

SCOTT PATTERSON

IT TAKES A VILLAGE
IDIOT



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First published by AuthorHouse 9/11/2008

ISBN: 978-1-4343-9496-5 (e)
ISBN: 978-1-4343-9495-8 (sc)

Printed in the United States of America
Bloomington, Indiana

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Cover art by Laura Patterson.

FOR CHRIS

TH' INAUDIBLE AND NOISELESS FOOT OF TIME.

ONE

One by one, throughout the warren of squalid cellblocks, the lights winked off, giving advantage to the plotting tenants. To a man, each private scheme for freedom took a first breath, hope springing eternal.

Water ran everywhere, the still-driving three-day rains overwhelming the ancient gutters. Leaves and whole trees, homeless, twirled in the shrieking wind, and sought refuge.

Too bad those little places to which the downstream detritus flowed included the two hundred year old prison's septic system. 'Cause in a prison setting, *all shit runs downhill*.

In a tiny guardhouse, Jeb stood abruptly, and stepped back with primordial instinct, nature's call suddenly urgent. His poker companions looked up from their hands, divining a suspension for higher duties. "Leave my cards be," he barked. "Gotta drain the main vein."

"Sure enough, guv'na." They all laughed, a running joke about Jeb's striking physical likeness to the sitting Tennessee Governor.

He grinned regally and shuffled out the door, autopilot kicking in. By solemn decree, in this place of crime deterred, they set their cards down.

Zephron, one of the guards, observed, "Be funny as Hell if Jeb met the Governor here. Radio said he was talking about making a surprise visit. You know, keeping in touch with his constituents."

A reedy thin man named Stalk coughed up something terminal into his mouth, spit without regard for direction, and remarked, "Bet the sewer's going to choke. Happened last time we had forty days and nights."

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The other two nodded, recalling that apocalypse. One of the guards spoke up, laughing, "I remember that. They had those huge pumps over from the army base going flat out for a week."

The other man added, "It was that, or more mattress fires."

That visage swarmed into their minds and displaced everything, the instant vision of pandemonium and high jinx, the kind that forge prison lore.

"Remember Cellblock B2?"

"Hell, yea. Toilets backed up there first night. It always happens at night." He paused, collecting his thoughts. "Whole place was flooding, then the system starting back-draining into B2. That was a sight."

"I heard some of the guards made wooden rafts, trying to keep their boots dry," mumbled Stalk.

"I don't know about that, but I can tell you I saw the darker side of Man. Like something in the Bible."

Jeb wobbled back through the door and found his beer. He took a powerful pull, and sat down in one practiced motion. A three day beard covered his face like a prairie blight, streaming with rain. "Man, it's still falling hard. Might better turn the beeper off."

The three other men, prison guards clocking time between shift changes, picked up their cards and drew them close to refresh distracted memories. Jeb asked urgently, "You think you'll need me later tonight? I mean, I'm here already."

Jeb was a new entrepreneur, three weeks into business, dreaming of empires and dominion. He believed his new venture, American Super Sanitary - Optimizers, pronounced ASS-O, was to become the world's foremost septic management company, soon to plunge competition like a plugged soil pipe.

Zephron snickered. "Sure enough, you'll be busy tonight. Guess I can understand you wanting to stay here, the weather and all. I just hope you know what you're getting into."

From somewhere distant, a manic clanging started up. "Yep, it's going to be a mess."

They all stood, glad for the fortification of numerous beers, and filed out. The stench of sodden vegetation and ripened odors set free assaulted

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them, and Stalk yelled over the storm as they ran through the open breezeway. “B2. I know that smell.”

As they entered the main building, Zephron observed, “That could be mattress.”

Down a long corridor, lit poorly by two swinging bare bulbs, and past vacant cells, they moved with surprising vigor. Passing into the next cellblock, the high note of raw sewage came at them like a police state. Stalk said officially, “Jeb, you’re on point.” The new businessman moved ahead, his soft face set with an expression of professional dismay.

A moment later they reached the cellblock security station and looked through the tiny window in the center of the submarine-grade door. A brown slurry stood the better part of a foot deep, rippling currents around the cell bars testament to a rising tide.

Zephron, the assumed leader, looked at his troops and stated, “There’ll be hazard pay in this, men. We gotta keep ‘em from tearing the place apart.”

The third guard remarked, “I’m sure glad I hammered in that water-tight door, there’s rapids forming.”

Jeb gripped the center wheel like some Rooskie going “into the reactor” and gave it a hard, manly twist. It shrieked with the complaint of neglect, turning loudly. Like the Duke, he said, “I’m going in alone.”

He looked down at his three week old tennis shoes, bought the day he got his business license and thought, “*Occupational hazard. Deductible.*”

Like entering Hades, he swung the door fully open and stepped down into the swirling water, movie fragments similarly twirling in everyone’s minds. They pulled it tight behind him and he half turned at the suddenness of his isolation. Ten cells, five to a side were alive with primate antics, arms swinging in rage as projectiles flew with felony intent.

He’d been on rough job sites all his life, at home instantly with the cacophony and anger. He yelled, “I’m the plumber, convicts. You want to survive, best treat me with respect. I’m here to find that bad drain.”

Personal regard silenced them all, each man moving robotically to the back of their cells. Jeb looked into each, seeing nothing unusual, given the setting. At the dark end of the hallway, a small door stood ajar, water rippling out.

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He yanked it open, causing a wave, and took a sloshing step back, expecting some varmint or prison ghost. It was a dingy broom closet, littered with floating filthy sponges and discarded buckets. In the center of the floor a large grate was fountaining all manner of corruption and Jeb yelped, “Pay dirt!”

He turned around to his audience and spoke like his businessman’s handbook had encouraged - *always project*. “Problem’s elsewhere. This is just the low point. I’ll go fix that.”

The guards were waiting, relieved he had stopped the real problem, buying time for the mattresses to get soaked. As the hatch closed behind him, Stalk said, “At least they ain’t burning. You find the problem?”

Jeb snapped, all business, “Nope. Just the consequence. And I’d say we got about thirty minutes to clear those higher drains before this place floods.”

“That’d be nasty,” said Zephron, always the analytical. “Let’s get up to building A, that place is a million years old. Gotta be there.”

Jeb said, “Nope. I need some specialized equipment. I’m going to run the truck back and get my biggest rooter. We’re going to need it.”

The other men nodded in agreement, their mechanical reasoning meshing poorly with the memory of arson.

Outside, Jeb checked the bed of his truck for escapees and climbed in the cab. *This could be gravy*, he thought. He pulled out of the lot, rain coming down in forceful sheets, not a guard in sight. Five miles down the road, he knew he’d made a big mistake. He said aloud, “Should have taken that road leak.”

The trees whipped by, water smearing across the windows, and turning the world into a foggy, drenching Middle Earth. The beer spoke to him with every bump, abdominal turgor getting needy.

An instant later, despite the waterfall showers, he hit the brakes and struggled out of his truck, half-running to the cover of some short trees. His clothes went heavy with water, and he looked quickly around for a dry place to do his business.

Just a bit deeper in the dense woods the trees were larger, expansive canopies suggesting shelter. He lurched forward, nearly doubled over with urinary alarms, and pushed through a massive bush.

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He tore his pants down to loose the liquid demon, and a blinding light came on, flooding the forest with midday brightness. Mother Nature had no regard for this new development, and continued with her own program.

Jeb squinted blind into the light, waves of micturitional bliss flooding through him and thought, *Some things take precedence*. A gag voice called out, clear against the storm. “What are you doing, Earthling?”

He shouted back, “What’s it look like? Don’t you aliens pee?” The alien comment had just come to him, his mind always a little damaged by the prison vibe.

A little laughter. “Yes we do. Are you finished?”

“For now. You know what they say - you don’t buy beer, you just rent it.”

A stronger guffaw came from the spotlight, and he smirked, imagining some of his buddies pulling a complicated trick. The light snapped off and a single form approached. His vision dazzled with the afterglow of the artificial sunshine and he yanked his pants up. The silhouette stopped five feet away and burped overlong.

Slowly his night vision returned, the face coming out of the dark like a developing photograph. He staggered back at the recognition, the other’s face an identical copy of his own.

Jeb spat out, “I don’t want no trouble. You just back off, or I’m going to have to get into you.” It took a step towards Jeb and said, “I am your replacement. You have not worked out.” The clone raised its arm, and Jeb caught the glint of metal. Suddenly a stabbing pain wracked his world and he collapsed, out cold.

His double turned around and grunted. “I thought he knew we were coming. Who was supposed to call him?”

No one responded, CYA-mode running silent and deep. From an anonymous direction, someone half-murmured, “I heard he was coming to the prison. Who cares where we grab him ‘long as we grab him?”

A few moments later two heavy bipeds lurched forward and picked up Jeb’s body. One asked with polished indifference, “Should we just bury him here, or do you want to take him back in the elevator?”

Jeb’s clone considered the logistics and replied, “If it was my call, and it is, maybe we can figure out why they’re all failing. Bring him.”

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One of the laborers grunted Jeb up on his shoulder with a gasp and remarked, “He’s been eating. I’ll bet the grub’s better here than that crap we’re eating. They always bulk up on this planet.”

Jeb’s replacement, spooling up for his role as the Governor of Tennessee said in parting, “It’s October thirty first, twenty fifteen. I expect you-all back in five years. I got my assignment, but then I want out. I’ll put in my time and then ...” He paused, his mind trailing off to consider a distant notion. He thought dreamily, still groggy from endless space-time burrowing, and its crazy sleep patterns. *I wonder if the Governor’s mansion has room service?*

Two

The clone found Jeb's pickup and ground the starter getting her to turn over. Studying the controls for an instant, he pulled out onto the highway, and immediately flicked the radio switch. *Time to get the pulse of this world.*

An all-news station filled the sweltering cab, the announcer hyperbolic. "Reports of widespread rioting at KnuckleJoint Penitentiary. Prisoners are burning their mattresses and screaming to get out. Apparently the Civil War era septic system has been overwhelmed and the cells are flooding."

The Jeb-clone chuckled at the likely melee, and began reviewing what he knew of the man he was to become. The radio continued on and then he heard, "And we go now to the prison for an onsite report."

A clutter of noise came through the radio, someone yelling against the raging wind. He heard, "It's like Saigon in seventy-five. Three cellblocks burning, and where's Noah?"

The biological robot laughed harshly, remembering his studies about Man's folklore. *Noah's Ark*. He saw it then suddenly. Puffing his chest, he thought, *As Governor, I can fix that.*

He said aloud, practicing his new voice, "Maybe I'll just swing by that prison and get gubernatorial." From his pocket he withdrew a tiny all-purpose computer and commanded, "Driving directions to KnuckleJoint Penitentiary."

A course traced out on the impossibly-detailed display, and he hunched over the wheel, looking forward to mayhem. The country miles whipped by, the rain still ferocious. By degrees the misty skies ahead grew very

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bright, and he realized they must be using spotlights to illuminate the prison.

He rounded the final corner and ahead lay a scene from some Hollywood disaster movie - emergency vehicles, sweeping lights, flashing police cars, and engulfing fire. Deciding to get the lay of the land before barking orders, he pulled around to a rear parking lot, fumbled with the key, and climbed out. It was still raining hard and he moved along the prison building, trying to keep dry. At the corner nearest the entrance he paused to take in the entire scene.

It was the picture of calamity. He thought, *This is a perfect photo opportunity for a Governor. Time to take charge.*

As he was about to step out from the shadows, a posse of four cars charged rapidly through the front gates, and swung with official ceremony around to form a tight arc. The second car, an enormous black SUV, sprang open, all the doors swinging in synchrony. Out jumped four large men, all speaking into handheld radios. As a cohesive knot, they moved to the identical SUV next in line.

Their heads swept back and forth and the clone knew someone important must be waiting for an "all clear" signal.

A radio squealed and two of the men drew their weapons. The clone laughed quietly. *Bet they still use chemical propellants and heavy metal projectiles.*

This robot, a Central Systems Guild actor from an insignificant planet, scratched at his crotch, and thought about his wet clothes. Here for a five year gig, he mused that he'd just encountered the first flaw in the research data they'd given him for the mission.

The security detail was barking at each other, the rain driving them crazy. They had no umbrellas, and their matching raincoats, as stylish as they were, billowed and blew about uselessly.

A single door vehicle door opened slowly and a mammoth umbrella popped out like a sailing spinnaker. A man struggled out, and thrust a huge umbrella forcefully up at the rain as if to drive it away.

He pushed from the SUV like a candidate ducking an obnoxious pollster and the umbrella caught the wind. His feet went left and right in the mud, the motions nothing but comical, and he went down hard.

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There was a splash unbecoming to his station, and eight arms came rushing. One of the nearby television malingerers caught the action and motioned wildly to his feral crew. A beefy technician grabbed a videocam gussied up in a flamboyant waterproof case, and came running across the slick grass like Mary Poppins on acid. Behind him, “the talent” wobbled along in her spiked heels, cursing the clutching mud.

She was half-enclosed in a drooping clear umbrella, nothing to obscure her dazzling Goldilocks looks. The videocam strobes came on like a pursuit light, and zeroed in on the fallen VIP. They hadn’t any idea who it was, but it smelled like news.

The real Governor was covered in mud and rolling around monstrosly. His hands moved in a blur as he tried to get up while concealing his face. The security team leader croaked out, “Stand back.”

“Hell I will,” incised the blond as she reached the mudhole. “It’s the people’s right. Who is that?”

The downed man struggled to stand, kicking at the betraying umbrella. The clone, riveted by the circus before him drew in a sharp breath at seeing his own face, suddenly aware he’d soon be improvising. He took an instinctive step back, snapped a quick digital photograph, and watched.

Someone handed His Honor a fresh umbrella, and he shielded himself to gather his wits. Election was a year off - not for Tennessee, he’d already gotten that. The Big One, Washington, beckoned and a familiar vision crowded into his mind - President of the United States!

He set his best smile, and laughed over-hard, recalling dusty sound bites about humility.

Pulling the umbrella aside as an act of the inevitable, he addressed the camera. “I am the Governor of Tennessee though I may not look it.” The blond had endured some tough assignments, and was no stranger to bullshit. “Prove it.”

An unspoken gesture prompted one of the suited security men to step forward. He pulled out a badge and flashed it around, making sure everyone got a long look. He had a good voice. “This is the official seal of the state of Tennessee. You will address the Governor as Governor, or Your Honor.”

She laughed caustically. “So you’re here to help with the prison riot, is that it?” She made a clear effort to complete the question. “Governor.”

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A loose cannon, especially here with the cameras rolling suddenly seemed threatening, and the Governor said sweetly. "I'd be happy to speak with the press as soon as I run inside and change. Can you wait five minutes?"

She smiled devilishly, and asked, "Need any help?"

"No, I've been dressing myself for fifty-one years." One of the staff looked away, thinking even this idiot could put clothes on by drinking age. But in these troubled times, it paid to "tow the line."

The Governor strode off, two security men flanking him. One of them grabbed an official change-of-clothes, sealed tightly in a fancy leather bag, the State Seal stenciled on both sides.

When they reached the prison, Zephron swung the door open, everyone inside up to speed on both disasters. The clone slipped along the wall knowing if he couldn't capitalize on this easy test, and reverse a bad start, he'd never win the White House in 2016.

Two official well-trained security guys and some lackey prison guards - no sweat. Running back to Jeb's vehicle, he reviewed the tools he had brought along. Inside the cab, a small case lay on the passenger-side floor, and he snatched it out, leaving the door open to the rain.

The sound of sirens and urgent commands blended with the wind and slanting rain to suffocate all but the loudest noises. Ducking under the ineffective eave, he pulled out a lightweight pair of glasses and put them on. They came alive with information, their tiny screens simulating a wall-size data display.

He studied the fresh image of the Governor, paying particular attention to the facial details and hair. Mimicking behavior might be difficult at first, but he'd have to get the appearance right. *Maybe the weather will be my ally.*

Out of the bag, he whipped a fat blinking comb. It had already received its instructions, and he started drawing it through his soaking hair which instantly twirled and dried. Subtle colorants streaked in to match the real Governor's.

He flipped it open, and checked the narrow slot that ran along its length. A thousand tiny laser sutures sparkled, ready for a deep-cover alien makeover. He grinned like a chimp and passed it over his face a half-dozen

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times. His face shivered with the horror of a million nano-cuts, healing instantly.

Shaking his head around, he yelped into the rain. “Shit, I hate that part.” He put the data glasses back on, and pointed the comb at his face. On the left eyepiece, the real Governor’s image came into focus, airbrushed beyond belief, on the other his freshly sculpted face.

He spoke to the comb, a little heat in his voice. “You bastard. It hurt bad, but I gotta give ya credit, I could be him.”

This message was presumed to someday find its way back to the inventor, every culture relenting to its own folklore.

He fumbled around in his case, and came up with what he believed to be a birdshot-sized hearing transmitter and pushed it deep into his left ear. It came alive, running a chirpy diagnostic. After an interminable clicking fit, it said softly, “Version Dee Seven One. At your able service, Guv’nur.”

The clone subvocalized gently, hoping this thing could work on the slightest input. It responded eagerly, like an inner voice. *Sure thing. I know this guy. Read up on him while I was sitting in that bag.*

The clone made to speak, and the tiny computer cut him off. *It is no longer necessary to speak aloud. I have synced with your cerebral cortex, such as it is.*

The clone filled his mind with hate. He hissed, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

You can just think your thoughts, I’ll read them. That’s my job. Do yours, hillbilly.

The clone started digging at his ear, orders be damned. He heard, *Too late hayseed, I’m burrowed in like an Alabama tick. We’re partners now.*

Every field agent, regardless of their mission or acting ability knew they were never really operating alone. The missions had grown just too complex, nobody could memorize all the little details. And as every stellar undercover asset knew, details were for staff. *He was action.*

Those who controlled him, in exchange for nearly-boundless latitude, demanded only one thing - a symbiosis. Every agent who ventured out, whether to take public office, or assassinate a sitting leader, or both, must still take orders. And since the controllers were always long light years away, they founded on a simple, and universally hated solution - a micro-sized computer that hitched a ride, well down in the ear canal.

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Guarding his innermost thoughts, he pushed a clear message through his brain. It was hopeless to delay, every agent understood eventually what it meant to suffer such ignominy - distance. *Okay, I need you. Tell me something smart - like how to do the switch.*

The symbiotic implant responded, *I'm thinking. One of the things about being Governor is everyone will do what you tell them. First we smoke the real Governor. Then we find someone who will recognize you, but not suspect deception.*

The clone moved back along the prison wall, a sizable stream overrunning the foundation trench.

He heard, *This Hellhole looks like it has been built and rebuilt for over a century. It's got to be as porous as cheese. There's gotta be a way in up ahead.*

Not far away, the real Governor was in a squalid bathroom, yanking at his clothes. Being a modest man, he asked for some privacy, and his security men relaxed to the request. When the Governor closed the bathroom door behind him, one of his security squad said, "You can guess what he's hiding."

The other remarked, "What the hell, this isn't the worst I've seen this fool do. At least he's in the safest place in the state. Only about half the people here want him dead."

They nodded to one another, doing the math to retirement.

Outside, the clone stopped beside a crudely bricked-up hole in the wall and asked, *Here? This looks like a repair.* Birdshot the implant chuckled, the sound quality in the clone's mind first class. He pushed across the boundary between his own mind and the clone's, saying, *Looks promising. Loosen up the old bricks with a force beam. Do it slowly, this wind'll cover some of it, but them guys are packing.*

Even before the clone could command his own muscles, his hand withdrew another small device and flicked it on. It hummed malevolently as the business end pointed at the crumbling wall. Pushing a thumbwheel up gently they drew the outline of the old opening, describing the shape over and over.

The bricks shredded to rocky dust, splashing into the rain trough, and swirled away. Inside the unlit cavity, an ancient hot water tank and steam boiler squatted in sheets of filthy rust.

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The tiny voice speculated, *Okay, this used to supply the showers in this building. Let's get into that bathroom.*

A fully integrated team now, Birdshot and his meat puppet moved forward, the rain still driving down hard behind them. Relieved of the eighty decibel stormy din, they immediately heard the sounds of someone struggling, the grunts very strong.

Birdshot, now almost fully in control of the clone, stepped gingerly up to a door and pulled it to him an inch at a time. He sucked in a full breath at his luck. Not twenty feet away, the Governor, the real one, was jumping around, fighting a sodden trouser leg.

It tore, and he went down for the second time of the night. Someone yelled from beyond, "You okay, Your Honor?"

The Governor sat up, breathing hard, and bellowed, "You'll know when I need your help. Stay sharp!"

The guards outside the door looked at each other and thought *smoke break*. They shuffled away, embarrassed for their homeland.

At the end of the corridor, they pushed out onto a covered porch, and started digging for cigarettes. The shorter man, once a farm league wannabe observed, "What a loser."

"Yeah, but how about that reporter? "Love to tag that."

"She'd scar ya man. I know the type."

Birdshot knew he'd survive a shoot-out, even if his host got drilled. The problem was waiting until someone yanked him out of the corpse. He didn't have time to wait for another archeologist to find him.

But that was another story.

He commanded the clone to step into the room. The Governor, hopping around on one leg, turned to check a noise on his flank, and felt a searing pain. The weapon cycled again, and he vaporized, the drenched clothes sizzling to acrid steam.

Birdshot hummed a little ditty, and picked up the official wardrobe bag, complete with the Seal of the Great State of Tennessee.

In control of his body and future, he thought, *White House, here I come.*

THREE

Jeb awoke in the dark, his head splitting in pain, completely at home. He'd had some deep benders in his time, *this weren't nuthin'*.

A thin spongy pad wheezed beneath him and he sat up, not remembering much, and thinking *jail*. A moment later, an assaulting smell of sewage came out of the dark like a living thing. He clamped his nose forcefully between two fingers, professional action kicking in.

He bellowed, "Fix the shitter!"

The sound of approaching footsteps prompted a return to reality, and he remembered his fee schedule. *This might be the big one*. The door slid open with a dirt-in-the-gears scraping, silhouetting a dowdy woman. Everything about her was short, round, middle-age and caucasian. In her hand hung a pistol-like weapon and she said, "Lights."

Luminescence flashed out from everywhere, and nowhere, illuminating every crack and blistering wall injury. He swung his eyes around, sizing up his customer's capacity to pay.

An instant mental image of decay formed. In the corner stood an old porcelain urinal, a crack fissuring down its face like the House of Usher.

An old wood table stood against the far wall, perhaps twelve feet away, its top stacked in rubble. A moment later something weird registered. In the other corner, a man stood frozen like a Queen's Guard. He was dressed in a World War I uniform complete with large brassy buttons and a ridiculous spiked helmet.

The woman said, "Welcome to Hell, Jethro. I'm betting you've been abducted before - all you good ol' boys have thumbed a ride."

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Jeb suddenly remembered his businessman's handbook, page one. *Some customers will be weird. Just go with it. Their money spends like the properly medicated ones.*

He asked, "You the jailer? I think I can help you with your problem."

The woman entered the room confidently, her gun-hand relaxed. "Sonny, you can't fix shit." He cut her off, grasping the professional segue. "That's just what I can fix. Your septic system is compromised."

He got a glow of enthusiasm within, his words sounding professional.

She took another step into the room, and laughed. "Okay, that I believe. Funny thing though, after a while you just get used to it."

"What's your name, ma'am? I'm Jeb." She stared at him vacantly, and he continued, his pitch ready. "I own Advanced Super Sanitary - Optimizers."

"I can guess the short form of that multinational."

"Yes ma'am. We service vital systems all over the world."

"How about off it?"

Jeb's witchy country wit, fine-tuned to smoke out BS regardless of race, creed, or budget, went on alert.

"You're putting it together, I see. Want me to fill in the missing pieces?" she asked sourly.

"We on a spaceship?" He squared his shoulders, and stood. "I think I've been snatched!"

"Hold the curtain call, mister. It's not the honor you might anticipate." He took a couple of steps towards the stationary soldier and was a kid again, "I want to see everything. Can we take a tour?"

"Sure. We'll start in the sewage processor hold. Maybe find you some billable hours."

Jeb fished around in his pockets, looking for a touchstone of sanity. "I forgot my invoices."

"That's alright, sweetie, we pay cash on the barrelhead."

"Now you're talking. I'll follow."

"No, you just step past me real slow, and we'll see how it goes."

Leaving, they took a right and started down a poorly lit corridor. The bulkheads were all dingy metal, large rivet heads sticking out, the evidence

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of disregard apparent everywhere. A piece of torn clothing hung from an exposed metal burr, and twirled as Jeb passed around it.

Huffing a little at his rate, she said from behind, “My name is Ethyl. I’ve been sailing around the universe with these guys forever. Every time we get near Earth, I think about getting off and then I tune in the nightly news. Been thirty-two years now.”

He turned around excitedly, and asked, “How do they go fast? I mean, this thing goes real fast, right?”

She gave him a snotty face. “What, do I look like a scholar? The universe is full of beings and weird stuff. At any spaceport, and I’ve seen ‘em all, you might find a hundred different types of ships. Sometimes I think Man is the only germ that didn’t get the memo.”

“Memo, ma’am?”

“We’ll get into that later.” Sixty feet more, and she said heavily, out of breath, “Here’s the elevator.” She waved her ringed finger over a shiny plate and the door groaned open, begging for lubrication.

“Sounds like deferred maintenance, Ethyl.” Using the customer’s name was always encouraged in the handbook. It built rapport.

“You some kinda handyman?”

Next to the mantra of providing quality service at a competitive price was the concept of flexibility. *Always offer to tackle the jobs nobody else can do.* “Yes, ma’am, I can fix just about anything.”

“You’ll be running the ship tomorrow. Nothing works on this fossil.” The elevator doors shimmied together, and slammed them against the rear wall with a tremendous bang. “That’s normal,” belched Ethyl caustically. It started moving slowly down, gravity not quite oriented through the floor. Jeb leaned against one of the walls and began assembling a picture of his situation.

Ethyl asked, “While you’re sorting out your new life, how ‘bout some music from home?”

Jeb nodded absently, his deeper reason gaining zero traction. She twirled a small dial on her ring, and the sweet sounds of Willie Nelson filled the cylindrical room. It was a familiar theme, a weary cowpoke far from home. Ethyl laughed under her breath, adding editorial. “You miss Earth yet?”

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He shook out of his reverie, and looked straight at her, thinking she might be damaged goods. Her loose-fitting muumuu was drab and not over-clean. Taking in the whole package, he landed at her feet; short, stubby toes sticking out of a pair of tattered sandals. There was duct tape all over the nose of the left one, and bits of junk stuck to the exposed adhesive.

The handbook would have referred him to an immediate discussion of pre-payment terms, but he decided to let it ride. “Everything busted in this jalopy?”

“I think you said it best - deferred maintenance,” she answered without a trace of warmth. The elevator car impacted hard, and the door half-opened, sticking. She hauled off and kicked it like a feisty mule, and it bucked fully open. “Of course, Man adapts.”

She stepped out first, some bond of tentative trust gained on their journey down. The smell was overwhelming, an attacking force that instantly strained Jeb’s professional mien.

“This might take some time. You got a working diagram, Ethyl?”

“Nothing works, Jeb. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. All those stories about advanced civilizations were right, but like every well developed society, even ancient ones, losers settle out like septic solids. You’re on their flagship.”

“Okay. Let me study this system, and then I’ll give you a quote.”

“Knock yourself out. I’ll be back in a while. And don’t go nowhere.”

She stepped back in the elevator, and when she had gone, he walked slowly around, his feet slapping against the slick floor.

Septic systems perform a vital, but rudimentary function. Collect the bad stuff, recycle the non-killing components, if any, and pump the rest into your neighbor’s yard.

Jeb suspected that yard meant open space, a stream of noxious waste pouring into the cosmos seizing his mind. He stepped up to a large tank, and traced the pipes leading in and out.

Every connection was oozing, streaks of brown fluid running over earlier congealed leaks like some ghastly cave formation. If he could get paid, he’d have work for months.

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Against one of the walls stood a bench, tools strewn haphazardly. Since using tools is about directing the same forces found everywhere, he expected and found a tapered lever.

He moved over to what must be the ventilation fan, knowing that “needed fixing right now,” and pushed the tip up under a lip of metal and smacked her home. Yanking back, the entire face of the fan cavity popped off, by the book.

Inside, an enormous three foot diameter four-bladed fan stood locked in grime and broken motor fragments. “She’s all froze up,” he said aloud to keep himself company. The blades wouldn’t budge with his hand so he grabbed a chunk of firewood from the floor and levered down heroically against the mechanism.

One of the blades broke, snapping away like fine ceramic. Jeb realized anew he wasn’t in Kansas anymore, but a job needed doing. More than professional pride drove him, his instincts quickly understanding he’d come into something valuable, assuming they could smell anymore.

The air duct that presumably went to space bent through a rough sheet metal turn, and connected to the fan housing. Suspecting it didn’t dump directly into space, he whacked it with all his might, getting a feel for the engineering.

Destructive testing is a valuable industry procedure. Before a part fails completely, the skillful technician can learn much of the original inventor’s thinking. He struck it over and over, the metal denting in and starting to pull away from the wall.

Remembering a scene from a Kung Fu movie, he jumped up like a Ninja master, and round-house kicked with all his might. No owner’s manual describes such techniques, all technical writers ignoring the most immediate solutions.

With a terrific clang, it tore away, exposing a gaping two foot hole in the wall. He pushed the collapsed duct out of the way, ripped it from the fan assembly, and hurled it at the work bench.

A good start.

Wedging himself in behind the fan mechanism, Jeb studied the thin lattice work that joined it to the wall. He went to the work bench, and found Man’s first invention - a hammer. Back in position, he swung with all his might, and struck the first strut.

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The hammer bounced off dangerously, nearly smacking him in the face. It was made of a resilient, almost springy material, obviously designed for flexibility. To add weight to his plan, he said aloud, “Just need to add a stress riser.”

Back to the bench, he dug through the piles of corroded implements, and found a toothy saw. It was incredible in its lightness, about fourteen inches long and perfect. Looking at the struts again with a different approach in mind, he pushed and pulled, looking for a vulnerability.

A moment later an attack plan came to him, the saw coming alive with determination. The material came away easily, such wear never imagined. A deep one inch groove formed rapidly, and he picked up the hammer.

Bam! The strut failed instantly, satisfying even here in the hold of a spaceship barreling through Earth’s neighborhood. Energized, Jeb moved from one support member to the next. Three minutes later, without much warning, the entire fan assembly emitted a low groan and shuddered from the wall. He gave a “so long” push, and it banged against the floor.

Stepping into the center of the room, he surveyed his domain. A thought intruded, *Well, all we need is a new fan, then we can suck them fumes out. Hope they have spares.*

With that reckoning, he kicked at the housing, and sat down on its edge, contemplating the new meaning of life as a spaceman.

FOUR

Birdshot, slumming as the clone's master, got dressed slowly, sorting out his priorities. The plan was simple really - insinuate himself into the governorship, get nominated as the republican presidential candidate, and take the election in a year.

He drew out an official Tennessee ballcap, emblazoned like a NASCAR driver's getup. Much thought had gone into the executive spare clothing ensemble. Action was the theme, and Birdshot admired himself in the broken bathroom mirror. The jogging suit was crazily stripped and yet well-made, 'cause *handmade items never go out of style*.

That is, unless they penetrate that invisible line where forgivable ill-taste crosses the tracks, and propels itself into a white trash shantytown. Thus attired, he twirled around, liking the human body.

Looking again at his clothing, he laughed quietly, humor an emphasized part of his consciousness. He couldn't quite put it into words, but the suit somehow captured the jocular balance between the absurdity of trying to gain the highest office in the land with the likely route he foresaw. But the outfit was perfect, ready for stump speech, or a marathon.

All in style. He stuffed his other-worldly gizmos into the generous pockets, flashy zippers glinting playfully. The Governor took one more appraising look, a new face for him, and whispered, "Time to go meet the crew."

Through the door confidently, and up the tactically green hallway, he strode like Alexander, ready to sunder. The rain had slowed a bit, and from

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beneath a small porch he could see the presumed gubernatorial guards smoking, taking it light on the clock.

His alien sensors took a sniff, assayed the second-hand smoke, and he thought, *Reefer - this could be fun.*

Ambling over, they picked up his scent, and one of the guards tossed the joint out into the rain. The Governor walked up close and said nothing. When in doubt, he'd learned, passive aggressive behavior backed with a willingness to harm was a winning duo.

The other guard, three sheets to the wind, blathered over the rain's light hiss, "That's a fine garment, Governor. I'd sure fancy a setup like that." Birdsong forced the alien body to rapidly respire into his stomach, and burped out a loud, long, unending frog croak.

No one said anything, the rules suddenly going weird for the help. The Governor, legally but divisively named Temperance Good, eyed his boys, and commanded the face to mimic John Belushi's willy smile. He spoke seriously, "Gentlemen, we've done all the good we can here. Let's get on back to my place."

Relieved to be spared a career derailment, they ran to the Governor's SUV, the Guv' taking up the rear. Getting in, Birdshot sensed their weed-angst and said firmly. "The rest of the men can catch up later. I'm tired. Take me home."

As he knew, the most useful thing about power was that people obeyed. The stretch utility vehicle, done up nice with TopGun landing lights, had a well-considered bar, three bottles of Tennessee's finest nestled in burled oak. Selecting a commanding glass tumbler, he popped the top off a fresh bottle, and transferred eight ounces of the sweet and bitter concoction. Making sure the passenger seat security man was spying him, he upended the glass, and drained in it in one sweeping motion.

It came down hard against the tiny but solid desk and he immediately poured another snootful. The guards exchanged glances, but the alien registered a hopeful inference. *He's going around the bend again.*

And that made his job easier. It was always the first few hours that made the difference. Fool a fool or two, build a fortress of believers, and get to work. Birdshot had survived hundreds of like campaigns, his instinct for weakness, regardless of species, keen.

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He poured a third, feeling his fleshly host slow, and waited for more data. For six minutes, the bottle was in robotic motion, filling an equal numbers of tumblers, some part of his psyche operating with increasing vigor.

The sensation was wonderful. Despite Birdshot's diminutive physical stature, his vast mind swam through the memories of infinite millennia, acting out the wishes of manifold others. He suddenly knew this time, universe be damned, those goals would be entirely his own.

He drained the last of the bottle and pushed back. *This gig is already getting good. Much better than the Disaster of Xenis IV a hundred thousand years ago.*

After that miscalculation, he'd been stranded for all time in the rotting remains of his fleshy servant, an untimely attack ending that surrogate's life and his plans for planetary rule. The student archeologist that found him, lying in the nasal cavity of his former skull, thought it another oddity, some primitive implant perhaps.

Birdshot was carried for countless time in a collection bag, vaguely aware of his surroundings, smoldering at his foul luck. Through a comedy of misdirects, and bald error, he moved across the cosmos, unable to act.

Great civilizations came and went, as they always will, and he waited, little more than pocket lint. But in the history of Life, the Universe, and Everything, pocket lint cannot be ignored. Like enemies, it accumulates across the span of one's years, the more dear the coat, the stronger the trail leading back.

In many of the more relaxed civilizations of the Milky Way's eastern spiral arm, multi-generational underwear was regarded a mark of wealth and position. Carrying the essence of your forbears might be presumed, but when a strutting-rooster young'n declared, "My ancestors are in my loins," he was certainly more right than he supposed.

