

# **SHOPOCALYPSE**



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*David Gullen*



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*Full Paperback ISBN 978-1-909016-20-0*

*Clarion Publishing  
PO Box 45298  
London  
England  
SE10 1BN*

*<http://www.clarionpublishing.com/>*

*Cover artwork by Ben Baldwin  
<http://www.benbaldwin.co.uk/>*

## Acknowledgements

Well, I made it. Like many authors the road to my first published novel has been a life-long trip and I have many people to thank. Please bear with me.

First and foremost - Colin Tate at Clarion. A more conscientious and perceptive editor and publisher you could not wish to have. Dude.

No book gets written alone. In the T Party writers group ([www.t-party.org.uk](http://www.t-party.org.uk)) are just about the finest bunch of writers and friends you could want. Martin, Helen, Sarah, Rosanne, Sumit, Peter, Sara, Melanie, Jehangir, Julia, Mark, Tom, Bruce, et al, the inspiration, the trip itself - none of this would have been the same. Advice, companionship, leaning on all those bars and talking all that writerly shit. Without you I'd have drunk a lot less whisky.

Jaine Fenn. Thanks.

Dwight V Swain, who knew why you do what you do. And when not to.

No writer writes without having read. And I read. AA Milne & Hugh Lofting made me dream; John Christopher, Andre Norton and HG Wells were with me as I grew up. The incomparable Jack Vance. JG Ballard, Robert Holdstock, Philip K Dick. So many more.

Gaie. Who always believed. For all this, and more. My companion.

Evolution, God, kismet, life, call it what you will. Thank you for making me the rhino-skinned, pig-headed weeble I grew to become. Lessons learned the hard way. Finally, I learned to dree my own weird. The sun always rises. Thank you so much.

It's good to be alive some days.



*For my parents, who had it harder, and never complained.  
For my children: constant joy.*



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Josie was an hour early, unable to sleep, up before dawn. She'd cut her hair, scissors in front of the mirror, a ragged, gamine cut, all she could afford.

The long road out to the prison was quiet, Josie took her time, the old, split-screen camper wasn't good in the heat. She drove with the window down, the morning air hot and humid. Arizona desert stretched all around, patched in the far distance with vibrant green. Once in a while mirage-ponds resolved into real water.

High on the prison walls, auto-guns slid along recessed rails, metal singing, steel on steel. One tracked Josie as she drove alongside the prison. Behind those high concrete walls were thirty-thousand inmates, a small fraction of President Snarlow's great roundup. One of them was Novik. Josie had been waiting for two years.

The ground was bare all around the prison, the new and old growth hacked down by chain gangs.

You can try, but you can't stop change, Josie thought. You politicians stopped my life for a while, but now it's going to start again, and it's going to be good.

Novik was two hours late. The system ran to its own schedule and changed the rules as it went. When you were this deep in, all you could do was accept.

One of the high steel gates swung open. Half a dozen men filed out onto the dusty apron and blinked uncertainly under the open sky. Two prison guards in navy pants, short sleeved shirts, and gold-framed sunglasses followed them out. One was fat, one was tall. Both chewed on matchsticks, both held shotguns.

Up on the wall the autoguns clustered above the men. Josie got out of the camper. The sun on the gun barrels dazzled, she shielded her eyes. A car went by, a brand-new solar-electric diesel hybrid. An autogun sped away after it.

There he was.

‘Hey,’ Josie waved her arm, ‘Novik.’

Novik raised his hand, a slow gesture. He slung his bag onto his shoulder and walked across the road, shoulders hunched, a downbeat silhouette.

The other ex-cons went their own ways. Two climbed into waiting cars: a battered pickup with a woman in late middle-age at the wheel; a gleaming, black sedan with tinted windows. The rest set out on the long, dusty walk into town.

The pickup headed through the dry, Arizona landscape, past the walking men. After a moment, the sedan followed. The fat guard raised his hand, both guards went back inside the prison, the heavy steel door clanged shut. Autoguns slid back along their rails to the end of the wall and tracked the cars and pedestrians until they were out of range.

Novik and Josie sat in the camper. Josie started the engine. She kissed Novik’s cheek, ‘What do you want to do, hon?’

Novik closed his eyes. ‘Just go, babe.’

Josie took them out towards the interstate, away from town.

