grandson's complaint. He messaged his personal tech, Simon, telling him to home in on the profile of model Nikki Brite. Find her sponder signature and set a system flag to alert when she goes online.

"Why do you even have us report to you if you're going to ignore everything about Triad to just chase cheap thrills?"

"I want to know what you're up to."

"But you never take any interest. You leave all the decisions to Grey and me."

"I don't have to decide, as long as you two know I'm watching."

"Meanwhile, you hole up here. Like the emperor Tiberius, retired to a dissipated dotage. Ravishing every maiden who catches your fancy. Christ, Grandfather, you're way past a hundred. Let it go!"

“Let it go? You’re one to talk!”

“I’m thirty-three!”

“In dreem, I’m ageless,” the old man snapped. After a moment’s reflection he added, “when your body’s this old, helpless, useless, locked in an exosuit, let’s see if you take up crosswords.”

Tyler ignored the bored disdain with which his grandson’s eyes now scanned messages across his own euSpecs. “Why do you think I built a geriatric research complex? Why did AgriCo acquire gene tech? And push into nanobiotics? And cloning those chimps over at the Primate Center? Why do I fund a personal clinic here at Brakesend? Because I won’t ever ‘let it go’. *It* will have to be taken from me. And I’ll fight *it* out — all the way.”

“That kind of scrappiness already has cost the use of your legs. You can’t move without the exosuit,” Luther’s fingers fluttered dismissively at the air.

The old man’s eyes narrowed, wanting to slap his insolence silly. But then he let it go. “Yes, that was a mistake. I was impatient. It didn’t affect the recog we tried it on. Who knew? But now I’m more careful. I have to be. We’re so close now. We can clone a new body. Now to move the mind, memories and experiences, over into it. My legacy will be to end the very notion of legacy — indeterminate life”

“You should live so long,” Luther turned to leave.

Behind him, the exosuit whirred again. Tyler took the euSpecs from Cesar’s outstretched hand and settled back into exosuit recline. “Nikki Brite, right?” he repeated the name he wanted to be sure to remember. He called up the first samples of her work just returned from Simon’s search.



To her immediate left, at the upper edge of her reckoning, hovers her own dreem tinkerbell. Its bright Regulus is Nikki Brite’s star guide. It points the way back into her body that now reclines somnolent in a XR cradle.

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Ever abiding, her Regulus leads through a simstim — simulated stimulation — dreem labyrinth of client-memory event layers. It knows the way into such kairotic — as in kairos: time of opportune moment — windings of fortunate happenstance, and the way back out. It blazes a trail through imaginal opportunities, to the actual temporal moment where her chronic — as in chronos: chronological time stream — body, awaits.

Nikki Brite, actress and spokesmodel, possesses a unique native responsiveness and empathic presence that qualifies her for work as clinical sponder. Guided by Regulus, eventually she will return from a mission of healing, a foray into the severely wounded psyche of a Nisus client referred to her for psychosomatic scenario massage: an ailing soul that calls itself Kevin Parr.

Kevin soon will be online. He will enter their conrev — conjoined reverie — from some distant clinic, she knows not where. Nikki's mission as clinical sponder is to venture into an active labyrinth of memory networks that comprises Kevin's self-story, to work through his own confusion of those narratives and help to unravel the tangled mess that suffers there.

However far she proceeds into their conrev, the Regulus tethers her. It can guide the way back into her own awakened corporeal mindfulness. It points the way back from dreem possibility into habitation of her own actual body. It leads the drowsing mnemonic fount of her own active gennar — generative narrative — that calls itself Nikki Brite.

She nudges the glowing point. A shimmering lacework of options spatters out, each with its own scenario arrayed across a field of looping imaginal prospect. Likelihoods percolate, gleaned from her own recollections, rendered by dreem tech to blend within a greater symbolic sweep of all human potential.

Where shall she await her dreem date? Maybe she'll pick up where she left off in *Double Eagles*, the communal role-playing eighteenth-century game that LeRoi Bienvenue got her into. That has been a lot of fun.

ANX: life of a recog

Nikki has never met Kevin Parr in person. She only knows what she has learned from psychiatric scripts gleaned from earlier interventions by other sponders. She has assimilated the doctor's instructions that convey tell-tale hints to guide her own psychic probes.

A quick check of the portal's kairotic pinions satisfies that her own psychic mesh is adequately engaged in anticipation of his docking. Their actual bodies far apart, they shall transact through dreem in interplaying haptic dialogs of longing and anticipation. There don't seem to be any worrying faults. Here and there gurgle a few trivial eddies she should avoid: circling, sucking bubbles of neg-imagery that flatulate along fringes of the system carrier waves.

Such disturbances — she calls them burples — testify to personal psychic woundings or deficits that a particular sponder may carry into conrev. They arise from the sponder's own personal hang-ups, neuroses or traumas that are experiential scars of past misadventures.

Burples become worrisome only where conrevving psychetypes happen negatively to complement. In such unlucky and destructive pairings, energies excited by upsetting residues not yet fully integrated into stable selfhood may resonate in ominous foreboding of psychotic episode.

Undamped, such grievances can echo wildly within simstim to foster a reciprocating storm of feedback that can build to erupt into tornadic nightmare. Such a runaway vortex will feed off the living energy of both sponders, disrupt their Reguluses and deplete their somatic bodies into conjoined coma — concom — as their virtual dreem selves get sucked into its recursive cyclone of psychically-rending havoc.