Sweat and other less polite body fluids aside, age begets a patina, often better ignored. The Governor dug in his left pocket, mining for expected castaways. He seized a slippery fabric flag, and yanked hard. Out came a label - MADE IN CHINA.

He whispered an ancient curse, dug forcefully back into the over-soft car upholstery, considering the next act. They moved along in silence, the guys up front catching the unsettling, new vibe from His Honor.

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One of them flipped on the radio, and zeroed in the news. The Governor was always on the lookout for approbation, or a flanking adversary. The male commentator was mid-story, hyperbole set to max.

The vehicle filled unexpectedly, its sound system ridiculously overpowered. “They’re still burning, three cellblocks are now gutted. The Governor showed up briefly, but seems to have vanished. Someone said he’d been abducted, one of the fleeing convicts settling a score.”

“Switch that shit off,” barked the Governor, reaching for another libation.

A half-bottle later they turned into the Governor’s palace, a forty thousand square foot log cabin painted high-gloss white. Off to the left of the mansion, an enormous treehouse perched in an ancient elm, and all about the lawn, a forest panic of plastic animals.

The alien screwed his face up in disgust, suddenly offended by the absence of taste. He said, “Boys, first thing when this rain lets up, lose those fake critters. Looks like Bambi from Hell.” He nodded to himself, loving his database of local vernaculars. One of the guards answered, “Sure thing, Guv’nur. Always spooked me too.”

A new bond thus formed, the tires crunched to a halt. He pushed the NASCAR cap on and twisted it a few degrees, feeling jaunty. One of the guards hopped out to open his door with dispatch.

The Reigning Boss of Tennessee slipped out of the vehicle and turned to have a last longing look at his bar. A second later, the meat puppet, with Birdshot riding up top, collapsed like a Republican mandate, and together they head-butted the doorframe, everything instantly going black.

Someone hit the emergency button, and six true men ran from the mansion, expecting another circus.

“Governor’s hurt,” cried the driver. “Get a stretcher.” They swarmed over the fallen man, king of these parts, lifting him gently onto a premium gurney. It had alloy wheels, and a nice leather headrest, its side panels festooned with motor oil stickers. “Call the doctor. I think he got a bad bottle.”

Someone switched on the gurney’s sound system and the other guard growled under his breath, “The whole bottle.” He shifted at the glare from his partner, but they both knew the truth - The Governor was a hard-living man, and the flesh was weak.

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Birdshot, a bright point in space through which consciousness streamed, was out like Enron. His mind, the gateway to a parallel universe teeming with manic mentalities, scissored closed, a critical thread between here and the beyond sheared.

Despite the drizzling rain, they pushed him with care along the brick walkway, his jowly face smooching around like a lard pie. The doctor came out in a clear parka, huffing heavily, and met them. “What happened?”

One of the SUV guards stood a little straighter, and proclaimed, “The prison was rough. He fell and I think he may have banged his head.”

The doctor sized up the story, and asked patiently, “That all?”

“Well, he fell again here. Might be related.”

“Thanks for the medical advice, I’ll make my own diagnosis. Who’s been drinking? I smell Kentucky hooch.”

Eyes fled everywhere, and the same guard added, professionalism straining against a good yarn, “He had a few on the way back. Like I said, that prison was rough.”

The doctor shook his head, and said, “Get him indoors.”

The “Residence,” as it was referred to with hushed and revered tones, had a first-rate medical clinic. They wheeled him in, the straining gurney assist motor the sharpest thing in the room.

“Clear out,” shouted the doctor. The crew bolted, seeking their own ministrations. Into one of the lavish bars strewn throughout the mansion they moved as a clump, hoots and hollers erupting spontaneously.

The SUV driver got behind the bar and said proudly, “I’ve seen him head off the deep end more than a few times, but he was setting records today.”

The leader of the mansion security men, the Chief, asked through raucous laughter, “You said he burped for sixteen seconds?”

“Like some goddamn radioactive frog!” He grabbed his mug, and took a quick sip. “One of those frogs you see in them B movies. You know, the kind that’ll eat Toledo, or some other shithole.”

His team member added, “Creepy.” The Chief sat down on the softly padded bar stool, settling in. Still on the right side of fifty, carrying a couple of pounds over optimal BMI, he felt secure in this setting. He still had some good muscle, and a fair mind when it suited him.

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The Chief turned to the bartender, asking, “So he fell in the mud at the prison, went to the can to change, and came out different?”

“Ever been in a prison bathroom?”

“I took a leak at KnuckleJoint once.”

“That your idea of reconnaissance?”

A pretty young woman ran in, panting officially. The Governor approved of education, especially for fetching but unpaid interns, learning poly-sci the hard way. She whined with distress, “The doctor said you might want to spool up the chopper. The Governor is unresponsive.”

“Last poll said that,” jabbed an anonymous voice.

One of the men, taken with her loveliness asked, “Heard any prognosis?”

“He’s speaking in some weird tongue, and not the kind he does in revival. Doc said he just keeps croaking out some unknown language, but not listening.”

“Sounds normal. You do a blood alcohol on His Honor? I’m thinking that language is the call of the bird.” She looked at him with alarm, and he clarified. “Wild Turkey, missy. Makes a man say the damndest things.”

Everyone burst in laughter, and the intern fled, thinking it was time to switch back to pre-law.

The Chief said gallantly, “After this one, I’ll go get a SitRep.”

A few minutes later, he slapped one of his men on the back, and headed out saying whimsically, “Got to go see the Governor.”

The clinic door was locked so he pulled out a master key and fished it into the lock with the force of authority.

The Governor was laid out and stripped to the waist. From his stony face, a loud croaking utterance issued, not in the least musical. The doctor stood well back, a horror reserved for slasher movies locking him down.

The Chief brayed, “Whoa, what the...” The doctor cut him off, “Let him be.”

“He possessed, doc?”

“Maybe. Gonna have to go back to my roots to deal with this.”

“You need anything - hot water, or chicken blood?”

“Maybe later. Hit the pantry for some cooking sauce. The hot stuff.”

The Chief spun out of the room, knowing this deal had to be gone. *And the mansion is so comfy.* The Governor was in trouble, and the Chief

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sensed then and there he had to take the matter into his own hands. The Governor needed him, and his career, never a stellar straight arrow, was ready for some consistency.

In the kitchen, he retraced familiar steps to the fridge and grabbed a cold beer. The pantry had dozens of barbeque sauces, and he scanned the labels looking for the “five alarm” symbol.

Tucked in the back, a single bottle squatted in the remains of a gift basket. Pulling it through the other bottles, one fell out and shattered on the floor. He grabbed the basket and took it to the pool-table sized cooking island. Dual gas cookers, lots of stainless, and Corian.

The bottle had a homemade wrap-around red label, a sizzling yellow lightning bolt its center feature. Printed in large, dot-matrix characters, it declared Uncle Amos’s Liquid Fire.

He thought, *Suck-ass lobbyist*. Digging around in the dried straw that crowded the bottle, he found a crumpled card. In a rough scrawl, he made out “To the Governor, from your friends at Chattanooga Baronial Cabins. Your personal condo is a variance away.”

“Knew it,” he snapped. “Goddamn developers.”

Deciding to test the mix, less as an official taster, and more to see if she had a kick, he snatched a box of Triscuits, tore it open, and dumped the contents into a nearby disused fruit bowl.

He drizzled on some of the thick sauce and pushed a single Triscuit tentatively into his mouth. It was tangy, a suggestion of molasses and honey blended with a smoky deep-woods flavor. He dumped more sauce on, and rapidly ate a dozen more dripping crackers.

Mucus starting running from his nose and a clamorous ringing sounded in his ears. He coughed, saying aloud, “Yeah, just what the doc needs.”

On the way back down the hall to the clinic, he felt an increasing respiratory distress, falling in love with the concoction. He walked right in, and hacked for several seconds, a deep bronchial orchestration that would have alarmed the doctor on any normal day. “Doc, got what you need. This shit’ll take grease off a tranny sump.”

“Dump it in one of those basins. I’m gonna lay hands on him.”

The guard nodded absently, his head a hot incubator of pain. Suddenly he fled from the room and the doctor grabbed the bottle, pouring it out

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slowly. It gurgled and surged into the porcelain bowl as the Governor went on speaking, his voice growing hoarse.

Selecting a large blue bottle from medicine case, he pulled the cork and dumped it into the barbeque sauce. It gave off a biting chemical smell like ether and he spoke professorially, "Governor, I gotta snap you out of whatever trance you're in. If you can hear me, give me a sign."

The Chief re-entered, his finger hooked through the plastic ring of a dangling six pack. "Had to put out the fire, doc. What can I do to help?"

"Just stand back. I've mixed your sauce with some naptha - a blending of the hillbilly and scientist. I'm waiting for a sign, and then I'm going to induce."

"Induce? Somebody knocked-up?"

"A seizure you idiot. Gotta shake him out of this spell. Be ready for anything."

The guard unsnapped his holster, and drained the beer. "I'm good to go."

The doctor pulled on surgical gloves and scooped his hands into the rich, walnut colored sauce. With cupped palms, he swung over the Governor's body, dripping a noxious trail. "Hold him down."

The Chief clamped the Governor's legs, his mind a confusion of beer, caustic barbeque sauce, and mirth. When he had signed on two years back, the recruiter only promised a "varied agenda," never mentioning exorcisms.

In the center of the Governor's sallow chest, the doctor poured several handfuls, chest hair forming a ghastly patch of briar. Next he smeared the potion on the Governor's face, and pushed an ample load up his nose, and into his mouth.

"Okay, chief, stand back."

The Governor reared up, throwing sauce everywhere. His head started shaking from side to side manically, and the Chief bellowed, "That the sign you're looking for?"

"It'll do." Seizing defibrillator paddles, he brought them together hard on the Governor's oscillating temples and yelled "clear."

With a foot pedal, he gave her all she had and the Governor jangled like a convict riding Old Sparky. A cruel and unusual three seconds later the doctor flung himself back, overcome with the smell of burning flesh.

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Birdshot came to, remembering millions of years of living in a nanosecond, and instantly wrestled control from his awakening protoplasmic servant.

“Damn,” barked the Governor, “That was a trip!”

The Chief stared at him wide-eyed, knowing he’d have stories for years.

The doctor dropped the paddles, suddenly aware of his hippocratic oath. “You had us scared, sir.” Knowing the Governor sat on a medical advisory committee, he added “You look better.”

“Feel great. Something smells good. What’s for dinner?”

FIVE

Jeb heard the doors open, and sailed back up from a deep, escapist dream.

Ethyl entered tentatively, taking in the destruction. “Been busy?” Jeb stood up, ready to talk business. “Ya got a Hell of a mess, ma’am. That fan assembly was shot, had to de-install it.”

He pointed to the gaping hole in the wall, and continued, “As soon as you can find me a new ventilator, I’ll get them fumes sucked out’a here.”

“Urgon’s gonna be pissed.”

“‘bout what? Standard procedure - ya gotta get rid of the bad parts first.”

She stepped around the battered duct work, and he noticed she didn’t have the gun. *Good sign.* Ethyl asked calmly, “Jeb, aren’t you glad that old air shaft didn’t just connect to space?”

“Naw, I knew they’d have a pressure vessel on the other side. ‘just good engineering.”

She laughed, “Did something here suggest that?”

Jeb’s early training had served him well. Working as a slave-labor wage apprentice, he’d gotten every wretched job Old Man Surly could underbid and throw his way. Into the bowels of septic systems, public and private, he had journeyed, learning a thing or two in each.

“Ethyl, the materials are different than what my experience knows, but as you said earlier, “Man adapts.” What his experience really knew was that actually quoting a customer’s witticism was listed as the number one best way to get the job.

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“Jeb, I can tell you one thing, we don’t have any spare parts. And Urgon’s gonna be pissed.”

“Let’s go talk to this Urgon. I’ll make him understand.”

They got in the elevator and Jeb studied the control panel more closely, thinking a Plan B might be prudent. She stabbed at one of the buttons and twisted a knob that came off in her hand. She scowled, “Can you fix this?”

Jeb took the silvery part, and dropped to his knees to eye the mechanism with the air of the master. He realized again that if he was to make his way in this new world, he’d better start showing some value.

Like any good old boy, he had a fanny-pack pouch filled with necessary treasures: chewing tobacco, a universal fishing tool, magnifying spectacles, as well as a hundred other little things that made life easier in a broken world.

He pulled out a half-used tube of superglue, and squeezed a thin bead along the cracked part. “Feels like it might work. This stuff will bind anything.” Holding the knob in place for a few seconds, he yanked his hand back like a magician, remembering the flourish of his old employer.

Another of that septic king’s aphorisms came to him - “Always seek to amaze.” The elevator knob stayed in place, and Ethyl observed, “Maybe Urgon won’t kill you after all.”

They bumped along, Jeb wondered how large the ship was. “How many people are aboard?” he asked innocently.

“I told you I had seen a hundred different ships, remember?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She regarded him levelly, sizing up his odds of surviving here. “I lied. I’ve seen way more than that. In fact, because of that time dilation thing, Earth has aged over a thousand years while I’ve been whipping around the Milky Way with this crew, and others. When I get tired of one, I just hop off at a way station and grab the next ride.”

“You from the Middle Ages?”

“Something like that. Anyway, you’re in for a surprise, Jeb. These creatures you’re about to meet are not like you and me. You up for that?”

No man likes to be patronized. “Ethyl, in rural Tennessee, you meet all kinds of strange. In fact, some of the folks I’ve encountered in the smaller towns must be from outer space.” He paused, realizing she was trying to get him to think big. “Are they?”

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Without a touch of warmth, she replied, “Yep. Earth is like everywhere, nothing is as it seems.” He nodded, knowing she was getting him ready. “Jeb, I’ll bet when you think of space flight, stuff like Apollo comes to mind.”

He let her go on, knowing it was a time for listening. “What I mean is, Man’s travel machines, whether they’re airplanes, or even ocean-going ships are limited in size by your, or your species’ understanding of energy shaping.”

“Aren’t you human?”

“Partly, but let’s stick to space ships for a bit, okay?”

“Give it to me, Ethyl.”

The elevator door slid open, and Jeb gasped as he took in the view from another world. Through the corroded door of the elevator stood a mammoth Smoky Mountain lake, its distant shore ringed with bright fall trees, and then he realized he was on a speeding boat, peaking out from a cheap deck house.

She said, “Go on, git in the boat.” She pushed him surprisingly hard, and he near tumbled out. His hands struck a crudely molded fiberglass seat hard, and he swiveled around to get even. A wooden outhouse, complete with a crescent moon, stood on the red carpeted deck. The door, a roughly hewn cedar plank affair, flapped open and closed as if to show its emptiness, and Jeb knew instantly weirdness had landed.

A sweet voice came to him over the sound of straining outboard motors, “Need a beer, Jeb?”

The boat seemed about thirty feet in length with a narrow beam, built for speed. He looked up, and above the outhouse a backwoods tuna tower shot up twenty feet, a hand-made affair of Rustoleum red angle iron and bailing wire.

Perched atop the plywood platform were two wicker chairs, roped down to the open structure good and tight. One was empty, and in the other sat a smallish humanoid dressed for bass. He refocused his mind, half his mental cylinders misfiring, and realized the alien was a gorgeous female, much better built than the boat.

He switched to autopilot. “You got Bud?”

She smiled like Helen of Troy, her reddish hair long, and very straight. Through perfect teeth she answered, “Only brand allowed on my rig.”

He scampered up the flimsy ladder that was tack-welded to one of the main struts, never taking his eyes off the prettiest girl he’d ever seen. Described by

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his closest friends as a dog that could hunt, he plopped down in the empty chair, and spied the cooler. “How’s yours?”

She was close to him, and he felt a radiant heat that was as odd as everything else. “‘bout spent. Fish me out another.”

Fighting the urge to ask a million questions, or gawk leeringly at her, he grabbed two cold ones, snapped the tops, and swung over the first offering. She grinned devilishly, throwing the near-dead can way up, part of his mind tracking its lazy arc back into the motoring spray.

She accepted the beer with a gallant wink, and they flew forward, the lake like a still pond, its glassy surface reflecting puffy clouds and the diffuse fall colors. Jeb had been born and raised in Tennessee and that meant he knew from boats. He said peevishly, too rapt to find any sane context, “Sound like pair of blueprinted Mercs.”

She let a petite burp slip, and responded with a little pride. “Mercury Verados. Three hundred each. Polished the valves myself.”

“You get service out here?”

“She laughed openly, long and easy. “I looked at the extended warranty, but they had a travel charge based on distance. That was a deal-breaker.”

Now it was his turn, and he belted out a good, full-sized laugh the likes of which he’d not felt in ages. He suddenly realized that for at least an instant in time, his life had been reset, and he had zero worries. Before fresh ones could be conjured, he asked jokingly, “What kind of bait you running?”

“Hot dogs. Good ones.”

“I like Oscar Meyers myself. ‘cept I’m really more of a gunkhole kind a guy.”

She leaned over and kissed him quickly on the cheek. “I know where.” Roped to the right arm of her queenly wicker chair was a throttle lever and she looked ahead and shoved it forward to its stops. The boat leapt like possession, the ragged noise fantastic, and Jeb took a deep pull of his brew.

Foam whipped away around his face and he drained it in three seconds. Pausing to remember waterway littering laws, he tossed the can back; in for a penny, in for a pound.

They came up on the shore rapidly, a splendid V pattern bisecting the lake behind them. She throttled back and said, “My name is not Urgan. That horrible woman just wanted to scare you. I don’t know why she always does that to pickups.”

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Slowing through a tight entrance to a one acre cove, the trees reaching out with earth tone hues, the water absolutely flat, Jeb felt a consuming thrill run through his body. She chopped the power, the boat pitched, and a single ripple moved out ahead of them like a gentle announcement. Jeb watched it lap against the tangle of brush at the water's edge, his signal to grab another beer.

“You good?”

“Yes, Jeb, I'm better than good.” He flew off on an instinctive tangent, and then shook his head, too much going on upstairs.

To do something, he stood up and the boat shifted to port. Reaching up to steady him, he lost his balance and fell across her lap. She hoarse-whispered, “Them Bud's'll get ya, ya don't watch out.”

Embarrassment running, he started tickling her, racing up under her arms through the standard issue camo t-shirt. She squealed in delight, squirming like a demon, loving the struggle.

His shoulder was wedged between the throttle lever and her writhing body, the world too bizarre for anything but living in the now. Their hands danced over one another for an eternity and an instant, a wild to-and-fro of panicky fun, and warming arousal.

He kissed her on the mouth once tentatively, and she returned his intention with a slower version, ending with a poke of her tongue between his teeth.

A notion of alien anatomy crossed Jeb's mind, and he dismissed it. *Everything looks to be where it belongs. So far.*

Using playful passion as a theme, he squirmed down in front of the chair, and pulled her squarely to him. She leaned forward, her body extremely lithe and supple. The boat, still coasting in, struck an outstretched limb and with a loud crack bounced away from the shore.

They bumped together, giggling like children. Jeb was again seized with a sensation of unfettered joy; doubt and uncertainty not registering at all.

“My name is Billie Sue.”

He slowed down, taking time to peer into her eyes. Feeling very human, aware, and sublime. “Pleased to meet ya, Billie Sue. We gonna do some fishing, or...”

“Please, no worm jokes,” she begged with a huge smile. He pushed his head back, grinning in mock consternation. “I though you were going to put the dog on the hook.”

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“Tell ya what, after we catch us a good ol’ hawg, I’ll take you back to my treehouse, and we’ll cook.”

Sensing that was the best deal he’d get for the moment, he nodded happily, hope once more springing eternal. They climbed down and set up their fishing gear, two good stout poles fitted with shiny new 30 lb. test.

Billie Sue cut a hot dog in half, pushed the slimy pieces onto their hooks and they both cast, and recast, getting a feel for the spot. Standing next to one another, Billie Sue arced left and Jeb right, their lines singing out like gossamer wave forms, silent and intent. After a long Buddhist moment, the hot dog bait began to look nibbled, the fish getting keen to the local treat.

“They’re hitting, Billie Sue.” She nodded like a Bassmaster in the zone. Jeb’s line jerked savagely and he yelled, “Got one!” He started reeling slowly, twitching the line to jiggle the bait. She set her fishing pole down, sidled in against him and placed her hands gently over his, riding along.

Jeb’s natural inclination would be to hazard a quick kill, yanking the fish in as much as tiring him. He tugged hard and she offered no resistance. The fish jerked sideways and he relaxed, anticipating a sudden pull in the opposite direction and Billie Sue was there, putting some fancy english on the pole.

She corkscrewed the grip, the business end darting like a divining rod. Her hands were strong, and moved with a rapid stop-start motion as if digitally actuated. She giggled to show him know she “wasn’t no robot,” and bumped her hip against his.

He smiled with his entire face, laughing like a man smitten. “Even if you are a robot, I love you.”

She yanked the pole back swiftly into his firm belly. “I like a man with a flat stomach.”

“Billie Sue, I gotta ask. What the Hell’s going on?”

“We’re fighting a honking big catfish, I reckon.” On the payroll, the fish yanked hard, snapping the line which promptly flew back and fell between them, giving a shape to his sense of sudden distance.

She grew very still, and slowly wrapped her arms around him, squeezing like a sailor’s wife. He disengaged from her, knowing something was really crying out to him, and then got it. “Gotta bleed some pressure!”

He handed her the pole, clambered up to the bow, and whipped it out. The yellow stream rose up high, defying gravity, and he looked back over his right

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shoulder. “Can’t keep Mother Nature waiting, hon.” The fish, visible under the surface, shot away, knowing Tennessee runoff.

“Shit, Jeb, ya’done spooked em.”

He twirled on his left heel, a momentary flash, and zipped up. “They’ll come back, ‘cause us septic engineers know God’s plan.”

“And that would be?”

“The solution to pollution is dilution.”

“That’s not my God. She believes in corking it up, letting it simmer.”

“I thought you might need to use the facilities. That outhouse work?”

“No, I’ll just squat here.” His face twisted around in playful offense, and he took a few steps towards her. “I’d like to see that.”

She said tauntingly. “No lookin’.”

After the door had creaked behind her, Jeb swung around, wondering when the game would suddenly end. He looked down at his left hand, and studied a small cut across one knuckle. *That sheet metal was real enough.*

A bird lifted from a nearby tree, crying like a raven. It climbed, fighting a rising wind. A wing dipped, and the bird spun around in a spiral, hunting for dinner. Another joined the first and they circled and cavorted, the choreography visible.

One dropped sharply, snatching some unknown beast, and the other closed in for trimmings.

Billie Sue pushed the door open slowly, and Jeb turned smiling, expecting the best. In the background, his subconscious mind quickly diagrammed the sanitation system, speculating some vague connection to the earlier septic hold.

He asked with professional curiosity, “That go down to the place I came from?”

Billie Sue did a nice pixie, and said, “I hope Ethyl’s in there.”

“What?”

“Just kidding, Jeb. That elevator is real, only it’s special. It can go about anywhere.”

He stepped up to the outhouse, and pulled the door fully open. A single rough cedar plank with a hole in its center was nailed across the width of the structure, the floor partly sawed out below it.

He turned. “This is a spaceship, right?” Jeb needed a good answer, the world getting a little too strange.

SCOTT PATTERSON

“Sort of. We travel in elevators mostly, but to get to the best places, you have to move the elevator.”

“I need another beer. You want one?”

“Yeh, but let’s go up the lake. This place is dead.” She snapped their rods into deck holders and followed Jeb up the tower. He noticed a spray-painted star on her funny seat’s headrest and asked, “You a real queen?”

“In some circles. You’re pretty fond of me.”

He cracked a couple more open, and stated proudly, “Damn sure am.” They blasted out of the cove, shotgun start rules gone on a rooster tail. The boat jumped up on plane and smoothed out, hitting fifty five knots. It was intoxicating, the wind and motion all consuming, and they glanced back and forth at each other, in love with life and themselves.

Jeb stood, a hand on Billie Sue’s shoulder, and howled with the vigor of youth, seventeen again, flying across some Blue Ridge finger lake. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head, and she swiveled up for the real thing.

The kiss was long and instructive, a thousand words of meaning exchanged. He sat down very slowly, still kissing her, feeling proud and confused all at once. Up the lake they flew, enjoying the sense of aliveness, the ragged cacophony of many powerful sounds pressing them together like an efficient airfoil.

The boat surged a little crossing another wake, and they came apart scanning for other boats. A sixty foot sport fisherman’s battlewagon ripped ahead, going like the dickens. Billie Sue pulled a pin quickly from the throttle handle, yelling “Hasta la vista el safety stop.” She rammed the throttle fiercely, it hit the old stop, and broke through to a deadly new setting. The Mercury engines screamed and the tower rocked back, the stern digging in like a funny car.

They shot each other a terrified look and hoisted their beers, all the world a ride. She swung wide to port, gaining quickly, and the other boat, sensing the gambit, poured on the coal.

The wind was deafening, all verbal communication impossible and pointless. Like life-long friends, they felt a simpatico, a muscular thrill to win suffusing everything. As they shot past, the bigger boat honked a vanquished sound and peeled off, their paths diverging rapidly. A minute later, it was a distant speck.

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She turned to the mile-off shore, brought the gas back half, pointing ahead. It was dusk, and in the trees Jeb could just make out a giant tree fort. As they approached, he could see soft orange lanterns strung around its balcony, a crazy curving ladder leading up from the ground.

It was a twenty by twenty foot carved wooden structure with a cedar shake roof, peaked comically like a fairy tale. Smoke lingered out of a stone chimney, the sprouting window boxes, all wildly painted, poking out here and there.

She eased the power down to idle and they coasted into the little cove. Jeb climbed down the ladder, seeking the coil of line at the bow. Checking for errant pee, he grabbed the end and sized up the dock as it came into reach.

Billie Sue gave it a touch of reverse and they bumped in like a snowflake. He asked, "What kind of knot do you favor?"

"Bowline'll git it."

"And what kind can I use to tie you up?"

She scampered down, fun and games coming his way. "We'll just have to see about that, mister." Jumping off, she came to him and they joined hands.

With a flourish of her other hand, she said, "Follow me, my love. I have something very special to show you."

SIX

The Governor hopped up, ready to recover lost time. He knew instinctively a step had been missed and turned to the Chief. “Did I lose consciousness?”

The other man’s eyes swung to the floor. He mumbled, “You’d have to ask the doc, Governor. I think you just had a rough time at that prison. ‘happens.’”

The State of Tennessee had switched off the preferred fee-for-service medical system under “This Governor,” and their Residence plan was the only oasis for state workers. Lose this gig, and he’d be back to those damn HMOs.

Birdshot got the subtext, scratching a single mark on a mental blackboard - one ally. “I appreciate your words, Chief.” He turned to the doctor, smelling a do-gooder. “This has been a difficult experience for all of us, even the honorable Temperance Good. What happened here stays in this room.”

The Chief knew the story already had wings, but he’d ridden harder ponies. Sensing the doctor could be trouble, he said, “Come on Governor, let me buy you a drink.”

Under his lingering stare, the doctor turned away, personal visions of a revivalist practice going poof. “Stays here.”

The Governor strode from the room, no clue where he was going. On his rapid heels, the Chief studied the new bearing of his boss and liked it. He had often remarked over beers about the sloppy code of the Residence, “bunch of losers,” his usual descriptor.

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His men, hand-picked obsequiously by someone else from the washout of law enforcement and spooked by the scent of royalty, they were as combustible a crew as he'd ever seen. But the pay was good, the bennies unbeatable, and once in a while, with "This Governor," the circus came to town.

And now he was following the head clown. Temperance Good, elected on a platform built with below-code thirty-two inch centers, scanned around for something to leverage. From an adjoining hallway, the intern ran out, panic mode going full tilt. "Oh my God, you're alive!" She grabbed ahold of him, the compact supermodel body giving it all she had. Her luscious hair, big like a country western singer, enshrouded his head, the meat puppet part of the Birdshot/clone duo going off-line with glee.

Birdshot struggled to countermand another collapse, his boundless mental faculties drawing a huge lump of thinking power from another dimension. It pulsed through the connecting strand that communicated this universe and the next, and he mapped every muscle in the clone's body.

Working in nanosecond slices, he pulled and relaxed hundreds of separate muscles, the Governor's body rippling like a bodybuilder doing a steroid commercial. She stepped back, beaming, and declared, "You're really cut, Governor. I didn't know you worked out."

Something had gone real bad in the clone's brain, and Birdshot switched off its lights, fully at the helm. "Thank you. There's a lot about me that would surprise you." He held out his arm for her and said, "Pretend I'm a stranger. Take me on a tour."

Overwhelmed at her fortune, she exclaimed, "My name is Sissy. I want to be a Senator someday."

He slid his arm around her with a dark avuncular motion and said, "I think I can help you with that. Let's start upstairs, and work our way to your election."

They sped off, the Chief grinning like a playground voyeur. He ambled back to the bar, the crowd turning all at once for his situation report. The driver shouted for attention, asking, "Is His Honor still with us?"

The Chief shook his head in amusement. "He's never looked better. He'll be boning that intern in 'bout five minutes, I expect."

"No way," yelled one of the guards. "Guy's gay."

SCOTT PATTERSON

“Not anymore. He hopped off that operating table like some zombie - a real fearless and certain zombie.”

Another of the guards laughed harshly, saying, “He had that political advisor over yesterday. Maybe he got told to grow a pair.”

The driver added, “Yeah, it just took the Turkey to push him over. I’ll bet that’s what happened.”

The other SUV guard squirmed in his chair, remembering the Guv’ was real weird even before the “bird” had landed. About to arouse that sentiment, another man cut him off, “Hey, the Presidency’s up for grabs next year. I hear he’s in a good position to get the nomination. I say let’s ride it.”

A burble of ascent moved around the room, no one wanting to be back on the street. Private visions of past career detours riding in every skull; flicking, furtive glances moved swiftly between every set of eyes, a consensus locked and loaded a second later.

The Chief said softly, the weight of his station in full affectation, “We gotta stand by the man. We all got flaws, and he’s no worse than any other.”

The intercom crackled and a tiny voice barked, “Governor’s in the Presidential Suite, needs a bottle of champagne.”

In any organization, a pecking order sorts out in one shift, and the lowest man stepped up to the bar, scanning the labels. Ranged against twenty-five feet of polished mahogany, glass shelves stood four deep, two hundred elixirs on display.

“Give me a good one. The Governor’s had a Hell of a day.” One of the guards, working a second job as a bartender three nights a week, paused in professional consideration, and eased out a dusty cobalt blue bottle. The gopher accepted the regal libation and spoke its name like a court jester. “Blue Nun. A sister that understands.”

The Nashville Contractors Guild, never a gentlemanly organization, had nearly sundered itself mudslinging for the contract to build the Governor’s new mansion. No stranger to feeding at the public trough, Chattanooga Baronial Cabins had fought a dirty campaign, knowing their likely customer revered such tactics.

Under a cloud of felony indictments, they had built the mammoth log home to the Governor’s specifications, kickbacks the time-honored grease

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that saw it through. At the end of a long masculine corridor, nine and a quarter inch logs running true the length, the royal bottle carrier made a right and found the elevator.

A hand-carved cedar slot accepted his security card and the doors, of highly polished red oak, slid silently open. He entered the five by five foot chamber and spun as they closed. *Somebody's been crop dusting*, he observed silently with a sneer.

He pushed the button for floor five and the tiny car rumbled upward. Of all the lowly junkets that had come his way, conveying liquor chapped his ass the most. The only thing worse than waiting tables was doing it for free. *And this guy can pull a cork!*

The doors popped open, working a little harder up here in the State aerie. He checked his holster as a course of action and emerged, his blood pressure climbing. The motif was still woody, but none of it was from Tennessee. Ebony and African Padauk hardwoods, hideously expensive, cried out for recognition. Little brass placards announced the odd names, and he took a museum moment.

Bubinga, Cocobolo, and Purpleheart furniture was everywhere, wood normally reserved for the most tasteful accents swallowed whole by inbred design. In the corner of the waiting room, he spied a crazy red rocker, and leant forward to read the boastful tag.

Bloodwood.

He ran his finger over the braille-embossed button beneath the name and a luted African voice said, "Bloodwood, botanical name *Brosimum Rubescens*, is very rare. It is cherished for its haunting red hue and signifies the blood given up in our struggles. For more information, press and hold the button again."

The guard looked around, figuring he had another minute until the screaming began and pressed the same button again and held it as instructed. The seconds ticked by, surely longer than anyone would ever wait.

Suddenly a low drumming came malevolently out of the invisible speakers and a fierce voice said, "And it's all but extinct now since some cracker politician bought it up for his mansion."

The guard drew his finger back sharply, knowing the message would never find his boss, the prince of short attention span.

SCOTT PATTERSON

He whistled a happy little tune spontaneously, a larger man for the experience. Then his thoughts darkened, recalling his mission. The namesake of his charge leered up at him, the bountiful maiden begging consideration.

Knowing the Governor wasn't one for ceremony, he yanked at the plastic cork and wrenched it out, slopping some of the noxious fluid on the slave-rubbed hardwood floor.

He thought, *He'll want it open*. The guard reconnoitered about and brought the neck up to his mouth with resolve. A third of a bottle later, his feet started moving, knowing he was out of time. Pushing the cork into his pocket as the start of a good lie, he approached the Presidential Suite, and knocked.

A recumbent voice penetrated the door. "Leave it."

The guard took a last parting pull and set it down. Eight feet away, he heard, "Wait. I got some 'em else for you to do." The voice was strong, and didn't connect with his old memories of His Honor.

The door flew open and the Governor stuck his upper body out, the now impressive physique flexing with vigor. "Larry, it's you. Hey, can you get me some, you know, protection? The little missy is one of them believers."

Birdshot was having the best time of his multitudinous years, seeing far over the horizon to a plundered world taken one captivating hussy at a time. He grinned like a lovelorn fourteen year old, thinking it was good to be back on Earth, and Larry returned the smile, riding along in his youth.

"Yes sir, Governor. I got some in my car." Too anxious for a response, he ran back to the elevator, sensing a genuine need for once. The doors opened as if watching, and he bolted in. As the car descended, his eyes moved around idly, the largest part of his mind running through the Chief's earlier words. "*Not anymore. He hopped off that operating table like some zombie - a real fearless and certain zombie.*"

Like all elevators, this one had an emergency switch reserved for fire-fighting personnel. Larry suddenly felt mischievous and stabbed it with newfound adolescent whimsy. The elevator room stopped suddenly, between floors and the doors remained closed.

Larry hated mechanical things, all the more as the fire alarm started bleeping in sync with a flashing light. He stabbed at the lobby button, and

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then in frustration, every other one. Nothing happened, so he pushed two at a time and then three, desperate to find the secret combination to get him on his way. Finally, holding four buttons down, nearly out of permutations, he tapped an old navy SOS on the fifth button, the Blue Nun doing the cogitating.

Looking up from the control panel as the doors slid open, he sucked in his breath, stricken with fear. A beautiful lake stretched out from the bow of a boat, a rapidly rotating moon rippling out a dazzling stream of flashing light to a heavy woodland. It alternated white and red like a prison beacon, and clearly didn't belong to Earth.

He turned around quickly to get a grip and found himself in an outhouse, presumably on a boat. He shifted his weight, and a gentle rocking motion confirmed the hypothesis.