Novik looked back at the receding prison, still only half believing he was outside that enormous, bleak structure. The autogun still perched at the corner, its perforated black muzzle aimed towards them. Novik kissed his middle finger and held it out the window.

The road crested a rise and dropped into a shallow dip. Now the prison was out of sight. Josie pulled onto the verge and stopped the motor.

Once again it was just the two of them, Josie and Novik, like it always was. Like it always should be. They climbed out of the camper and looked at each other. Josie wore an old green top, flat shoes, a favourite skirt, a faded Mexican print Novik remembered.

Novik had the same clothes he’d worn in court two years ago: brown boots, jeans, a collarless white shirt, a black leather jacket. Now he also wore the black metal hoop of his parole tag, clamped round his neck like a loose dog collar.

Josie kissed Novik. He kissed her back, he buried his face in her hair and breathed in. Josie did the same, her face against his old jacket.

‘Hey babe,’ Josie said.

‘Hey, hon.’

The cut on Novik’s scalp that had bled so much was now a ragged scar. Josie brushed back sandy hair that could never decide if it was a parting or a fringe. He’d always been lanky, now, like her, he was several meals on the wrong side of thin.

They walked round a low bluff and discovered a shallow pond, reed-

flanked, the water skimmed by iridescent damselflies. A frog croaked, wild iris bloomed. The trunk of a rotting saguaro cactus lay collapsed in the shallows. A year ago the pond had not existed. Now it rained most weeks.

All around, the desert was blooming, out of season. It was strange, beautiful, unsettling. Novik returned to the car and waited for Josie.

Five miles down the highway they passed a huge area of new construction, earth ramps, steel frames, and concrete slabs. Signs announced three square miles of self-store warehousing. Occupancy was already at 80%. Avoid disappointment, advance bookings now being taken.

Josie looked across at Novik. He shook his head. 'No more, Josie. Not me. Never again.' He looked down at his hands, broken fingers never set quite straight. He was through with protest. 'Look where it got me.'

Look where it got us both, Josie thought.

He'd given her the right answer, the same one he'd used on visiting days. Until today, until he was out, Josie had never been sure. She looked through the fly-specked windshield and pressed down on the gas, the half-finished warehouses sped by.

On the opposite side of the road was more construction, a new mall with walls of pink and gold glass. To one side a small group of activists stood between a stand of mature desert ironwood and the bulldozers. Novik turned his head away.

See no evil.

Exhausted by the stress of the prison release, he closed his eyes and slept.

When Novik woke they were on the interstate. He felt refreshed, reborn, made anew. Cool air blew through the dashboard vents, the sun shone in a blue sky. Josie was beside him, the blacktop ran ahead for miles.

'Want to eat?' Josie said.

Novik stretched, and settled back into his seat. 'Sure.'

Up ahead was a diner, a single car in the parking lot. Josie pulled in, Novik walked over to inspect the other vehicle, a drop-head Cadillac AFC-16 lobsterback, a model he had never seen. The design was radical, near Mil-Spec in its muscularity, sleek and powerful, the folding roof segmented like a carapace. Novik gave a low whistle, he'd missed out on a lot in two years.

Then he saw the fibre-glass Viking longboat on the roof of the diner, manned by three turnip-headed warriors with horned helmets.

Novik gave a disbelieving laugh, 'What is that?'

'Cheese-a-Swede,' Josie said, 'it's a new franchise.' She gave Novik a hug. 'We can still get a burger.'

Hands on hips, Novik studied the vegetable Vikings, 'Thank God.' That old adoration was in her eyes, 'It's good to see you happy.' Novik ruffled her hair, he kissed her brow, 'Things are going to work out.' 'Come on,' Josie pulled on Novik's hand. Novik looked up at the garish sign. 'Are you sure this place is OK?' 'Trust me.'

He'd always trusted her. It was why she'd waited.

There were three other customers in the diner, older men, clean-shaven, smart, dark suits, their grey overcoats neatly folded and hung across the backs of empty chairs. Their conversation was sparse, their gestures careful. One of them glanced up as Novik and Josie opened the door, his face pale and heavy, dark hair swept back.

Novik saw them as he came in, and although he wanted to turn around and leave, he kept coming. He'd learned not to make such simple mistakes. He didn't think the three were made, but neither did they look like businessmen. He turned up his jacket collar and wished he had a proper shirt.