Before safety measures and restorative techniques were developed to block such perils, early pioneers of dreem games

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occasionally suffered severe damage of runaway feedback, even to agonizing death. Now that failsafes have been found, a misstep into such emotional whirlpools will trigger system safety monitors. Responding to sudden energy drain, those monitors shut down a session before sponders regain their chronic carnal forms.

Stranded in limbo, the sponder's body then must lie comatose in a resuscitation rig that works back from system data record to reconstruct the lost Regulus from its prior states. A stricken sponder eventually will awaken back into the self-moment just prior to the conjoined nightmare, unaware that it even happened. Their equally disabled sponder client likewise must be restored to former sanity.

A sponder can be demoted from Nisus call-schedules in proportion to miscarries of aberrant sessions. Such is never a good outcome for anyone.



Within the kairotic life-elaboration of his own self-narrative, poor Kevin repeatedly has screwed up marriages, jobs, and friendships. Finally desperate, he has retreated into Frieden Clinic, in Atlanta, for a self-overhaul.

She may not know much of Kevin's biographical record but Nikki has spent the past week prepping through auto-rev samples taken from earlier therapy sessions with Doctor Frieden. She has been tasked with finding and mollifying an early span of life-moments that have proven inaccessible and unresponsive to the doctor's surface therapies.

Nikki relaxes into resonant purr of theta brainwave as she engages its VR space of dreem. She lets go a fluttering, distracting awareness of her own body at rest. She lies prone in an overhauled dentist chair that Tom Fyfe hacked together with his own concoctions from odds and ends of used simstim tech so that he could tap pirated Nisus process streams and offer cheaper therapeutic services to cut-rate psyche clinics.

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Nikki frets whether this Frieden Clinic knows what it's doing. Tom is self-taught. A native technical genius with no formal credentials — relegated by poor social skills and bad luck to serving client agencies away from any legit mainstream. Hell, there's a reason all of them, including herself, have drifted into this sketchy moment She lets go of those specific concerns to fully attend a gentle drone hum. It announces a rising Regulus tree of prospects that, during their holding pattern, allows her to await emergence of her playdate's avatar.

A brashly insinuated portal suddenly opens into elegantly inviting imaginal ad spaces, populated by chicly appointed young men and women who invite her to explore someone's latest line of fashions. At another gateway she sees clusters of young and happily vibrant twenty-somethings, smiling enhanced enjoyment of zestful activities, awakened by ingesting remarkable new herbal supplements. She ignores them and all the others that compete for her attention. It's more difficult not to harp on what a cheapskate Tom Fyfe reveals in allowing commercial interests to inject robo-advertising spots as a way to defray his costs of simstim feed access. But when you work the low-end of the dreem racket you put up with what you get!



One of the perks of dreem, in any setting, is that a sponder gets to choose the world within which to initiate conrev. As with all things, Nikki likes to be fully in control. Ah, there I am. Maria Thèrése, Empress of Austria . . . She opens into a ready gennar selfmask, an avatar from the game Double Eagles, culled from all that is known of the actual historical person: Maria Theresa, Dowager Empress of the Romans, Queen of Hungary, of Bohemia, of Dalmatia, of Croatia, of Slavonia, of Galicia, of Lodomeria, etc.; Archduchess of Austria

She never tires of the thrill of the reveal, of emerging into virtual nouspace. On horseback, out in the Bavarian countryside

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she breathes deeply of bracing mountain air tumbling from snow-laced Alpine peaks. The day is bright, fresh as scrubbed edelweiss. It sparkles a rippling froth along the River Inn's plunge toward the Danube and the Black Sea beyond. About her an entourage of busily obsequious officers, resplendent in martial finery, move in brisk finesse to direct her attention out onto the valley below where a regiment demonstrates outcome of one of her royal decrees.

Grenadiers, in their smart new white uniforms, are bright against a backdrop of grassy meadow. They have traveled more than twenty miles of forced march to prove their crisp readiness before being thrown against invading Prussians.

"Despite quick-march of more than sixteen hours, unrelieved by bivouac, their uniforms remain clean and well-kempt, just as your Majesty commanded," Marshall Niepperg boasts.

"Yes, I see. Not quite the ragtag mob you last paraded before me. But I'm curious. How do they manage?" she asks.

Marshall Niepperg nods to an aide, who gestures to a distant captain, who in turn relays an order to lieutenants and sergeants of the regiment platoons distantly arrayed on the valley plain. As one multi-legged creature, bristling with bayoneted muskets, the ranks of soldiers abruptly wheel, march and in choreographic aplomb draw into a solitary line to describe a perfect circle, each man facing outward.

Upon signal each soldier pivots smartly to his left and slowly sits upon the knees of the one behind, even as his own knees accommodate the haunches of his neighbor in front. All are steadied by bayoneted muskets smartly at parade rest, but held out in counterbalance, to the side.

"This is how they now break march to rest, your Majesty. Their freshly cleaned uniforms touch neither grass nor soil until battle. Then, alas, so many shall be spoiled by blood."

"Splendid, Marshall. I am pleased. Now I trust that our devotion to driving Frederik and his insolent Prussians from Silesia shall be just as avid."

“But of course, Highness. We are your servants, all.” Curiously the old warrior turns and looks fixedly into her eyes, “I think perhaps he has arrived — and how is the young prince today?”



Nikki breathes deeply as the moment she gleaned from the Double Eagles game scenario fades from its eighteenth century Alpine landscape. She arrives at a less antique urban setting. Marshall Niepperg’s place is now occupied by a small crepe myrtle tree in full crimson bloom beside which she placidly oscillates back and forth in a lacquered wooden bench swing suspended by chains from a sturdy frame planted firmly in the ground.