Most of the Governor's Guard, as they were fond of calling themselves, had experimented with the finer art of Moonshining. Some batches were good and some even better, and then, once in a while, something just goes way wrong, casting a wide net of doubt.

"Damn, that Summer Hooch dun took my mind," he barked aloud. The doors slammed shut like some cheap peep show and the car shook hard. An instant later they parted again and he was back in the mansion, floor one.

"I need a drink." Laughter guided him in, the boys at DefCon Three. Somehow, a sense of finer days coming had caught and they were thinking big. The tables and chairs had been cleared out and a snazzy new engine on a working mount wheeled in as a centerpiece.

It was chromed, done up fine, an enormous supercharger on top with red inlet flaps and a bright blue block. Larry slipped into his favorite seat, feeling the wealth of a good story on deck.

A beer slid across, and he pushed it back. "Need something stronger, places I've been."

Three men were grouped around the engine, admiring its shrine-like aura. They all looked up and one asked, "The Guv'nur taking care of business?"

He'd learned recently that a slow answer was a better one, and he counted to five silently. "Oh yeah, he's doing the deed. That's strange enough, but the shit I saw after ain't right."

SCOTT PATTERSON

The laughter was raunchy, his crowd all lubed up for a sex tale.

UFOs are a special topic in all circles. Too much enthusiasm and you're branded for life. They watched him flip back a shot, and then another; TwoFer Tuesdays. Thusly fortified, he continued, "Okay, you're going to think I've been blowing weed, but that elevator took me to some other planet. I swear."

Someone farted, and they all broke into laughter. "You get your hands on the Governor's private stash?" He stood quickly in anger. "No man, I tell you, them doors slid open, and I was on a boat, on some lake on another world. Might be Uranus, or Neptune."

One of the guys yelped like a coyote, and dug for his smokes. Another played along, "It's been a strange day, even for here. Tell us what you saw." He was stifling a laugh, but friends were friends.

They moved in, ready for a good one. What with the Governor suddenly acting a man, maybe the Almighty had changed the rules. It quieted down and he noticed a rack of shots lining up at his elbow, encouragingly.

He snatched the front one, and the file moved down the wooden slot like a soda machine, another round chambered. "Okay, I accidentally hit the emergency stop on the way back from the fifth floor, but the doors stuck. I punched all the buttons and then tried some combinations. What I think did it was doing that SOS signal. Doors popped open when I did that."

Twelve doubting eyes bore into him, and he put back another bracer. "I was on a boat, standing in some outhouse, and right away I knew something was up. Then I saw that moon reflecting on the water, and it was flashing all white and red like KnuckleJoint's light."

Someone interjected, "I'll bet you was on the third floor. You can see Knucklejoint from there on a clear night."

Larry snapped, "It's raining, dipshit! And there ain't no boats, or lakes around here."

The Chief cleared his throat. "Something's up. Let's go find out what." They each grabbed one for the road, and followed their leader up the hallway. Midway down the hall, Larry stepped out front, his honor in regard, thinking crop circles and anal probes.

Reaching the doors, he remembered the Governor's need and yelled back, "Anybody got a rubber? Guv's waiting." Every man reached for his wallet and the Chief said sternly. "That can wait. I want to see this

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other world.” He finished the last statement with an inflection of guarded amusement and they all caught up.

All seven crowded in, ready for space flight. Ernie, the de facto intellectual of the crowd said wistfully, “Parallel universes have been speculated to join spontaneously, like teenagers.”

Grumbled assent moved through the fathers. The Chief said, “Larry, let’s go right through the steps you took to go....where you went.”

Larry shuffled around, the group rearranging homophobically like pushy electrons. He knew the pressure was on, his story connecting with some deep collective urgency to explain everything that had gone wrong in their tarnished lives.

He pushed floor five tentatively and the car groaned alarmingly. “Over spec,” someone offered. A full minute later, the doors parted and they pressed out, expectant. Larry snapped his fingers and Ernie fished out a rubber. “While we’re here. He’s a man, just like all of us.” Delivered under the Presidential Suite door like an official epistle, they all crowded back into the elevator. One of the guards intoned, “That’s the Golden Rule in action.”

Larry pushed the lobby button, and started power-praying he could find the lake again. With a silent promise to “do everything right from now on,” he flipped the emergency switch, and the car shuddered to a stop, a panic spreading instantly. Everyone took a simultaneous breath, but the doors hummed, and stayed closed. “I told ya. Now watch this.”

Mating a finger to each button carefully, Larry recreated the earlier sequence. The doors slithered open, and Larry heard the crickets before his brain could process the image. The Chief pushed out, walked a few feet forward on the deck of the boat, and stated flatly, “Could be the Ozarks.”

“cept that moon, Chief.” They stumbled out, the boat rocking hard to port. “Get in the center, boys.” A few seconds later they had her balanced and everyone looked around, the familiar clashing with the blinking orb.

Ernie said, “I don’t think we’re on Earth.” Larry felt vindicated. “I knew it! How come?”

“The stars. They’re way wrong. In fact, some of them are blinking like that stupid moon, so I’d have to say they might be nearby pulsars. Nothing like that near Earth.”

SCOTT PATTERSON

The Chief said cautiously, "We know it wasn't a fluke, or whatever. We can come back here again. Let's git out, and come back better prepared."

An anonymous voice offered, "Yeah, I got a saw'd-off in the truck."

Three minutes later they tumbled out, and rushed to the bar - seeking hearth, heart, and home.

SEVEN

Billie Sue peeked out from beneath the covers, the wildly over-stuffed bed an amusement park of fluffy curves and comfort. Jeb was snoring lightly, sweet dreams carrying him far away.

She whispered just loud enough to wake him. “You hear that?” He turned over, a shit-eating grin plastered across his face. “Hear what?”

“Somebody’s messing with the boat.” She sprang up like an alien triathlete and bounced provocatively to the window, butt naked. Light from the blinking orb strobed the landscape, illuminating every nook and cranny like swarming paparazzi.

Flash, flash, flash.

The boat lay calmly alongside the dock and then she saw the outhouse door. “Somebody used the elevator, I think.”

Jeb pushed up on an elbow, new citizen of the galaxy. “Where they from?”

Billie Sue turned around and did a little act of modesty, drinking in his approbation. “I hope it’s not Cleveland again.”

“What?” Jeb sat up fast, his fragile world view wobbling. Four steps later, an arm around his new prize, he stood looking out from the coolest tree fort in the known universe. “Man, what’s with that moon?”

What makes you think it’s a moon?”

Jeb was getting tired of riding the short bus, and wondered idly what kind of bathroom she had.

“It’s not a moon, dummy. It’s an advertisement. Some chewing tobacco.”

SCOTT PATTERSON

“Hun? You’re saying somebody put that there to sell chew?”

“Yeah, their colors are red and white. Right on the pouch.”

A painful period later, she kissed him and said sweetly, “Just roll with it, big guy.”

Jeb had always been a country boy, most comfortable in the woods, preferably near water. His earliest memories came to him then, some part of his mind trying to scratch out a pattern of sense. He smiled remembering his parents’ lakeside summer home, really a cabin not much larger than Billie Sue’s tree fort. It might not’a had running water, but as his mom used to say, “Who needs a bathroom when you got a lake.”

Perhaps that comment had set him off, birthing his future professional trajectory. His inner life tape reel spooled forward a decade, and he was driving a speedboat across that same lake, beer-hammered and loving life. His imagination looked over its own shoulder and zoomed to a topless babe, cutting a slalom ski hard.

He came into the present a bit and flicked his eyes left and down, letting her scent draw him fully out. “You travelin’?” she asked.

He blushed and straightened his back, sucking the gut like a man. Strangely, he’d been gone for what seemed an eternity, and yet not, but hadn’t eaten anything. Yet he wasn’t hungry, at least for food. If he could just stay focused, he’d figure this out.

A wave of clarity grabbed him. *I don’t want to lose this woman. Everything else can go.*

She pushed up on her toes like a ballerina and said huskily, “I’ll bet you want some answers before we go back to bed.”

“Ah...”

“Let’s just sit down around a fire and jaw a bit.” She threw on a nearby bathrobe, a furry animal pelt affair cut real short and walked across the cedar great room’s bumpy floor. The structure was roughly round with eight foot walls that went conical above, and then twisted like a Dairy Queen curl.

Against the rear wall from the single door were several tall bookcases filled with gold-leafed embossed legends. In a nook between the two largest cases, a enormous bed stuck out like a tongue, nearly three feet high with a short ladder against one side. Around the room, a small kitchen

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with bright, brassy utensils, and then a writing desk, carved right into the wall.

Billie Sue piled some kindling into the open hearth fireplace and put two beautiful splits of seasoned hardwood on top. "Stand back!"

From the pocket of the bathrobe she fished a small silver roundish device, and Jeb thought it might be a computer mouse. He heard a distinct click, the wood erupting with a whoosh, everything burning on the surface.

"I like this gizmo. Works by pissing off the outer molecules. It'll work on any shape." She winked at him and beckoned with her mousing hand.

They sat down next to each other on a long firm pillow, Jeb watching the fire warily. *Just when things start to seem normal.....*

"Okay, Jeb, here's the deal. I have most of the pieces to your apparent puzzle. I'm going to lay it out like Sherlock Holmes, who by the way came from my part of the sky."

He set his remaining weirdness sensitivity response off, relaxing for the unbelievable. She squared up a little and said, "Well, the universe, even the observable one, is teeming with life. It's everywhere, absolutely everywhere. Once Man gets a good propulsion system cobbled out, he'll be joining the biggest party in thewell ever, and everywhere.

"Your Planet, Earth, is special for many reasons, but I believe its diversity of culture is what makes it a natural attractant to Fiddlers."

He smiled slowly. "Should I hold my questions?"

"Best you do. But because of that diversity, people who just can't leave well enough alone, whom I call Fiddlers, come from across the cosmos to study xeno-anthropology there. That meddling is usually harmless, even amusing, but once in a while things get out of balance. Know what I mean?"

"I can connect the dots. They've been here for a long time."

It wasn't asked as a question, and Billie Sue changed tack. "Not all of us support such interventions. Vast societies have sprung up declaring Prime Directives and whatnot. The important point is that Earth is coming up on a critical moment, and so there are lots of folks in town."

"Hate crowds," said Jeb, his head nodding slowly.

SCOTT PATTERSON

“Problem is, they hate each other, at least some of them do. And with the weapons Man has developed lately, innocent proxy wars can have final consequences. I believe such a contest is widely predicted.”

Jeb was so far beyond drawing a box around this explanation that instinct reached for the only thing real. She tangled her arms in his and they hugged tightly, both knowing simple time was necessary for meaning.

The fire crackled and shifted, the flashing moon progressively dipping below the trees, its “Have a Chew” semaphore damping slowly away. Like a unitary organism, they stayed clutching until the embers went gray, saying nothing. Billie Sue knew she could fill in the technical pieces of the story later, but the “why” meant something, it explained a few things right away, and every other question over time.

Later, they went back to bed, making love without spoken words.

* * * *

The sun broke across the lake like an A-bomb, a million buzzing insects announcing the start of another day. Jeb ambled down to the water for his morning constitutional, felt the pull, and dove right in. The water was silky, high-summer warm; smelling as rich as home.

Billie Sue bopped down the short trail in a tiny pink polka-dot bikini and dove off the end of the dock like a stylish dolphin. She knifed a dozen strokes to blow out the carbon and circled around to Jeb, a hint of the predator seeking.

As she approached, Jeb said longingly, “Wish I had my dog here. He’d love this lake.” Billie Sue dipped under the surface and he felt a hand slide up his leg. “Whoa, girl, ain’t you had enough?”

She broke through the surface laughing, and asked without missing a beat. “What’s his name?”

“Toby. He’s a bloodhound. Real smart, and a perfect nose. He’d like you.” She grabbed his ass like a tentacled serpent, a hand coming out of nowhere. He whipped around, and they wound together, doing a crazy bicycle-riding kick to stay afloat. Their knees banged harmlessly, the moment somehow special.

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It was a summer-time romance and nature was playing along. Jeb was seized again by a sense of everything being “just right,” and kissed Billie Sue like he meant it.

They swam around, greeting the day in the most sensible way, oblivious to those opposing forces far distant and dumber than a box of rocks.

EIGHT

Birdshot liked sex. In fact, he was lost on a lightyear tangent that raked across his next imagined kingdom. Just because his past ventures had never sorted out meant nothing, he had infinity on his side.

In any real sense, he did not exist. The small physical presence that lay burrowed into the under-informed meat puppet was important, but he could relocate if needs be. Knowing this, he also knew he was invulnerable.

That's when the funny shit starts, usually.

He watched Sissy scoot off to the bathroom and rolled over on his back, his meat vehicle gasping. Knowing and caring even less about this temporary creature's tolerances, he might have been surprised to learn it had nearly died dancing to his choreography.

From behind the closed door, Sissy yelled, "Damn, Governor, you're a monster! I can barely walk."

You won't have to go far, he thought with a sinister laugh.

When the Big Bang released the tight embrace of everything, holes punched between parallel universes sucked like tiny sewers, early detritus swirling the drain. Though infinitely small, these microscopic points gained a critical advantage - consciousness.

Countless such pinch points between boundless volumes of space came into existence, none liking any of the others. In an instant of imperious will, they sped apart, dragging a reluctant cosmos.

Mass and knowledge accreted, and intelligent life evolved. Some could even reason, but nature had no use for such options. Procreation,

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that was her game. Get as many improbable combinations going as you could, and give 'em room.

As Douglas Adams had once observed, evolution was a matter of three questions, asked with increasing urbanity.

How can we eat?

When can we eat?

Where shall we eat?

Looking out over the water with five courses in your belly the expectant end point.

Birdshot scratched himself rudely, surveying anew his domains. The room was palatial, reserved for the highest campaign contributors. An entire wall was consumed by a mammoth video display, and soft music piped in from an unknown source, somehow knowingly a lucky cowboy tune. The bed, as big as Plymouth Rock, was lofty and shaped like Tennessee.

Its hand-sewn comforter had Memphis, Chattanooga and Nashville indicated, little blue lines streaking across to signify rivers. He looked to the eastern hill country past his feet, and imagined how he would take this land.

Time for a caucus, he thought. Sissy came out in a borrowed negligee, and he frowned. She got a whiff of his ire, and said, "I found it. It fits."

Of course it does. There's only one size in this room. Nympho-petite.

He asked sweetly, "Sissy, you're an angel. Can you get my troops together in the morning. Say about nine. I want to go over my election strategy." She smiled, feeling part of the machine. Governor Good. President next year.

"How 'bout you snuggle back in here with me, and we'll go over your part in it all." He flashed back the covers, and Sissy was again startled by the physical transformation of the once shapeless Governor.

* * * *

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While the Presidential hopeful sat buttering his toast in a crimson bathrobe the next morning, the election team was starting its ninth pot of coffee. Sissy had triggered the avalanche of action with one 3 a.m. call, as she knew it would. Between marathon sessions with the Governor, when his body appeared to be crawling back from near-death, she had been busy.

Another intern, this one with ravishing black hair, stuck her head into his forest-like breakfast nook to deliver the message with a wink. “They’re ready for you, Governor.”

“Let me throw some clothes on. I’ll be there in ten.”

Thirty-eight minutes later, down a long corridor and into the “business” end of the mansion, Birdshot strode, remembering a time with Custer. *I told him twice to watch them indians.*

Failed indigenous slaughter his backdrop, he walked right into the small auditorium, winging it. They stood as a unit, ready for battle. Birdshot was surprised to see so many men, having already decided women were running the show on this planet.

“Who’s in charge today?” It was a calculated maneuver to flush out ambition, his being enough. “You are, Mr. President.” The voices were suspiciously synchronized, and Birdshot made a mental note to track that.

He moved to the stage and stepped behind the lectern. A thought struck him, “Let’s be clear about this campaign. I intend to win. In fact, I intend to win early.”

Sissy was there, miraculously made up considering her active night. She asked with a shilling twinkle, “Governor, or Mr. President I should say, what do mean by early?”

He projected, thinking the night before had further strengthened this body. “All battles are decided well before a victor is declared. I want you all to re-assess everything you’ve done to this point and look at our every move with one clear vision in mind. I want each of you to pretend you can see the future, ‘cause I can.”

Many in the room were career politicians, having seen the good and bad of the business. And lately, mostly the hard amphibian underbelly. The former Governor, former to Birdshot anyway, had been a man of the local

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people. That's what his stickers said, all ninety eight container loads that had shipped COD from Taipei.

Three of the women in the room ran side businesses, reading palms, and more productively greasing them from the Governor's deep slush fund. One hopped up and said, "I share your vision, Mr. President. I too can see into the future, and it's Pennsylvania Avenue."

Birdshot looked her over, thinking, *I might do her, but I'd have to be past singing.*

An elderly man waved for attention, his bad rug shifting around like a dog-hair encrusted tarantula. Birdshot didn't know anybody's name, but he knew people. "Yes sir, please take all the time you need and share your vision with my team."

The old man rose from his theater style seat, and kicked the bottom back with surprising force. "Won't take long, Governor."

The young girl seated next to him rolled her eyes, dreading another yarn about the wonder of me. He began, "As you know, your Honor, I've lived in the state my whole life, got educated here, and even served with the National Guard for Tennessee. You might say I *am* Tennessee."

What you are is boring, thought Birdshot. Debating what would most hasten the old guy, he chose not to respond. "I have an idea for your presidential ambitions, and with your permission, I'd like to lay it out for you and those gathered."

A low groan moved throughout the auditorium, too diffuse for an easy ID. "Yes, proceed. A man of your experience must be wise," allowed Temperance Good.

"Thank you." The old geezer swept his head around like Lincoln loaded with the Gettysburg, and took a deep smoker's breath. "This campaign is about restoring the frontier man. Face it my friends, those early days were hard and not everybody made it, but those who did were worthy of survival."

He'd bought a short minute with his strong beginning, and barreled on. "What Tennessee means to America is Davey Crocket, the greatest frontiersman of them all. Though he lived a tragically short forty-nine years, his memory has been alive for nearly two hundred. He's a pioneer, and one of this country's greatest survivors."

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He wasn't done, still winding up, and Birdshot was suddenly liking the tale, thinking maybe the old guy had provided a lip under which he could lever hard, maybe all the way to Washington.

Having a storied disregard for this bygone hillbilly, Birdshot time-sliced the orator's next inhalation and interrupted, saying, "Yes, Davey Crockett was hero to all. I hereby authorize this campaign to seize that image and make it our banner call."

He paused, reaching across the barrier to another universe to cast amongst the wickedly idle intellects for a slogan. Wincing at numerous references to the Alamo, and an infinite number of other suggestions shoved at him from as many dim-wits, he cleared his throat for a billion extra nanoseconds and proclaimed, "We take the crock out of Crockett."

Everyone, roused by this fresh exchange, ducked their heads, knowing political suicide when they heard it. The old guy laughed real hard, a grinding bad gearbox racket, and spoke roughly, "How about 'Follow Temperance Good, a Crockett for today'."

Grumbling murmurs signaled a step in the right direction and Sissy piped up. "Davey Crockett was strong, and daring. I think we should stress that." The Governor pumped out his chest, building up a pulmonary overload in the creaking ribcage.

He let loose a long, protracted, gurgling call, the room going very still. Being a poor scholar, the old man yelled out, competing with the unending croak, "It's the sound of the frontier, just like Davey did 'fore the Alamo."

The Governor finished up, rotating his head around unflatteringly and stomped his foot down hard. He spat, "Nothing can defeat us!"

The meeting broke up fast, all political capital on account spent.

* * * *

Later Birdshot sprawled back in his private library, a small room filled with every Reader's Digest book ever hocked, and a million fishing magazines. Sissy was on his lap, doing a slow PG lapdance.

"I loved your call, Governor. It'll catch on." He gave her a dark look, smelling an agenda. "Yes, it was good." He laughed at the play on his

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assumed name, everything falling into place. At least, as far he knew, which wasn't much, given he hadn't been on Earth for well over a century.

Last time had begun in the year 1836. He'd arrived with a Fiddler and ended up as buckshot wedged in the ass crack of Davey himself, his pellet-like proportions lucklessly added to a muzzle blast by the fighting xeno-anthropologist.

That scientist, not near the top of his class, felt genius at work when he pushed Birdshot into the rifle's maw, hoping to re-engineer a historical crisis. That Davey had reared up and taken a slice of the fusillade wasn't part of the plan, but nature, above all else, could be counted on for a sense of humor.

Forty years later, another enterprising Fiddler had Birdshot along, freshly programmed to give General Custer an advantage. He had stuffed the tiny implant into the general's turkey dinner, food-borne buckshot common.

Too bad Birdshot had ideas of his own, allowing yet another student to anticipate slaving compliance. The battle didn't go well for anyone but the indians, and several years later, a desperate Fiddler scavenged him from Custer's West Point Cemetery grave with fresh designs.

Off to Andromeda for more unsatisfying campaigns, but here he was, back on Earth, a picture of feminine vigor perched on his lap, looking again at the highest office in the land.

Sissy squirmed suggestively. "You're going to need the right image. And no man can get elected President without a supportive mate."

Birdshot quickly reviewed all the various forms of co-habitation he had endured, and smiled. "It's an asset, no denying that. How 'bout we go upstairs, and explore that?"

NINE

Jeb caught a good-sized bass for breakfast, and skillet-fried it over a small green wood fire at the water's edge. Billie Sue added some garnish, describing it as "a mixture of things from all over the panoply."

She said, "Let's go get your dog. A man ain't complete without his dog." Jeb realized again how much he was attracted to this woman, or whatever Billie Sue was. Frankly, everything worked like a real live female, and that was good enough.

"That'd be great. How do we do that?" He was getting dangerously close to asking for answers beyond his grasp, and waited patiently. Billie Sue stirred the dying fire, pushing embers with a stick, one by one forming a cone to prolong the warmth.

"I said earlier we travel by elevators that themselves must be moved to get to some places. It's not important to understand how that works, only that we can go anywhere we wish, almost.

"We are not on Earth now, but this planet is a facsimile of many worlds, this little region my patch. You with me so far."

"I'll keep up."

"I believe there's been a mix-up. You were confused with a Fiddler, or his agent that will factor in the coming crisis. I believe he'd been planted as the Governor of Tennessee."

"That past tense?"

"Oh, once they figure out the faker is still running around, they'll off him. Prob'ly dead already. That's standard procedure."

"Oh, God, I'm losing it."

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“Sorry. The universe is a big place, and most everywhere, a real wild west.”

“West?”

“Slow down, country boy. Let’s get back to the tangible. Okay, when we climb into that outhouse, I can tell that little volume of space to find another portal, and since I got a map, sort of, I can pick exactly the one we want.”

“Explain to me why I ended up in a space ship.”

“The Fiddler who took your place thought he was replacing the Governor of Tennessee which makes this a Big Deal. That’s an official term. It means an historical adjustment, or tinkering that might be undoable.

“Since they already had a fake Governor in office, well on his way to becoming your country’s leader, it was important to make a quick, quiet swap. I’m sure somebody higher up wasn’t pleased with the current stand-in. That happens all the time.”

She paused a minute, urging sufficient gravity. “Jeb, trust me, I don’t approve of all Fiddlers. These zeros, most anyway, think they’re the smartest gals in any room.”

“So why are you here? Don’t get me wrong, I already can’t imagine leaving you Billie Sue, but how do we fit together?”

“The usual way last night,” she giggled, some of the tension escaping. “I’m here to help you.”

He blushed earnestly, contracting back to a tight little knot, pushing against a strangeness that seemed a constant. “Let’s go then. I miss Toby.”

Billie Sue headed back up to the tree fort, and Jeb extinguished the fire country-style, standing upwind from the anything-but-sweet uric cloud that moved out across the diluting water.

* * * *

A surprisingly long time later Billie Sue climbed down the tree fort ladder. On her back was a camo-themed pouch, sewn directly to her similarly colored one piece overalls. Clipped to a flat hemp belt was a shiny device that might have been a cellphone.

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She walked directly to the boat, passing Jeb without a look. “Come on.” Jeb picked up the vibe and after the line was cast, they sped out of the cove at mid-throttle without a word. She had a set countenance that seemed uninviting and Jeb played along, his freshly minted perspective sundered once more. A sensation of learning swept through him, a forced reckoning that brought teachings at a high rate, some of which were sticking.

Billie Sue looked over. “This is a long lake, ‘bout fifty miles. I’ve programmed the boat to keep cruising as we’ll want the elevator in motion when we go. I’ll explain why later.” She released the controls, and the boat took over.

They climbed down and she pulled open the outhouse door. In a flat voice, he heard, “You might think I’m a magician, but once we go through that door, anything can happen. You ready for that?”

Since that was another unanswerable, he stepped in and took a professional second to inspect the design. No moving parts, which was good. *Less to break.*

Billie Sue joined him and pulled the rough-hewn door to. Jeb could see light coming in between the planks and thought he might figure out how it worked. A panel appeared where none had been before. It had a single column of four blinking lights of various colors, the top one red and the bottom blue like a visible spectrum.

He heard another distinct click and noticed Billie Sue has holding the silvery object from her belt. The lights fluttered in a code-like fashion and the boat rocked a bit from side to side. The cracks between the door planks, his only clue to the outside world went soot black, and he thought *outer space.*

“We in a space ship again?”

“Sort of. Let me concentrate.” A vertical stripe of intense light burst through the cracks, and then shut off. Something very near went “clunk” and Jeb knew they were no longer on a boat. *Just a feeling you get.*

Billie Sue said, “We’re on Ethyl’s bucket. Here we go.” The door creaked open on its own like a haunted house and Jeb saw they were in a store room, cords of wood stacked row after row. Billie Sue swept around with her eyes. “It’s for their engines. They’re wood-fired.”

“I know, save your questions.”

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“Jeb, Ethyl can be real testy. You probably caught her on a good day.”

“Why you say that?”

“You’re still alive. Maybe she took a fancy to you. I have.” She smiled, and Jeb saw a corner of her former self peeking out. “Billie Sue, just tell me what to do.”

“I’m going to give you a little bit of history, it’ll help you sort out what we’re likely to see.”

They both moved into the room.

“I’m ready.”

“Ethyl is posing as a travel agent. She cruises the local universe in this old busted ship, writing a travelogue for cover, and serving as a clandestine jump point for the elevator system. At any one time, thousands of such posers are webbing the cosmos. We just have to know where they are and then plan accordingly.

“I think I can follow that. What’s next?”

“Next, we find another elevator opening, one I know must be on this ship, and go to Earth.”

“I think I know why you believe that. I came from Earth to here. Doesn’t that mean there’s some kind of permanent connection?”

“Not exactly. Nothing lasts forever, but the rest of your guess is right. We can still use that link.”

“Billie Sue, I can help you find that elevator.”

“How?”

“Just follow your nose. It was down in the septic hold.”

“I don’t smell anything.” He blinked and thought, *She’s an alien, this stench’d knock a buzzard off a shitwagon.*

The moment they’d stepped out of the old outhouse, Jeb sensed with career-testing certainty they had found the ship. He said aloud, “Always know a meat-eater. Special kind of smell. Follow me.”

They passed down between the stacked logs and out a nearby door. Ahead was a circular staircase and Jeb took point, missing Toby now more than ever.

Three decks lower, the stairs ended in a narrow corridor stretching away to darkness. Jeb looked back up the cylindrical stairwell, immediately taken by an awareness of how far he’d come in two days.

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Discovering more about the nature of the universe than he could describe should have been enough for any man, but at his side stood someone just as infinite, a person who had come into his life just hours before, and with whom he imagined spending the rest of his days. He said without device, "I love you, Billie Sue."

She had taken a few tentative steps up the corridor and turned around. "You sure?"

"As sure as I've ever been. So let's get off this garbage can. I don't want to lose you, or my ass." Billie Sue liked the attitude, and skipped over for a quick hug.

"I'm not too worried about Ethyl. It's her crew, they're down right ugly. Unauthorized jump-pointing pisses 'em off. They have a primitive understanding of partnership, expecting instant results. To net it out, they like to get paid, which I don't do. Jump-points should be free for all travelers."

"I'm not touching that. Just follow me."

* * * *

Jump-pointers are a grudgingly necessary, but officially scorned force in interstellar travel. Regarded in governing circles as intransigent trouble-makers, they undertake lonely and hazardous duty with little oversight. Most such ships, way-stations for the outlying regions of space, operate on a shoestring budget, bumming tips, and attracting cheapskate vagabonds.

By comparison, in and between the central regions of most galaxies, well-lit and friendly elevators can be relied upon. Many even have attendants, well-scrubbed elderly gentleman with crisp uniforms and bits of wisdom for the weary traveler.

Not long after the universe was birthed anew, this time around, enterprising students and inveterate journeyman had cobbled together a make-shift method of getting to the next place. First the elevator principal was discovered, opening up the most densely populated sections of the visible universe. But this breed of travel-junky wanted more. He being and she-being, hand in hand, wanted to go somewhere new, really new.

They soon found the Milky Way Galaxy offered that wanted adventure. Described as a middlin' old collection of some hundred million stars and

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boring to any casual observer, something had happened there early on, something that made her a natural Tahiti. And the word got out - there's a place called Earth that has millions of different semi-intelligent species.

For that is what the early visitors had observed, Earth was covered, in little knots, with a similarly-featured biped creature so different from one other that they must be a different species. That assumption met all the rules, and was well on its way of becoming accepted inner-galaxy lore, scientifically vetted and roundly funny for as far as that explanation was meant to go.

It was the hilarity of the place, of course, which caused the largest ever cruise ship line's formation, catering to weekend empire builders, and humorists. For two point two million years this company grew, host to some of the most regal and foolhardy adventurers the universe could concoct.

Vast boats plied the heavens with hundreds of elevators, their doors snapping open and closed to personal growth, harmless practical jokes, and villany. The early trips were a little rough, Homo Habilis a poor social provider. By the time Neanderthal Man had reared up, the business was singing, and when Homo Sapiens appeared, the stock split.

But bad stuff started happening on this happy planet, and finally, after two back-to-back world wars, the edict came down.

Hands off. Under penalty of law.

The cruise line instantly went into receivership, driving a junk bond scandal that ended as witch hunts must with the prosecution of the innocent.

The elevator system returned to its former status, serving only the "good" places, and Earth was socially forgotten. But a good thing can't just die, like a dalliance with a personal toxin, the offspring linger on.

Independent malcontents rushed in to fill the presumed need, carving the outlying sectors of the major galaxies into a workable geometry with promised, but not-as-yet realized financial performance. *It's the guys who get in early who always make the big bucks.*

From 1950 until the late 70s, this ragtag group of far-flung jump-pointers bargained and schemed to create the perfect collective effort. Then, one day, a "real smart guy" came up with multi-level marketing,

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and the deal was cut. Everyone believed they were a founding member, but if you're not sending the contract, you're not vested.

This new secret society attracted the easy money crowd from a jillion worlds; big hat, no cattle. Ships unworthy for any safe purpose were pressed into service, their neglected operating costs suited to this start-up mentality. On the promise of "sign up anyone, and your pyramid will grow," a thousand battered, broken, and dangerous space ships blasted out, seeking high ROI.

And that is the history of one of Nature's biggest ever gags.

* * * *

Billie Sue held up an index finger to her lips, and shushed Jeb quiet. "No more talking. Let's find that elevator, and git."

Jeb's nose was good and clean, the air being foul, but free of antigens, nothing much caring to live there. "It's gotta be this way." They stopped at a three-way junction, and he sniffed like a bloodhound. "Gees, I wish Toby was here, we'd already be gone."

"Just pick one. I got a bad feeling they know we're here." Jeb took off, an olfactory bulb in motion, stomping ahead like a gray water diviner. He pushed open a sticky hatch, and looked inside. Against the wall was his old buddy the soldier, still dressed for the Great War.

Billie Sue poked her head in, and Jeb said confidently. "I was in here. I know where we are."

Two minutes later they found the septic hold, nothing having been touched. Billie Sue observed dryly, "This is surely Ethyl's dump. Look at that crap. Somebody knows how to screw up the works."

"That's my hand," declared Jeb. He let it hang, making sure the little lady knew where the line was drawn.

Under normal circumstances, a tiny tiff might have erupted, but practical alarm seized their attention with the sound of approaching footsteps. "It's now or never, babe." They climbed in the elevator, and Billie Sue yanked the general purpose controller off her belt. As she keyed a button sequence on the wall panel, she said cautiously, "I don't have time to calibrate this junker, so we could go anywhere."

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The ride was quicker, it seemed to Jeb, as they stepped out a moment later into a bright, blue room. He turned to Billie Sue and asked casually. "I think I figured out what's going on between Ethyl and you. She owns the part of space you need to get to your patch. Right?"

"Yep. That's right."

"You been paying her?"

"Nope. My ticket ran out."

"I'm not going to ask." He reached for his wallet as a neighborly gesture. "How much to settle up with her?"

"You wouldn't believe me. Ah, Hell, here's the deal. She expects me to get a newbie guy aboard every now and then. You know, some tender company."

"Glad we made up."

"Me too."

Jeb felt better. The place was sunny and comforting. Then his heart sank, and he said loudly, "We're not on Earth. I can tell."

"That's right, but it usually takes longer to develop that keen a sense of location."

"Grew up in the woods."

"Right."

They looked around, flexing their anxiety, ending up at each other's eyes. He said, "Okay, Billie Sue, I'm lost. You gotta find Earth for us. You gotta find me Toby."

She smiled reassuringly. "We will do that. Once I figure out exactly where we are, I'll plot a way to Earth."

"Plot? Isn't it just another jump?"

"No. We're back at the inner core of Andromeda. Still have about two million light years to go. When I panicked back there, I hit the Go Home button. It's the safest thing to do."

Jeb was focusing hard. It was time to get with this plan.

She continued, "We just reset to a standard elevator terminal. We're in a waiting room outside the main hall of an Andromeda station. They provide these so travelers can freshen up before hitting the station. Can be wild places."

"Like a bus station, or airport. I get it." He had no idea what was going on, but spoken belief occasionally precedes understanding. "Exactly, Jeb."

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And after we hit the facilities, let's find the Lift Diagram. Every station has one."

Jeb then noticed a bank of doors against the wall, symbols indicating anatomical distinctions. Three made sense, and one looked like something he'd seen late one night in Jackson, Mississippi.

TEN

The pace of life at the Residence notched up without any spoken acknowledgment, a quiet gossip burbling among the staff about the new tenor of “This Governor.” Meetings had more flair, if hyperbole, and a sense of building campaign momentum gradually took hold.

Almost daily, His Honor could be heard croaking behind closed doors, the protracted call cutting through walls and floors like an air raid siren. It was dismissed with fanciful speculation, just the Guv’ blowing off steam.

As the year 2015 closed out, TV crews came and went, everyone saying that magical word in hushed tones. “Iowa.”

Carpetbaggers from Washington swarmed into the mansion pushing polls and punditry, but the Governor had his own way of doing things, and no one running for the highest office had a more loyal staff. They knew to a man that their campaign was different, as was their candidate, and could be expected to reach the common American as no other had.

The Governor was looking alarmingly good. Sissy’s knowing ministrations had firmed him up, everywhere, and his gait had become confident, even swaggering.