The waitress was a stocky Mexican girl. She wore a plastic Viking helmet with fake blonde pigtails. When she poured the coffee, her eyes moved over his parole collar like spit sliding off glass. Novik lost his appetite.

Even so, the coffee was good. When Novik went up to the counter for a refill, the man who'd watched them come in left his table and stood beside him. Close up, he was younger than at first impression, early middle-age, deep-chested, muscular, a little overweight. His forefingers beat a fast rhythm on the counter top, he bared his teeth in imitation of a smile. 'Howdy.'

'Howdy.'

'Name's Black.' The man finished his beat with a drum-roll flourish, 'Happy birthday.'

Novik stood very still.

Black leaned one elbow on the counter, 'Don't tell me you walk around with that fucked-up expression on your face all the time?'

'No,' Novik said carefully. 'You're absolutely right, it is my birthday.'

Black tapped Novik's parole tag with his finger, 'I saw it when you came in.' He leaned back on the counter, 'Hey boys, it's this gentleman's birthday.'

The two men at the table looked up. Both were older than Black, one was slim, bald, his skull elongated, his jaw narrow. The other had dyed hair, bad skin, a pock-marked lump for a nose, he gestured to an empty chair:

'Be so kind as to join us. A man needs company on his birthday.'

Helplessly, Novik looked down the room to Josie.

'You too, ma'am,' the pock-faced man said.

'He didn't do anything,' Josie said. It came out shrill, louder than she meant. Nobody appeared to hear her.

Josie took the seat next to Novik. The three men stood until she was seated.

'Novik,' Novik held out his hand. 'Thanks for asking us over.'

'I'm Josie,' Josie said.

'Names are masks,' the man with bad skin said. 'We're the Old-fashioned Boys. That's who we really are.'

Novik put his hand away.

'Jimmy, I already told them my name,' Black said.

Pock-faced Jimmy swore vilely under his breath. He massaged the bridge of his lumpy nose for a long, cold moment. 'Fuck it. Meet Mr Morgan.'

The narrow-headed man slowly inclined his head.

'We need some drinks,' Black blurted out. 'A man needs drinks on his birthday.'

'If I'm going to drink, I need to eat.' Jimmy looked round the table, 'You want to eat?' He snapped his fingers at the waitress, 'We're all going to eat.'

'I'll get the drinks,' Black said.

'You'll get it all,' Jimmy said.

Black patted his jacket, the seat of his pants. 'Wallet's in the car.' He hurried out of the diner.

'Fucking young punk,' Jimmy gave Novik an apologetic nod, 'No offence.' 'None taken.'

Jimmy pointed to Novik's hairline, 'You get that from the Feds?'

'The Weekenders.'

'The good old National Guard.'

They ordered burgers and fries, whisky and beer. Black paid the waitress in cash. Novik sipped his first drink in two years.

Morgan traced a line through the condensation on his bottle with a well-manicured finger. 'Tell me something, Novik. When did you stop ass-raping your cell-mate?'

Despite the beer, Novik's mouth was dry as dust, 'I didn't-'

Morgan looked around the table, 'He says didn't stop.'

Novik held up both his hands, 'No, I never-'

'Forget it,' Jimmy said, 'it's just a joke.'

Jimmy told them a good story, Black told a better one, funny, nasty, illegal. When you thought about it, it wasn't funny at all. Novik and Josie laughed with the rest of them.

The waitress laid out another round.

'My glass is dusty,' Morgan said.

Jimmy gave a loud sigh, 'How's the burger?'

'It's good.'

'It's a great burger,' Josie said.

Jimmy shook his head, 'It's not a great burger, it's a good burger. You're a pretty woman, but you should always tell the truth.'

'It's a good burger for five bucks,' Black said.

'My aunt used to give me five bucks to fuck her,' Jimmy said.

'Which side?' Black said.

'What the fuck difference does that make?' Jimmy said.

'You fuck your own mother's sister, it's disrespectful.'

'She only had brothers,' Jimmy said.

'She had a mother too.'

'That's disgusting,' Jimmy jabbed a finger at Black, 'You know what, you're disgusting.' He slouched in his seat, 'I did not fuck my grandmother.'

Josie shifted uncomfortably, a rabbit trapped by the headlights. Jimmy made a conciliatory gesture, 'I was a stupid punk kid. Back then, five bucks got you more than a burger.'