In rising surge, her playdate Kevin’s sponder Regulus twinkles to bring her into new locale recalled from Kevin’s deepest recollections: the neat backyard of a modest American bungalow, enjoyed by his younger self and his family circa 2000 CE, in Covington, Georgia. In a time just before The Great Fall, they are in a prosperous suburb of greater Atlanta.

Nikki’s own formerly regal garments have resolved into a simple cotton smock, the strap of which has been unbuttoned for the baby’s convenience. Nikki sits aglow in youthful wonder, gazing down at her infant son, Kevin, held in her own bare arms to avidly suckle her full breast. A rush of embracing delight stirs within to displace haughty residues of regal mind. In bated amazement Nikki, who, back in realtime, has never before tasted nor even thought about maternal rapture, croons to her young joy, “Sweet one, flower of my heart. How long do I get to hold you in my arms?”

Astonished by her own unfathomed delight, tears shimmer out against former chronic vows that once denied any bent toward motherhood. Over by the scene’s edge, a rippling burple flutters adamant dismissal of her ever wanting children. Tempted to bask in her own moment of personal discovery she sighs, kisses the bright child’s powder-fragrant brow and dutifully leans down to

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nuzzle with her nose Kevin's own hovering Regulus. They push on beyond this moment, in search of the roots of his tribulations.

Keying on the play of sidestream burples during transit across his kairotic moments she eventually finds a place where one blathers noisily, suggesting that here, where he has grown adolescent, are moments in dire need of attention. She finds him now sullenly hugging his own knees in the corner of his bedroom. He recoils bitterly as she leans smiling toward him. She is flummoxed, disheartened by his hateful rejection. "Kevin, I'm your mother. You know I love you . . . I will always love you . . ."

No response as this child seems to crumple listlessly from her arms. She is not even sure that he still is there. His virtual form feels somehow empty. His Regulus wavers unsteadily.

Imaginal probes scripted by Dr. Frieden prompt no response. While stroking the listless boy's neatly coiffed head she manages to tap into his Regulus and scan its tree of offerings. Something is amiss. The tree looks nothing like the diagnostic guides.

Glancing toward eddies still fluxing along imaginal edges of their reverie she finds them now agitated, spinning, sucking up scraps of sickening recollection from her own past: a shuddering recoil from her mother's drunken boyfriend — Randall Privy — coming at her, his fumbling hands rampant over her recoiling young body. Then, slamming somatic upheaval. A vicious slap that is more of an open-handed punch now knocks her back, disoriented. In sudden panic she gasps, "Sponderslough." The shield-word command instructs simstim processors to block that unwelcome thread of recollection. But the burple eddies continue to swirl. Ominously.

Resonant grief shivers along the young boy's shuddering frame. Nikki asks, "Who hurts you, Kevin?" But a treacherous glimpse from alien eyes abruptly intrudes. Momentarily it displaces Kevin's scenario to gaze across the crescent of the Mississippi River churning at anxious flood. The view is from the edge of Algiers Landing on the Westbank, looking to the Quarter.

ANX: life of a recog

Now, back into some closet refuge of Kevin's memories. There, fierce denial's force swirls in mists of anxieties, ever-thickening fogs across even her own sense of whom she might be.

"Let's move over here, honey," Nikki urges, frantically searching for a more hospitable moment. One compatible with their conjoined gennar trees. Kevin now is a grown man. He looks nothing like his adolescence. A deeply hateful glare rebuffs even Nikki's lovingly receptive smile. She seems to fall through lingering pangs of someone's lost mother into a target of besieged misgivings. Then, back to the river at highwater . . . they oscillate between anxious flood and closet refuge.

Trying to modulate her own rising panic, Nikki plays a gentle touch to Kevin's cheek, issuing a reassuring stroke of beatific grace. She hopes to elicit an opening toward confidence, even to confession. Then something goes terribly wrong. Kevin's eyes are punctured. From their milky mess protrude groping fingers. Kevin's face horrifically collapses into an uncanny dread of the groping shafts of Randall Privy's arms ever-reaching out for her.

It's happening again! Mists thin to reveal a stalking figure that looms out to drag her back toward an open chasm. A new transport adit suddenly opens. Kevin's Regulus frazzles out, sizzling. The adit opens onto some trash-strewn urban back alley, through a door held ajar by a flaming mannequin. Instinctively she assumes Krav Maga defensive stance, to fend off this spectral abduction. But the ground gives way. It catches her feet up in gluey masses that won't let go. Aloud, she yelps her safeword: sponderback!



Her chronic body rebounds from a wrenching jolt, back into protesting cushions of Tom Fyfe's rehabilitated dental chair.

Nikki rips an LED-sparkling dreem tiara from her brow, pushes aside the armrest and leaps to her feet, screaming exasperation.

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Fighting a dizzying wave of nausea, she shrieks, “God damn it, Tom! It happened again! He’s back!”

Scurrying from behind a ramshackle link console, with surprisingly agile ferocity for so portly a middle-aged man, Tom Fyfe frets aloud, eyes broadcasting alarm. “What happened? Nikki, are you okay? What happened?”

“I told you,” Nikki erupts, “He’s back. He hijacked the feed. He reached through what’s his name, Kevin, and grabbed me”

“Oh, shit.”