During a casual get-together on the back lawn late one afternoon, five weeks after the largely-unguessed gubernatorial substitution, media malingerers stood around inhaling high-glycemic bribes; expected largess of the state machine.

A buffoonishly dressed fiftyish journalist, adorned with a pink bow tie and green waistcoat stood holding a towering plate of cheese balls arranged like something from the Plains of Giza. He ogled an apparently

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young female cub reporter standing a fearful ten feet away, mashed a two inch nut-encrusted sphere into his masticating orifice, and asked oversweetly, “Where’s His Honor? You seen him?”

“Stay away from me. You’re gross.” She moved off, using the buffet table as a tactical barrier.

Every man makes choices, and he pushed another lipid treat home thinking women were the only real enemy. A smartly dressed man jumped up on the wooden dais erected for impromptu Mansion stumping, and grabbed the mike. “We hot?”

He wore flashy druglord shoes and a designer suit spun by some rare Indian worm, endangered and then forgotten. Someone had fashioned him for the image of the “new southern man,” a small confederate flag neatly folded as a pocket square.

His rugged outdoorsy look communicated the spirit of honest work, but as he moved, a hard fake-tan line cut across his wrist, catching the eye of the pretty twenty-something reporter.

She had the schoolgirl gig going, her plaid skirt provocatively short, matched with a tight white curvy blouse. A low hedge of fluff ringed her neckline, and two pink bows clenched long strawberry blond pigtails.

Her employer had been led to believe she was a design student turned journalism major; the outfit explained as an abandoned item in her new apartment; some aging porn queen failing down on the payments.

The area before the speaking platform continued to fill, arriving career journalists fighting back wolfish grins at her taunting costume.

“Go ahead, mike’s on.”

He tossed his head around to affect some burnt-out but earnest surfer-boy, and flashed twenty-two grand in dental appliances. The crowd settled, having drawn short straws to cover another no-news event.

The editorials of the last few weeks were not unkind, but rather spoke of the new momentum riding a vapid wave. “Where are the plans? Where are the issues?” the plaintive sentiment.

The announcer spoke, “The Governor has a very demanding schedule, but would like to introduce a new campaign focus tonight. We expect him any minute.”

He stepped away quickly, the operation of limited short-term memory apparent. The mike was still on, and as he moved off the dais, everyone

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heard the decaying statement, “God, I hope he doesn’t do that frog thing!”

Rumors had gotten out, of course. Strange tales appearing in the Tennessee Bugler about a BigFoot-grade woods beast ranging the grounds, but gained little traction against the more sizzling suggestion that the Governor might be from way out of state.

The word *alien* hadn’t been used in print, perhaps because in these troubled times, it was felt, a really fresh perspective might not be all that bad. So the suspicious played it close, awaiting the Holy Grail of UFO debunking - physical evidence.

There was a hubbub, and The Governor bounded out, looking very fit and confident. Birdshot was about a billion years old, but felt sixteen, and commanded the body mercilessly, absolutely unconcerned of consequence.

“Gathered, let us pray.” Heads ducked as the price of admission, and he cleared his voice. “Oh multi-dimensioned being, that which guides the flesh and the firmament, be with us now. Lift our hearts and hands to your obedience.”

He been reading up on Alabama stump speeches, circa 1930. You always begin with a prayer. Then make a strong, even outrageous opening remark, and dodge the probing questions.

Five minutes max.

“I’ve been asked to state the direction of this campaign. Tonight I will do so. Our great state has always led. Davey Crockett, betrayed in Texas, was a man who saw the trail others missed, and carried forward.”

A writer in the audience scratched “Texas” on a small notepad, thinking it might be good for five hundred inflammatory words.

“I want everyone here, and all those who follow the core belief of ‘What one man can do’ to join this campaign. We need that, the state of Tennessee needs it, and the citizens of the entire universe would really be amused by it.”

A disconnect rippled though the crowd and was rapidly damped by relief, this fresh message actually newsworthy.

“This planet is ready for expansion into the cosmos, and the universe is ready to receive us. If we can band together and send a common message to our fellow galactic neighbors, I believe we can count on them to fill the

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ballot box and take This Governor, and This Administration all the way to the highest office in the land.”

He gave them a few seconds to absorb the volley, and continued in a softer voice, “I’ll take a few questions.” Sissy was waiting back in the Presidential suite, unpacking a large adult mail order delivery. Temperance Good checked his watch hopefully, and looked out over his believers.

A shilling plant asked, “Governor, are you saying there are extraterrestrials following this campaign?” It was a foppish question, but Birdshot knew they would take it easy. They loved him.

“I haven’t checked that poll, but yes, I believe the results of this critical election are being followed keenly all across the heavens.”

Carpal tunnel thumbs clicked away on their mated devices - this was something new! An actual position.

The cheese-eater put his plate down and signaled for attention. The Governor spotted him, sneered and quickly recovered. “You have a question?”

“Yes, Governor. Your second term has been marked by conservative station-keeping. Now that may be just what Tennessee wants, but this spatial directive seems to take-off in an entirely new direction. What is your flight plan?”

Birdshot visualized the reporter on fire, and stuck his chin out.

“We’re in the final days of the year twenty fifteen. We have been to the Moon, a while ago, and sent flimsy robots to other places. I’m talking about reaching out, far out, to the unheard voices. I’m talking about a big table, with lots of chairs, and some new deals.”

Another hand flew up. It was the coquette, every eye turned to her. He nodded with a whimsical smile, and she pushed up on her tiptoes to give everyone a good view. “Sir, we’ve all seen your dramatic transformation in the last month. What changed?”

Birdshot was giddy with lust as primal forces in the captive meat puppet raged against draconian muscular control. His chest swelled magnificently, and a few ladies near his feet sucked in their breath. Throwing his head back hard, he released a building bullfrog call.

The mike picked up the feed, filling the seven acre clearing with a caterwauling bellow punctuated by a quick lusty snort.

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The Governor took a step back, bowed, and left the podium gracefully.

* * * *

The Nashville Tennessean printed its first issue on May 12, 1907. Its roots go back farther still to the Nashville Whig which began publication in 1812. Across two centuries, these fine papers served the people of Tennessee, placing on the common man's morning step stories from the next county, and around the world.

After the Governor's short speech, the Tennessean's forty inch web presses ran all night, a good-sized stand of trees slaughtered to the public good. The cub reporter had gotten her byline, her fifteen minutes, splashed across the front page, above the fold.

DECEMBER 28, 2015.

**THE GOVERNOR'S NEW CONSTITUENTS - ET
WORKING THE PHONES?
BY CONSTANCE PERLEY-MOSS**

GOVERNOR GOOD ADDRESSED THE MEDIA LAST EVENING AT HIS MANSION, LOOKING HALE AND READY FOR BATTLE. IT WAS A SHORT SPEECH, DIRECTED AGAINST COMPLAINTS OF A LACKLUSTER CAMPAIGN. WHILE SOME HAVE DESCRIBED THE GOVERNOR AS DETACHED, EVEN ABSENT, HE MADE HIS POINT LAST NIGHT - THE ALIENS ARE WATCHING, AND THEY VOTE!

FRESH SPECULATION IMMEDIATELY AROSE THAT THE GOVERNOR MIGHT BE REPRESENTING HIS OWN - BEINGS FROM ANOTHER WORLD. GIVING CREDENCE TO THIS SENTIMENT WAS THE BIZARRE CROAKING

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CALL HE EMITTED BEFORE LEAVING THE STAGE. AND WHILE IT IS REFRESHING TO SEE GOVERNOR GOOD FINALLY TAKING A STAND FOR SOMETHING, THIS REPORTER IS NOT SURE IF THIS STATE CAN AFFORD THE LONG DISTANCE CALLS.

The editorials lit up with vigor, finally something to get the election going. Local TV networks re-ran the speech throughout the day, and it was picked up by the nationals. From there it went international, the translations tricky.

But if the words could not find foreign meaning, the bullfrog call to exploration captured the world mind. In a week The Governor was grinning on every newsweekly, the Residence phones going crazy; Oprah holding on four.

A thousand shock jock radio personalities went to town, and late night talk shows got new viewers.

It was *the* topic. Could he really be from another planet? Was this the beginning of something new, or just an invasion?

Unlike Davey Crockett's age, the time was right for a really fresh genome. Maybe it was time also to get on the winning team, and throw in with the off-worlders.

The Mansion's PR machine offered no statement, refusing to even discuss extraterrestrials. Some thought was given to floating the rumor of pneumonia, but he just looked too good.

Governor Good was!

It was New Year's eve 2015, and everyone was talking "The Iowa," as they called the upcoming caucus. They'd find out then if their space ship had wings.

Lying in a disaster panic of broken blow-up dolls and battery-powered sex toys, Sissy and Birdshot were watching the Presidential Suite VideoWall and eating frozen candy bars.

"We might have got all the best mileage we can from that alien angle," observed Sissy.

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His Honor stopped mid-chomp and spit a peanut thirty feet. It struck the window resoundingly and he grunted. "I think it's working real well. In fact, I think it's my platform's central plank."

"It's been good, Governor, don't get me wrong. It's just that those votes from out there in space are fantasy. We need real votes."

"Maybe I can get the immigration laws relaxed."

"What?"

"I don't know, maybe I can get a few hundred million spacemen to come here, get 'em registered and stuff the box."

Sissy knew everything was not as it might seem with Temperance Good. He was an insatiable sexual athlete and didn't even sleep. His nightly two-bottle nightcap would surely kill any of the the front-runners, which might be useful later in the campaign, but his behavior was getting very strange. She had to admit to herself, however, that in politics it was the polls that made the truest sound and his were red hot with approbation.

"Okay, let's play that one a bit more."

"I'm glad you agree. Now, do any of these devices of yours still work?"

ELEVEN

“This place have beer?” asked Jeb after they’d washed up.

“Of course, follow me. I know my way around.”

Jeb watched Billie Sue’s cute derriere sashay out the door, and a moment later they entered a great hall that took his remaining breath away.

It was the biggest place he’d ever seen. Forget LP Field where the Tennessee Titans played, that was a bowling alley by comparison. A mile across, its outer walls soared three hundred feet above into a glassy dome that was hazy with the perspiration of tight travel plans and missed connections.

The massive volume was oval at ground level, and all around its periphery were stalls, a million barking vendors pimping the trash of as many worlds. It was instantly overwhelming, the scale way out of proportion to Jeb’s experience, but even that recognition did nothing to prepare him for the smell of pungent meat turning on a thousand spits.

Like a tea party mum stranded in New Delhi, he grabbed Billie Sue’s hand and yanked it excitedly. Over the din he beseeched her, “Come on. I’m so hungry I could eat the ass out’a dead dog.” She winced, but breakfast seemed an incalculable time ago, and anyway, Jeb needed to overload before they could move on.

Creatures were rushing everywhere, a complete chaos of action and noise. Jeb got bumped, and then again, and decided to pretend he was in New York, just like when they took that class trip.

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His hunger derailed by the sensory onslaught, he slowed his mind down to take it all in. Face after face came at him, and many, most in fact, only vaguely human. The natural inclination to classify, even according to number of limbs was fruitless, so great was the variety and pace. It was like he had been dropped into a radioactive forest fire, the fleeing creatures already mutated.

He turned to Billie Sue in a near convulsion, some already-tensed critical breaker ready to pop. Seeking a familiar sign, she pulled him down through a row of flashing kiosks filled with talking sunglasses and pushed on a tiny opening at the back of a huge animated head.

The door snapped closed with a click behind them, and she asked, "Had enough?"

"What kinda shit was that? It was like a million circus freaks, and every carnival in the world stuffed into one place."

"Many worlds actually, Jeb. Look, all across the myriad worlds of the universe there's one thing known for sure - funny looking folks travel a lot. The philosophers say it's a never-ending escapist act. I think it's just amusing."

It was surprisingly quiet in the dim five by ten foot storeroom. Along both walls were shelves packed tight with smiling heads, many completely alien. Against the far wall was a large mirror, the reflection somehow not quite right. "What's this place, or should I ask?"

"It's a kind'a breathing room. This plastic head manufacturer always provides such before he rushes you to buy a personal upgrade. Let's you start doubting yourself. We've got about three minutes."

"I need a beer, babe. Just get me into a bar. I got some drinking to do." She could see Jeb was nearly unhinged. Maybe he was right, a little buzz might help. "Okay, when we exit, I'm going to take you directly across the hall to a dark little place I know. Be about five hundred yards. You up for that?"

"Yes. Go."

They heard a voice approaching from the front, the proprietor hustling a cranial tune-up, "Yeah, you can have thirty days on that head, but I gotta check the rear office. A *buying* customer's waiting." As the salesman entered for a fresh campaign, he saw a blur of motion, and they were gone.

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Like fire-walling a Yugo onto the Autobahn, Billie Sue stormed ahead, Jeb clutching dearly. It was a standard rushing offense, straight to the goal line. Billie Sue was attractive, and could count on deference in more courteous settings, but here it was push, jink, and jive.

They pummeled across the expanse and Jeb spotted their destination. It was a facsimile of a redneck bar, all done up in confederate flags and NASCAR ads.

Over the entrance was a lurid red neon caricature of a buxom cowgirl breaking a mustang, her long hair flying back from an oversized cowboy hat. Above that flashing graphic was a sign that said simply “Jeff’s.”

Billie Sue slipped the Frankenstein bouncer something, and he motioned to a corner booth. A moment later they were seated, taking in the surroundings. Low log rafters crossed in shadow above them, held up by scantily lit walls that were covered with memorabilia, much of which Jeb recognized.

“It’s a franchise, Jeb.”

“God, I need a drink.”

“Settle down. The house draft is good. Order two.”

“What’ya having?”

“You *are* upset.” She got the server’s attention and an obvious robot came to their table. He appeared about sixty, with long stringy hair, and seemed familiar. Jeb got it a second later, “You’re Jerry Jeff, ain’t you?”

The robot pushed a cowboy hat back, asking, “You long-necking it tonight?”

At home a trillion miles from it, Jeb ordered, “Two of your homebrews for me and the missy’ll have a Bud.”

The robotic singer moved away with gleaned dispatch and Jeb sputtered excitedly, “That guy wrote ‘Up against the Wall Redneck Mother’. He’s a freaking legend.”

“Freak is about right. That’s a cheap robot, Jeb. They’re everywhere. Wait ‘til you get a load of Jenna Jameson.”

The drinks arrived, and Jeb held his bottle up, ready for a toast. It took her a second, but then she mimicked his action. He said proudly, “Here’s to the best friend I ever had.”

A chugging contest came out of the blocks and they both drained their bottles, zero to sixty in five seconds flat. Jeb cracked his down and grabbed

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the second. Billie Sue shot a hunted look, and he tipped his beer into hers, giving half.

She waved at Jerry Jeff, a local hand gesture to say “keep ‘em coming.”

Three more rounds came and went, and they shifted into maintenance-drinking. Not much had been said, she knew Jeb was seeking a state of mind from which he might make some sense of the past two days.

“Jeb, it’s time I told you a little more. I’ve already explained your abduction by some unsavory people with possible designs on Earth’s next US Presidential election. Luckily they thought it was worth looking into why you, or rather the existing Governor had failed. By the way, did you know you looked like the Tennessee Governor?”

“I don’t look nothing like that fag. I didn’t vote for him. Anyway, I don’t look like him.”

“Then why’d they mistake you for him?”

“We’ll never know. And I doubt the real Governor gets caught taking a leak in the woods.”

She let that go, still stumped by this hole in her reconstruction.

“Anyway, they didn’t kill you right away, which I’m glad about, but which is also uncommon. Then you got pushed back up to Ethyl’s ship. That sound right?”

Jeb nodded, warm from the beer and ready for some understanding. He might have grown up in rural Tennessee, and skipped college “to get a real job,” but things had changed, and he better change with them.

“Billie Sue, I know you’ll take care of me. All I want right now is a few more beers. Then let’s go get my dog. That’ll make me feel whole.”

“We will. First, let’s discuss a problem you got.”

The beer softened his response. “Tell me. I knew there had to be more.”

“This problem is not just yours. It concerns all the people living on Earth, as well as those of us who love the place.”

She pushed her beer to the side as a gesture of focus. “Like the internet businesses that flew up on your planet at the end of the last century, there is now widespread belief that early adopters can corner the resurgent transportation market and leverage that position when outlying elevator travel becomes popular again.

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“A pyramid scheme has developed to encourage these get-rich types to tool around the loneliest corners of the far-flung reaches of space and serve as remote moving platforms to extend the reach of the inner core elevators. You with me.”

“I did Shaklee for a while. I get it.”

“Right. Soaps and vitamins. I’ll bet business went dead once you pissed off your family and friends.”

“Pretty much. I’m still hearing about that. Makes holidays a real drag.”

“Right. So creatures like Ethyl want the traffic, even if it isn’t all paying, just for the hits. That’s why she has a love/hate relationship with free-loaders like me. But more importantly, she knows that its the hits she records, one for each person who jumps through her ship on an elevator, that’ll get her to the next level.”

“Level?”

“Like any multi-level house-of-cards, the founders promise the world, or the universe, collect usurious entry fees from the gullible and drive a self-igniting mania outward until it implodes. Because of the scale of this particular scam, it’ll have legs for years.”

Jeb sat back, seeing the twelve hundred in vitamins he’d bought from his Shaklee Level Three Team Leader in a different light. It’d been all his cash, the promise of overnight success writing the check. Billie Sue continued, obviously driven by a fear she couldn’t quite describe.

“This deal is huge, Jeb. We should look into it.”

Jeb realized at that instant that she saw a future together, and that changed everything. Up until that moment, it was minute by minute. Now, he had a shadowy framework for the future, one that included Billie Sue in this new time.

But no more of that Shaklee shit!

His eyes unfocused, bad memories grabbing him hard. Billie Sue’s fears seemed frankly distant, he was more concerned about how to make a living. Then maybe-possibly even settle down with this woman. But balancing her against these confusing ambitions was beyond his experience. It would be the first important challenge in this new life, and he did what came natural.

“Hey, Jerry Jeff, can you scrounge us up something a little stronger?”

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Turning back to Billie Sue, he saw there'd been a misstep. She said evenly, "You took off real far that time, country boy. You thinking a movin' on?"

"Whoa, where'd that come from?"

A couple of shots slammed down on the table, and Jerry Jeff picked up the vibe. He started humming real low, Jeb catching the reference - *Desperados Waiting For The Train*.

He crossed eyes with the aging cowboy, and they passed the baton, one each direction. Robot and Man, each in that trench.

Jerry Jeff beckoned to a barman who brought over his guitar. He kicked back a chair, and sat down, fine tuning the instrument into a song. The strumming was wonderful, its soft voice casting a warmth like a log fire, enveloping the new lovers.

It was sad old tune, boy and girl meeting on the road. Burned pasts finding anonymous solace. Plans made and broken, storms and quiet beaches.

Jeb sucked back a tear, and Billie Sue was smiling, all teeth and sweetness.

It ended too soon, and as Jerry stood up Jeb fished out a couple of crumpled ones. His wad, never heavy, seemed light in this uncertain world, causing him to reflect again he'd have to get work.

Billie Sue jumped up and hugged Jerry Jeff. "That was beautiful. Thanks for reminding us of things we already knew."

"Yes, ma'am, we all need reminding." He spotted another couple in distress and shuffled off, Buddha with a six shooter.

They kissed, and Jeb asked, "I wasn't thinkin' of leaving you. I was just having confusing thoughts. I don't want to ever lose you, it's just I don't fit in yet, and some multi-level bullshit is not for me. Been there, done that."

"Jeb, I didn't mean we should invest, I meant investigate."

As if Jeb's world hadn't grown enough in two days, the suggestion of meddling in a broken business strewn across space was beyond him. "You mean we should try to get involved with them, but only to find out how they work?"

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“No. I know all I want to know about that. I’m more concerned these new marauders are letting anyone through, and the creeps that are going to Earth now are troublemakers.”

“What has changed, Billie Sue?” He was trying to penetrate her concern, but he had so little context on anything.

“People like Ethyl are not concerned with the long-term. They move from one scam to the next, and there’s so much chaos in their scattered lives they can’t see two weeks ahead. I’m pretty sure some real bad folks have some real bad plans for Earth. Rich biosphere to plunder, and all that.”

“Tell me more, that’s a cold fear you got.”

“Jeb, a few hundred years ago a Fiddler could incite a local panic, but now the ABC weapons Man possesses are planet-killing. “

“ABC?”

“Atomic, biological, and chemical. Real crowd-pleasers. I understand there’s about a hundred thousand nuclear weapons, all fully operational, on Earth right now. Each can kill millions. That’s a big problem.”

He urged gently, “It’s a threat, but something you learn to live with. To get at them, these Fiddlers would have to get into the government, or military. That can’t be easy.”

“Jeb, old elevator law prevented any clones, or duplicates of VIPs to travel to sensitive planets. That’s code for unstable, and Earth quickly gained the highest classification. Because of the absence of guidelines, any being can be made up to look like an existing leader, or triggerman. So, the power has absent-mindedly been transferred to these MLM guys, and for Earth, that means Ethyl.”

“Oh.”

“Right, honeybee.” She winked at him, and he smiled back.

They both took a deep breath. Billie Sue said, “Let me buy you a fine dinner. Then we’ll get you back to Toby.”

TWELVE

Sissy yawned crudely, her mouth open like a Hindenburg hanger and then scrunched her face into a whistle shape. A falsetto croaking call issued from her lips, a bit wheezy and thin.

“No, you got to breathe from your chest. That ougta’ be easy for you with that rack,” chided Birdshot.

Sissy pulled her Victoria’s Secret nightie close, and gave him the look of the scorned artist. “I thought it was fine. Not as deep as yours, but I got range and duration. I can croak longer than you, alien man.”

Temperance winced. “Hey, let’s lay low on that alien shit. Don’t want to feed them rumors.”

She folded her arms and looked defiantly across the half-acre bed. Birdshot was in deep with her, he knew. She had guessed way too much about him. *Might need to be a correction there*, he thought slyly.

But she had her charms, and not all here in the Presidential. She knew Earthly politics. More importantly, she could maneuver within Tennessee politics.

Sissy didn’t like his sudden look. “You thinking bad thoughts?”

“No, I just have a terrific inner dialogue.”

“Don’t you mean voices? Plural.”

“You got voices too, woman. I hear ‘em.”

That stopped her, and she tilted her perky head like a quizzical hound. “Really?”

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“Shit yeh, they’re coming in real clear. Like standing under some goddam FM radio tower.” Birdshot had pulled that out of his ass. He was about as clairvoyant as asphalt.

Sissy was her own favorite topic and he had her hooked. “Well, what are they saying then?” Sissy had been around championship liars for a full year, getting six semester hours credit at below minimum wage. She’d heard more than her share of smoke and pipe dreams. A summary was simple: the guard staff were a bunch of cop rejects, and the Governor, at least before his prison experience, was as slippery as effluent.

But something had changed, really changed with His Honor, the man or whatever he’d become was a new force; confident, positive, and athletic.

Maybe a little too athletic. Her first year at college had been a rodeo, but man! nothing like Temperance.

The Governor framed his response carefully, tempted to reach through that portal to a parallel universe. The voices there, too many to count, could be relied upon for ideas, but the signal to noise was real low.

He trusted Sissy more than any being with whom he’d ever crossed wits. And maybe he trusted her enough to solve this problem alone. Maybe enough to leave the cacophony of advice for another time.

“They say sweet things, Sissy. They love you, and so do I.”

This was a trial balloon for Birdshot, something he’d heard worked some of the time - being nice to people.

She kicked her head back a bit and gave him a torn look. “Really. You just saying that?”

“I am saying it because I mean it. Come here and give me a squeeze.”

She shimmied across the bed, a robotic blow-up doll tumbling off the distant corner. *Maybe he is weird, but* The sentence swept away with her fears, all caution switched off.

They wrestled playfully into each others’ arms and tussled and eventually flopped over on their backs, breathing hard.

“Sissy, what’s going to happen in Iowa?”

“Well, it’s all about getting delegates. You get enough there, we’re on the big scorecard. The political junkies really watch that state, someone long ago deciding those flat-landers were representative.

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“Then you go to the other states, tune your message, and get anointed by the Republican party as the likeliest to beat the democratic Beelzebub. From there on out, it’s a slugfest.”

The Governor smiled devilishly. “I can handle that part. It’s getting those early steps to go. What’s our strength?”

Sissy knew something was going on. This supposed creature from the stars learned new stuff when the mood was on him, but his understanding of past events and common knowledge was shallow. Either he was suddenly brain-damaged from the drinking, or some idiot was in there with him.

But political campaigns had gotten so intense and fake by any metric that he might just be the man, or whatever, to go all the way. And she’d be at his side.

First Lady. It had a saccharine ring, but maybe she could come up with a new title. First Consort, or bring back the royal trappings to get a queen thing going. Some alien, and the new Queen. She liked it.

Her answer came across as mostly sincere. “You have a loyal constituency. And your national profile is, ah, a combination of benevolent indifference, and persistence.”

“Is that valuable for the Presidency?”

“Those are good traits. I believe we’re at a point right now, with all the warmongering out there where people want a strong leader who’s ready to fight.” She paused, and then added, “Even more importantly, our next national leader must be transcendently capable enough to keep us from that war.”

Birdshot perked up. “What makes you suspect war? The briefings I get seem harmless. Just a bunch of bottom feeders bitching and moaning about nothing. I could take them in a week.”

“But would you? The smart play is to manage the power ‘cause then you get the money.”

“And then you get the women.”

She elbowed him hard, and he laughed, intensely amused by the whole human mechanism.

“Look Temperance, I’m not going to say you haven’t changed, and I mean a lot. I don’t care, I just want *us* to win that Presidential election. Take me to the White House. I’d fit right in.”

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Birdshot observed to himself that fate had placed a strong ally at his disposal, someone who cut could corners and navigate the system. And someone who would leave him alone to build his next organization.

“You got it. We’re both going to fit in there. I know I put off this vote-chasing until the last possible minute. What’s our next step?” His voice was strong and assured.

“You should have gone earlier, but tomorrow we get in your jet and blast out to Iowa. Your team has everything ready. You just have to show up.”

“I get the picture.” He checked his watch. “Let’s get one of your favorite movies going, and maybe I’ll fix that doll.”

* * * *

After they’d made love to exhaustion, he got up quietly and found his way to the attic. Over the past few months he’d squirreled away the better things in life there and put a big-ass padlock on the door.

Cases of the finest liquor and imported fine foods all ready-in-the-can. That they were in reality relabeled ready-to-eat army meals black-marketed out of some Hellhole skirmish never crossed his mind.

Coupla’ turns of the long topside key and you were eating like a king.

He plopped down into an overstuffed Barca-Lounger, reached into a chairside copper kettle and wrapped his paw around Old No. 7, his favorite Tennessee Sippin’ Whiskey. It was already open, nothing vital enough to venture in. He flipped a hidden panel in the chair arm back and pulled out a four ounce shot glass.

Governor size, he thought. Maybe big enough to hold the Presidency.

Considering his inner circle, he knew Sissy could be counted on for her own reasons, just like his other steady confidante.

The Chief had seen the promise, his knowledge of men guiding him from the instant he saw the Governor rear up from the gurney, alive with hot sauce. It had been an epiphany, even a Theophany.

The Chief liked revival night, and had often spoken in tongues. Most involved high octane ritualistic libations, but some of it came from the heart. Deep down, he loved his crew and even the Governor, especially now he’d found a pair.

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Temperance Good pushed well back into the Big Man's chair and visualized his early cabinet. Sissy as mine sweeper, the Chief running interference. *So far, so Good.*

Maybe that's why his original controllers had selected Temperance Good, Governor of Tennessee as their next fulcrum, a visible crack for their impatient lever.

Birdshot knew all this, knew he'd been pushed along on the trip by some conniving sort who had himself been out-connived. He was his own man now, but he admitted to himself their original plan was bolder than anything he had ever considered.

Shooting for the top slot on any planet was expressly verboten, but every problem presents an opportunity, and the collapse of out-world governance was his gain. Before it returned, and it would, he needed to get ensconced. Established. Made king.

Temperance was a good target, he realized. That individual, whom he'd vaporized without regard, had somehow created a loyal, if stupid, staff. And loyalty went a long way in those early days when discovery, or more likely death of the host, was a constant threat.

He would survive, of course, to be picked up again by another schemer. But each cycle was nothing like regular, it could be ages again before such corruptible circumstances presented themselves.

His shot glass received another bracer, time for some plotting. Tomorrow he'd go sailing on "The Iowa," heading out on a long metaphorical sea voyage. Up until now, he stood behind the fortress of close quarters, but upon the 'morrow, it'd be battle stations.

The bottle shattered when it hit the trash can, and The Governor of Tennessee, the Honorable Temperance Good, staggered down to the Presidential to see if Sissy could be aroused once more.

THIRTEEN

The meat puppet body he had appropriated was a standard issue protoplasmic bio-machine, engineered for field duty, and warranted for three weeks. Happily, claims were few, missions seldom lasting that long.

Most failures were chocked up to light planning, but deeper threads ran through the whole program of amusing infiltration. The blank clones were made for harmless pranks and a few good laughs back at the lodge. And yet Earth had had two world wars, and the people who made law smelled devilry.

The edict that came down was clear. Stay away from the unstable places, and don't impersonate. They might have looked the other way for gags like music piracy, but blowing up cities was uncool. With the new guidelines in place, these beings of great learning turned to other pressing matters - interstellar lottery fixing, and space ship chop shops.

It was now January 2, 2016. The rain was falling biblically, and The Governor's jet sat at the runway run-up area, number two behind an AirEcuador Cargo DC-3, four thousand kilos bound for Buffalo.

Birdshot liked machines, being something of a machine himself. He sat in the jump seat between the pilots, scanning the flat panels, trying to make sense of all the symbols and lines. On his head sat the latest in sound-clamping headgear and it was whisper quiet.

"Tennessee One Echo Bravo, you are cleared for the active. Hold in position." The DC-3 had fire-walled its aging rotary piston engines and was lumbering away. They pulled out on the runway, and Birdshot looked

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down the ribbon of concrete before them. Its end was lost in ground fog, forbearance against IFR departures below minimums being ignored. The tower boys were on the drug-runner's extensive payroll, and The Governor was "hands off."

If you want to take off in this, good luck. I didn't vote for you.

The DC-3 got swallowed up in the wall ahead, and Birdshot pulled an ear cup away, listening for the crash. Twenty seconds later the tower spoke again. "Tennessee One Echo Bravo, departure approved as filed. Direct Des Moines. Climb and maintain flight level three six zero."

The pilots did some technical stuff, and the one on the left pushed the center levers forward. Birdshot heard the ferocious engines in his uncovered ear and removed his head phones. *This was exciting!*

By 2016, everyone wore ear protectors when flying, and the engine designers knew this. To get the increasing power needed to stay competitive, they had let the decibels creep back up, ninety five dBs of rock concert assault now considered unactionable.

The mid-size jet accelerated like an SRB and lifted off into a complete white-out. Birdshot felt his meat puppet host squirm and realized this extreme act of faith had awakened a deeply buried primitive mind. One that might be beyond his control.

He once again felt the temptation to reach for the shouting chorus of a million unbridled intellects, just a parallel universe poke away, but took a deep breath and willed himself still.

"You okay Governor?" The co-pilot had taken his headset off and was yelling. Birdshot put his headphones back on and the co-pilot snapped his into place. "Governor, are you okay? Taking off into fog can be real scary."

They were climbing sharply, better than ten thousand feet per minute.

The pilot put her into a steep bank, a hard climbing turn to the west. The numbers on the colorful panels were all changing rapidly, and Birdshot had no idea what they meant. He asked, "Can you explain some of this to me? The flying."

The pilots exchanged a quick look, and the co-pilot said, "This jet, your jet, is very new. It's wicked fast, and climbs like a fighter. I understand you approved that investment."

It wasn't a question, and Birdshot knew this guy was on the team.

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The Governor was all business. “Yes, it’s a great time saver. Tell me about this flight. How far, how fast, how soon?”

The co-pilot turned a switch and typed in a few character strings. Pointing to the right side flat panel screen he said, “Here’s our flight plan.” It was a computer diagram, lines and shapes that created a moving facsimile of the surface features passing below them.

Birdshot studied the screen for several seconds, saying nothing. Inferring he’d want more, the co-pilot turned a knob, and the scale shot out to show their entire course. He continued, “The airport on the right is where we departed, and that yellow graphic is a nighttime representation of the Des Moines city lights.”

The Governor asked, suddenly interested, “But it’s morning. How long will it take to get there?”

“Not long. It’s about six hundred miles, we do that in an hour. *Better than that when we’re alone.* We’ve got some headwind, but we may be able to get a more favorable altitude. In any event, we’ll be there for lunch.”

“Good, I didn’t have any breakfast. Guess I was excited to go flying.”

Thinking food, he thanked the pilots, and stood up. Making to remove his headphones, the pilot turned and said curtly, “Leave those on, Governor. You’ll go deaf in an hour.”

He nodded, pushed open the flight deck door and passed by the lavatories, one marked ‘BUSY’, and then the galley. The main cabin was lavish, all hardwoods, polish and leather. Seated in comfortable club chairs were Sissy, The Chief, and two of the security staff, Larry and Ernie. A petite flight attendant was bending over to fill The Chief’s drink. She had on a diminutive miniskirt which exposed her wonderful ass and he drank it in, black panties and all.

The Governor cleared his voice into the sound damping microphone below his lips and they all turned.

It was a bit unnatural using a radio to communicate across a few feet, but the suffering Hammers of Hell occupied the cabin like a living thing. It was all displacing, yet in the calm of their headsets, nothing more than a distant rustle.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

He needed an opening banter. “I just got a short lesson in flying, and I believe we’re in *Good* hands.” He couldn’t help himself, a play on his name amusing him every time like a slow child’s top. They chuckled through their headgear, and he took a seat that had obviously been left empty for him.

It was the commander’s throne, complete with smaller versions of the flight instruments and an ebony inlaid holder for his cut glass tumbler. The pretty attendant brought over an Old No. 7 on a linen draped silver platter, its edges machined into a difficult scallop, emphasized just because they could.

Everything was as it should be. Temperance leaned back and closed his eyes. He’d twice resisted the common practice of reaching through to the thoughts of the “parallel others.” And he didn’t understand why.

True, opening a momentary portal to the vast, screaming blizzard of a billion minds was stupefying, and sometimes, immolating. But through that white noise on the other side ran courses of coolness too, songs so coherent that instant and dependent oneness arose, those special enslaving sirens’ calls irresistible.

Once heard, they would be forever-after sought. A ruinous moment of perfect communication, a complete and utter simpatico that shattered all inner barriers and aged self-knowledge profoundly.

Birdshot had gotten a taste of that drug-like discourse and every third waking thought took him back there. A dip into that well of noise was wrenching, but the promise was there - *you may hear me again*.

The plane rocked hard, spilling the drinks, and then it hit another microburst. This one was its big brother, packing a twenty thousand feet per minute downdraft and it slammed the jet hard.

In the cockpit, shit was going way wrong, the boys having just set up the first round. On a short flight like this they could usually be depended to polish off a pint, over ice. They were sipping Old No. 7 too, flying down the Victor Airway with a ‘lil bit of Tennessee hitch’n along.