The drink had gone to Novik's head. 'You're from Alabama?'

'How the fuck did you know that?'

Novik thought about it. 'I don't know how, but I do.' Something wasn't quite right.

'My father used to touch me,' Morgan said. There was a sibilance behind his voice, the skittering of cockroach legs.

Some time during the third round, Black jumped up on the counter and made like he was surfing. Josie and Jimmy got into a deep conversation about karma and predestination. Morgan ordered pie and held the first spoonful at eye-level for minutes on end.

It wasn't the drink. Something was *in* the drink. Novik lurched across the diner, went behind the counter and grabbed two bottles of coke. Back in the kitchen, he saw the Mexican girl sharpening knives. When Novik looked up at Black, surfing on the counter, he could see the waves break and hear the Beach Boys. When he listened to Josie and Jimmy, their words held a wisdom so far beyond the ken of mortal man their auras glowed. Josie's shone rose gold, Jimmy's pulsed old blood and meconium. It was as if an angel debated with a demon.

Novik drank a bottle of coke and felt a little better. Then he saw Morgan and Black had auras that dripped filth, and grew very frightened. He took Josie by the hand and led her outside. Behind them at the table, Jimmy sat

weeping.

Inside the camper van, Josie collapsed on the passenger seat. Novik didn't know where he wanted to be, but it wasn't here. The camper wouldn't co-operate. It went forwards, then it went back. There was a bang, a jolt, the engine struggled. Novik slipped the clutch, revved the engine. Gears clashed, finally the old vehicle gained some traction. Out on the interstate the camper finally began to accelerate.

With the windows down, and the passage of time and miles, Novik's head began to clear. After an hour, Josie began to stir. Novik opened the second bottle of coke, took a mouthful, and offered her the rest. She gulped it down and stared bleakly out the window.

'That was very wrong, very bad,' Novik said.

'Where are we?' Josie slurred.

'An hour away. Fifty, sixty miles.'

Josie looked back down the road, screamed, and covered in her seat, 'They're here! Oh, God, Novik, they followed us.'

Novik checked the mirrors. In cold horror he saw she was right, the big grey Cadillac was behind them, so close against the rear fender he couldn't see the hood. His guts turned to water. How could he have not noticed? He was sure the road had been empty. Had he looked? Perhaps he had never looked. What did they want? Novik knew the answer: they wanted to kill them, murder them for kicks and feed the dark auras of their wicked souls.

The Cadillac matched their speed perfectly, nose to tail. 'I don't know what they're waiting for,' Novik muttered, 'they got the power, the speed, they can force us off the road any time.'

'Don't stop,' Josie begged. 'Never stop.'

A mile went by, and another. Novik studied the Cadillac in the rear-view mirror. What he saw was crazy. He looked and looked until he was sure. Then he took his foot off the gas, he changed down into third, into second. He pulled onto the shoulder.

'What are you doing,' Josie shrieked. 'Keep going!'

'They're not here,' Novik drew the camper to a halt on the verge. 'The car's empty.'



*Southern States Littoral – Still part of the USA!!!*

*‘Of course it is,’ Vice President Oscar Gordano told us on the steps of his official residence at the DC Naval Observatory. ‘And you can quote me.’*

*Gordano dismissed suggestions that the coastal regions of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana – colloquially known as the Southern Littoral – were effectively outside the law.*

*‘There are some local difficulties,’ Gordano admitted. ‘This administration is committed to returning the rule of law to every square foot of our territories.’*

*He also dismissed claims that organised crime, specifically Mitchell Gould, had established self-governing enclaves along the Littoral.*

*‘Hurricane Larry knocks down conventional structures and it’s uneconomic to build hardened facilities. Frankly, who’d want to live there anyway?’*

*The Vice President was on his way to the Presidential ball. Semi-official on the political calendar, it is described as a low-key, intimate affair for the President and four thousand of her closest friends.*

*Syndicated feed, K UW Jones.org*



I40. Westbound.

Josie and Novik stood beside their camper. Behind them, the Old-fashioned Boy's car was locked onto their rear tow bar by its front fender.

Empty mesquite landscape stretched away in all directions. The interstate itself was deserted.

Josie hugged herself and shivered, still shocked by the sight of the powerful limousine behind their own vehicle. How was it possible to accidentally steal a car? How could anyone do that? One more strike made Novik a three-time loser, they were supposed to be on holiday, this trip was going to be a fresh start. Now it was a disaster. Deep inside, Josie despaired, no matter how she tried the breaks never came their way.