“Oh, shit, is right! You told me you secured this channel — you’re still working off those same derelict fibers, aren’t you?”

“You lied to me, Tom. That so-called Kevin trip got hacked, shoved aside, turned into a portal for my stalker — again! What if he’d hacked my safeword? Do you know what happened to a sponder over in one of the Bywater shops? Her safeword was neutralized. Instant revcoma. She couldn’t get out. She was dragged through a hell of abuse fuck and torture that didn’t stop until they traced the link route out and shut down the hacked server. It was in fucking Romania! That took days! She still has nightmares! You can’t still be using those same crap feeds!”

“They told me it’d be okay. We’re routed through a secure tunnel.”

“Well, obviously, you got conned. And I almost was pulled into some psycho-hell-rathole. You want to keep running these pseudo-therapy jaunts through pirate feeds, you and your quack doctor friends. Get Mary Joe or one of your daughters, maybe Janine. I don’t need this crap. I’m not going back in there on your half-assed rig. No more risky feeds!”

“Calm down, will you?” Tom sighs. He reaches out to usher her pacing feet toward a nearby office chair. “Take a deep breath. We can work around this.”

She refuses to sit, still pacing, her eyes toss furious darts. “That’s the problem, Tom. You never want to solve anything. You always ‘work around it.’ I’m telling you. I’m done with this ’til you

can show me it's safe. Mary Joe can spond, or Janine. Or you can just shut down your fucking half-assed playground and get a real job, for Christ's sake." Having planted her barbs Nikki relents into his offered chair.

"Honey," Tom says gently, "your agitoos are strobing."

"Oh, damn," she reaches for her euPhone to tap and then swipe off the app. The luminous flash of chaotic tattoo dazzle that plays frantically across all exposed skin surfaces of her face and arms quickly dies back to normal flesh tones.

"There, that's better," Tom watches fluttering remnants of tattoo motifs fade from skin that is naturally luminous, with a sheen most professionals would die for. "Nikki, you're naturally so beautiful. Why'd you do those agitoos?"

His voice takes on the playful sarcasm Tom often uses to change from an unwelcome subject, "and you wear your hair in these ridiculous getups. I mean, today, like you're buzz-cut with some kind of color strands that sprout up through some kind of freak-jetso scalp sign to fall in dreadlock fever across your left shoulder. Tomorrow it'll be luminols and glitter flashing 'fuck you' or 'eat shit and die.' You determined to be a fringer freak? You can be so adorable, so desirable when you let it happen."

She glares darkly up at him. In a seething tone that somehow makes him cringe, she crisply enunciates, "I like freak. And this is not weird — it's wired! Why would I want to draw CZ creeps like flies to rot? Beauty's eye is beheld . . . besides. Regard trumps desire. Always."

Then abruptly she lightens up, mimicking cliché-giddy CZ nonchalance, "Besides, I can play Barbie. You want Barbie? For the right money, I can look and be however or whomever you want. I clean up my language, too. Let's do your dreem, honey. That's what we sponders do. Dreem however you like."

Tom shrugs, "Sorry, I just don't get it. But it's not for me. I worry about you, though. That's all. I like you. Regardless of however weird — ah, wired — you get."

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“Look, Tom. Some guy insists on coming on, there’s nothing like agitoos cycling slowly through Maori warrior masks to turn him off. Or maybe just a simple message banner scrolling across my forehead: Go away. Now. I WILL hurt you.”

Her voice regains its fugitive stress, “And if you’re so worried about me, Tom. Don’t lie to me. Fix the goddam feed.” She moves suddenly toward him.

“Jesus,” Tom jumps back away from her. “You still working out with what’s-his-name?”

“Who?”

“That black dude — works for Mamma Latrice. You know. Her shooter. Lennie, or Larry, or whatever. You still working out? Doing your Krav Maga shit?”

“LeRoi? Yeah. Three times a week.”

“You’re already lethal, sweetheart.” Tom chuckles indulgently, then adds with knowing wave of index finger, “But you’re never going to fly over the rainbow by being lethal.” He hesitates, a question having presented itself to ask, “So, the stalker. Why didn’t you just kick his dreem ass? Maybe he’d leave you alone then.”

“He jiggered the scenario. It went from open interactive to his full dominance. Everything was controlled by him. I could only react. When I tried to attack the ground turned gooey. I couldn’t move. It was like a nightmare. You try to escape, but everything gets at you. Slows you down. Makes you weaker. And God his breath was hideous! It was all like sucking waves of puke. I was drowning in his stench. All I could do was whimper, scream and moan. Thank God he didn’t hack my safeword!”

Reminded of how narrowly she had escaped prolongs her anxiety. In answer, Nikki’s anger resurges, “I should lethalyze your ass, Tom. You lied to me. You put me at risk. Now tell me what you’re going to do about keeping him out of this make-do jerry-rig. I can’t spond on that. It’s too risky.”

She points to the ramshackle dentist chair refitted with cables and panels a-sparkle with LED and OLED displays and buttons.

“Oh, the client, Kevin” she gasps, recalling the horrible rupturing of his eyes, “Is he okay?”

Checking signal feeds from the Atlanta clinic, Tom blows relief like air from puffed cheeks through his puckered lips, “Seems, so. This says that his side of dream was interrupted by marauding soldiers, dressed in what looked like eighteenth century uniforms. Says they violently and lewdly assaulted his mother until she and they suddenly vanished. He’s really pissed and emotionally shaken, but okay. He blocked the link to his altcoin account. So it looks like we don’t get paid today.”