The co-pilot had worked on the airplane a little in a back hanger. He’d sawed a hole from the flight deck rear wall to the adjacent head and installed a switch to lock that lavatory off from the cabin. Using the handy water and power hookup, and the clean power of their spooling Auxiliary

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Power Unit, they had a genteel still cooking away for those coast-to-coast slogs.

Homeland Security wasn't up to speed on the modification, nor was the FAA. A million regulations had been summarily ignored, but if you were going to have a few in the air, what's a class two misdemeanor for interstate liquor smuggling.

We're talking felony, but flying attracts the daring. And compared to the mayhem not uncommon back there with the GuvNur's party, who'd care?

The co-pilot pulled out a roll of paper towels and sopped up the boys' beverage. The left seat aviator, pilot in command, checked the forecast on the weather depicter, and said, "We're in for some shit. Tops at flight level five two zero. Can't climb over it. Sigmets everywhere."

Sigmets, or significant meteorological events, were bad news to most aircraft. The co-pilot put the whiskey away - this was going to be a dry flight.

The left wing banked up abruptly, rotating the aircraft right over on its back and then with a shudder, through a complete roll. Sirens went off all over the panel and the pilots put on their oxygen masks.

Flying at thirty six thousand feet, the air is thin, and perfect aerodynamic control illusory. They killed the autopilot, strangers to actually flying at altitude and began working through the emergency procedures.

With such rarified air and a near tumbling flight profile, they had true danger, the loss of the engines. Those big turbines, over-optimized for terrific power were a work of Man, and all such devices have their compromises. This design favored power over in-air restart capability, the latter never happening because no one was damned fool enough to fly through such a volcano of moving air.

The turbines whined well over spec and suddenly quit. They had attempted to suck in what little air they could autonomously, but given their useless angle of attack, the air was ripping another direction. The program's simple logic concluded that the plane was now over the Moon, or some other airless place, and shut down.

Just another untested software consideration.

"Oh shit, compressor stall," yelled the pilot. "Restart procedure *now*. I am declaring an emergency."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

The co-pilot tried to punch the procedure in but the aircraft was rolling and yawing wildly, too much for the thin air aerodynamic response to correct.

“Ain’t happening. Get us cleared below. I’m going down.”

Back in the cabin, they were having a kinetic party. The Governor bellowed like a bull gorilla, their headphones all ripped off. Sissy yelled, “The engines are dead. And we’re next!”

They were clutching the chair bases and anti-personnel objects came at them from everywhere. The Chief took a direct hit in the face from a tumbling ashtray, nine ounces of beautifully leaded glass deadlier than ever.

The attendant had been in the second lavatory, and was bouncing around like a Vegas keno ball. The plane jerked all over the sky, descending at five thousand feet per minute, a crazy calculated maneuver to find clear air.

The pilot keyed the mike and yelled, “Cleveland Center, Tennessee One Echo Bravo. We are engine-out, and passing through nineteen thousand. We need runway vectors now.” The air was still a raucous whirling milkshake, and the engines refused to re-ignite.

Without the banshee scream of the over-torqued powerplants, it was surprisingly quiet. “No joy on re-start,” stated the co-pilot. “It’s dead stick time.” They were flying entirely on instrument faith, plummeting down through solid whiteness to find the bottom of the storm.

A circuit shorted, and the fire alarm went off at a hundred decibels. “Can anything else go wrong,” roared the pilot, suddenly remembering he was not actually current in the plane.

That’d look Good for the Governor.

They put their headphones back on just as Cleveland Center called, “Tennessee One Echo Bravo, turn left to two eight zero, expect vectors to Barkley Regional Airport.”

“That’s Paducha,” barked the co-pilot as he extinguished the fire alert. “I’ve been there. Sixty-five hundred foot runway, and decent local sour mash.”

The air had smoothed out and they were in a controlled descent, losing about fifteen hundred feet per minute at ninety five knots indicated.

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The co-pilot, interpreting the navigation instruments, was really flying the plane. Without any external visual references, it was the instruments between them and an inverted flat spin.

He called out their situation calmly, “Field elevation at Paducha, er Barkley is five hundred. We’re descending at fifteen hundred from eighteen, that gives us about ten minutes. I say we bring our speed up fifteen knots and try to coax some distance. We’re going to need it.”

“V-b-g is ninety knots. That’s our speed,” urged the pilot.

The co-pilot countered, “The stated best engine-off glide speed has always been low. I read somewhere that someone discovered higher speed is actually best for getting distance,” replied the co-pilot.

“You read that somewhere? Popular Mechanics?”

The last allowance was the the kind of gentle bickering Men do when they’re scared shitless and haven’t had any relevant training.

The pilot had the final say though, and he said it. “We’re better than ten miles out. What we need is more time.” He clicked through a dozen screens, snap-studying possible combinations of speed and sink. They had about fifty thousand feet to the runway, and less than ten minutes left in the air. Then the FAA would be out of the loop, and there’d be an awkward handoff to the NTSB - the guys who sort the wreckage and place blame. The co-pilot said, “My window’s stuck, you better get them bottles out your side.”

The aerodynamics of the aircraft was based on assumptions. Keeping the windows and doors closed was high on that list. Again, what damned fool....

The pilot knew a real threat when he saw one, defeated six safeties, and yanked the side window open. Designed for on-the-ground operations like getting a last minute hooch delivery, they were not up for in-flight operation.

The small window, ruggedly built, was no match for two hundred foot pounds of rushing air and desperate thinking. It ripped away from the aircraft, and yawned open a three foot tear behind it.

“Whoa!” screamed the pilot, his hand bloody from collateral damage. The co-pilot yelled out, “We’re in some shit now. Descent rate jumped to two thousand feet per minute. We’re dragging something!”

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

“The goddamn fuselage,” said the pilot angrily. He tore a wad of paper towels, staunched his bleeding hand and snapped out of it, remembering his naval aviator days skud-running in Afghanistan. “I have the airplane.”

He flicked a few switches to disable every capable system. “I’ll fly her in. We’re going to make it.”

The co-pilot looked at him in awe. He’d seen the pilot in a lot of moods, but this was a new one. He turned to his instruments, the wind roar behind them just a minor concern. Without the turbines, it was like flying a Piper Cub on a sunny day except for the complete lack of visibility coupled with the Space Shuttle’s glide ratio.

They were riding down through a storm on a meteor, and out ahead through eight miles of fog was a line of concrete lit up like Defcon Four. Emergency vehicles were stuck all over the road shoulders, mud everywhere. News helicopters darted across the cleared runway, zigging and zagging for the best slot.

Nine stations had scrambled and were circling like a hydrocarbon ballet, waiting for the lead story. Already news outlets were spooled up, the national breaking story instant video messaged to a hundred million IP addresses.

A tall man in a whipping raincoat stood before the camera and said, “The Governor of Tennessee’s state jet has lost all power and is descending through fog to here, Paducha, Kentucky. It’s speculated they encountered a microburst weather phenomena and lost their engines. We have with us a representative for the engine manufacturer, Torquey Turbine.”

The spotlight was being held over the short wide middle-aged man who stood a few feet away. He was bundled in an enormous great coat, doing a Breshnev impersonation. His porkpie hat had a tiny white emblem festooned on its side which glinted light, sending a desperate semaphore to its clueless owner.

The interviewer had positioned him so that the viewers could see across his low shoulder to the active runway. Behind him a million flashing lights were alive with menace, the perfect backdrop for an onsite dismemberment. The interviewer held up this microphone against the wind and light rain.

“Mr. Dwenty, is that it?”

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“That’s my name. Raymond Dwenty. I’m chief of marketing for the turbine found on the Governor’s plane. We’re all spinning for him.”

“Not tonight. I understand this engine’s been called the ‘Cougher’.”

The little man squared his shoulders, and shook a little as if driving off a horny dog. “That’s not fair. And it’s ‘Gulper’. That’s actually a flattering term. Our engines have the biggest inlets in the industry and can ingest more atmosphere than any of our competitors.”

He was proud of that, but things were happening out on the runway threshold. Some fool had backed half off the edge and was flinging mud in a desperate attempt to escape media scrutiny.

The engine guy turned around to see who had stolen his thunder, and the Governor’s jet burst out of the low clouds, the left forward fuselage torn wide open.

It was the main attraction, and every lens spun on center.

“Look at that!” cried the interviewer. The helicopters scattered like flies off a swatted roast as the plane dipped a wing. It corrected quickly, the pilots obviously working hard.

It was time for the branding spiel. “This is Kentucky’s Number One Action News Network, W-H-A-C. And there’s the storm-damaged Governor’s plane, dangerously low and missing vital parts.”

It was not a situation for words and the cameraman swung from the commentator, smelling gold in the can.

The plane came in at treetop, the landing gear still up. Less than fifty feet above the ground, the wheels dropped suddenly and she hit hard, the impact audible across the tarmac.

The choppers pursued like DEA hunters, and the Governor’s plane rolled on forever, eating every precious foot of runway they had.

FOURTEEN

Billie Sue and Jeb ended up staying at the redneck bar, eating spicy bar food as Jerry Jeff worked through a slow set. The place was packed with homogenous hillbilly genetics, almost no variance among them. Inbreeding will do that. And when them recessives take over, phew - watch out.

The music was good. Many of Jeb's old favorites, and some new stuff Jerry Jeff had been working on since he'd left Earth. This time. That was how he explained it between songs, wending a tale of hard living, death and re-birth.

After a tear-jerking rendition of *Backsliders Wine*, he nestled his acoustic into a nearby standing frame and switched off the mike. The room was a hundred feet square with a complex ceiling, a tough place for unamplified sound.

His voice was clear. "I died once. Lived like a lot of you want to, and then one day, everything went black.

"You might think you're going to see a bright white light, and even angels, but let me tell you, death is blacker than a moonless night."

Jerry Jeff pawed a longneck off his stage monitor and took a long loving guzzle. The place was pin-drop quiet; they were there for a master, coming from every wink of the universe.

"But death ain't so bad, at first. I knew I had died like you know you've died when you're dreaming. Difference was I couldn't wake up. So I dreamt and dreamt. Must have been centuries. Seemed like it anyway.

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“Some guy named Freud said dreams are for working out problems. I remember thinking I’d be dreaming forever.”

The crowd was liking the yarn, unconcerned, so far, at its verity. Bottles clinked respectfully, the tempo of everything syncing with the story.

“Then one day I woke up. Somebody had made me this fine body, but it was me. I swear.”

An edge had risen through his tale, some of those earlier problems clearly unresolved. Jeb thought to himself maybe Jerry Jeff had been awakened a bit early like an anxious distiller popping too-young mash.

“It’s me. Now I’m going to sing you a song about my new self.”

He started into a faster tune, the strokes of a younger man driving the hard chords.

Jeb whispered to Billie Sue. “Is that possible? I’ve got to get an open mind if I’m going to survive here.”

“Kind of, Jeb.”

She sipped her beer, watching his consternation build. “There’s much you obviously don’t know, but comparatively, we’re both down right ignor’nt.”

“No, Billie Sue. You know about places I can’t even imagine. But just tell me, can we live forever like Jerry Jeff?”

Immortality is a big hit everywhere, and like your first girl, you always remember when you got first wind of a method to cheat death. Most on Earth had sought the promises of institutionalized belief, or mail-order nirvana, but some of the quieter minds suspected other roads not taken.

Bottom line: it was *the* question.

She answered, “Yes. If that’s important to you, it can be done.”

A sadness had seeped into her, and Jeb had no idea why.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“No, you didn’t. Just one of my skeletons. It’s simple really.” She took another sip, seemed to make a decision and continued, “I lost someone dear to me recently. I kinda want to join him someday. That’s all.”

Jeb scrunched his face around like “The Duke” sizing up a prairie fire and said nothing. There are times for talking and times for listening.

“We were in love. He was killed. That was about a year ago, almost exactly.”

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

Jeb wondered idly how they really kept track of time flipping between time zones like shooting stars, the fastest thing he'd ever seen. "You want to talk about it, Billie Sue?" His voice had dropped an octave, that range reserved for earnest dealings.

"Maybe I should. It could happen to us."

Jeb's gentle visions of eternal life went poof, and he asked with fresh interest, "Why can't you just bring your old lover back like Jerry Jeff?"

"Jeb, I want you to know some of what I'm going to tell you is established fact, and some of it is belief."

"Couldn't be any other way. I'm here." He took her hand and relaxed, already sensing that Earthlings had a strength for listening.

"These Fiddlers, Jeb, they're dangerous. Because they believe their operations are time-critical, they exercise a crude mantra of expeditious violence. In other words, they will kill to keep on schedule.

"If we venture back to Earth, if only to get Toby, we may run across them, and they won't hesitate to eliminate us. We are a threat to their plans."

Jeb wanted to stay focused and that meant he had to ask questions. "What is their plan for Earth?"

"Ethyl and I have an on-again-off-again relationship, so my access to her knowledge is spotty but they're definitely going for the US Presidency. And the real contest for that office has already started."

Jeb shook his head to reconcile the two days he had spent with Billie Sue against the implication of significant time passage on Earth.

She understood this common new-traveler problem and said with a smile. "It's called time dilation. Since we're moving at just under the speed of light, the optimal velocity for these jump stations, time is passing about one hundred times slower here than on Earth. It's almost January there."

Jeb did the date math slowly, realizing again he wasn't in Kansas. He asked, "Are you planning on getting even, or something?"

"I got a score to settle, yeah. You with me on that, or are we just going the same way?"

Jerry Jeff finished the high energy ballad to reincarnation and strummed lightly, trolling still waters for reinforcement. A man, even a robot slumming as one, needs vindication.

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A muted applause passed through the bar, a chip flipped table center to get the real music rolling again. He started into a lugubrious plaintive song, the guitar speaking softly for him.

“I’m with you Billie Sue. You know that. But tell me, what do you hope to accomplish?”

He was reckoning back to that old business handbook, seemingly a million miles away, and actually quite a bit farther, to the phrase ‘what do you hope to accomplish’. It sounded like the voice of reason.

“I mean to stop them. The law is clear, and in this case, a good one. *No impersonations*. It’s never done except to deceive. And anyone willing to lie on that level is up to deep harm.”

“Well then, let’s go. I wasn’t never one to wait around.”

He pulled out his remaining cash, and tossed it down as he stood. She took a deep breath and rose. “Follow me to the Lift Diagram.”

* * * *

It’s said New York is the city that never sleeps, but surprisingly few there had ever seen this place. Stepping out of Jeff’s bar, a little less sure-footed than a few hours before, Billie Sue and Jeb were nearly knocked over.

They entered the traffic lane of scurrying creatures, making their way back towards the center of the great hall. If anything could prepare one for the scale of interstellar flight, it was the enormity of this place.

Billie Sue tugged Jeb’s wrist roughly. She knew he had a wandering mind and this was an ADD paradise. Smoking meat and whirling colors and every trinket for the disaffected traveler.

If you had a button to push, they had the finger. Passing a GENUINE RAY GUN stall, Jeb pulled back on her insistence and asked loudly over the steady noise. “If we’re going into battle, I need to bulk up. Can you spot me for one of them blasters?”

She answered, “Grab the bright red one. It’s got some kick.” He motioned at the small, furry, ape-like being that was minding the store, pointing to the suggested device. The little guy was an agile fellow and bounded back to Jeb in an instant.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

Jeb inspected the craftsmanship, tracing his eyes along the mated surfaces for a sense of precision. The vendor's head bobbed up and down, reassuringly and said, "Vulcan. Very powerful."

Jeb turned to Billie Sue, a look of amazement spreading across his face. "They speak English here? In fact, why do you speak English?" His world view was finally growing in proportion to the interlocking pieces he held.

"Of course they do. It's the interstellar language of commerce." She said it with a matter-of-fact tone, but the corners of her mouth had moved up. "Fiddlers have been going to Earth and everywhere else for a long time. You're safe to travel, at least as far as language."

He felt she was revving him up for another lesson, just as Ethyl had done before. All this learning was starting to hurt. *Thank God for the beer.*

"He'll take it." She passed her ring over a gizmo reader and the transaction was complete. Billie Sue started to move away and Jeb asked, "What about ammo?"

The hairy salesman answered, "Good for six discharges. Then throw it away. It gets a little testy after that."

Jeb knew he wasn't holding his old Smith, deciding then and there to get some training before he fired it the first time. His daddy's echo came to him, "Firearms and alcohol can be glad companions, but a man needs to know his weapon."

They took off, Billie Sue pulling with an unexplained urgency. Since they had discussed the passage of time, it seemed to Jeb a new fire had been lit.

It was a mad suffocation of stimuli, colors and shapes and a million questions. Out of the blurring passers-by Jeb momentarily saw a three foot man go the other way on mechanical legs, stilts festooned with blinking lights flashing yellow and black.

How they got light to be black was unanswerable, but a moment later he saw a flying biped zoom to the left from behind, a long blue contrail marking his path like aerobatic smoke.

Jeb just shook his head as an allowance to another dose of confusing sensation. Billie Sue spoke excitedly, "It's right there." A few hundred

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feet ahead, a thick blinking cylinder rose from the floor about twenty feet, and as they came up to it Jeb realized the entire structure was an active display.

Billie Sue let go of his hand and rushed around its circumference through the swarms of intersecting beings, all anxious to make *their* connection. Jeb stood still taking in the utter chaos of the scene, suddenly feeling very alone. Far from Home, his dog, and his new company.

That last tickle, over before it'd started.

Billie Sue ran back around to him and said loudly, "Let's go, I found the next jump."

As they ran on, Jeb asked, "We going to Earth?"

"Nope. From here we jump to Gamma Canaris Seven, a remote world back in the Milky Way. Then we'll figure out our next step."

There was no point in questioning the logic, and he ran on behind her, jostling through the throng. Next to a sleazy T-shirt shop, complete with selections for two, three, and four limbs, a narrow wooden door stood slightly ajar.

"In here." Billie Sue threw the door back, and pulled Jeb in the dark alley. At the end, about fifty feet away, was a PortaPotty, its bright orange and white plastic shape somehow comforting.

Jeb released a tiny laugh, his first in a while, saying, "I've seen that baby on job sites. Low end. No fan."

There was a cheesy padlock snaked through the door hasp and Billie Sue said, "Time to try your six shooter, partner. Turn that little knob on the side counterclockwise. Be sure it's all the way."

Jeb took a careful look at the weapon and twisted the intensity to minimum. "Point at the lock and shoot."

The gun clicked when he pulled the trigger and the lock vaporized. The adjacent plastic was hot and shiny as if sanded impossibly smooth. Billie Sue said, "It's works by causing molecules to dance. The denser the material, the faster the dance. Metal can't keep up with itself."

It seemed as good an explanation as he needed. They entered and he took a professional glance around. It had never been used. He observed crisply, "Waste of a good crapper. Bet somebody paid a few thousand for this one. It's a shame."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

Billie Sue pulled the door closed while she waved her ring around in a complex pattern. A small panel appeared with several buttons. “You ready?”

Compared to some of the jalopies Jeb had ridden in, this was melodramatic. *It was a goddamn shitter.*

She pressed four buttons at once and then fluttered her fingers in some kind of code. Knowing he was completely lost, she filled in the blanks. “I’m hacking this thing to act like an elevator. It works sometimes.”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

The PortaPotty rocked rapidly, a low six inch sideways motion back and forth.

“We’re here.” She bounded out, leaving Jeb standing in a portable toilet looking out onto a boundless grassy field dotted with a million crazy windmills.

FIFTEEN

Jeb stared out at the green smooth carpet of verdancy that swept away in every direction to the soft plum-colored horizon. Everything shimmered and pulsed slowly as if this was a drowsy place, a destination one sought wishing to be pampered by summer's forever embrace.

The windmills were tall conical towers, scalloped like exaggerated Christmas trees and topped by blue cylindrical gear houses. Each had a single four-pane window, and it was easy to imagine an equally single watchmen seated up there, oiling and moving to the tempo of the tower.

The blades were thin wings, like a long insect such as a praying mantis might have. True to detail he then noticed vasculature, red lines fanning out in each like veins.

Billie Sue ran back, quite out of breath, "Sorry, just had to stop for a friend. Pick something up. Let's go."

She climbed back in, and worked through another sequence of elevator commands. The tiny space ship, for how else could one really describe it, shook again and Jeb *let go*, switching off all his remaining expectations.

It was a zen moment and over in just the right amount of time as stillness filled his being. All motion had ceased. "Get ready, this could be weird," declared Billie Sue with feigned concern. Beneath a false face she was giggling, but Jeb had made the leap, shutting down every circuit that lead away from doubt.

And so - bring it on, girl.

He yelped like a *Deliverance* banjo player and kicked open the door.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

They were downtown. Jeb consciously relaxed himself and stepped out onto a brick street. He turned around with whimsy to see from whence he'd come and was mildly alarmed to see the tentativeness of Billie Sue's step.

Things had gotten so weird so fast. He had passed through all of his simple defense mechanisms and was operating in take-it-minute-by-minute mode. To keep things moving, he asked, "Where we now?"

"God knows." She laughed to ease some of her own tension. "Just kidding. Look at this chart."

Jeb saw her quickly unfurl a small tube. It snapped into a rigid black sheet with a detailed drawing of the Milky Way galaxy seen edge-on. Across the nearest pie slice of its great swirling collection of stars were labeled worlds, suns and planets marked with identifier codes.

He'd spent a fair amount of time outdoors, especially at night, craning his head skyward as he paid more rent on beer taken. "I don't recognize anything."

Billie Sue pointed to a bright dot and it enlarged to nearly fill the handheld screen. "That's Earth's neighborhood. If you look closely, you can see Jupiter's inner moon Io moving."

"This real time?"

"Well, there's some hairy math going on, but mostly."

Dropped into the bottomless pit of imponderables, Jeb asked, "So we're near Earth?"

"Not really. Well, depending on your definition of 'near.'" She flicked a tiny edge switch and the display rolled up.

"Billy Sue, be straight with me, please. Where are we now, and when will we get to Earth?"

"Something's wrong. Get back in the can. Hurry!"

They jumped through the plastic threshold and closed the door. She ran through another sequence, this one much more complex. Shaking came and went as before, Jeb happy to find one dependable pattern.

To display worldliness, he quickly reviewed his knowledge of Star Trek episodes. "Was that a Klingon planet?"

"How'd you know?"

"Ah, come on, Billie Sue. That shit's made up. Isn't it?"

His head moved side to side slowly.

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“Some of it. Sorry, Jeb, I have to concentrate.”

The noise rose above easy conversation level, a steady grinding coming from outside. Billie Sue looked up from her handheld device, a touch of fear there, “The back way.”

“Whatever,” mumbled Jeb, lost and lost again to future shock.

It went silent with a thump. “Jeb, I made an error back there. Something’s wacky with my guidance device. Gotta get a replacement.”

“Where’s here?”

“We’re near Earth, pretty much. This planet is real friendly. In fact, you’ll be right at home.”

Jeb smiled. “Let’s go then. You may not believe this, but I need sleep. This traveling is real stressful. Can you find us a little place to just snuggle together?”

“I’d like that,” answered Billie Sue.

* * * *

Billie Sue had been right, it was real homey, in fact, it was just like The Smokies.

They were in a pine forest, and it felt pretty high to Jeb, maybe five thousand feet above sea level. The air was thin, and winter morning cold, large billowing breaths issuing from their mouths as they climbed the half-mile dirt road to a large log lodge that stood in a clearing above them.

The mountain was covered in forty foot pines and rose on up behind the structure another couple thousand feet into a soft undulating forest. Someone had felled a keyhole shape from the trees, and dead center in the barrel of the lock stood the mammoth, sprawling fortress.

At least that was how Jeb described it to himself, fully aware a sense of welcome defensibility had crept into his thinking.

A few minutes later they entered a vaulted lobby. The walls and ceiling were made from mammoth logs, shaved clean and lightly oiled to create a natural soothing ambiance.

Jeb was bushed. He asked weakly, “Billie Sue, can you get the room? I need to sit down.”

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She directed his attention to a semi-circle of comfy woolen chairs and they split up, Jeb really dragging. A few seconds after he had collapsed in the nearest one, sleep came at him.

Billie Sue had been there before. After receiving a room code and number, she showed the desk person her malfunctioning guidance device and explained the need for another. With a promise to obtain one possibly as soon as two days, Billie Sue stepped away from the front desk also thinking it was time for bed. Two more lodge employees came over, Jeb's chair silently moving with them a few inches above the floor.

Reaching the room, they helped Billie Sue get Jeb out of his clothes and into bed, his slumber so deep he was beyond waking. After they had left with quiet efficiency, she stripped, pulled a cobalt blue nightie out of her backpack, slipped it on, and eased into bed.

The world to which they had traveled was an Earth-like planet orbiting one of the stars in the constellation Pleiades, or The Seven Sisters. In the winter, in the northern hemisphere of distant Earth, The Pleiades formed a prominent seven-starred feature of the night sky.

One of those seven stars carried the name Alcyone, the warming star of their current planet. This kindly world was without oceans, but instead offered the rustivating visitor an unending alpine forest, all mountains, lakes, and trees.

It was called Wood.

By decree, the planet Wood had been set aside as a non-industrialized place, a preserve, free from all but the silliest machines. Nearly everything to sustain life was caught, or hewn there; it was a simple place for simple folk.

* * * *

They awoke the next morning reinvigorated and made love like punctuation, inserting a powerful experience between their frantic past together and this new day. During the night, Jeb had crossed through a fresh barrier, another step towards discarding the sentiment that life on Earth was alone in the heavens. Perhaps it was the calmness of this place, familiar enough to grant some self-permission to relax.

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Sounds of a haunting but comforting nature had moved through his dreams and he awoke feeling “visited.”

Billie Sue hopped out of bed, her voice energized, “We’re back on a planet, so some of the heat’s off to rush back to Earth. The passage of time is now pretty much the same. We’ll go back as soon as I get my new direction gizmo.”

“I get that,” responded Jeb. “That time dilation stuff you mentioned earlier. My teacher called it ‘time bending’ in high school physics. Never thought it’d be bending me.”

To Jeb, Billie Sue was a picture of amused warmth. She remarked softly, “I’m really starting to like you. Not a trace of hubris. So preciously rare.”

He climbed out of bed naked and waddled to the bathroom, the floor a few degrees too cold for his toes. From behind the closed door, she heard, “Can we stay here a few days?”

Billie Sue had taken her roll-up screen out, and was studying their sector of the sky. “Yes. The lodge staff have ordered me a new direction finder. We have to wait a day or so for that delivery.”

“Good. What do you want to do?” Jeb was geared up for discovery and Billie Sue felt the same. She laughed hard and stood right against the door. “Let’s go to a tractor pull. A big one.”

He yelped back, “Shit yeah, girl. They use turbine engines? They’re the best!”

“I think you’ll be surprised at how powerful these ridiculous tractors are. This activity attracts some of the craziest nut-jobs in the galaxy. Fun people, but don’t mess with their logging machines.”

They grabbed a quick breakfast with room service. Coffee, salty bread rolls the size of bowling bowls, and a sugary sap extracted from a native tree. Jeb tried to identify the flavor, deciding it was a cross between maple and sweet hickory.

Going on three days in his timeframe with the same clothes was no issue to Jeb, he’d gone longer with work clothes, which risked professional censure. Codes and all.

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“If you don’t mind, Billie Sue, I’m going to have to climb back in these same clothes. Would you love me any less?”

In a soft voice she asked, “What is love?” and gave him that pixie-dust look - half angel, half she-devil. “What it isn’t though is that smell. I’ll run down to get you some new duds. Won’t be ten minutes.”

Jeb feigned dishonor, but was secretly pleased. She had the cash, and he needed to look his best at the tractor pull. *You never knew who you might meet there.*

In this case, it might have been what, for Jeb hadn’t any idea *what* to expect besides a side-splitting good time. Noise, fury and impossibly funded engineering. If this place was anything like the lunacy he had seen in Tennessee - ludicrous venture capital had given wings to explosively absurd contraptions designed for one solitary purpose - the raw application of power.

Billie Sue returned a short while later with a standard issue uniform, correctly sized and very soft to the touch. She handed him a red flannel shirt and a pair of straight-legged blue jeans. With a little laugh, and a pause that suggested he might take offense, she reached in the bag again and withdrew a medium width black belt sporting a saucer sized Red and White Chew belt buckle.

While he examined the garments, Billie Sue scrounged around in her small backpack; nothing to wear. As Jeb yanked on his trousers, he saw her pull out seven complete sets of clothes and lay them out on the bed.

He asked, “Le’me guess. There’s no bottom to that backpack.”

Billie Sue picked a pair of jeans and a black & white checkered cotton shirt. Retreating to the bathroom to dress, she said, “A woman’s wardrobe is no man’s business.”

He heard her laughing from behind the door, and waited, as all men must.

* * * *

The area in front of the lodge had been transformed overnight. Nearly twenty trailers were parked in neat rows, their tarped loads taunting the crowds that streamed in from all directions on foot. A swarthy green rope,

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strung over the tops of temporary posts encircled the waiting machines, served as a polite barrier.

A freshly cut road led away from the lodge, and Billie Sue took Jeb's hand, tugging with excitement. "Come on, let's get us a good seat."

They walked hurriedly along, swarms of other tractor pull enthusiasts all around them, joking and laughing. The trees, mostly uniform in size at about forty feet height were spaced in the forest as if by intention. Pine needles covered the ground thickly, and it smelled wonderful as the crowd fanned out towards the show area. Like a posse combing a woods, hundreds of people, all very similar to Jeb and Billie Sue in appearance, pushed forward.

Ahead were the backs of long, low bleachers. Garnished across this framework hung all manner of advertisements, the flexible outdoor signage tugging gently against little strands of colored twine holding them in place.

Everyone funneled through an arched gateway created by several overhead poles stretched between two adjacent sets of stands. The event had an organized, yet folksy feel about it.

From the poles hung a banner declaring the benefits of Red & White's Chewing Tobacco. Jeb made the connection and said, "Look, Billie Sue. Red & White. Just like that flashing moon."

"Yep Jeb, good branding."

Billie Sue passed her ring gizmo over a wooden turnstile reader, the transaction complete, and they moved away from the stands to take in the scene. The area, perhaps a thousand feet wide by half that deep had been cleared recently, tangy sap lingering in the air as a reminder of commitment to this sport. Coupled with the light breeze, and surrounding trees, it was a very pleasant venue.

They got a feel for the dimension of the place and turned back to the stands to find a seat. Jeb said, "Let's get up high as we can. Maybe there'll be some wrecks!"

Billie Sue remarked with a suggestion of ignorance, "This ain't NASCAR Jeb." It was time to strut out personal knowledge of motor sports, and Billie Sue had fired first.

He shot back, "I know NASCAR, been to my share. This is something completely different. Ain't just crazy power, it's imagination."

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“Trying to imagine how they can afford these crazy things, you mean?” she asked with a light taunting finish.

“Nah, this is a grown-up boys’ passion, no chumps allowed.”

Against the top backdrop they found a couple of remaining seats. The stands were better than tree quarters full, lots of blue jeans and flannel and ball caps. The crowd was young with a happy mixture of both genders, sparking with comradery.

At the far right end of the clearing stood the staging area and already a gaggle of machines took position. The largest, a monstrous green farm tractor lookalike, backed down off a color-coordinated trailer. Its large contingent of crew barked orders to one another as if it were a newborn.

Over thirty feet long, a King Kong farm implement on any planet, the stately machine stood nearly ten feet high. Giant rear tires were set wide apart, ready for some serious pulling.

The driver signaled to his crew and fired up the terrific engines. From its tapered nose rose two matched one foot diameter red exhaust stacks. Smoke billowed up, a solid column of sooty black combustion that mushroomed out into an immense thunderhead.

He goosed it, filling the clearing with a tearing, ragged roar that echoed back and forth for several seconds.

“Whoa,” shouted Jeb, completely lost to the moment. “That’s no turbine, but it sounds ferocious. What kinda engine she got?”

“Corn-fired, Jeb. Uses a biomass convertor to yank out Mother Nature’s own heart and soul of power. Eats about sixty cobs a second.”

Jeb bounced his head once to show hillbilly consternation, and went with it. “Sounds ecologically sustainable.”

Billie Sue punched him half-hard and they both laughed, enjoying the anticipation.

The announcer called for attention on a first class public address system. “Good morning. This is our ninth annual logging pull and this year we’ll see many of our old favorites and a few exciting new challengers.”

A smaller red and white tractor pulled up alongside the green monster and fired off a deafening exhaust note as if to concur. It had the plain, positive attitude of the contender, better but unproven.

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“That’s your chewing tobacco guys, Jeb. I understand they’re a new outfit, the moon ad campaign really working for them. I like to see that. Take a gamble, and win.”

Jeb suddenly missed his new business and wondered if he had any messages waiting.

He said forlornly, “Yep, that’s the backbone of America.” She looked over at him slowly. “That’s why we came here. I wanted you to get a taste of home again before we went back.”

“Why?”

“Because it isn’t there anymore. In your mind, anyway. You’ve seen other worlds now, and you’ll never sit around a fire in the woods again and wonder what’s out there.”

Jeb took it in stride. “I want to get back to that fire, Billie Sue. And I think once I do, I’ll look up, and remember some pretty good times.”

The green tractor towed a twenty five foot trailer out onto the cleared forest road in front of the stands. It was a flat metal platform with swarthy skids on the bottom. Welded to the front was an enormous iron eyelet.

The announcer came back on. “Welcome again, friends. Before the heats get under way, I’m going to go over the rules. There’s been a couple of changes, so listen up.”

About five hundred people, no stranger looking than those drawn by your average deep south motor sports exhibition, grew quiet. “Most of you know the reason we’re here....to see the mightiest tractors in the land! Well, we have a dozen of them. Each will take their try at tugging a good load of logs up our little hill.”

Jeb looked off to the left, and realized the ground did rise slightly, maybe thirty feet higher at the left end of the thousand foot long fresh cut. *But that could be critical*, he thought.

“Our contestants are starting this year by pulling twenty eight thousand pounds of logs. The smart money always watches the wheels, ‘cause the winner knows it’s not just power that will win. You gotta be able to get that power into the ground.

“By the rules of our organization, no one knew where the final pull would be until last week. That ensures every contestant has the same soil advantage, as we call it. I can tell you one thing, there have been more

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firmament scientists here this week than this sleepy little getaway has ever seen.”

A gentle ripple of laughter spread through the watchers, but they were ready for the show to start.

Jeb liked the easy-going exposition of the official. *Lay out the rules, everything up front, and bring on the buggies.*

The announcer continued, “Red and White Chew is the main sponsor this year, and their red and white tractor is first up. The rest will follow by random draw.”

As he was speaking, two front end loaders of heroic proportions moved seven mammoth logs on to the trailer. The skids pressed down in the reddish dirt, and dust and pine odor billowed up and blew over the anxious spectators.

The light breeze had shifted direction and was now coming down the mountain through the pines and flowing across the stands. The temperature was long-sleeve shirt comfortable. Above, a nearly clear sky, just the wrong shade of blue, was marked with a few scudding white clouds.

The tractor labeled Red & White Chew pulled out on the action area and swung around in front of the log sled. A large man struggled a swarthy chain out to join the two vehicles, about fifteen feet of steely links stretching between them. He gave it a tug for safety or mirth, signaling the all-clear.

The presumed path from right to left carried the tractor and sled past the stands at about fifty feet distance. No barrier stood in front of the crowd, and Jeb knew that was different than home. If these things were as powerful as they looked and a chain let go, there’d be shrapnel.