Novik rubbed the parole transponder clamped round his neck. Back in the diner, Jimmy had talked about the pleasures of his profession. At the time Josie had been protected by a golden light. Beyond good and evil there was only truth, and the acceptance of truth. Only opinion brought morality and outrage, their conversation had been matter of fact, the dreadful things Jimmy had done for money were simply events. Out on the hard shoulder, that state of tranquillity was gone, replaced by a grimy, trembling dread, the aftershock of reality.

'You ran the tow hook under it in the diner parking lot,' Josie accused. Fear made her angry, 'How could you not notice?'

Novik's brow furrowed, 'I don't remember.' In fact, between pulling in to the Cheese-a-Swede, and about a minute ago, he couldn't remember anything. That wasn't right.

Josie gave an exasperated sigh, 'Why am I not surprised?' She loved Novik, but he wasn't practical. Sure, he could change a wheel, but by the time he'd finished he was also planning on fitting wings and a sail too. For the benefit of mankind.

'Somebody spiked my burrito.'

‘Oh, come on,’ Josie exclaimed. Then she hesitated - one thing Novik didn’t do was lie. She thought back to the last time conversation with a stranger had spanned the universe. ‘Really, hon? That’s what really happened?’

‘Something synthetic, radical, maybe a cocktail. A fast burn, like Briefstacy, but with more mind-fuckery.’

Novik knew he’d screwed up again, his inadvertent theft had left Josie scared of both the past and the future. He didn’t know how, these things just happened to him, it was expected, it was a given. He’d spent his life doing his best to impress, trying to be smart as she was, eternally worried she’d leave him for someone more together.

‘I’ll-,’ Novik scratched around for ideas. ‘I’ll let down the rear tyres and jack up the front of the Caddy.’

He wriggled under the big car with the old bottle jack from the camper. With most of the air out of the VW’s back tyres, the Cadillac would only need lifting three or four inches. As he offered up the squat, blue metal jack, it transformed into a smiling, pot-bellied Buddha.

‘I’m too short,’ the jack placidly informed him.

Novik blinked, the jack was a jack again. Under him the road was hard and cold, above him an electric eye watched him from the underside of the Cadillac’s floor pan. He crawled out from under the car and tossed the jack into the camper.

‘Unbolt the fender,’ Josie said.

‘These new cars are single-piece extrusions. There’s nothing to unbolt.’

‘Actually, I was printed,’ the car said, in a polite mid-western drawl.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Novik leaped away from the car.

‘New Detroit engineering, sir,’ the car said.

Novik looked suspiciously at the car, he waved his fingers in front of his eyes. ‘I thought I was coming down.’

‘I heard it too,’ Josie said.

Novik studied the car, goggle-eyed, ‘You’re a real talking car?’

‘Yes, sir, I am.’

‘That is so cool.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Novik held up a finger, ‘Please don’t call me sir.’

‘All right.’

Josie was intrigued, ‘These printers, how big are they?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ the car said, ‘I wasn’t there.’

‘You could print your own spare parts.’

‘Then I would be a printer instead of a car.’

‘You’d last forever.’

'My substrate is photo-unstable, a deliberate design decision.'

'I can fix that.' Novik dashed back to the camper, rummaged in the footwell, and returned with a bottle of sun block. 'Factor forty,' he said as he sprayed a film of white cream onto the Cadillac's wing.

Josie and the car exchanged a look.

'A considerate gesture,' the car said. 'Unfortunately, few people will want last year's model.'

Novik peered through the tinted windshield at the empty driver's seat. 'Mr Car, your fender's locked onto my rig. Can you pop your trunk so I can get your jack?'

'Technically, no. I can only open for the owner, or his or her designated associates.'

'The Old-fashioned Boys? The three men at the diner?' Josie said.

'No, ma'am.'

'Who is your owner?' Novik said.

'Technically, nobody, sir.'

'You're stolen?'

'Technically, no, sir.'

'Stop calling me sir.'

'My apologies. I have a speech-pattern modifier request timeout. My firmware needs patching.'

'You opened up for those Old-fashioned Boys,' Josie said.

'They acquired me via a method which evaded legal niceties.'

'So have we.'