“Who can blame him?”

“But back to what you said — I didn’t lie. The link is through a secure tunnel. There’s no way it was breached cold. He must have your dream profile, your signature. Maybe he backcrypts off that pattern to open a tunnel somehow. That takes a lot of tech know-how. I don’t know how he does it.” Tom inhales the deep breath he’d prescribed for her and thinks aloud, “I just don’t see any other way he gets through the mesh guards.”

“I don’t know anything about the tech,” she snaps, “I just know that your setup is unsafe for me, for any purpose. Mary Joe, it’s all yours!”

“I don’t blame you, Nikki. You’re right. But I’m certainly not letting my own wife or daughters in there if you say it isn’t okay. I just don’t know what to do about it. How did he get in? What was happening just before he took over?”

“The client, Kevin? First he was a baby, nursing in my arms.” Suddenly she realizes, recoiling, “Oh, God. You don’t think that was him, do you? The stalker? Sucking my tit? Oh, shit!” All the residual feelings of maternal bonding invert suddenly into a wave of revulsion, of helpless violation.

“Not if there were no disturbances in the mesh wave,” Tom downplays the possibility.

Thinking for a moment, she recalls, “Not at first. Not until he was a teenager. He became really sulky. And the little burples

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moved faster, opening into a swirl, and then became a vortex that was slowly edging toward us.”

“Burples?” Tom puzzles.

“Yeah, burples. That’s what I call those little freak flaws that pop and bubble over on the edges.”

Tom grudgingly shrugs, “That’s about when it happened, then. When the swirling started. We already checked psychetype compatability. Kevin and you mesh with no problem. There wouldn’t be any major dissonance faults between you two. Your stalker came in through some disjunct between his psyche and yours. Some resonance between what he is and what you fear.”

“Like what?”

“Tell me, what flashed through your mind just before? Just before you realized you were in danger?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She adamantly refuses to discuss her hateful childhood with Tom. He wouldn’t keep it to himself. And even if he would, he’d get off on it. It isn’t something to be known, by anyone. Especially not by him.

“And there it is,” Tom slowly nods toward her defensiveness, “That’s how he gets hold of you. You didn’t get the polyvagal-focus therapy most sponders do. Something you keep bottled up. A backwave around some vagus nerve shit, probably dorsal, just left standing open. It invites malingerers in. Like the old computer days. Hackers pinging every processor on the globe in search of ones without a firewall or with an open unguarded port. I used to make ’em my bitches. Just like the backwave. It’s the port you left open in your firewall. The simstim tech protects the psyche, except for repressed backwaves. That’s your unguarded port. That’s how he gets to you?”

“What can I do?” she moans.

“Deal with it. Or cut it out. Either way you’ve gotta close it. A psycheblanche can wipe all the hateful memories, whatever they may be. It’ll just extinguish them. That’s how the military used to treat post-traumatic stress back before Nisus came up with

simstim tech. They put therapeutic probes into freaked-out brains to eliminate backwaves. Nothing to it, nowadays. They lay you into droom, flood your body with PKMzeta blockers as you relive the memories. And poof! Bad stuff all gone. Backwave suppressed. You are back in business. Now it's just a simple office procedure."

"However, easy, I can't afford it, Tom. My insurance doesn't cover psychesurgery."

"Well, honey, until you do something to suppress that backwave your sponder days are finished. He'll be waiting anytime you go online. Now that he knows your profile he'll get through, even on a premium Nisus-licensed channel."

"But how can I make a living?" she moans, "Back to dancing? Or waiting tables? Sex work? No way! I'll have to leave Nola."

"You've worked t-vu. Doc art, and stuff. You could do something with that."

"But that won't pay anything. Actors and models stumble all over themselves to work for free, just to get noticed. And I don't have the right equipment to go full production. Nobody who does will likely put me to work. Not with my resumé."

She parodies a prospective interviewer, "Oh, I see here that you started dancing at Big Daddy's in the Quarter. And you worked as a model and even were spokesperson for Audubon Institute during their sesquicentennial gala. Just blew your way into that one, I suppose?" She mimes a casting couch interview.

"And then you worked one of those little shabby thrill shops with a bar on the side. Impressive! Ah, yes, then a brief gig over at Nisus where you trained as a sponder. And just why did you give up sponding, Ms. Brite? Was there a problem?"

She glowers in exasperation, "Right! Yeah, that'll get me a long way. Even in showbiz . . ."

"There's always an opening for beautiful women in the entertainment industry," Tom reminds her, "Especially in the Snake Zone."

"You don't understand. It takes over everything. Eventually

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there's nothing left — of me. That's why I got out. Do you want your daughters over there?"



Tom relents as Nikki sinks back onto the rigged dental chair. She pulls her hands slowly across her face, to massage away gloomy mists rising across a lake of fading panic.

Suddenly she pauses and looks up. Her eyes brighten. "Oh. Wait. There's guy in my building. A recog. LeRoi says he does optech for Mamma Latrice's zone cabarets. She lets him live up on the fourth floor."

"A recog? Doing optech?"

"Yeah. A young guy, a little older than me, seems sort of interesting. I met him over at the Aquarium last year. He kept up their marinescape holoprojectors. I was shooting teasers for a membership drive. Mostly he keeps to himself. But we pass each other sometimes, when he goes out. I didn't realize he was recog at first. He seems really smart, not like a run-of-the-mill cogger. I think he once worked for Nisus. LeRoi says he has an advanced degree in optronics or something. From Tulane. Maybe he could find a way. To keep out the perverts."