As if the announcer could read his mind, Jeb heard, “Now last year we had some accidents with chains exploding into the stands. We published our intention to change the setback distance and were surprised by the response. Everyone who wrote in said ‘No Changes’ or ‘Part of the Sport’.

“Under advice of counsel, we did make one significant amendment. We added a disclaimer to your ticket which is a legal agreement.”

Someone cupped a hand over the mike to cloak the raucous laughter coming from the officials’ platform.

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“Sorry, some damn fool lawyer told me to say that. Anyway, Red and White Chew is up. Watch the lights along the pulling course. As his nose passes each, they’ll light up. The tractor who goes the farthest wins the heat. We eliminate by taking only the top performers while cranking up the weight.

“From the first round we’ll keep six contestants, then the top four, then two, and the last heat will determine our winner.”

Billie Sue pulled her direction finder out, and fumbled with it to pass the time. Jeb remarked, “Yeah, let’s get this show on the road.”

“I can’t figure it out, Jeb. This thing is supposed to be simplicity itself. When you enter a travel-capable enclosure, a panel appears in this thing’s presence. That part works. Then you just tell it where to go.”

It was an oval shaped, smooth metallic device with the dimensions of a computer mouse. Jeb realized there were no buttons or visible means of control and sensed it was not so simple after all.

Billie Sue moved her thumb over its surface in a counterclockwise direction very rapidly and its entire surface lit up in high resolution detail to depict a star chart.

She held it up to Jeb. “This is a view of the universe from the outside looking in. As we select different points, the perspective zooms.” Flicking her finger five times, the display shot in steps to the Milky Way and then to the stars of the Pleiades.

“Here is our current location.”

Jeb owned a GPS receiver, and understood the location part of the design. Facilitating a jump across space was another thing. He reached over and she handed it him.

A thunderous exhaust seized their attention. Red and White Chew sent up a column of belching fire as she dug into the soft soil of Wood. The tractor and sled surged forward. Dirt flung back from the gargantuan twisting rubber paddles that radiated out from the tires like punk rocker spikes.

The lights along the side of the dragway were spaced fifty feet apart and the first lit up as the screaming vehicle, its nose bobbing up and down under a shred of comical control, passed. The noise was deafening which caused Jeb to remember the time he had stepped behind a moving airliner just to see what *loud* was really all about.

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The crowd caught the energy of this logging dragon, complete with snorting fire and a mighty rumble that penetrated the chest. Jeb grinned with excitement, lost to the distance that separated him from his home planet. For the moment, he was unconscious of anything but the ferocious roar that displaced everything else.

Red and White Chew struggled past the stands towards the hill, huge rooster tails of dirt spraying back a hundred feet. It reached the gentle beginning of the incline, about three hundred feet from the starting line, and the tractor rocked from side to side trying to get a purchase on the pliant ground.

Jeb yelled over the calamitous noise, "He's losing it."

Forward motion slowed, the driver fighting not to blow his engine up but wanting every inch he could coax. With a final full throttle burst, the tractor's nose bucked up and he chopped the power, this pull over.

The stands were alive with excitement, fans standing and cheering with insane appetite for more. Raw acoustic power brings its own intoxication, the attendant and raucous note suffusing all subtlety.

Red and White Chew was disconnected and trundled off the course. The Green Monster dragged the log sled back to the start as a bright blue contestant moved into position. Instead of rear tires it had a single three foot diameter, eight foot wide cylinder with metal spikes for traction. It looked like a huge lint brush on steroids.

The smallish nose stretched out nearly twenty feet, and sported six chrome smokestacks. Its exhaust note had the sharp crackle of high-performance timing, the idle rough and menacing.

The announcer barked over the public address system, "Red and White Chew got three hundred eighteen feet. Next up is The BlueDose Dozer, representing its well-known sleeping aid, BlueDose. Their product may put you to sleep, but this baby won't!"

Billie Sue exclaimed, "BlueDose. Coma in a bottle."

"What?"

"Those things are strokers, Jeb. Had two friends claim to lose brain function after zonking themselves. I hope that tractor blows up."

"Claim?"

"Well, okay, BlueDose probably took the fall for hard living."

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With a signal from the chain man, the flag came down smartly, igniting a ten foot burst of fire from each smokestack and the lint brush tractor jumped ahead.

The spinning cylinder approach to traction worked. When the BlueDose Dozer lit up the seventh fifty foot light, passing Red and White Chew's mark, the crowd stood back up. Billie Sue whooped like a moonshiner, forgetting her vex. "Look at that bitch go!"

The sound, though ferocious, had a tinkling high note that belied a tricked-out camshaft. Its razory exhaust call made Jeb's shoulders bunch up in an effort to drive the tortured sound away. He yelled aloud, his voice beaten back by the assaulting pressure wave. "That's a one and a quarter cam, Billie Sue. I'd know it anywhere."

She let it go. There was no competing with the demon that was grinding its way up the incline, and she didn't have the heart to tell Jeb "there weren't no camshaft." These mechanisms ate raw biomass, stalks and all. From there, the liberated energy drove a rotary multi-chambered combustion inferno that produced tens of thousands of horsepower, if for a flicker of time.

Somebody smart on Earth could have parlayed that invention into an overnight fortune, and perhaps already was, cross-pollination never entirely suppressed by Prime Directives or other mythology.

Three more improbable tractor wanna-bees took the course, but by the end of the fifth pull, BlueDose was still leading. During a moment of relative quiet, Billie Sue asked, "I have to hit the can. Need anything?"

"Nope." Then he tilted his head like a country philosopher and added, "Maybe a bag of Red and White, missy."

She gave him a "maybe" look, and climbed rapidly down the stands. Jeb had a fleeting sense of trouble, but the little inner urging came and went like a bird's shadow, lost in the background of constant uncertainty.

He turned back to the race after a moment's pause, deciding he could forgive himself some anxiety, circumstances being what they were. The sixth and seventh and eighth pull came and went, Jeb growing slowly annoyed by her absence and then worried.

By the end of the twelfth pull, Jeb got up and wandered down, without a plan, but aware that any normality to what was going on was ethereal.

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It only seemed like home. He still had the direction finder and wondered practically if it could find Billie Sue.

Most everyone had gotten up after the last pull, the end of the first round a natural time to load up and unload. Jeb bumped along with a sick feeling that Billie Sue was gone, had left Wood.

After he'd crossed behind and around the entire length of the stands, he spotted a line of PortaPotties crouching under a stand of pines. Each was identical to the orange and white portable toilet they had traveled in, and Jeb loitered outside them like a hobo, hoping for the best.

The doors all cycled with urgent use and after a few minutes Jeb heard the sound of the first contestant in the second round revving up. Everyone in need had used the facilities, and Jeb was sure they were all now empty. To be sure, he stepped up to each, knocked and opened every door in turn.

Billie Sue wasn't here!

Returning to the lodge, the desk staff hadn't seen her, and upon entering their room, his anxiety cranked back up with the certain knowledge that something didn't feel right. If Jeb knew anything about this woman, it was that she wouldn't just abandon him. *Somebody took her!*

He sat down on their bed, afraid and mad and wondered how to get back to the most perfect being he'd ever known.

SIXTEEN

Back on Earth, it was March twentieth, two thousand sixteen, the passage of time relative and relativistic. Everywhere the Governor and his troupe ventured, he was a hero, the tang of their near death flying experience *the* only issue of the early Presidential campaign.

Temperance Good stretched out on a comfy day bed in a west Kansas City hotel suite, and brought a fresh Jack Daniels to his lips. On the wall screen, the coquettish Constance Perley-Moss stood holding a microphone. Birdshot remembered her from the ad hoc speech he had given on the back lawn, the fetching babe who had induced his first public frog call.

She was facing his likely Democratic challenger, Massachusetts Senator Montgomery Wright, known everywhere now as Monty Wright. *Maybe Right*, thought Birdshot. But it had to happen, at some point he knew a challenger would resolve out of the chaos and attract a following.

“Mr. Wright, we know you’re scheduled to leave shortly, but can you tell our listeners how the campaign is going?”

“Thank you Constance. Our campaign is ahead in most relevant polls, and our momentum is far greater than any other Presidential candidate including the flagging Governor of Tennessee. He may be an alien, but we have out-of-town help too.”

There was a clutter of polite laughter from off-camera, and Constance turned a little more serious. “Monty, may I call you Monty?”

“Yes, everyone does. I’m a man of the people. Humans that is.”

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“Yes, I see the distinction, Monty. Anyway, you say the Governor Good’s momentum has waned. Do you think his alien angle is no longer working?”

Monty laughed to show off perfect teeth. “Oh, I’d love some aliens on my campaign. Had a few offer, but we have high standards.” He winked to show it was all in sad jest and waited for the next question.

“I have to ask, Senator, how will you win against him? His appeal is very strong, almost superhuman, like an alien might have.”

The Senator was running out of patience. “Constance, before I go, let me make one point. If there are any qualified aliens out there, we are hiring.” He turned away to signal the end of an unsatisfying appearance, and his entourage swept in to block further questions.

Birdshot didn’t like the implication, or Monty. They were making fun of him and he knew the universe was full of crackpots. All he needed was some off-world wacko hearing this bullshit and joining Monty for a good laugh.

Maybe it was time to lay-low. He looked over at his paramour. “Sissy, this campaigning is running me out. Can’t we just cancel tonight’s meeting and rent some of your movies.”

He suddenly felt the need to get a fresh perspective, talk to some of his common folk. Sissy responded, “No can do, alien man. This is the Lawrence, Kansas Rotary you’re talking to. Dead center of your demographic. You gotta go on, do the show.”

“Give me a better reason.” Birdshot had watched Sissy engineer a capable campaign, well beyond his instinct, but she couldn’t be expected to understand a threat from beyond her experience. *That Monty is cunning, he thought. Probably knows us aliens are everywhere, and he’ll do anything to win.*

“Governor, you’ve about rung all the life out’a that plane ordeal there is. Time for you to sink a real piling for your platform.”

He flung back the first thing to enter his mind. “I like the plane angle. It’s got legs yet.”

“What remains of that overblown story might be useful against a surprise attack, but it’s time to frame your Presidency. And I believe the Rotarians are the perfect audience for our next fabrication.”

SCOTT PATTERSON

Some things are best left to ruminate beneath the surface of admission, and the Governor shifted around to stare at his campaign manager cum cool mistress. “I’ve been thinking about that. We need to take this Monty seriously.”

“You come up with that all on your own, Your Honor?” She was thumbing through an *Illustrated Guide to The Rotary*, a children’s book for her off-world child’s mind.

He ignored her, the kernel of energy in Birdshot’s increasingly flaccid perspective unable to rouse itself for a verbal battle. When Birdshot first saw the Presidency as a distant but possible goal, he was motivated, even eager. What had become of that, he hadn’t a clue.

Maybe it was the lack of real danger. Sure, there were hecklers and the drama of lost political brochures, but Birdshot needed a campaign with weight, one that held the promise of death. For someone. And maybe now he had that. A credible threat.

Of course he was immortal, which he discounted, but for the first time in eons of memory Birdshot had felt utterly safe, even protected, and that was something unwanted - to be encumbered with assured security. It was time to go back on the offensive.

He snarled abruptly, “I’m going out for a walk. Alone.”

The Governor never went anywhere without minders, and Sissy heard a bothered little boy wanting to pout. *Let him*, she thought. *One of the roving security teams will pick him up at the hotel bar.*

Temperance went into his separate suite, seeking one of several walk-in wardrobe containers the campaign team shipped everywhere he went. Just small enough to fit in the executive jet, the new one, it contained all of The Governor’s “looks.” On its sixteen feet of polished clothes racks, all manner of “cowboy, redneck, fireside uncle and Wall Street insider get-ups hung, freshly pressed and ready for illusion.

He found a recent addition, a biker ensemble, and pulled it on roughly. One of his guys had donated the leather duds and it was said to have real blood on it. *Lots of it.* In a large hardwood box of Rolexes, he pushed a barely perceptible spring switch and a thin drawer slid out holding four handguns.

Birdshot still had the original disintegrator weapon, along with his other alien gizmos carefully hidden in the suite, but tonight, against the backdrop of a withering ennui, he felt like mixing with his constituents and that

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meant sharing their fears. Accordingly, he chose a Walther PPK for its ready concealment.

As an act of independence he slipped out quietly, telling no one, and made his way down to the street, joining the early evening strollers.

It was a winter night, light rain falling cold on his long-forgotten host's hair. The streets shone with slickness as they reflected the lights of passing vehicles. Block after block, looking for a starting place. Somewhere to find a taste of fear, or punishment sought.

The neighborhood deteriorated as he walked forcefully, finely trimmed hedges giving way to litter and neglect. After a couple of miles, set back off the road behind a gravel parking lot, he spotted a one story block structure, misleadingly nondescript. A single grimy red door was positioned at one end, framed by a board's worth of unpainted facade. Above it hung a cursive red neon sign that simply said "Jeff's" in a rough scrawl.

As Birdshot approached, he moved his eyes over thirty Harleys squatted six to a row on the lot, not a rice-burner in sight. The white noise of blue collar energy came at him like a greeter and he smiled thinly, doing an Army.

The spherical steel doorknob was warm to the touch, heat from in there, and he pulled firmly and entered.

His first impression was of a low incandescent coven; everyone here knew everyone else and hazing newcomers was deep ritual. He moved over to the shiny bar which ran along the left wall, leaned an elbow down and scanned the place as if deciding whether to stay.

Jeff came over, all six four, two sixty of him, his arms bare to expose a glossary of prison tats. He was clean shaven, bald and unfriendly by nature. The Governor had on a fake eyepatch as minimal disguise, but Jeff wasn't following the race.

"Yeah. What'ya have?"

"Jack. Couple of rocks." The bartender turned away, some small litmus test the right color.

Birdshot flipped a ten on the bar and it slid across the heavy urethane. His drink showed up but before Jeff could set it down, Birdshot grabbed the other's hand and looked him in the eye. "Just bring one every five minutes."

Jeff liked that, both in principal and as a businessman and snatched the ten without a word.

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There were two pool tables of good quality in use, four hard men standing back, casting hostile looks his way. One of them slapped a queue stick into his husky palm, over and over again, the stern staccato beat of a first class whooping on tap.

These kind of men were slow to trust, and any man coming in here alone had to think he was bad. *And that needed testing.*

His outfit was standard issue “knock your teeth out” denim with silver-tipped cowboy boots past any spit n’ polish redemption. Birdshot tossed his drink back and motioned to Jeff he’d be taking the next over there. As he approached the pool tables, someone yelled out, “This is our place, one eye.”

The delicate balance of limited violence that Birdshot’s presence had disturbed was anxious to be rid of this intruder. With him likely to do anything, an unknown to them, all previous alliances were stressed by a reinvigorated fight or flight instinct.

The Governor picked up a cue stick from a wall rack, and came over to evaluate the spread. They were playing eight ball, and solids’ had two balls remaining. The temporary claimant to stripes obviously couldn’t play for shit, not one ball in.

The other table was dead silent, better entertainment likely to be coming soon. Two sullen men stared him down. *This is what I was after. Genuine risk.*

Birdshot checked every muscle in the hijacked body, tensing each individual fiber bundle for readiness. One of the nearest men came at him fast, swinging his stick up and around with deadly intent. He whipped an arm up to block, and the stick cracked across his forearm, splintering.

The bioclone was standard quality, but for field work that meant tough as nails. Early trials had disclosed that mistakes made on other worlds were often prosecuted with unusual vigor. Birdshot had a stick gripped firmly in his right hand and swung it around at better than two hundred miles per hour, his muscles on blurring burst-mode overdrive.

It caught the assailant exactly in the temple, and there was the sickening crunch of a compression skull fracture. He collapsed in a lifeless heap and Jeff asked from behind, “You want your drink at his table?”

Birdshot spun around on the bartender, and slowed his system. Throttled down, he replied, “Sure, I think there’s an opening.”

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Someone kicked the body against the wall like a spent keg, and everyone turned back to their conversations, the intruder no longer a threat. This man understood the code of aggression, and all was right with the world again.

He addressed the fallen man's partner, "Mind if I finish up his game. You're solids, right?"

The other nodded and said, "There's a thousand on the game. You good for that?"

The Governor pulled out his traveling choker roll, a thick cylinder of wound hundreds. "I got it covered." He flashed it just long enough to establish his financial credentials, and shoved it into the jacket's pocket, understatement expected with this crowd.

By courtesy, the mid-game joiner was given first shot, and he ran several million permutations as he stalked around the table, looking for something dramatic. With a misleading nonchalance Birdshot leaned on the table edge, braced the stick through his other hand and stroked back and forth to gauge the mass of the implement.

A solution presented a moment later in his mind, and he fired off the stick with robotic precision. The objective of eight ball is to knock all of your solid or stripe balls in first, call the final shot, and pocket the winning black eight ball. Each player begins with seven balls and with average skill can sink them all in three or four turns.

The balls smacked around magically, complex mathematics operating on a field of slate and felt. One by one, all seven of his balls dropped in and several men stood and starting moving quietly over for a better view.

His opponent snapped, "Shit, boy."

Birdshot called one of the side pockets and buried the eight ball with authority. "Got that thousand?"

Every eye on him, the other man fished out a crumple of hundreds, counted reluctantly and tossed them down on the table. The Governor swept his cold stare around the watching faces and declared, "Anyone wanna take me?"

Jeff brought over his drink, saying, "Best damn shot I ever seen. This one's on the house." In this place, simple competence was recognized with honor, every man an aspirant to inferred excellence.

The door banged open and three shouting men entered. All were dressed in worn leather, shiny with fresh rain. They paused just inside the door to

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understand why everyone was packed around the pool table, spotted the crumpled body and one of them asked harshly, "Something happen?"

In their parlance, that meant, "Somebody dead?" Death here was not uncommon, opinions often gnashing into felonious proportion under the influence of intoxicating chemicals and natural hostility.

Another one of the men asked, "Jeff, you need help with Glen?" In a like way, "help" was code for a disposal, their clan and creed always balanced against an unsympathetic SWAT-grade response from the real world.

"Might," answered Jeff. "He attacked this guy here." The Governor nodded, the quiet steely look working real well. The largest of the three men came over and extended his arm for a shake. His hand was large, damp from riding and fiercely strong.

Birdshot let him compress the bioclone's hand to what should have been permanent disability and then cranked his own musculature in a single pulse, dropping the man to his knees with white pain.

Jeff exclaimed from behind the bar, "Goddamn, Frank, you getting weak?"

Frank's face was florid with humiliation as he struggled back up on his feet. He said, "I owe you a drink." Birdshot leaned over the edge of the table where a drink was already waiting, and tossed it back rapidly. "I'd like that."

Frank called over to the bar, "Jeff, bring a bottle of whatever he's drinking. Me and the boys will grab our usual."

They walked to a square wooden table that had been in use and swept all the half-consumed drinks off with disregard. Birdshot was in hog heaven, richer by three redoubtable companions.

He looked each man in the eye for a practiced five seconds and they all sat down.

Frank leaned in and asked quietly, "You're the next President, aren't you?"

SEVENTEEN

The Lawrence, Kansas Rotarians showed up, expecting a caucus of rare moment with their favorite Presidential candidate, the reigning Governor of Tennessee. It was not to be. Less than fifty miles to the east, in the industrial sector of west Kansas City, Kansas, the Honorable Temperance Good was putting ‘em back with his newfound biker pals, whimsically plotting the overthrow of the free world.

It was past legal quitting time for all drinking establishments, but at Jeff’s, the marquee light was on a timer. To the outside world, everything was buttoned up.

The boys had a couple of strippers up dancing on the pool tables. The lights were turned down cave dark to lend some intimacy but there was nothing personal about the performance.

The Governor had spent six hours regaling his three new buds with stories about the known universe and they were drinking it in like gospel. He’d learned these three men were their own motorcycle club, a budding startup in the world of hardcore, full-time biking. They had prospects for gainful, and even semi-legal employment, but were open to opportunities.

His kind of guys.

He lazily tossed a few galaxy-class ambitions out to them, such as selling the Moon, but they weren’t thinking big. The term chop-shop was uttered, but Temperance had work “needed doing,” and would wait. He had to sneak it up on them slow. Let ‘em reject a few of his ideas first.

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As the right moment approached, Birdshot had to contain himself. His urge to spool up some high-energy bullshit was tugging something fierce, but these were seasoned men, used to hardness, and ill-tempered to condescension. It was a fine line.

Frank sensed the Governor was building up to a high stakes long shot and asked, “You want to ask us something important, Governor. Go ahead.”

“You’re perceptive, Frank. I need some unofficial help with my campaign.”

The boys crowded in conspiratorially, smelling a steady paycheck. “That Monty Wright could be serious competition if he gets the wrong alien on his side. You with me?”

Frank looked into his sixteenth drink of the night wondering if all politicians were batshit crazy. “Yeah, Governor, we follow. You need us to whack some alien?”

“Maybe. But first we gotta spot him.”

“I’ll bet you got special goggles, or something for that?” Frank was on the edge of popping the Governor, his native anger pushing against the one-in-a-million chance all this shit was for real.

Birdshot reached into his waistband, and drew out the Walther. “Let’s be real clear, gentlemen. I’ve killed here already tonight, and it wouldn’t take much more for another. Maybe three.”

Frank and his crew leaned back quickly in concession. Frank said weakly, “Sorry about the goggles thing. What can we do to help?”

“I have a proposition for each of you. Meet me at Kansas City Regional Airport tonight at eleven. I’ll be waiting at the executive terminal. Biggest jet there. Eleven sharp.”

Frank looked each of his men in the eye, and spoke for them. “Governor, we’re with you. Eleven sharp, as you say.”

EIGHTEEN

Jeb rummaged through Billie Sue's bottomless backpack in search of clues. He half expected to find the black map of the cosmos and figured it might help him use the seemingly broken direction finder.

Whenever he had come up against a plugged toilet line only one approach seemed to work, his old mentor's words coming to him. "Jeb, some problems are too complicated to solve all at once. You gotta start at the end and work backwards to what you know." Viewed as a process, everything to his kind started with an asshole.

And that meant Ethyl.

Billie Sue had said Ethyl was a multi-level marketer with a ship positioned nearest Earth. Jeb pulled out the direction finder and whipped his finger around to activate the device. The universe blinked on and he clicked progressively towards Earth, its operation very straightforward.

After a few clicks he found Jupiter again, remembering her moon Io's fast orbit. Nearby a small light blinked, possibly Ethyl's jump-point. He tapped there to enlarge and the device buzzed.

"Maybe I need to be in that toilet," he said aloud, getting excited for any solution. Grabbing her backpack, Jeb left the room and ran right out the front entrance, certain Billie Sue would have pre-paid.

The tractor pull was still going, but that was forgotten as he climbed into the nearest PortaPotty. Once the door was closed a panel appeared, complete with four blinking buttons and no instructions.

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He tapped the direction finder again, it buzzed and he stabbed at the four buttons desperate for some deliverance. All of our prayers are answered, just not always as we like.

The PortaPotty bucked with terrific force as the noise grew outside, another back route across the stars.

A seasoned intergalactic traveler, Jeb bore up under the unknown sound and motion, expecting a brief journey. But something had changed. After twenty minutes of rocking and shrieking, Jeb sat down on the plastic seat, resigned to learning a fresh lesson. *Maybe there is a right and a wrong way to make these jumps*, he thought.

There was nothing comforting about the experience, especially to Jeb who thought about flying through the freeze-dried hostility of space in a thousand dollar portable toilet. He'd seen these things split open in the field, falling off an overloaded truck, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Suddenly his tiny world banged hard and went silent. Jeb had walked into some scary bars in his life, but this was something different. He could be anywhere, or nowhere, stranded this time beyond his skill.

Then he caught a familiar whiff, and thought. *Ethyl's old junker!* Jeb's nose was a finely tuned instrument, odors its business and this one was distinctive. Given Billie Sue's suspicious absence, he pulled out the tiny red Vulcan blaster and palmed it.

The door opened into a familiar room from a trillion miles and three days ago but he stepped out no less confused. His old buddy the World War One Guard stood in the same place, its constance somehow a sterile comfort.

Jeb took two steps out and Ethyl walked right in, her foul mood on point. Without greeting, she held out a gun and said, "I thought I got rid of you. Sent you away to that little girl."

He snapped right back, "She's a lot smaller than you, that's for sure. You seen her?" A frontal return seemed best, the old business handbook saying some customers just expect slaves. Ethyl made a puffy face, intended to intimidate but she was way out of practice. And had clearly never been to Tennessee.

"No, I haven't.

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Jeb didn't like anything about the situation. "I think you're lying. I think maybe you snatched her off that planet Wood when she went to take a leak. Real tricky-like."

He spotted something in her look, a telltale that at least part of his guess was correct. Then she smiled devilishly, a sense of superiority clearly entering her mind. "Well, hillbilly, maybe you learned a few things while you been travelin'."

The gun was aimed directly at him. "Tell you what, Jeb, I'm going to tell you a few things just to piss you off. You can't do shit about it anyway."

"Go ahead, piss me off. We'll see about the rest."

"Your girlfriend intends to stop my business partners' from taking control of Earth. This is my big shot. I've been tracking her and have been fouling up her direction finder. When she ducked in that can, I commanded it to come here."

Jeb saw it then. "But she outsmarted you, didn't she?"

Ethyl raised the gun slightly, "A temporary inconvenience. She went somewhere else, probably Earth, but I'm taking a few of my toughest men with me when I'm done with you, and we're going to get her. Settle that for good."

"You better hurry, you shitbag. That time dilation means she's living a hundred times faster than you."

"You have learned a few things, haven't you sewerboy. I was going to lock you up for later, if you know what I mean, but maybe I'll just kill you now."

She took a step forward and the duct tape on her left sandal snagged against some discarded object. When she looked down, he snapped his arm up, and fired.

Ethyl burst into flames, a ragged scream sizzling away as she disintegrated. In shock, he yelled, "Take that, you bloated shit weasel."

NINETEEN

Official duties kept the Governor “in” later that day, his staff told “it was some kind of flu.” The Chief, along on this Kansas City junket to visit his ex was heard to remark, “Yeah, brown bag flu.”

As Temperance recuperated, disgusted at the weakness of his current host, he flipped channel after channel, looking for his closest campaign rival, the Honorable Senator from Massachusetts, Montgomery Wright.

On the second cycle through four hundred stations of dreck, an image of Constance Perley-Moss filled the screen, another provocative outfit snaring the camera’s focus. He remembered her from a few months back, the night he’d made his first public frog call on the back lawn.

She was interviewing the candidate at the bottom of an airplane stairway, the sense of a quick sound bite apparent.

“Thank you, Senator. We appreciate your time too. I know you have to catch a flight, but could you tell our viewers what you think of Governor good? He seems the man to beat.”

“The alien?” He let it hang, network time ticking by. Then he laughed, obviously wanting to say more. “Our campaign manager has been checking his credentials, working with the SETI people, and no one *out there* has heard of him.”

“Out there, Senator?”

“You know, outer space. But just to show we’re open minded, we invite all interested aliens to come join the winning team, and we’ll find a place for you in our administration. Plenty of cushy ambassador posts available.”

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Birdshot scowled in disgust and flicked the set off.

His greatest fear came back to him - appearances. Each time he mounted that stage, an opportunity presented for a colossal misstep, an error or emission that would exchange the gentle suggestion of other-worldliness he had concocted for the horror of Megalon.

Now, with Monty going on about hiring competing aliens, he had a fresh concern. The universe was teeming with interlopers, beings ready to snag an easy berth. SETI, from his reading, was the human's first attempt to reach out to space. *You never knew, they might get lucky.*

Or even if a passing wastrel, on the lamb from some stellar debacle, catching the Senator on the nightly news wrap-up. His invitation might be taken seriously, if only to make some galactic folding money.

Sissy entered the dark chamber with an air of grave convalescence, Mother Teresa for hire. Every man needs an inner bulwark, and Sissy was tough as they came. "Can I get you anything, Governor?"

Birdshot felt shitty all over, more so now as she was insufferably solicitous, the worst lies the ones we live. He turned to his co-dependent co-conspirator, his voice gentle, "Thank you, no. I'm feeling much better, just fighting a new infection."

Birdshot was immune to all chemical intrusions, but his ride, the suffering humanoid bioclone, was running flat out at a febrile one hundred six degrees fahrenheit. Its old brain was smoldering so bad Birdshot couldn't get the body to do anything.

"Sissy, is there a way we can, ah, limit my appearances for a while?"

Instantly recognizing a genuine threat, she snapped out of the misty-headed nurse role. "You're running for the most visible job on this planet, Governor. Last night can't happen again. Sometimes I wish you'd be more like the old Governor. "

Birdshot withdrew into himself, long past indulging the temptation to reach across to the other dimension for inspiration - one silver-tongued temptress surrounded by a million shrieking harpies. The spheres were aligning in a way he sensed was animus to his goals, maybe even a distant threat from his hillbilly lookalike. It was time to plug that hole, bring him back, and lock him down. Keeping that nobody under lock and key might also provide a disposable "spare" if this body got any less reliable.

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In that instant, a plan formed, the next one or two moves clear. “Sissy, can you ask the Chief to come in here? I’d like a private word with him.”

* * * *

Fifteen minutes later The Chief entered the darkened room, sniffing for telltale aromatic alcohol metabolites. As he expected, the suite was suffused with fruity aldehydes and ketones, nature’s by-products in its slugfest with the Demon.

He lowered his head respectfully, asking with a mixture of genuine and sham deference, “You get bit by the bug, Your Honor?” They both endured the subtext and the awkward moment slid by. “Yes Chief, a twenty-four hour kind of thing.”

Sissy sensed it was going to be a “men only” sort of discussion, doubtlessly laced with anatomical humor, and departed quietly.

“Chief, it’s time I explained a few things. I have to trust someone, and I believe you’re the man.” He shut up, waiting for the confirmation that can only come in silence and reserve.

A full minute later, “I knew I could count on you. I’m going to tell you some things which you won’t believe, but you’ll have your proof soon enough.”

The Chief rushed forward in relief. “Governor, I know about the elevator. Some of the other boys do too. We kept it to ourselves.”

Birdshot was a little surprised. “What else do you know?”

“You’re not a man, I’d guess. I mean, you’re not human, or all human. Maybe some kind of alien.”

“That’s right, Chief.” It was out in the open, but Tennessee folk are comfortable with all kinds of strange. The Chief had seen his share and plowed right ahead. “Whatever you need doing, Governor, me and the boys are with you all the way.”

“To the Presidency?”

“If that’s where this leads. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

“Chief, I came here from another world, and replaced the Governor in hopes of winning the Presidency. You’ve guessed that. The real Governor is back on the my ship, though he may have suffered a head injury. I want you to go get him.”

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“He’s been brain damaged for years, Governor.”

Birdshot needed a stand-in for his plans, and didn’t wish to complicate the plot by disclosing the real Governor’s demise. Especially at his own hand. Whoever they’d grabbed by mistake would do. The suggestion of brain damage would confuse a multitude of questions.

“I know you’re a loyal man, Chief.”

“Will that elevator take us there?”

“Pretty snappy of you. Yes, it will. But one thing, you can’t take your men. I’ve got three guys for you.”

The Chief registered a doubt, but plowed ahead. “You can count on me. When do I go?”

“Soon, Chief. We’ll go to the airport at eleven. Some people will be meeting us there.”

“Yes sir. I’ll get the usual detail to take us at ten thirty. Good bye, sir.”

Birdshot watched his truest confidante pull the door quietly closed and turned the TV back on to find *that pretty-boy Monty*.

* * * *

The new State of Tennessee jet sat at the end of executive parking, beyond the throw of the anti-crime lights that warmed the near-midnight evening. Our favorite fly-boys were working late on an airworthiness directive, this one concerning the installation of a shiny new still.

In circuit design, a nod is always given to pure, unwavering power. Most fragile modern systems, unless locked down with an isolating battery/transformer getup will fail instantly in the presence of backwoods electrification, say from a twenty year old generator running on the end product of bark distillation.

These pilots knew from power, being schooled to drive ninety seven thousands pounds of aluminum and plastic up against the speed of sound. And as such, revered the clean, well-mannered current that flowed silently from their brand new aircraft’s auxiliary power unit.

Normally wired to vital systems such as navigation and radios, it was an irresistible prize for these moonlighting moonshiners. Failing to temptation,

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even under the recent spell of an FAA censure for “irregularities” with the last state bird, they felt this installation was *mission critical*.

Pilots have an instinct for probability, and our boys sensed the campaign was building momentum - that meant one thing: We might soon be flying too much to run “our business in the country.”

Their last contraption was regarded as a proof of concept device, suitable for little more than a pint per hour. For the frequent long haul flights they now anticipated, they needed to bring the business with them, and that meant one thing: the plane needed some upgrades.

As such, they’d tied into the main circuitry bus with some Radio Shack bargains, and were about to test the system with a quick, unauthorized flight when they heard several motorcycles approach.

As before, the forward head was sacrificed to the cause, all the easier as the new plane had four spacious lavatories. This time the co-pilot had brazed the door closed from the inside and installed a fancy sliding hatch from the flight deck. The Tennessee taxpayers would have been proud.

The pilot pulled his head out of the electronics bay at the rear of the aircraft and watched three motorcycles circle once around like slaving hyenas. They shot off into the dark and he called to his co-pilot, “Hey, you see that? Three bikes. Low-lifes, I think.”

A few minutes later, they stopped working and stood near the concrete edge, looking out at the runway. The sound of straining engines could be heard and the co-pilot exclaimed, “Shit, I think they’re drag racing on the active!”

The pilot shook his head in amazement. “I almost hit a deer once. I’ll bet slamming one of those bikes would be a treat.”

Car lights swept over the area and the Governor’s three SUV parade snaked up slowly to his jet. “Oh, shit, we gotta button up.”

They ran back to the plane to close all the access panels, scurrying so they could be caught doing routine maintenance. The Governor walked up just as the co-pilot was replacing the APU cover.

“Everything good with my plane?” asked Birdshot, feeling fully recovered from his bout with the flu. The pilot walked up to meet him, his partner needing just a few more seconds. “Just making sure, Governor.”

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“Excellent. I have a few friends joining us and I thought we’d have our meeting in the air. Maybe just fly out to the Rockies and back. Two hours tops.”

“I’ll get working on the flight plan. Departure in fifteen okay?”

“Perfect. I think I hear our friends now.” There’d been a tremendous crash out on the runway and Birdshot thought of his buddies, cranked on meth and likely drag racing.

The turbines started as the pilots worked through the checklist which included a new item: Power Up Still and Test.

At idle the jacked-up engines could cure paint with their acoustic assault so the Governor passed the order and the Chief made his way up the staircase into the plane.

The pilot had his small window open, pining for a delivery, and Birdshot yelled up to him. “Hey, hit the landing lights.”

A million candlepower flooded the runway and Birdshot could just make out two bikes coming towards them, one doubled up with two riders. He mumbled to himself, “Great boys, leave it out there.”

Frank came in with one of his crew on the seat behind him, and the other bike stayed well back. They pulled into the shadow of nearby hanger and dismounted, one of the men limping hard.

“Somebody hurt?” asked the Governor with a cold chuckle. They had the same clothes on from earlier, much earlier, that day. The Governor was dressed in Gentlemen’s Quarterly “I’m Rich” pair of slacks and a coordinated sports jacket.