Mr Car thought about it. 'I concur. I let them put things in, you can take things out.'

Josie and Novik walked round to the trunk. 'What kind of things?'

'Money, mostly.'

The lock clicked open, the lid swung up. Josie and Novik looked into a trunk filled with lidless boxes stacked with used ten, twenty, and hundred dollar bills.

During that tumbleweed moment, a distant look came into Novik's eye. That's a fuck-ton of cash, he thought. You could do a lot with that.

One of the boxes contained a packet of latex gloves, a pair of filter masks and ten fist-sized packages of white powder. Some packs had burst open, a fine layer of powder coated the money, seeped down into, and between, the cash-filled boxes.

'Please note the currency is contaminated with fluorinated LSD, mammalian Oxytocin, trans-PTTH and brominated ketamine, mixed with an inert carrier in a ratio of 100,000:1,' said Mr Car.

‘Black lied when he said he’d forgotten his wallet, he just didn’t want to spend his own money, so he paid with some of this cash,’ Novik said.

Josie pulled on a pair of the gloves and picked up the bundle of notes behind the burst drug packets. A hole ran part way through, she flicked through the sheaf and extracted a flattened bullet. She held it up for Novik to see. ‘Looks like you were right about the burritos. It wasn’t deliberate, it was contamination. How do you know about the drugs, Mr Car?’

‘The Cadillac AFC-16 is not only the model of choice for senators and chief executives, it is also popular with other gangsters and hoodlums. This is because I am so Awesomely Fucking Cool. As required by legislation, I am fitted with an integrated air analyser interfaced to GPS and law enforcement agencies.’

Dread clenched Josie’s gut. She tossed the money back into the trunk. ‘Novik, get the cars unhitched. We’re out of here.’

‘My GPS uplink was disabled by a single bullet fired from a handgun. The very round you are holding,’ Mr Car said.

Novik looked at the car open-mouthed. ‘They shot you?’

‘In actual fact, sir, yes, they did. It was why I decided to take the tow.’ A speculative tone entered the car’s voice, ‘I always wondered what it felt like to be a hitcher.’

The wind was damp, gusting from the south-east. Unseasonal rain clouds swept up from the distant gulf and gathered over the hills. Powder from the split packet lifted on the breeze and settled in shallow drifts over the money.

Novik didn’t like hard drugs, he didn’t like the way they ate people’s lives. Ambitions became daydreams, daydreams became could-have-beens. Home became memories, and your home became the street. He had seen it too many times. In prison it was a way of life, and it was encouraged.

‘Stand upwind, Josie.’ Novik snapped on a pair of gloves and fitted a filter mask. He took each packet, tore it open, and emptied it onto the road. A plume of white dust swirled away, a few hundred-dollar bills spun up into the air.

Josie pulled him back. ‘Be careful, babe. That stuff goes through your skin.’

Novik watched the dust cloud dissipate. When it next rained, the desert flowers would bloom strange new colours, and coyotes would form rock-and-roll bands. He affectionately ran his hand over the dusty, rust pocked rear wheel arch of the camper. ‘We’ll put her in storage. When things are quieter I’ll fix her up.’

It was an old mantra, a prelude to every big idea Novik had ever had. Josie did not like it at all. ‘This is a bad place, babe. We’ve got to go.’

Novik squared his shoulders, he stuck out his chin. 'Leave all this money here? We've can do something with it. Something good.'

The thought terrified Josie. Maybe it was post-trip paranoia, maybe it was cold reality. She didn't know whether to slug him or get on her knees and beg, so she grabbed him by the lapels of his denim jacket and shook him like an old rug. 'You listen to me. Two years I've waited for you, and I've just got you back. You break parole, you'll go back inside for four more. Any ideas about doing good, about making a difference, just forget it.'

Novik gently took hold of her hands, 'Two years for me, too.'

She pulled away, furious, he never thought things through. 'You actually do something bad, you do something crazy like this, you steal a car full of drugs and money, it will be ten times that-'

'We haven't done anything wrong, Josie. We've stolen a stolen car from some very bad people. That money doesn't belong to them, to anyone good. It's not set for a good purpose, it's going to cause misery.'

'Burn it, then,' Josie gestured wildly at the car. 'Burn it all, burn everything.'

'I'd prefer a different solution,' Mr Car said hastily.