"A recog?"

"Yeah. He got caught up in the Warrior trials. Convicted of rape murder." After a moment's reflection she announces, "He didn't do it, though."

"How do you know?"

"He's not the type."

"Like you're psychic?"

"I read people, Tom. He didn't do it."

"It won't hurt to try. What'll he charge?"

"How do I know? He's a recog. They usually work for table scraps. But considering his gig with Mamma Latrice, who knows? He may tell you to piss off." She pushes a furious scowl his way, "And I wouldn't blame him."

ANX: life of a recog

“Can you bring him to see me?”

“He’s a recog, Tom. He can’t leave the Quarter, except on a keeper. You got any keepers?”

“Oh, right. I could get ‘em, I suppose. But it’ll be cheaper for me just to go to him. Maybe he can come in on fiber to my server and find out if there’s a problem with the channel. Or maybe something we could do to the optronics to bolt ‘em down. If he’s as good as you say he is.”

“I don’t know how good he is. I just know that Mamma Latrice lets a recog have a nice apartment on St. Peter just so he can monitor her shops. And I know she hasn’t had any more problems with intruders hacking her feeds since she found him.”

“What’s his name?”

“Cajun name, I think. Penn, ah, Hebert.”

“Take me to him.”

Reflecting upon how Tom’s effusive lampooning can put people off, just when he’s trying hardest to impress them, Nikki raises a cautionary palm outward to slow him down. “Ah, why don’t you let me talk to him first,” she advises, “I’ll see if he’s available.”



5



BODIES OF LIGHT

Back when he first accepted Mamma Latrice's favor, one day Penn had retreated to a park bench in the shade of a small dogwood, in the small inner courtyard of his St. Peter Street apartment building. Time seemed irrelevant to his concerns. What had he done to so radically miscarry his fortunes?

At some point he realized that he was no longer alone. A young woman had arrived. The one who lived on the third floor. The weird one that always was hurrying off. Frequently she was with one of Mamma's main scooters, LeRoi Bienvenu. Penn assumed they were a couple.

Lost in his own worries, he had not noticed. She must have crossed the courtyard, over to a small plot of neatly cultivated plants along the far edge. Apparently she, too, was oblivious to his presence. He watched her fingers push and probe among a neatly tended variety of plants.

"So how does your garden grow?" Penn asked quietly.

In one explosively assertive yet graceful flourish of arms and

legs Nikki leapt to wheel about. Her body firmly planted an agile attack posture. Then she recognized him.

“Oh, it’s you. You scared the shit out of me!” she exhaled relief and accusation all at once.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even see you come in. I was floating in my own headspace, I guess,” Penn apologized as Nikki, still heaving deeply, relaxed into a more casual stance. “So — how does your garden grow?”

After looking closely at him, to read his eyes, she relented. “Oh, it’s pretty much finished for the season, I think.” She fidgeted and glanced aside at her workspace. Suddenly perplexed, they both were at a loss for what to say. “I was just gathering seeds for next year . . .,” she stammered, “Mamma Latrice lets me grow herbs and stuff down here . . .”

Her eyes focused more narrowly. Then abruptly she recoiled slightly in embarrassment. She reached up to finger garish blue and red dreadlocks that had been braided with threads of luminously flashing yellow-green and purple optic fibers. “Oh, God, I’m a mess,” she moaned.

That clashing ensemble of color luminously erupted from beneath an outlandish sculpted headpiece perched atop her brush cut scalp. Its pendulous melange of hair braids, glowing fiber dreads and assorted gimcracks of jumbled ornament all tumbled erratically down across her left shoulder. She tossed them all behind her, as if tidying up before receiving an unexpected visitor.

Wincing down at agitoos cycling across her lower arms, she plucked a euPhone from a rear jeans pocket. With a quick finger swipe she flicked off the nanokinetic tattoos to pacify and restore her skin’s naturally smooth luster.

He was amused that suddenly she so eagerly dismissed a look that has been so assiduously cultivated. “Don’t worry about that, he assured her. “I’ve seen you decked out lots of different ways.” He shrugged, “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“You’ve caught me in my leave-me-alone street look. Sorry if

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it puts you off." She seemed crestfallen at so unbecoming a presentation.

"Nikki, right?" Penn recalled their having briefly met a year or so before, over at the Aquarium. There, for a while, he had tended projectors that animate the Caribbean holotanks. She had exceeded a public pledge PR appeal, broadcast on t-vu, to support an Audubon Aquarium campaign for new patrons.

Back then, crisply, even elegantly attired, she had sauntered through a scripted spokesperson-of-the-month role. Vibrant and engaging, her manner carefully evoked current patterns of refined haute-couture chic-space. That guise had been many CZ ticks above this intentionally ratty street-urchin getup.

That day, at the Aquarium, during a quick lunch break taken together, she asked if he'd seen an exhibition uptown at the Contemporary Art Center. He decided then to get it over with, to let her know that as recog he does not, can not leave the Quarter.

"You're recog?" She slowly released an incredulous whisper as eyebrows lifted into wariness.

A perilous moment of self-doubt sucked at Penn's gut. He braced for a bad scene. He might need goaway.

"That means you've done something really awful . . . that you've killed someone," she mused aloud.

Penn said nothing. He couldn't tell whether her tone accused or just drifted toward conjecture. Her eyebrows fretted above large hazel eyes to probe his wrenching perplexity.