Frank’s anger, already supercharged over the collision out on the runway, wasn’t in the mood for GQ. He spat, “I knew that leather wasn’t your look. I hope you don’t disappoint us tonight.”

In his circles, this was considered a medium hostility greeting, flexible yet a ready segue to broken bones. The Governor needed these clowns and poured on the honey. “Frank, good to see you. We’ve been waiting.”

“No you haven’t. We came by ten minutes ago, right on time, and you weren’t here. That’s why we were racing. Didn’t bring any hooch and the boys are a little edgy.”

“Well, let’s get you guys some cocktails and cigars, and maybe even take a short flight. See the Rockies.”

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Frank and his crew had never been in an airplane, and the offer of a flying nirvana was just too much. Angling for the trifecta, Frank asked, “You got women in there?”

“Not tonight. We’re going to talk business. But if you pay attention, you’ll see a place where they have women from out of this world.”

Frank nodded lasciviously and motioned to his gang members to go up the stairs.

The new plane was even bigger than its predecessor, the seventy five million dollar price tag buried among a slaughterhouse of other pork on the state’s new 2016 budget.

Aft of the leather and rare woods seating area was the Governor’s private suite complete with a shower and queen size bed. In a locked closet, he’d even managed to stash a few blow-up dolls for the longer flights.

Birdshot walked over to his security detail and told them to go back to the mansion. “Just leave me one vehicle, and the Chief and I will be back later.” That handled, he mounted the stairs and the co-pilot closed the main hatch.

The cabin lights were low, the bikers already squatting like claim-jumpers. Birdshot stated openly, “Gentlemen, you’ve not met my Head of Security. We call him ‘Chief’. Please relax and get to know each other. I’ll be in the private suite making some phone calls until we reach altitude and then we’ll discuss our business.”

He wanted them speaking as a group, give them time to begin working as a team.

Frank and the boys were already well into their first bottle of Jack Daniels, enjoying the trappings of executive privilege. They nodded to the Chief who handed out headphones to protect everyone from the coming deafening roar of the engines. Frank asked coarsely, “You mean we gotta wear these things? We’re used to a little road noise.”

The Chief was sizing them up, wondering what the Hell was going on, and suspecting he wasn’t entirely in the loop. “This ain’t no road noise, Frank, it’s Hell’s own urgency. ‘less you wanna be wearing a hearing aid the rest of your life, I’d put them on.”

The plane pulled out on the active runway and the pilot fire-walled the throttles. At about one hundred knots the co-pilot yelled into his headphones, “You got that bike?”

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The pilot nodded at the crumpled motorcycle that lay directly ahead on the runway and yanked back the yoke. The aircraft's nose pitched up several knots below the optimal rotation speed and the stall siren went off, its scream lost to the metal bending distortion of the hotrod turbines.

Clearing the wreck by a few feet the airplane barreled into the sky, another disaster averted by a hair. The pilot trimmed her up for a leisurely climb and reached for his tumbler, first of the new batch.

It was real chummy back in the main cabin, everyone getting along too well. Frank's social barometer, as creaky as it was, immediately understood the potential for this kind of power. This was a thing to be milked slowly and never released.

The Chief asked with a mixture of condescension and regard for the Governor's plan, "You ever been at over five hundred miles per hour before, Frank?"

The other poured his third command level drink and imagined thrashing the security man. "My bike's pretty fast."

"Doesn't it have a speedometer?"

"Don't want one. A man should only ever consider where he's going, not how fast."

The Chief was thinking that if the Governor didn't get out here fast and tell these boys where *they* were going, there'd be trouble. In another twenty minutes that liquor would be whispering loud, telling them shit was coming. He'd seen this type before.

Meanwhile Birdshot was fiddling with his elevator controller, a premium model that could turn just about any enclosure into a fully functioning jump craft. His plan was to give everyone a tour of the aft suite, and pack them into to his personal sauna for a ride to Ethyl's jump-point ship.

Despite the passage of seven months on Earth since they'd grabbed the hillbilly and sent him up to Ethyl, only about five days had elapsed on her ship because of time dilation. If he knew anything about the prurient instincts of Ethyl, that hillbilly would still be there.

The pilot came on the intercom telling everyone they'd achieved flight level four two zero, or forty two thousand feet. He added, "For those interested, the Rockies are fifty eight minutes ahead at current speed."

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Satisfied it would work, the Governor connected to the shipwide intercom, and said to everyone, “Frank, bring your men and the Chief back here, I want to show you all something.”

There was a burst of laughter from forward, and Birdshot heard them gathering their stash for the journey to the inner sanctum. They came into the suite carrying small Tennessee goodie bags and stood around the Governor who was seated at a small writing desk.

He didn’t waste any more time. “Okay, here’s the drill. I’m from another planet, and the real Governor is aboard my space ship. Your job is to go get him. You might encounter some resistance, maybe from him because he’s crazy.”

Frank was ready for some wayout shit. The Chief stared at the Governor and then at the bikers. He too was ready for all manner of crazy and suddenly realized the Governor anticipated some potential danger.

Frank laughed hard, and asked, “We get there on this airplane?”

“No, we got something way faster. You boys ever been in a sauna?” There was an unreality to the situation, but the liquor was free and the place smelled real good. Frank pushed all his chips in. “Your move, Governor.”

TWENTY

They entered the private bathroom and Birdshot pointed to the sauna. “Frank, you and the boys get comfortable in there. The Chief and I have to cover the return procedure. You’ll be leaving in a minute.”

They crowded in and he pushed the heavy wooden door nearly closed. The Governor pulled the Chief a few feet away, saying “Here is a small device that will activate any potential jump cavity. You just spin your finger around like this and a panel will appear on the wall. Then enter this sequence on the panel buttons. Very simple.”

He turned the handheld device to the Chief who saw a diagram of a standard jump panel with four buttons. As he watched, they cycled a 1-3-2-4 combination over and over. “I get it, just punch in that sequence. Right?”

“That’s right Chief. Now, listen to me. You’re going to a space ship that has a lot of dingy, dark passages with potentially nasty people in them. You got that? I don’t care who you kill, just be sure to bring the Governor back.”

He didn’t say “unharmd,” and the Chief made a mental note of that. Clear as Afghanistan.

It was time to go, but he caught the Chief’s arm as they turned around to enter the sauna. “Be careful. I’m sending those morons along as muscle but look out for yourself and the Governor. They don’t need to come back. And one more thing, Chief. Time will be passing much faster here, so make every minute count.”

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The Chief grinned, liking the new Governor more all the time. It was feeling just like the best moments of his two tours. Tough officers, and tough decisions.

He stepped into the sauna, no more crowded than when the Governor had taken six cheerleaders to the State Championship. As the Chief wedged himself in, the door was pushed closed and a panel appeared. He carefully selected 1-3-2-4 on the buttons and the background hiss of the intercom headphones went instantly dead.

There was no sound at all, and Frank, way out of his comfort zone, tore the headset off. He growled, no pretense remaining, "There's some shit going on now." Kicking the door open, they all crowded out into a dimly lit storage locker.

Time on Earth was moving at more than one hundred times faster, and at the same instant The Governor was just touching down. The Chief said, "This place matches the Governor's description. We need to be real careful."

Frank didn't like surprises and the lavish aftertaste of the jet's opulence had evaporated. "No shit, Sherlock. We're in harm's way, I can tell. That damn Governor."

The Chief needed to assert himself. "Listen, we're here to do one thing - get the Governor. We get him, we leave. Simple. Now follow me."

He pulled out his old service pistol, a trusty friend who'd saved his ass more than once in the mountains of Afghanistan and walked to the nearby hatch. To the Chief, it felt like a museum submarine. Something from the fifties. Every surface was thick metal and it stank worse than the county fair.

Frank barked out from behind. "This some kind of sewer ship? I don't like it."

"What's to like?" snarled the Chief.

They had no idea what to expect and the enormity of what they didn't know began to fill their minds. Frank needed a step-by-step playbook and asked none too quietly, "What if we meet somebody we don't like?"

It was a ridiculous question as Frank didn't like anyone. Not expecting an answer, he drew out a shiny Desert Eagle hand cannon. On queue, his two companions, shell shocked already, each produced a firearm.

All four men moved ahead, handguns drawn.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE IDIOT

* * * *

Nearby, Jeb was thinking he had two choices. Find Billie Sue here, and return to Earth, or go back there right now, alone. He didn't know if she was aboard the ship. Furthermore, even though he'd been here twice before, the ship could have a thousand levels. On the other hand, Ethyl was clearly a loser, more so now that he'd blasted her all to Hell. *'cause losers don't hold onto anything too long.*

So, judging by the abundant deferred maintenance around every turn, it was a meager place. Also, Jeb was conscious the game had changed. If Ethyl had companions, they'd be gunning for him.

Considering his own weapon, the gun merchant's guidance was slim, limited to "throw it away after six uses, lest it get testy." He didn't want to find out what that meant. He'd used it twice.

Time for some reconnaissance.

Just as he was about to leave, the sound of voices came to him, at least two men in the corridor. One of them growled, "I'm ready to kill, Chief. Are you?"

The other responded bitingly, "You've never been in battle. Now shut up."

Jeb had no idea what to do. His options sucked. He could go back in the closet and hope to escape to Earth or elsewhere, but that felt cowardly.

Suddenly, a loud sound ripped through the ship, and Jeb crouched down. Someone screamed and then the sound blasted through the ship again. It was some kind of weapon, being fired out in the corridor, but it needed servicing by the ragged clamor of its operation. A voice yelled, "I got one of them. You fire, my gun's heating up."

The Chief had never seen anything like it. Two big bruisers had rounded the corner and fired without warning. One of Frank's guys had sizzled into a cloud of sooty smoke. He yelled, "Get down," and emptied his service pistol at the assailants.

The one with the bad gun caught a round in the neck, and whirled into the other spewing blood. Frank and his remaining guy opened up and fired ten quick shots like a gangland shootout.

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The bleeder dropped dead as the other enormous humanoid took at least two slugs and lurched back around the corner. Frank bellowed like a bull and took off after him, an easy kill.

There was a trail of blood to follow. Frank and his boy stormed to the end of the corridor and made a right, running as fast as they could. The Chief heard another loud discharge, this one clearly from one of the particle beam devices and several more gunshots.

He called out, "Frank, you okay?"

"No. My other guy got torqued, but I hit that bastard again. He's got three in him now."

The Chief crept forward and joined Frank. He asked, "Where is he?"

It was just the two of them, Frank's gang up in smoke. Frank motioned to a nearby hatch. "In there. I'm gonna get him."

The Chief had seen death in the caves of Afghanistan and knew going slow was the way to stay alive. He said, "I'm not following him in there. We'd get killed for sure."

Frank yanked a hand grenade out of his jacket and said, "Gonna send in my emissary. Stand back."

He pulled the pin, kicked the hatch ajar and tossed it in. "Run!"

The grenade went off buckling the metal wall and slamming the hatch closed hard. He screamed above the deafening echo. "Take that, asshole!"

Jeb had no problem reconstructing the battle until the explosion tore through the ship. The compression wave was harsh, all the more so as everything was metal.

He instantly felt sick and overwhelmed. Shooting at the prison's annual paint gun tournament was one thing, even when they let the convicts join in for a little release, but this was for real.

The Chief and Frank had run back to escape the grenade's concussion and were standing outside Jeb's hiding place. Frank said, "There's more of them, I can feel it."

Jeb heard the two men reloading and then the closet from which he had entered the room began making noise. He thought, *I'm surrounded. It's my time.*

He spun around silently and held his blaster up, four shots left, ready to receive whatever had just jumped aboard.

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The Chief and Frank had heard the unusual noise, their senses tuned to any threat. Just as Frank entered Jeb's room with his gun drawn, Billie Sue pushed open the closet door. Jeb acted without thought, whirled on Frank and fired.

The blaster went click, nice and quiet, and Frank ignited into a burst of combustion and vaporized. The Chief, still outside the door, yelled, "Whoever's in there, we just want to take the Governor back to Earth."

Jeb yelled back, "There's no Governor here. You better take off, or I'm gonna kill you just like I did your buddy."

The Chief grinned, part of his personal agenda satisfied, peeked in the room, seeing Jeb and Billie Sue. Quietly he withdrew, thinking it was time to regroup.

Billie Sue ran over to Jeb and said, "Sorry I left you. Ethyl grabbed me when I went to take a leak and I re-routed until I knew you were on the move. I had some things to do, discussions to have, you know. I figured you'd end up here. Ethyl's dead, right?"

Jeb asked, still recovering from the violent exchange, "What? Yes. I'm totally confused, but screw that, all that matters is you. That we're together again."

She kissed him and he responded eagerly, vowing then and there never to let her go again.

"Billie Sue, will you marry me? I mean, when we get back to Earth."

She took a small step back, looking very surprised. "Yep. I need a vacation, and spending time on Earth with you sounds perfect. And we probably need to feed Toby and get him a gift too."

TWENTY ONE

The Chief slunk off, knowing he'd been told squat. Five men killed in as many minutes, and him now alone on an alien ship with the brain-damaged ex-Governor of Tennessee.

Somebody was lying to somebody.

He ducked through a hatch into another nondescript room, a jumble of trash its only contents. Between the smell, the decay, and the death, it was time to leave.

To the Chief, this was another deal gone bad in a string of such false starts. Promises made and broken. And now some alien, some creature from God knows where was running his life, telling him what to do.

That ended now. He pulled his shirt off, and tore at the sweaty white tee-shirt below. Grabbing a nearby piece of discarded angle iron, he quickly fashioned a white flag. *Time to get some answers.*

Billie Sue and Jeb hugged each other for several minutes, remembering a life from far away and yesterday. Outside in the corridor they heard, "I'm your old chief of security, Governor. Remember me? I just want to talk."

He thrust the flag of surrender in the open hatch and waved it up and down rapidly. Taking a bold chance, he glanced around the edge of the hatch, saw Jeb and Billie Sue in tight embrace and pulled back before they could spot him.

Jeb made the vague connection, realizing this guy thought he was the Governor. That this security guy had just suffered through a deadly battle chasing the wrong man meant somebody was feeding him a load of shit. That was point one in his favor.

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He yelled, “Hey Chief, stay put. We’re going to decide about you right now.”

Billie Sue whispered, “Jeb, who is this guy?” He shook his head slowly, plum tired of being out of answers. “Must be here to grab me, though someone is not telling him the truth. And the only person who’d want me is the guy who sent me here.”

She looked at him intensely, a bunch of dots connecting. “Want my guess what’s going on?”

“I’m listening.”

“Somebody smoked the real Governor and now they need another facsimile. Sounds like hazard duty.”

“Yep.” He turned to the open hatch. “Git your ass out of here or I’m gonna kill you. You got five seconds.”

The flag fell to the floor and they heard the Chief’s retreating steps.

“That was easy. Must be some kind of pansy.”

“Jeb, let’s go. This place used to stink. It hasn’t gotten any better.”

They squeezed into the closet and Billie Sue said, “Before we can go to Earth, Jeb, I have to make a couple of quick stops. One of them is to pick up a present for you.”

“I thought you wanted to get right back to Earth and deal with this Presidential Fiddler? Something change?”

“Jeb, it’s late April on Earth. We have over six months to the election. There’s time.”

Jeb was more confused than ever by the time dilation. He asked, “Tell me again. When we’re aboard this ship, or anything moving near the speed of light, how fast are we eating up Earth time?”

“It’s nothing like regular, but around a hundred to one ratio. Every day we travel at near light speed, three months or so pass on Earth. We’ve got around two full days, our time, until the next President is elected. If we hope to have any control over that, I must make at least one stop. Two if you’ll let me.”

* * * *

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The Chief didn't understand anything about time dilation, but he knew a bad deal by its smell. And this place was like an open sewer. After getting his bearings, he found the sauna door and climbed in. It was now a broom closet, perhaps rearranging to fit in with its new surroundings. *Nothing makes sense here*, he mused.

The panel appeared as expected and a few seconds later he was pushing the door open into the Governor's mansion.

It's surprising, without any understanding, how quickly one can adapt to the ridiculous and bizarre. Just another of Mother Nature's wiring shortcuts to fix a non-linear universe.

He walked directly to the security station, surprised by how quiet things were. Everything seemed vaguely out of place, items moved around a bit as if life had gone on without him. A second later, after checking the scheduling computer to confirm his doubts, the world tilted - he'd lost four weeks!

It was now the early morning of April nineteenth.

With a sense of the beyond, he whispered to himself, "I'll be goddamned. Somebody took a month from me."

A short examine-your-entire-life moment later, he was on the move. The Governor had some explaining to do, and the Chief knew where to get those answers. Up five flights, by the stairs, to the padlocked hidey-hole. The lock was ajar, meaning someone was up there in the attic, so the Chief kept going, not particularly scared of anything now.

The Governor was asleep in his over-stuffed chair, a dangling hand loosely clamped around the neck of a half-spent bottle of Old No. 7. The Chief was locked and loaded for some truth.

He boomed into His Honor's aerie, "What kind of shit was that, Governor? I almost got my ass shot off!"

Birdshot was on a far-off planet in his dreams, dancing with a lovely creature and planning an unlikely sexual segue. The Chief's voice penetrated the reverie like a LAWS rocket, blasting his object of affection to smithereens and dousing him rudely back to reality.

"Governor. Wake up!"

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The Chief had his holster unbuckled and his hand hovered over the gun, ready for any alien tricks the Guv' might have up his sleeve. To Birdshot, this looked like a re-direct "needing fixing." He sat up hard, turned half way towards the Chief and yelled, "What's this? Where's the Governor?"

The Chief cooled on instinct. *If a fast hard approach falters at all, go back in smart.* He replied calmly, "The Governor didn't want to come back. And the other guys, your muscle, they got popped in a wild shootout."

That should rattle him.

The Governor's eyes slid away, looked down at his bottle, and he took a long leisurely pull.

"Governor, are you hearing me? Five dead, and that Frank guy used a bloody hand grenade. I might just check *our* inventory."

The thin threat made Birdshot chuckle a little, an echo of Custer's rant when he'd spotted the second wave of indians. "Chief, I expected those guys to die. And don't tell me you're surprised."

He wanted to hit the items one at a time starting with the inconsequential.

"Maybe not, they were fodder, but what about the Governor? I was expecting him to want to return. He had some babe with him and I think he's dug in. Was that part of your plan?"

Try as he might, he wanted to beat the crap out of Temperance. In Afghanistan, he'd seen bad officers get their comeuppance and it was often the best thing. *Maybe this Governor needed an event.*

"Ah, that doesn't matter. If he wants to stay, let him." Birdshot didn't care if he stayed there, anywhere but Earth until the election was fine. "Chief, please settle down. You did a great job."

"I need some answers."

"I'll answer any question you have," remarked Birdshot as he poured a healthy measure into two glasses and handed one up to the Chief.

"Look, I know you're from some other place real different. I know you want to be President of the United States. What I don't know is how I fit in. I may not have liked Frank and his bums, but letting them walk into a shitstorm was cold. Is that going to happen to me?"

The Chief had a point, Birdshot observed to himself. But Frank was greedy, looking for a quick hop to the corporate jet and free-flowing luxury. *And that's a hard dream to follow.*

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“Chief, drink your whiskey. Settle down.” Birdshot watched him pull over a chair and force himself to sit. The man had discipline, that was for sure. They crossed glances, acknowledging a change of perspective was needed. And if it couldn’t be entirely achieved with reason, Old No. 7 was there to make things right.

After the Governor had opened a fresh bottle and they’d shared three speechless rounds, Birdshot said, “Chief, you’re useful to me. Frank was too, in a different way, one that Frank himself might appreciate if he were still with us.”

They both laughed sourly, most of the tension solvated by the enticing warmth of the whiskey.

“But you’re really useful for me, this campaign, and the future of this planet.” In the Chief’s absence, Birdshot had returned to the stump with new vigor, demagoguery already second nature.

The Chief remembered then the lost time and asked earnestly, “What have I missed? Are we winning?”

Birdshot smiled at the personal pronoun and replied, “We are winning, of course. I’m a cinch for the Republican nomination in September, and my Democratic challenger is a wimp.”

“Is that still *Monty*?” He said the name with a conspiratorial twang and then they laughed easily, all rancor forgotten.

“None other. I’d whack him, but they might find someone competent.” The Chief winced at the casual reference to assassination. Playing Lee Harvey Oswald wasn’t in his playbook.

The Chief wanted to change the topic. “What’s our next step?”

“Well, we have a bunch more states to visit, delegates to woo, and then the nomination. Then it gets ugly. You onboard for that?”

“Onboard?” asked the Chief, sensing the game table slide around. “I’m not a killer, Governor, except when it’s necessary. Did my share in Afghanistan.”

“It’s always necessary, Chief. This is *the* game. Top slot on the planet. That means commitment.”

The Governor had picked up an edge while he was away. But maybe that was required for this job. “I’m with you. I just don’t want to be shooting civilians unless they shoot first.”

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Birdshot had accomplished everything he could for now. He remarked with a tone of closure, “Chief, it’s *Good* to have you back. Go get some rest and we’ll talk, just the two of us, tomorrow.”

After his security man had left, Birdshot leaned back restfully, relieved that hillbilly lookalike had found a distraction and was staying out of his world.

He raised a glass to the Fates, and said aloud, I may just pull this off.”

TWENTY TWO

Jeb pulled Billie Sue into the closet, some part of his masculine makeup acting autonomously to hang on to this woman. She pulled a new gizmo from her jeans and the familiar panel appeared. Jeb noticed this one had five buttons, not four.

Billie Sue's fingers twittered over them rapidly, a complex sequence that was like Morse Code to an amoeba, and he shrugged thinking, *I'm still on the farm team.*

The tiny volume of space vibrated at a much higher frequency and she said, "Hold on, darling, we're going far."

Jeb had no context for far, or near, or a relationship between distance and comfort. The pulsations became vigorous, deforming the whole shape of their little traveling machine. It felt like the inside of a dancing jello sculpture, the lines between real and something else blurring.

"Whoa, baby, this is new" brayed Jeb. He was still clasping her hand and she felt the sweat running. The next instant it was silent, Billie Sue whispering "Got ten to the n-th over ten that time."

Jeb remembered something about a triangle from high school physics and asked confidently, "N being six?"

He was flat out bullshitting, having grokked that some factor of their supra-Einsteinian travel mechanics was exponential, the balance made of more pedestrian constants and variables.

She looked over and giggled, innocent as a rising thunderhead. "Six is about right." He watched her exit and his eye traveled out of the safe closet

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to a blue space. A moment later he remembered the powder room outside the main hub at Andromeda.

Jeb asked, "You like this place, hun?"

Billie Sue turned around, smiling. It struck him then that she was an alien and could be any age. She could be anything, for that matter. And despite all that, he was in love with her.

"Come on, Jeb. I want to buy you something I picked out for Toby." She ran into one of the female bathrooms. Jeb took a little closer look around, willing himself to slow down and perceive things.

As he turned to the male bathroom a wave of deep fatigue sweep from his belly outward and he nearly collapsed. He thought, *Now I know why they have these blue oasis buffer rooms.*

Fifteen minutes later they joined hands, and took a deep breath. She asked gently, "You ready?" He pushed open the door to the main hall, scant days before a place of pure chaos and Brownian motion.

It was utterly still. Jeb noticed immediately the lack of noise, the absence of life and the shuttered selling stalls. He remarked with a laugh, "Looks like the Jersey shore in winter."

They made their way through the great hall, the surrounding walls rising like rippling seashells three hundred feet over their heads. At the very top of this enormous place the two shells met and formed a silly smile that moved like an oscilloscope tracing. It was a fantasyland far, far from home. "Where's Jerry Jeff's bar? I need one."

Billie Sue turned around to face him. "They might be closed. This place is on holiday."

"Why we here then?"

"Couple of quick pickups. And I gotta meet someone. Then we go to Earth."

"Okay."

"Jeb, I have to meet this person alone. Don't worry, it's another woman."

He gave it his best "Man of the World" look and then remembered where he was. "Okay."

A ways ahead was an open sales stall, the vendor nowhere to be seen. As they approached, it struck Jeb this might be a pet store but much of it was too strange to match up with any known Earthly creature.

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Billie Sue walked right in like she was a partner and grabbed a thin black collar. It had a slight bulge at one place like a radio transmitter but otherwise appeared to be a common canine accessory.

“This is for you, Jeb.” She watched his face for a second and gave her usual laugh. “You’re supposed to give it to Toby. You didn’t think I meant...”

Jeb interrupted, “Of course not.” He delivered his response flatly, and then smiled to show he could give and take.

“Is this a present for both of us then?” She came back around the sales counter in a sweep, replying, “No. My gift to Toby will be a secret. For now, anyway.”

Jeb didn’t want any fresh revelations and went with it. He just needed to get back to Terra Firma.

“Okay, Billie Sue. I’m going to check Jerry Jeff’s place, and you go have your meeting.” He felt vaguely threatened again like he wasn’t getting anywhere near the whole story. ‘Cause there were two types of things people don’t tell you: stuff you won’t miss and stuff that might kill you.

He wandered off, near her now and needing distance too. It didn’t feel like they had found each other again, but rather that she was moving under her own power in and out of his life. *Jerry Jeff better be here.*

He spotted the red flashing light ahead, Jeff’s, and was delighted to see the old western split door swinging as if someone had just gone in. *They better order fast.*

It was very dark, a taste of the Great Hall’s mood intruding. A couple of tables were occupied by solitary drinking men, *A Time of Lonesome Consideration* playing low.

A server came over, some haggard old cowboy robot with dusty chaps and a battered black hat and asked without preamble, “Lonestar longneck?” Jeb nodded and a minute later he was pulling quietly, remembering all the solitary beers he had shared with himself.

Trying to put a box of reason around the last four days was impossible. He had learned some fancy new things and his personal universe had red-shifted outward enormously, but there was a hollowness that danced just beyond reckoning. It was like being with someone who is far more perceptive and you’re conscious of a shortcoming, an intimate myopia.

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He had no answers, and the only certainty present here and now was his attraction for something that was increasingly beyond understanding. Another beer showed up unbidden, a steady drip being ministered from elsewhere.

Jeb folded both arms on the table, cradling his suddenly heavy head. In an instant he was asleep, dream shapes rushing past like driving storm clouds. Their underbellies were sodden with expectant rain, gray and dense.

The wind boomed and whistled with chaotic menace, his mind's eye growing dark. Through the shouts of gusting force he heard a thin, sibilant voice faintly, just at the edge of his perception.

It wavered in and out as if carried near and far on the terrific wind. Like a waking dream, Jeb was conscious of his own identity as something separate from this experience, but intertwined.

The voice suddenly popped out of the noise and he heard the three words clearly. "You have purpose." Just as he warmed to the prospect of a life-changing theophany, it continued, "If you don't get whacked, that is."

His sense of supreme meaning snapped closed like a Venus Fly Trap and he woke up.

He looked around, and Jerry Jeff was sitting on a stool right next to his table, not grinning. A couple of shots stood next to his beer and he realized some time had passed.

"Jerry Jeff, I been out long?"

The old singer strummed a set of chords, and ventured into a long sequence of melancholy laced with a few bright high notes. It was a backdrop, something needing to be said to the traveler. "Jeb, you're about to take a dangerous journey. You've got good company, as far as that goes, but you need to watch out. Remember your life has value to others."

The saloon doors banged open, Billie Sue entered and bee-lined to them. Jerry Jeff stood without a suggestion of gallantry, still lightly strumming. He winked to them both, lingered on her face an extra moment, and left.

"Ready to go, Jeb?" She was excited, clearly not willing to sit down so he could finish his drink. He asked, "You want this other shot? I think Jerry Jeff meant to share a round with me."

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“Jeb, it’s time we moved on. I want you to come with me back to my patch of the universe for one night, and then to Earth. But we need to talk before I take you home, and that’s the safest place within three million light years.

Jeb had no inclination to quarrel and got up. She started towards the door and he grabbed one of the shots, tossed it back and took one last look back at Jerry Jeff. He’d taken a seat on the end stool at the bar and was watching them closely, perhaps too closely. As Jeb walked past, he stuck out his hand for a shake.

“Remember what I said. It’s your life.”

* * * *

Before Jeb knew it, they were back on Billie Sue’s king-sized bass boat, ripping down a sunset lake. How they found the boat, or how it found them no longer mattered - Jeb just wanted to get home. Back to his little house, his piece of land, and his dog.

Billie Sue was up top, running the boat while Jeb stood twenty feet below on the deck, looking back across the darkening lake. A deep v-pattern stretched out behind him in perfect symmetry, the purr of his girlfriend’s babied engines pouring out a long, sad song.

He wasn’t hot or cold, tired or restless. Just achy. He hurt all over for things that pushed back the way they were supposed to. Even here on Billie Sue’s “little patch of the universe,” it wasn’t right. Maybe it was the slant of the setting star, or the color of the water, but something was just off.

Maybe it was the crazy flashing red & white moon, belting out its urgent call for the perfect chew. That was surely weird. He watched the jagged reflections of red and white flicker off the water like tiny thunderbolts thrown by an angry god.

But a man is a man, and a marketing moment later, Jeb was fishing in his fanny pack for some Red Man. He chuckled to himself it oughta be called Red Neck Man. Like a native son, he was far from home, missing it, and he didn’t care for any comparisons, or flowery contraptions of prose to sell him otherwise.

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He drew deep within, and an hour later he was asleep in Billie Sue's arms, tucked away in her silly treehouse, listening for that voice.

TWENTY THREE

Like the white noise of an off-station TV, Jeb stared from his sleeping mind into a hash of seething clutter. Snips of speech fluttered and dashed out but he couldn't grasp the words. In the way a picture is built up a pixel at a time, these thought fragments were twirling and bounding off one another and conveying something.

And it didn't seem friendly. Jeb envisioned a despot's warmongering in a foreign tongue, the phrasing thrust threatening and universal.

After an indeterminate time, from the shapeless forms and sound emerged a clear, sonorous voice. It was perfectly modulated, strongly feminine, and certain. "Jeb, you have purpose. You may even survive it. And if you do, you will become shiny new."

He woke instantly, his face slick with sweat. Billie Sue stirred, perhaps enduring her own dreams, connected elsewhere. He got out of bed, threw on an old sweatshirt, and walked down to the water in the twilight.

His left ear hurt and he idly scratched at the side of his head as the surroundings registered. The manic moon had set, thank god, and he stared out over the sullen water, a black formless expanse that had morphed while he slept. Just hours before they had cut across its surface without a thought, but now it stared back like a single flat organism, hungry and dangerous.

Jeb knew he was on build-up, needing the familiar soon. His thoughts turned back to Billie Sue. She had something on her mind and he knew, in the morning, he'd be heavier by some burden.

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After an unconscious time, he found his way back to bed and fell into dreamless sleep.

* * * *

The morning came at once, hot and breezy. Jeb got up, wondering where Billie Sue had gotten to and noticed a thousand little mobiles and windcatchers twirling in the crowding trees.

Some of the menace from the evening before had gone, but in its place an emptiness throbbed as a constant reminder of how strange this place really was. Deciding to swim, Jeb pulled on a pair of shorts, grabbed a towel and followed the path to the dock.

The water was cool at first, but he swam aggressively, driving a cobweb of half-baked thoughts from his mind. *It's time to go, and if she doesn't show up soon, I'm going alone.*

After a good thirty minutes of vigorous pulling strokes, he hopped out of the water with focused energy and went up to the treehouse to gather his possessions. The stillness was unsettling, intensifying the already alien aspect that hung over every object. It was if everything suddenly didn't fit in his life, all appearances of commonplace familiarity false.

The engines started without complaint, no key necessary, nor did he expect any. If there was danger here, it was not from something as benign as property theft.

With the lines tossed away, Jeb pushed the throttles forward and the hull surged up on plane, knifing through the morning mist effortlessly. Pointing the boat directly at the center of the mammoth lake, he climbed down from the tower and entered the head.

A panel appeared and he entered the numbers displayed on his handheld direction finder, its tiny diagram of Earth centered in a field of stars distantly comforting.

The journey from Wood to Ethyl's ship had reminded him of his ignorance, and he pushed back into the corner of the little space, settling in for a long journey. Perhaps because of the unimaginable forces flexing the universe just beyond the protection of his crazy plastic

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travel machine, Jeb fell into a deep sleep. Some part of his psyche decided it was better just to wake up back on Earth, or not at all.

He was ready for either eventuality.

TWENTY FOUR

NOVEMBER 6, 2016

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF'S SPIRIT(S)?

BY CONSTANCE PERLEY-MOSS

GOVERNOR GOOD'S GOT A GOOD ROAD CAMPAIGN GOING, EVEN ACCORDING TO HIS DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGER, MONTGOMERY WRIGHT. THE MASSACHUSETTS SENATOR, AND FRONTRUNNER IN TUESDAY'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, WAS QUOTED LAST NIGHT AS SAYING, "THAT ALIEN IS REALLY MAKING A BIG SOUND, BUT I HEAR HIS JET HAD SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE REVENUEERS."

HIS REMARKS, OF COURSE, REFER TO A POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE FAA RAMP CHECK THAT DELAYED HIS OPPONENT'S PLANE YESTERDAY IN BATON ROUGE. APPARENTLY THE GOVERNOR'S STAFF PILOTS HAVE BEEN RUNNING A SIDE BUSINESS, COOKING HOOCH AND MAKING FAST DELIVERIES ON THE TAXPAYERS' DIME.

ALLEGATIONS THE FAA DISCOVERED A PERMANENTLY-AFFIXED, FULLY-OPERATIONAL

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SIXTY GALLON FERMENTATION DEVICE ONBOARD IS FUELING THIS LATEST TACTICAL BLUNDER OF THE "GO GOOD" CAMPAIGN. THE FAA SPOKESMAN HELD A PRESS CONFERENCE ON THE FIELD, STATING "FOR THE RECORD" THAT NO CHARGES HAVE BEEN FILED.

YET.

THIS REPORTER SMELLS THE RIPE CURL OF A BOILING SCANDAL, SERVED UP BACKWOODS STYLE WITH LOTS OF BLUSTER AND THE PROMISE OF HILLBILLY VENGEANCE. ONCE THING IS CLEAR, THE NIMBUS OF DECEIT COILED AROUND THIS WHITE HOUSE WANNABEE IS TIGHT AS A COPPER STILL.

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The Chief lay his paper down, shaking his head with a chuckle, glad he'd not been along on that southern states sweep. He knew those flyboys were hitting the sauce at altitude, but that captain was skillful. After all, he'd saved the Governor's bacon in Kentucky.

Hell, he always had a "go cup" in his truck for long distance; anything over five miles.

Driving makes a man thirsty.

But Temperance was landing in a few hours and there'd be hell to pay. The race was tight, too tight in fact. It was still anybody's win and he wondered again for the millionth time what it would be like to head up some high-powered security force.

It was a standard issue dream, a life changed overnight to a position of great power. First thing, the Chief knew, he'd find out what the government was hiding about them aliens. Were all those sightings fake, or did they know all along that people like the Governor were from way Out There?

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He could see a high-paid pencil neck squirming under his cross examination.

Chief: Colonel Gyser, you've stated for the record you were responsible for the Project Blue Book Revisited project. That project's findings were unequivocal - *There are no aliens*. Later you also admitted your brother-in-law was really from a landfill planet circling Alpha Centauri. Please explain the apparent contradiction.