'You keep out of it,' Josie snapped. 'Whose side are you on?'

'The side of not getting burned to a crisp, ma'am.'

'He's right. Josie, you can't just burn a talking car,' Novik said.

She challenged him, hands on hips. 'Why not?'

Good question. Novik floundered, he gave the thinnest of answers: 'It's a *talking car*.'

'I just meant the money,' Josie said. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes, the anger drained out of her. She gave Novik an unhappy, tearful smile. 'I've only just got you back. Don't make me wait again, I can't do it.'

'I'm sorry,' Novik reached out, 'Hey.'

'I'm sorry too.' She came into his arms, held him tight. 'I hate arguing.'

'Me too.' It made him feel so fragile. 'Listen, it won't be like last time. I promise.'

Josie traced the scar that ran from just below his hairline back across his scalp. She rapped the steel band of the parole transponder with her knuckle. 'What are you going to do about that?'

President Guinevere Snarlow came to office on a promise to revitalise the economy and end the protests. People didn't like what she did, but they tolerated it. 'Hard times,' she told them, 'tough love. People want a liberal, socialist government, they can cross the pond.'

Once it was all over, the prison population had doubled and everybody knew somebody in jail. Quite a few knew someone who was dead. Citizens kept their heads down, the country was quieter than it had been for a decade.

The malls stayed open.

‘When I was inside, people said you’re OK if you cut it off under water,’ Novik said. ‘Lie in a bath, breathe through a tube.’

While they talked, the two cars separated. The Cadillac’s fender slowly flowed back and over the tow hook.

‘Did I see that?’ Novik said.

‘I think so.’

‘Fender-morph technology,’ Mr Car said. ‘Memory Kevlar means I never have a scratch or a dent.’

‘No bullet holes,’ Novik said.

‘It’s a gift.’

The sight of all that money had re-kindled a spark in Novik. President Snarlow had beaten him once, now he had another chance. ‘Josie, just think about it. We could really do something.’

They had been together since the High School recycling club. They camped with the Occupy protests, joined the flashmobs, signed up to the networks and petitions. For a season it felt like something was going to happen, things were going to change. An American Spring.

Then Snarlow was elected. Novik went to jail and Josie worked for nickels and dimes. They were the lucky ones. All Josie wanted now was to stay out of trouble.

And now Novik had that look in his eye.

‘You really want to go back to all that? You really want to try again?’ Josie said.

Novik swallowed hard, he had already made up his mind, he was ready to break his promise. ‘Yes, I do.’

Josie punched his shoulder, thumped his chest, each blow punctuating her words. ‘So how’s it going to work?’ Thump. ‘What’s this good thing we’re going to do?’ Thump. ‘I’m not going to try unless there’s a plan, so you tell me a good one.’

Put on the spot, Novik hadn’t a clue. Josie was the smart one. He had dreams and enthusiasm, she thought things through and made them happen.

It came to him: ‘We’ll just buy it all up before anyone else does.’

‘Then what?’

He had it. It was perfect, he had to laugh. ‘We’ll give it away.’

‘That’s crazy,’ Josie said, but she laughed too.

‘We can’t get arrested for shopping, we’re doing what they want us to do.’

Right away she could see the utter impracticality of it. It was ridiculous, they would never have enough money. As usual, Novik simply hadn’t thought that far ahead. Josie looked into his eyes and for a moment she was

back in high school, seeing him for the first time, his taut muscular body, the change from uncertainty to happiness when he knew he'd said something that made her laugh.

It was ridiculous, but he was right about one thing, it was safe. Purchasing commodities was the one thing Snarlow's government wanted them to do. Josie pushed down the Cadillac's trunk. 'We still need to move. You take the Caddy, these cars can half drive themselves.'

'Ma'am, I can completely drive myself if the driver is incapacitated, distracted by drugs, blood loss or amorous intent,' Mr Car said.

Novik saw the change in Josie. He didn't understand why, all he knew was, he couldn't do this without her, and was glad. Guilt twinged at him, he'd finagled Josie into another of his schemes, and despite his explanations, it was a highly dangerous one. If those Old-fashioned Boys caught them, they'd kill them.

'Josie, are you sure?'

'One condition - when the money's gone, if everything's still the same, we'll walk away and never look back. No regrets.'

She'd take this chance, she'd stand by him while he tried one last time. Then he would be with her for good. No more waiting. She'd have her man.