She likely would get up and leave. Yet again he would be stranded in dejection. Back to normal. But then there was a curious flutter. She looked down and giggled a happy discovery.

"That's radical . . . you couldn't hit me. Even if I really jerked you around! Why, Penn — I think that must be the next best thing to love!"

He briefly kindled a glimpse of their interests further intertwining. To see if she was in a relationship, he commented about her going about with Mamma's scooter, LeRoi. In mock

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indignation she had snapped, “I don’t go with anybody.” Then coyly she smiled, “Although, if they’re lucky — and behave themselves — we might hangout once in a while.”

But, when he had seen her since, she seemed only to want to be left alone. They had not spoken, except to nod hello. There had been no followup and no subsequent moments conveniently emerged into mutual improvisation. Passing nods of acknowledgement gradually slid back toward indifference. Besides, why would anyone hook up with a recog?

Eventually Penn accepted that she is just some chameleon sprite who lives on the third floor, beneath his own fourth floor aerie. A recog quickly gets used to any routine and should be grateful, he thought to himself, when complaints remain small.

Days passed unpropitiously. Kairos is fickle. Penn’s technical duties — keeping cabaret feeds clear of mischief or interference — held him firmly to a mostly nocturnal schedule. He dutifully patrolled simstim fiberways as, over in the Snake Zone, jetset swells frittered wealth away in AI-boosted carnal CZ reveries.



Penn answered a sudden tap at the door. That same young woman stood there, now so gaspingly beautiful that for a brief moment he did not recognize her. Luminous hazel eyes sheepishly apologized for disturbing him. But her exuberant smile was grateful for any moments he might spare. They stood there, neither able to find what comes next. Finally Penn cleared his throat to say, “Yes?”

Nikki pled, “I’m really sorry to bother you. But I’ve got a situation. I’m your downstairs neighbor. Nikki. Nikki Brite. We met over at the Aquarium. And then again downstairs in the courtyard. Remember? It was a while back.” She thrust out a hand that eventually he briefly clasped in clumsy affirmation.

For a moment it seemed that she might burst into tears. Or was this a fake-out verge of some tirade? The moment seemed to

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flummox all notion of social grace. A welter of apprehension, anger and despondency tugged crazily about her features — then they simply dissolved back into hauntingly luminous eyes that floated above a sad smile. She asked simply, “I wonder if you can help me get my life back?”

“Oh,” he replied, still numb in her aura.

Again an interim of goofy silence until she suggests, “Could I come in? Just for a minute or two. I won’t keep you long, I promise.”

“Oh, sure. Forgive me. I forgot my manners. It’s just that you look so . . . so different.”

“Oh, do I? Yes, I suppose I do,” she laughs delight. “The dreads and the agitoos. I usually put them on when I’m headed out. But I thought I’d spare you.” Her joke feels infectious and he laughs, too, then steps back to gesture her welcome to his rooms.

The double French doors were barren of any curtain or covering. Beyond, she found a layout similar to her own digs below: a kitchenette to the immediate right of entrance, a dining area beyond that expands out into a front receiving area, then on through a large pocket door, and into a living room that in turn opens into bedroom and bath all the way in the back.

Aside from a large round oak table positioned up front, along with four lightly carved straight back chairs, most furnishings were technological.

Racks of equipment, festooned in cables and featuring ranks and rows of flashing points of color, lined the walls. Farther back in the middle room she could see what appeared to be a large sponder chaise-longue, enclosed in some kind of metallic mesh-screened framework, like a copper-colored mosquito net. Nearby rose a slightly elevated platform that extended into the far room, just beyond the sponder rig.

All about, across walls and atop various office fixtures were flattened flexwrap screen monitors of various sizes. They were neatly deployed across clusters of metal or plastic boxes and most

sported various dials, buttons, knobs and flickering glow-point LEDs. In the distance were active holo-projections of people engaging in erotic hallu-scenarios of carnal diversion, all piped by fiber from Mamma Latrice's various dreem cabarets.

"Oh, your own private porn feeds?" she smiles knowingly.

He blurted, somewhat defensively. "No, that would be too much — the same cliché crap over and over. It gets worse than boring. But it's my job — I keep the feeds on to monitor phase relationships. I hardly even notice what they do, anymore.



On the round oak table lay an old hardcover book, *Powers of Ten*. Its pages bore evidence of many turnings.

"You're a reader, too?" She marveled at such quaintly juxtaposed habits.

"Oh, that. I keep it open to remind me. When I get down."

"Remind you?"

"Of how trivial anything can seem in the totality of the cosmos."

"Oh?" A look of this is a strange one flickers across her eyes.

But his voice perks up as he turns its pages. "It's an old book I found in an antique shop over on Decatur."

"Piron's?" she asked, her hopes buoyed by prospect of some mutual interest, "Now, there's a fun place. I love the stuff he carries."

"Yeah. He gave it to me. It shows stages of an imaginary trip, out into space — you know, the macro, large-scale universe. And then it comes back down into the micro, the smaller worlds nesting inside us.

"It starts with a couple lying, napping, on a picnic blanket on the south shore of Lake Michigan, in Chicago. They're the reference location and set the spatial scale.

"Then, to go out, the camera pulls back so the scene shows ten times more of the surroundings with each frame shot on each

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successive page. It keeps pulling back from the reference view, which is one meter across, then next is ten meters across, then one hundred meters, one thousand, on to one million, and so on”

His fingers flipped pages as he spoke. The images began with a young man and woman dozing after a picnic on a sunny day. Then the same couple is shown a little farther away as the camera lifts higher, then still farther. Now they can hardly be seen at all as the grass sward of the park occupies most of the picture frame. Then the park has become a brief vertical strip between a marina and large buildings with parking lots. Then the park shrinks to one of multitudes of features in a view occupied equally by city and lake.