Gyser: You ever met my brother-in-law?

Chief: Says here he's a plumber. I would have thought rocket scientist.

Gyser: He tells me these new "smart" toilets are rocket science. Push the wrong button, and"

The whole world is mad, thought the Chief. An alien weasels his way into the Tennessee governorship and makes it to the White House. Only in America.

His radio crackled and he heard, "Governor's plane lands in twenty minutes." It was one of the drivers, being efficient and hoping for an ambassadorship.

The Chief picked up the portable from its charging cradle, and responded. "Team B, you have the duty. I'll ride shotgun."

"Copy that."

The security team had tightened up a bit, the Chief admitted to himself. Starting as a group of law enforcement violators, he'd whipped them into a cohesive unit that moved pretty much in one direction. Even during the recent shenanigans they had weathered the Governor's mercurial ways, enduring his labyrinthine logic and witching call.

In the main, the Chief reflected, that was Good. From that first time he'd seen him rear up from that gurney, there was something about the man. Or alien, or whatever he was.

Yet there were many of his boys who divined a spiritual twitch. They saw a modern day saint, brimming with strange ways and that calling

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voice. He'd even heard one of the men had stitched together a little video of the Governor's cross country "Frogging Sessions," as they called it.

But that was just men being boys. The hardest work had been keeping the real law away from the many improprieties of the campaign. There was no denying it, the Governor was a night creature, venturing into the darkest places looking for hurt. And he had to admit, despite the numerous early morning coverups, Temperance Good had kicked some asses that needed kicking.

It was two days to the election, and right now the Governor was landing from his coast-to-coast travels to come here, hunker down, and get ready for the last lap.

The Chief gathered up his lawman tools and left, heading for the SUV snake that would head out to the airport for the final stretch.

* * * *

"Get me another whiskey, girl." The plane was on an eight mile final, straight-in as the Governor always demanded, and had four minutes to touchdown. Plenty of time for one more round.

Besides his playmate server, the Governor was alone in the mammoth jet. The pilots had the door closed and locked, the smell of a sweet honey brew filling the cabin. After the ramp check, there was talk of laying low, but Temperance stepped in, letting them know when he got that "1600 Pennsylvania place," he'd fix the FAA. The word rout was used.

His poison was Old No. 7 though and he sipped the last of his four ounce as the tires kissed the runway. Two days to go. Birdshot harkened back to his past campaigns, hundreds of botched adventures ignored to recall one near-success.

Someplace in Andromeda, on one of those watery planets, he'd met her, and together they'd almost taken a world. She was young, and beautiful, and ready for conquest. And then she disappeared.

"We're down, Governor," said the pilot as he lifted the hatch handle. His partner, the co-pilot, nodded in deference from behind a large container he carried. The Governor spied the ten gallon container, a new batch jostling around within.

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Birdshot loved these guys, laughed and yelled up to the front of the cabin. “Nice flight. You got some new product ready for sampling?”

The pilot pulled a stainless steel thermos from his flight bag and held it out as he walked back to the Governor. “Try this. It’s a new formulation. Little bit more hickory bark.”

The Governor gave him his million dollar smile and stood to receive the blessing. The pilot handed it across, and looked back at the co-pilot waiting at the hatch. “We both wish you the best, Governor. We’ll be ready for Air Force One. We’ve already checked out it’s power supply. Good clean power, enough for three hundred gallons at a time.”

The Governor looked him back in the eye, suddenly knowing he was going to win, and observed, “Hell, that baby’ll hold twenty good men, and twice that in hookers I hear. We’ll need that kind of capacity.”

The other, a budding entrepreneur, nodded knowingly, man of the world and soon the sky. His sky.

“Good luck again, Governor. I’m voting for you.”

He half-ran to the hatch to help his co-pilot, and they struggled the new batch out of the plane. As they conveyed their treasure to a waiting vehicle, Birdshot called out to them. “Boys, I may have one more flight tonight. Stand by.”

The Chief waited near the bottom of the air stairs and watched the hooch go past with a gentle smile. *Harmless.*

“Governor, welcome back. You want to go to the mansion, or *out?*” The Chief knew the pressure was way up on everyone. That could only mean one thing - time to beat the shit out of some deserving fool.

“Howdy Chief, I’d say ‘out’. Did you bring my hunting clothes?”

“Yep, got em in the truck.”

“Good. Tell my pilots we’re going back to Kansas City, just for the night. And tell your mole in Monty’s camp I’ll be at Jeff’s in a few hours.”

With a glimmer in his eye, the Chief responded, “Sounds like a *good* plan to me.”

* * * *

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Some time later, as the shades of the evening drew on, the single SUV crunched over the gravel parking lot of Jeff's bar. The lot was already choked with motorcycles, suggesting a target-rich environment.

Birdshot said, "I'll go in first. You wait five or so. I need to scout alone.

"Okay."

Both men rode up front, the Chief driving. Jeff's was a favorite haunt for the Governor, 'specially when he was in an ass-kicking mood. Being a thoughtful head of security, The Chief always kept a SUV at Kansas City Regional, making a quick hop convenient.

The rest of the normal security detail went back to the mansion with instructions to expect possible "night duty." A crack CYA team stood by like SWAT, ready to fend off the media or any interloper. They were down to the end of the game and everyone was locked and loaded.

Monty portrayed a "high road" campaign, implying with largely ineffective intent the Governor's wild ways, but the media loved Temperance Good, who they felt could be relied upon to deliver a laugh a minute.

Some journalists had even said it would take another Southerner to bring welcome cheer back into the highest office. A "taste of good ol' fashion womanizing, and hard living." And for those fundamentalist holdbacks, the Frogging call answered all remaining questions.

Governor Temperance Good, aka Birdshot, offered something for everyone. Rough and weird, efficient and funny, he'd run a risible campaign and deserved to win.

These thoughts careened around the Governor's mind as he pushed open the door to the bar and was surprised to see the place packed. All the better. Jeff came over with his usual, a four ounce shot of Old No. 7. He smiled like a villain, showing beautiful con artist teeth. "Welcome, Governor."

"Who we got here tonight?"

They both looked around. "Almost everybody. The regulars are all behind you. I hear the underground network has been running a hard campaign of their own, rousting the drunks and street life to vote 'Good'." That's a lot of votes.

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It was a grassroots effort, the Governor knew, but this city, like every other American city, was teeming with derelicts, and no one was speaking to them. If they could be mobilized.....

“That’s great, Jeff. Every vote gets us closer.”

He saw it then, America’s disenfranchised rising up, the parolees and pimps, street treats and panhandlers. America rode on the backs of these bedrock villagers, and perhaps it was time to give something back.

Tonight, that bit “of giving back” would likely take the form of an ass beating. He leaned in towards Jeff and said, “Need my old table. See to it.”

Jeff nodded and threw down his bar towel. Making his way around the opposite end of the bar he yelled, “Hey, Governor needs his table. Clear it.”

The two men playing eight ball ducked their heads respectfully and one of them swept the table full of balls into random pockets. Birdshot walked over and shook each of their hands, an understanding passing quietly. He selected his favorite stick and started dusting the tip. One of the men asked innocently, “Haven’t seen much of Frank and his little gang. You know where they got to?”

Birdshot inclined his head to the table as an offer to play, and replied, “He and his boys went for a ride in my jet. Haven’t seen them since.”

The other man shrugged, not really interested. He just felt something, and Birdshot liked that. *Let ‘em fear me.*

The game ended quickly, The Governor heavier by five hundred bucks. He played victim after victim, observing that the Chief had slipped in quietly, waiting for “the one.” They always showed up, right at the intersection of ruling toxins and pride. After two hours, he knew the broth was just about ready.

A man in the back had been talking on his cell phone, and Birdshot glanced at him off and on wondering what could be so interesting. Like a sportscaster, this voyeur had watched the succession of games, giving someone a blow-by-blow.

Everyone turned as a group of four men entered, dressed a little too similarly. It was somebody’s idea of a bad-ass ensemble but the effect was spoiled by too much newness and glossy pretension. They grabbed a table

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in the darkest part of the bar and Birdshot caught a stare pass between one of them and the cellular stool pigeon.

The Governor grinned and flexed all his muscle groups sequentially, firing each like a ship's gun battery. One of the shoulder seams on his leather jacket popped and the man standing next to him gasped. "Damn, Governor, you're ready."

The door opened and in walked Montgomery Wright, obviously on the cue with his security honchos. He crossed the room like Caesar and came right up to the Governor. They faced each other silently, no public forum protocol anywhere to be seen.

The bar went pin-drop quiet, this show beating any dancer or flogging. "Evening, Monty. You play?"

The democratic presidential contender was slightly taller than Birdshot's clone, and certainly heavier by thirty pounds of apparent caloric mismanagement. Up close, his age was there too, the public record stating fifty-nine. Somebody had clipped a decade.

His thin blond hair was tucked under a shiny new ballcap that displayed a red & white logo.

"I did back in school. Ten grand okay with you?"

"You need to see it?"

"Governor, *I* trust you." Monty inflected the "I" to suggest no one else held the same view.

The Governor watched Monty rack the balls up and then moved in to break gently, letting the balls scatter equidistantly for a near-perfect distribution. Tucked behind and touching the eight ball lay the white cue ball, no easy shots given.

Monty walked around the entire table as if he were sizing up a Cadillac, gave Birdshot a quick look and asked, "That your strategy Tuesday? Spread out the bullshit?"

In this place, such language was cub scout league and no one thought anything of it. Until somebody swung, it was just talk.

"Look that way to you, Monty? I mean, man to man, Monty, does it look like I don't know what I'm doing?" Birdshot was revving up for a first class whooping, and this guy looked weak.

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Monty took a step closer, shifted up on his toes for an extra inch and puffed out his chest. He'd been called mousy during the campaign, and election day was near.

His security crew went on alert, knowing their boss was going to get rocked by some alien. They'd told him not to mess with "that extraterrestrial," but Senator Wright always was.

Someone yelled out, "Bust his head, Mr. President."

Both men looked around, smelling the electric blood in the air. Monty stepped back, and kicked at the Governor with all his might. Birdshot registered the dopamine geyser spalling off the Senator before the other had even moved, and stepped easily to the side.

The Senator's center of mass moved beyond his belly and he went over, catching the table with his arm. There was an audible crack as the humerus let go; not enough reps at the gym. The bone ends ground harshly as he continued his fall, and as he hit the floor, Birdshot kicked him hard in the ribs.

Twenty men came to their feet, and someone yelled, "A grand on the Governor." One of Monty's boys yelled back, "I'll take that bet."

Monty lashed out a viscous kick from the floor, and Birdshot stomped his ankle with a muscular blur. The democratic hopeful bellowed like a stuck pig and scrambled under the pool table. Birdshot picked up the eight ball, palming it like a stalking southpaw.

"Get up you chicken shit. You gonna lead a country on your knees?"

Monty jumped up on one leg, the other dangling slightly. One of his men approached, and threw him a cue stick. "Go get his ass, Senator."

Birdshot had no particular belief system concerning a supreme being, save himself, but felt like praising someone. *Thank you, oh One Being.*

Monty came around the table surprisingly fast, hunting for hurt. He swung the stick up like an amateur and Birdshot jumped at him. The stick smacked his shoulder, splintering and Birdshot punched the senator right under the ribcage like a .38 slug.

Monty twisted away, swinging the shattered stick. It whipped around like a cheap wooden street tool as he stepped back for maneuvering room. Birdshot hated waiting and came right at him with reaching fingers. He grabbed the broken arm and yanked viscously, the sound terrible.

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A gun went off a feet away, and one of the Senator's guards barked, "Enough. You made your point."

Birdshot turned on him, and shouted, " You want some too?"

"I'll shoot you. I have authority for deadly force."

"Go ahead, dipshit. Pull the trigger."

Birdshot knew the clone body could handle one round before he tore the guy's throat out.

"We're leaving. You win."

Everyone relaxed, not really expecting a killing. That would come after the election. The Senator's crew hustled their damaged charge out the door, and a minute later the place was alive with laughter. Jeff shouted over the din, "Rest of the night, it's on me!"

Something needed to be said and Birdshot raised his glass. "Let's hope it's that easy on Tuesday!"

TWENTY FIVE

Boom! Jeb came awake suddenly, knowing with absolute certainty he'd made it back.

Earth! It sounded sweeter than ever and he kicked the door open, fearless. Exiting into a small grassy field, he looked around, reminded again he had traveled through space in a familiar jobsite PortaPotty.

Jeb had no reason to expect he'd land anywhere near home - Earth was just fine. He dug around in his fanny pack and fired up his low-tech GPS.

Tennessee.

All the better. He was just a few miles from home and in his world view, despite having left it for a spell, everything was working out dandy.

In a nearby convenience store he grabbed a telephone directory to call a cab. Only a few Earth days had seemingly elapsed to him, but here it was over a year later, the seventh of November, 2016 and every impulse rack article was about the following day's presidential election.

Jeb looked at the numerous images of the Governor, surprised anew by the likeness to his own appearance. They really could be brothers; twin brothers. He had never really given much measure to the casual ribbing from his friends, the suggestions of a backwoods tryst 'tween one of his parents and....

It was time to go get Toby and pick up his life again. Maybe get his abandoned business firing, and make some money. He was glad his tiny home had no mortgage, at least that would still be his. The phone and power were probably cut off, but he could fix that easily enough.

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Twenty minutes later he turned the key on his front door and was shocked to see Toby jump up from his favorite chair - all energy and fondness. Everything was clean and orderly, too much so, and the lights were on.

With Toby licking him manically, Jeb verified the date again on his computer, feeling like confusion wouldn't let go. Checking email, he realized in a different way the lost time. Screen after screen of messages, mostly spam, scrolled by, reminding him that life had gone on in his absence.

But somebody had been here, in his home, and taken care of Toby. And paid the bills. Jeb stood aimlessly and had to sit right back down, a wave of deep fatigue seizing him again.

He struggled to the bedroom, Toby clambering behind him. Without any ceremony, Jeb flopped down on the bed, out for the count. Even before the now-familiar dreams came at him, a solitary figure entered through the front door, and whispered, "Toby, want a treat?"

TWENTY SIX

“Where’s my goddamn shoes?” Sissy flipped back the sheets of their colossal bed, and answered, “Not here. I thought you were using them last night in one of your skits.”

“Skits?” Birdshot was getting dressed for election day, and didn’t like the sound of the accusation.

“Remember, it was the part where you were dancing on that Monty doll, bragging about kicking his ass. I hope that’s not true.”

“What if it is? Guy’s a wimp.” The Governor was prancing around like a welterweight in jockey shorts and a tight mob-style t-shirt. He took an imaginary jab and kicked high like Steven Seagal could before his movies went direct-to-DVD.

“You look ridiculous, Mr. President.”

He stopped and looked at Sissy. “That’s right. President. Get used to that.”

Sissy ducked behind a vanity screen, newly erected to bring some romance back into their lives. She’d read somewhere that men needed to be pursued with guile and magic; for the Governor guile was working just fine. She asked in her husky neo-hooker voice, “Are you going to give a speech at breakfast?”

Birdshot gulped down a blizzard of air, and chortled off a twelve second frog call. He ended with an up note for flourish and sucked his gut in. “Damn right I am. A speech to remember. Might be in the history books some day.”

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Sissy laughed mechanically, knowing she better get good at that, and cranked her corset tight. The screen was his idea, abstracted from some porno adventure, but it had practical advantages for her. She had to keep him on a wily leash at least until “he was ensconced down Pennsylvania way.”

That Washington was actually north of their latitude had escaped the creator of that little piece of current mythology. Everyone was cobbling together childish historical anecdotes, to be remembered later when they were all famous and quotable.

The Mansion’s entire staff, all shifts, were waiting downstairs to hear him proclaim his desire for imminent victory. Already voting machines across the east were registering the first deeply held convictions of the electorate, taking down the button pushes for Governor Temperance Good (R) or Senator Montgomery Wright (D).

It might have even mattered what the common man sought if not for Birdshot’s tiny little helpers. His programming boys, working down to the wire on a jittery caffeine jag, had just uploaded the freshest code, anticipating a “forty days and nights” landslide.

The routines were elegant, and tortuously complex. Birdshot showed one of the programmer some coding tricks he favored, borrowed from an ancient fixing scam in a galaxy far far away, and their use had spread like a pandemic.

In seven million electronic voting machines dotted across the United States and its protectorates, Birdshot’s purloined code was singing, playing votes against the house, and raking it in.

Birdshot took Sissy’s arm, and they glided from their suite and down the hall to an elevator. He could sense the onslaught of tiny advantages moving already, the election young, yet nearly decided.

He hadn’t said anything to Sissy, wanting his utter victory to be seen as a mandate from the people, taking his place in the long tradition of historical distortions.

The ride down was smooth and quiet. Birdshot was recalling famous speeches incorrectly, and believing they were his own words. It was going to be a doozy.

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They entered the main hall, seating for sixty anxious unemployables who threw in with the Governor for better or worse. Over the course of the last year, each had cut their own best deal, wrangling for cushy assignments here and abroad, some even suggesting cabinet positions.

But that wasn't on the Governor's mind when he stepped through the door amidst thunderous applause. He was thinking President, and the Hell with the rest of these losers. When he was safely planted in DC, there'd be a rout to end all routs.

And not just the FAA, he'd go through the entire federal government like a roter coil through a plugged soil pipe. He'd get a fresh new set of judges up there at the Supreme Court, even if it took a few eliminations, and most of the military command had to go. They'd been in Afghanistan for sixteen years without nuking the place; it was obviously time for a new chief.

He held his arms up, his beautiful silk suit dazzling, and pretty much over the top for this crowd. He looked like Michael Corleone, which made all kinds of sense since he'd just watched all three movies again for guidance on command stature. But maybe not the third one, something Lost in Translation.

That guy had style. Especially when he popped Fredo.

"Gathered, let us pray." Everyone ducked down, knowing the drill. The Governor had gone increasingly Pentecostal, or something, and had to be humored.

He began, "This holy mission is nearly over. We are at the gates, and the enemy, the honorable Montgomery Wright, is about to fall. It is the Creator's plan."

The clapping ignited as all political give and takes do -sound bite, response, sound bite, response. He let it go for a minute, accepting the acoustic wave as assent, a single voice in victory's far-off call coming through the hills and valleys of this great land.

Both mostly from stolen, and manufactured suffrage, served up guiltlessly. Click, click, click, the votes tumbled into electronic counters across Appalachia, and the northeast corridor, and the south, and each vote, one to a man, was getting a second look, just to be sure.

To be sure Temperance was getting more, that is.

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Click, click, click. Birdshot could feel the gavel swinging his way, the implacable march forward of a plausible national consensus.

“You will all be rewarded when that time comes, and together, we shall take down Moe Green and Hyman Roth. They’ll be sleeping with the fishes.”

The applause switched off like a light, everyone looking around to see if they had heard right. The Governor barreled ahead, confabulating on the fly.

“We shall take back the country from those who would destroy us. Today we settle all the family’s business.” The Chief started a solitary clapping, very deliberate like some rooskie slapstick gig, and by degrees everyone joined, already in too deep to trade horses.

“Yes, your are my flock, and we shall be victorious.”

He stepped back in mock modesty and released a long, tortured frog call. It was anything but human, sounding particularly alien this fine morning. But what the Hell, that’s politics.

* * * *

Jeb woke up refreshed, Toby sleeping at his feet. Next to him lay a colorful doggie toy, and then Jeb noticed the Billie Sue’s doggie collar. It was fastened tightly around his dog’s throat, tucked in his fur like it had been there forever.

Jeb reached out, thinking he should loosen her up a bit. From Toby came a clear voice, “Jeb, leave it be. It needs to be tight so I can talk.”

On any normal day, Jeb would have flipped that final breaker, but he’d been to Andromeda and back, a few times, and was getting comfortable with crazy. Toby yawned and continued. “You need to get ready. We got to go see the election. I hear we have great seats.”

Jeb had known Toby for five years, and though he suspected the dog could out-think him on a number of subjects, he didn’t expect one of them to be the presidential election.

“Toby, I’m not even going to ask what’s going on. Where is Billie Sue?”

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Toby scratched at an imaginary flea, all species having their ticks, and replied, "I don't know who that is. I just know you must go to the Governor's mansion."

"Okay. Why not? Should I put a leash on too?"

"No, just clip mine and I'll lead," answered Toby like he talked to humans every day, just another long-suffering entity confronting the inanity of life.

This might have been a dream, but a moment later the phone rang and Jeb reached for the receiver.

"Hello?" The world was wacky-gone-around-the-bend, and Jeb thought he was ready for anything.

"Hi Jeb. Miss me?"

He asked anxiously, "Billie Sue, that you?" The voice was like a composite shaped of sounds unknown but prettied up to match Billie Sue's manner of speech. Like a threading line, the scattered words of many had come together and spoken as one person - *maybe Billie Sue*, thought Jeb.

"It is. Please go with Toby to the Governor's mansion. I've left a disguise for you. Just tell them Toby's your helper." There was a tiny giggle, lending weight to his identification.

Jeb let the connection hiss away, wishing for more, and then he heard, "And, Jeb, I love you."

He tried to reach back across that curtain of vocal verisimilitude, but she was gone, to wherever things we cherish go.

"Come on Toby, let's git!" Toby hopped off the bed and started digging beneath a stack of nearby comforters. Jeb did his thing in the bathroom, an army-spec two minute shower, and ready to go in three. When he came out, Toby was standing in front of the door, the handle of a soft-sided Red & White Chew Tractor-Pull bag clenched in his teeth.

"Damn, dog. You're a few steps ahead of me. Let's go."

A few miles down the road, Jeb dialed in the truck's radio. It was election day, and he'd have to get around to his patriotic duty.

He pushed a radio-favorite button, and KRED came blasting out. The announcer said, "The early results, now available for sixteen states indicate a possible landslide. The Governor of Tennessee, our very own, is

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kicking that liberal Bostonian all the way to the outhouse. We'll be ready to declare a winner in a few hours."

It was 10:45 a.m., but the KRED crew was red state proud, and certain as starry moonshine.

Jeb laughed heartily, distantly pleased with his connection to this whole charade, whatever that might be. Like all men, he had visions of holding *the* job - President of the United States. The travel and people you would meet.

Toby barked, observing, "Please turn that program off. It's troubling."

Jeb ducked his head, sorting out the new relationship. "Ah, okay Tob." He'd heard of that religion Zen, the one where you lived in the moment, expecting nothing. And *when the student is ready, the master appears*. Most just don't have long, furry ears.

"Jeb, pull over."

"You gotta pee?"

Any normal person would have gone shrieking off, but Jeb was getting the hang of it. Maybe Billie Sue really had opened his eyes to a bigger place.

"No. You have to put on your disguise. You are to be a workman and I'm your helper."

Jeb was laughing hard now, the deal just plum way out. "Why the Hell not?"

He pulled over on the shoulder and grabbed the Tractor-Pull keepsake bag. Its silent zipper parted easily, and Jeb yanked the contents out onto the seat. Toby looked them over, gave a perfunctory sniff, and said, "There's a jacket, and a face mask. Put them on."

The jacket was all black with large white stenciled block letters across the back. It read "Septic Disaster Team."

The mask was more elaborate and moved in Jeb's hand. He tentatively pushed it on and it snapped against his skin. A thousand tiny sensations moved across his face as the mask figured out a new shape. He waited patiently, trying to imagine what the mask was doing, and then it relaxed.

Jeb looked up at the rearview mirror, and he was a different guy. "Whoa!" Toby barked in approval and added, "Nice fit, you might keep that."

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Getting bullshit from a dog might be relied upon to alarm your common man, but Jeb just smiled, marveling at the almost erotic feeling the mask imparted.

Up ahead, he saw the Governor's mansion, and a squad of policemen guarding the entrance. As he approached, an idea came to him and he pulled the jacket on and rolled the window down.

A guard walked up, clearly amped up for the big day. He stated self-importantly, "Mansion's closed. Election day."

Jeb sighed like the misunderstood and urged, "I understand you've had a septic disaster in the press corp facility. They said to come right away." He paused, and then added, "The press is real important today."

The blood drained from the guard's face. To close the deal, Jeb leaned forward, exposing the Septic Disaster Team lettering like an open nuclear core and the guard waved him quickly through.

Wheeling away in horror, he pulled his portable radio out, saying, "Workman coming through. Septic Disaster Team. Give the guy some room. Geez, on any other day...."

"Copy that. We see him."

Jeb pulled up to another guard who stayed a few feet back, a little light on germ theory.

"You know where you're going?" asked the guard. "Sure, been here before." Jeb drove forward, recalling vaguely the one time he'd ridden along with one of KnuckleJoint's guards to pick up some 'shine. Something about the Governor's flight crew, and a homebrew called Jet A-1.

Behind the mansion a dirt road led back to a maintenance shed tucked away in the trees. It was a one story plywood structure painted a drab brown and capped with a sturdy asphalt shingle roof. Half a dozen vehicles were parked on the gravel lot. He pulled in between two old pickups, ready to improvise.

Across the expansive back lawn of the Governor's mansion were scattered several media tents and their attendant trucks. Beyond that stood a grand bandstand, gussied up in southern style for the assumed acceptance speech. Several workers busily moved across its half-acre of white planks,

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setting gaudy floral arrangements and building the Superbowl-grade PA system.

The actual stage was enormous, a huge acoustic hemisphere reaching out over the seating to achieve the immersive atmosphere required for truly stellar Presidential demagoguery. All along its back a shanty town of temporary offices, hush-hush rooms, and grooming central for the cast to come clashed with the deep surrounding woods.

Jeb started walking towards the bandstand, some idea he could find refuge in one of those offices. If Billie Sue was running this show like he suspected, she'd find him. But if it was someone else, he might need cover.

"Come on, Toby. Maybe we can find us some grub." Toby had been hanging back, wise to a world of danger his master was clearly missing. He said, "Jeb, you were asked to come to the Governor's mansion. Nothing more."

Jeb didn't need this now, and yanked on the leash. Toby dug in and snarled. For a bloodhound, he had his moods, generally sanguine, but was quick to turn. Jeb had seen the manic switch in operation, and knew that would be the final straw for an already too-weird day.

"Okay Toby, that's sounds reasonable. We'll wait in the truck for a spell." The plan, he reasoned was good, as he could appear thoughtful to a being that wasn't what it was made out to be. Just like everyone else he'd been meeting lately.

He dropped the leash and started off without looking back. He heard a bark and turned, beyond expectation. Toby was seated on the ground, mouth open in a huge doggy smile, and panting. Jeb said, "Okay I sorta get it. Lead on."

As Jeb picked up the leash handle, Toby said, "Follow me." The leather bit into his hand with an anxious canine pull and together they bee-lined to a fifteen thousand square foot tent labeled WHAC - Tennessee's Action Network. Toby barked excitedly and pulled hard the last fifty yards. *Don't need any second thoughts now.*

He shot right through the open tent flap with Jeb riding along in wonderment. Inside were long tables covered with electronic equipment, the place crazy with seventy seated writers and technicians lost in a blizzard of work.

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Someone yelled, "Who's that with the dog?" A twenty-something intern came over, posing ably as attitude dressed in designer jeans. He was chewing gum, probably imported, and stated, "This is a secure area. If you don't leave, there'll be trouble."

Jeb had sorted out this kind of haughty vermin many times, implied social distance a common irritant to all sanitation engineers. "You already got trouble, what I hear." He dipped his shoulder around, and said, "You got a septic disaster brewing." The last statement was the clarion call of his business, the one line that got everyone's attention.

The intern hadn't signed on for that and said nervously, "Deal with it. We're too busy."

As he turned on his heel, Jeb looked down at Toby and winked. Softly he mouthed, "Works every time." Toby dipped his head as if to agree. He'd gone non-verbal, working deep undercover.

They made their way to the connected facilities trailer, a complete septic processing machine hooked to five temporary but fancy bathrooms. Jeb studied the mechanism, back on solid ground, constructing an explanation for his presence.

It was a sophisticated device, and Jeb unfocused, simply appreciating a well-built piece of machinery. After a few minutes, Toby said, "Jeb, you need to stay alert. Something's going to happen, and when it does, it'll happen fast."

Jeb realized then that Toby wasn't actually talking, thought he was clearly hearing him. He said aloud, "I'm losing it. I'm hearing voices."

Toby wagged his tail and sat down on his haunches. "No you're not. It's me, but my vocal chords can't produce speaking sounds. My collar is talking to you."

"I didn't see a speaker."

"There isn't one."

Jeb twisted his head around and sat down on a small storage tank. "What, am I clairvoyant now?"

"No, you have a receiver in your skull."

Jeb was suddenly overcome with fatigue again, out of ideas and out of understanding. "I give up. I...."

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He was interrupted by an explosion of applause from the main tent and then they heard a pompous voice, “Yes, of course I’ll say a few words to my fans.” Jeb pulled the connecting door open slightly and peered out. The Honorable Temperance Good was standing fifty feet away, a gaggle of reporters ringing him like it was the Second Coming.

Someone handed him a microphone, and the Governor cleared his throat. “I thought I’d pay a visit to my favorite TV crew. You’ve always been *good* to me.”

Jeb was shocked to remember the resemblance to his own appearance, that is, before he’d put on the motive mask. Toby whimpered, and nudged to close the door.

The Governor swung around like an entertainer and said clearly, “I wanted to tell you all first, the results are nearly conclusive already, thanks to the instant nature of electronic voting. I expect to be named as the President of the United States within the hour.”

The applause became thunderous, filling the tent with the whooping and hollering of a hundred excited media mechanics. He was their boy, born and bred in the strong arms of rural Tennessee, and even if he really came from a clone manufacturing machine in the Orion Cluster, this would be remembered as his first fifteen minutes aboard the departing Andy Warhol circus bus.

Jeb checked his watch - 12:10 p.m. They’d been voting, throughout the land, for several hours. Maybe it was possible, even now, to declare a winner.

What he didn’t know was that the voting machines, standing in libraries and churches and schools across the width and breadth of America were intercepting true intention and perverting it to true deception. Like a mounting wave, slight favors here and there were being compounded to a tsunami of advantage, one tiny lie at a time.

Traditional coastal blue states had held blue, but the balance of the country, at its core, was flowing with the red of battle victory.

And then a new voice entered his mind, sweet like fall cider, a possessing sensation that for an instant suffuses all else. He heard, *Jeb, get ready.*

Out in the tent, the crowd was jubilant, reaching a crescendo of excitement. From the throng stepped Constance Perley-Moss, done up

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right and pretty. She moved with a shimmer of feminine allure, a powerful magnet, attracting and captivating the hearts of every male in the room.

Gliding right up to the Governor's side, he beamed with the "things to come," swung his arm in vaudeville style and asked expansively, "Constance, am I your President?"

She smiled with impossible radiance, cameras firing like mortars to record the moment, and replied, "You are everyone's President, Temperance."

They joined hands, and she led with a bow, the Governor unsure for a second, and then following. The uproar kicked another notch, everyone lost to the sense of history in the making. Constance leaned in close and whispered. "I have something special for you. Will you follow me?"

He nodded, absolutely smitten, the intoxication of certain and absolute power fulminating with the promise of carnal reward. Birdshot was beyond any self-control, operating on pure instinct.

As they straightened up, she tugged coquettishly, indicating the nearby door. He smiled like a greedy wolf, the crowd eating it up, and they moved hand-in-hand, walking backwards for maximal prime time coverage.

Jeb knew something big was happening, way beyond his comprehension, and stepped back behind the mammoth septic tank, Toby following. Staring between the confusion of pipes, he saw the door creak open, and Constance and the Governor tumbled in, laughing like two horny teenagers. Birdshot was at his limits, completely lost to the nexus of too many hyperactive inputs, his hands flying all over her body with lustful abandon.

He kicked the door closed, and was all over her with a mania of passion. She squealed and squirmed in mock desire and slid out a small device from the hem of her miniskirt with a free hand, the other half-fending off Birdshot's attack. Constance brought the tiny silver orb up behind the Governor's head as he nuzzled her neck, and Jeb heard a familiar click.

The Governor went instantly unconscious, slumping to the floor. She turned to face Jeb's direction and said quickly, "I know you're back there; come help me undress this fool. Now!"

He was paralyzed with confusion and Toby said, "Go. Get him undressed. You got maybe a minute."

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Jeb scampered around the tank, suspecting this woman was also not as she seemed, and started pulling at the Governor's clothes. Constance got his shoes off and then unbuckled his pants. She said, "Put on his clothes. You're about to become the President of the United States."

Thirty seconds later, operating entirely outside of his reason, Jeb was drawing the knot of the Governor's crimson tie to his throat, fear and exhilaration at the helm.

Constance faced him, straightened his suit and said, "I have to make an adjustment to your mask. It won't hurt." She grabbed the back of his head with both hands, and kissed him hard, the mask moving vigorously between them.

Then she turned to the fallen Governor and pointed her device at him. Jeb heard another click, and the body vaporized with a sizzle, a small metallic ball dropping to the floor.

She picked up the implant and said, "Okay, Mr. President, you've got a country to lead."

TWENTY SEVEN

In the main tent, a chant was gathering wind, an adolescent urging for this new presidency's first sexual conquest. "Temperance, Temperance, Temperance," they called aloud, the play on words making them all crazy.

Constance smiled at Jeb, and pulled at her blouse, popping the two upper buttons off. "Time to act."

Jeb heard something familiar, and asked breathlessly, "Billie Sue, that you in there?"

"Yep. Now just follow my lead. You're already a hero, and the people love you."

They stepped out, Toby at their heels and let the screaming, yelping approbation wash over them. Wave after wave of cheering and hoots, cat calls and cries of excitement surged and swept through the tent. A dozen TV cameras were rolling, ambitious program directors visualizing the first broadcast of a new Presidency.

Constance made a gesture to close the top of her blouse, laughed resignedly, and put her arm around the Governor. A spokesman with the WHAC network called over the din, and asked for attention. He waited for two full minutes, no one wanting to the energy to bleed away, and then said, "It's official, our Tennessee Governor, the Honorable Temperance Good, has been elected the forty-fifth President of the United States."

He let the cheering rise up, level off, and as it began to ebb, he continued, "Two term President Obama has just made it official. WHAC wants to be the first to say 'Congratulations, President-elect Good'."

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Constance and Jeb smiled, waved, and stood together, letting the crowd unwind. Constance turned to Jeb as if she were sharing a secret, nice and close, and said, “We’re leaving. Just take my hand, and I’ll get us out of here. After that, we’ll find some place to talk. I have things to tell you.”

He nodded his head, smiling, to all the world a happy man. He whispered back, “Damn straight, you do.”

A sense of great change was in the air, an electric conviction that this time, somehow, it would all be different. Outside the tent, Toby bounded ahead and they walked slowly away with a suggestion of leisure, out across the large grassy lawn, surrounded by the reaching trees of Earth, hand in hand, through the starting rain into a galaxy of possibility.

THE END
February 3, 2008

Catalina Island

AUTHOR'S NOTES

As has often been observed, the purpose of politics is first to entertain. In no other pursuit of Man are the consequences more important, nor usually more amusing. This story is fiction, but if aliens are coming to Earth to take over, this author hopes they do it with a few laughs rather than death rays, and questionable hygiene.

If you enjoyed this tale, send me an email at scott@lifeseeker.com. If you didn't, well, don't.