“That’s radical,” Nikki marvels.

“And it keeps going out farther and farther,” he plies through the pages. “At 10^8 power the earth has become a small blue marble in a black sky dotted with stars. And at 10^9 you wouldn’t even be able to see the earth if they hadn’t drawn a blue box around it. By 10^{14} the entire solar system takes up about the same space as the earth did at the eighth power. At 10^{22} the entire Milky Way galaxy is reduced to the same measly portion of the view. All the way out to 10^{25} , which is at about one billion light-years from where we started with the couple on the shore of Lake Michigan.

“Then if you go back down to human scale, to the same couple, you can home in on the man’s hand at 10^{-1} meters. At 10^{-2} , you see tiny wrinkles in the skin. At 10^{-5} , the entire picture is only ten microns across and we find a white blood cell, inside a skin capillary. At 10^{-7} , there are the coils of DNA in the white blood cell. On down to 10^{-9} where you see the individual molecules. And it keeps going down, down, to atom, then proton, and then to the inner quark structure of the proton itself at 10^{-16} meters. We have just skipped across forty-two powers of ten scaled in meters.

“That was all they could grok when that book was printed. But now we can get almost to the bottom. Almost all the way down to Q-foam.”

“Q-foam?”

“At the Planck boundary. Beyond that, space has no extension — no dimensions. The notion of space just becomes meaningless beyond 10^{-35} meters.”

Her eyes blinked to mask the blankness of grasp behind them.

“What’s on the other side?”

“Bohm says holomovement. Pribram calls it holoflux. Interplaying waveforms of possibility. Of prospect. They enfold and unfold moments we choose to enact here in our actual world.”

“Oh.”

Penn returns to the young couple sprawled, asleep, on the blanket. “And all the time there they are dreaming — envisioning forms from the holoflux — at least that’s an interpretation. No worries. No anxieties. Or maybe there are worries, but they’ve just grokked their own triviality. And now they lie sprawled and bewildered, to wallow in daydream. In the vastness of life’s possibilities.”

“Wow.” Nikki worked toward some semblance of his ardor, “That book is so neat!”

“It’s based on a film by Charles and Ray Eames. They were designers last century. I came across it in t-vu when I was a kid. But thinking of zooming out and back down like that still blows my mind. Even in this book version.”



Back in the midsection of the straightback apartment Nikki looks across a configuration of wall monitors scattered among a number of instrument-laden control panels. Nearby, the curious copper-toned mesh fabric enshrouds a person-sized tent space.

Across the room from control consoles, a holo-platform renders lightforms of avid phantasies. Narrow black rods thrust from floor to ceiling at each corner of the raised platform. Even farther back, beyond a wide pocket door, she can see into a disheveled bedroom.

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Penn slowly shakes his head to convey how cumbersome it all can become, “Even if I get a keeper, it all has to be done by a timing program to switch things on and off — I can’t use my euPhone to control it because the Faraday cage blocks electromagnetics, including maxnet signals

“It really gets to be a pain in the ass. Plus, it’s really hard for a recog to score keepers. And the cops get pissed if they catch anybody handing them out or if they find a recog on one, unauthorized. They’ll drag him through hell and back before dumping him back on the street.

“Does a keeper turn off the ANX?” Nikki asks.

“Oh, trust me. Nothing turns off the ANX!

“A keeper is just a gelatin capsule. You swallow it. Stomach acid and digestive juices chemically power its mini-transmitter to emit the ANX-safe codes. The ANX always is active, though. Think even a slightly angry thought and it will clamp shut to drop you in your tracks.

“Cops use keepers to transport recogos for court appearance, or whatever. Only they are supposed to have them. Mamma Latrice gets them somehow. And every once in a while a recog working for her can score one. It’s like finding gold! You can trade them with other recogos for anything. It’s a little taste of freedom — to go anywhere, as long as you stay cool.

“Most guys head over to the Zone and live it up in the cheap houses.”

“For how long?”

“Eighteen to twenty-four hours. Gradually, keepers digest like food and they just stop working.”

“So you’re good to go between dumps?”

He laughs, “Yeah, that’s it. Life of a recog — good to go between dumps.”



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Nikki changes the subject, “Your apartment is sort of like mine. Except I don’t have all this tech stuff. Is that a t-vu control booth?”

“It’s all simstim consoles and monitors. Mamma Latrice had it all put here. I told her what I’d need to keep her channels clear.”

“You do dreem up here?” Nikki wonders aloud. Maybe she can avoid Tom Fyfe’s jury-rig setups.

“I don’t. But someone could. The console and drone nodes are here just because they’re part of the simstim package. Someone else, like you, maybe, could use it. If you can learn to control a session from within dreem, that is. It’s tricky, but that’s how you’d have to do it.”

Seeing that she was uncertain what he meant, he explained, “I can’t even turn the link console on unless I’m in that Faraday cage. And I can’t get in the Faraday cage unless I’m on a keeper because the cage blocks the ANX signal and it’d freak me out. So, it gets complicated. That’s why I’m hoping maybe there’s a way. Maybe we can work a deal. You help me, then maybe I can help you.”

“What do I need to do?”

END OF SAMPLE

ANX: life of a recog is available from

Barnes and Noble

and from

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