Like he said, shopping wasn't illegal.

'No regrets,' Novik agreed.

'Then let's start shopping.'

Call it love.



*Singularity? Schmingularity.*

*Trust me on this - tomorrow the world will roll along exactly as it did yesterday. And the day before.*

*Why is that? Because humanity has already transcended itself with technology. It happened in places like Catalhoyuk and Göbekli Tepe when we bootstrapped ourselves out of Homo sapiens and into human beings. It was so long ago we forgot about it.*

*Big change is coming for sure, but one thing is certain - it won't be an extrapolation of what we're already doing, it will be brand new. Just like when we stopped being smart apes with a line in sticks and pebbles, and settled down for some serious play with what we invented.*

*Nothing changed 'Out There'. We changed how we behaved, how we were organised. How we thought. If ever there was a Singularity that was it. The world we knew ended, we woke up the next day and moved on.*

*Today the only question is: 'Can we do it again?'*

*T. Hank Yousomuch, guest blog,  
KUWjones.org*



Jimmy was spitting blood. He was drunk, stoned, tripped out, paranoid and totally, like totally freaked.

He groped for his cell phone with one hand and gingerly prodded his upper incisors with the other. Teeth moved all over the place. It was a bad, bad feeling.

‘Oh, like, totally fucked, man,’ he muttered. Part of him was frightened, the rest was appalled at the whine that had crept into his voice.

What most freaked Jimmy out was that he was using phrases such as ‘totally fucked, man’ like he said them every day. Everything, absolutely everything had gone wrong, from the drugs stewing in his cranium, to Morgan face down in the lemon meringue pie, and that shithead Black clutching his nuts and puking on the ground where the car should have been.

And that was it. In a nutshell, on a stick, and in a bun. Where the car should have been. That big, smart-assed talking Cadillac was nowhere to be seen.

Jimmy’s boot sent an old coke can skittering across the blacktop of the interstate. Jimmy was not a poetic man, but the hormone analogues and para-halucinogens cruising his bloodstream made him see the road as a physical metaphor of his own future. Somewhere on the blacktop the Juggernaut of Destiny thundered towards him, and Mitchell Gould, THE Mitchell Gould, was in the driving seat.

Gould was going to want his money back, and he, Jimmy, was going to have to tell him.

Jimmy looked down at the number on the cell-phone and shuddered. His tongue worried at his top front teeth, his mouth was filling with blood but he was afraid to spit in case his bridgework hitched a ride. Across the parking lot Black had stopped puking. Jimmy snapped the phone shut and walked over.

He'd slugged Black in sheer frustration when they'd staggered out of the diner and seen the car had gone. Instead of just taking it, the stupid little gay punk shithead had slugged him back. So Jimmy had kicked him in the nuts. Twice.

Still on his hands and knees, Black mutely looked up at Jimmy. His expression was that of a man in intense pain, who would do much to avoid more.

Jimmy kicked Black in the face. 'Fifteen thousand dollars of bridgework, you fuck.' He followed up with a few more kicks to the body. Groaning, Black slumped on his side and curled into a ball.

It felt good stomping Black, it helped clear Jimmy's head. They were the Old-fashioned Boys and at times like these it was important to do things the old-fashioned way. Morgan was steady, but Black had always been a punk. The sonofabitch had shot the car, for chrissakes.

If there was one thing Jimmy knew, it was the importance of having a scapegoat.

Jimmy propped Black up against a dumpster, lit two cigarettes and put one between Black's split and bleeding lips.

'It's all right, compadre,' Jimmy told him. 'We're nearly through.'

Black grunted, inhaled smoke and blew it out through his mashed and purpling nose. 'Ere der car?'

All at once Jimmy felt very tired. 'Damned if I know.'

'Der muddy in der car?'

Jimmy gave a profound sigh. 'Yes, the money is still in the car.'

All one hundred and ninety million. The money they were meant to drive to Vegas and lose playing blackjack, craps and roulette at certain tables in certain casinos owned by a certain member of the executive in DC. A decade ago, one hundred and ninety million USD was a kill-your-own-motherfucker of a fortune. Today, it was still a shit load of money.

More than enough to die for.

Jimmy slapped Black on the shoulder, pushed himself to his feet and made his way towards the diner. He took one last pull on his cigarette and flipped the tab away. Beating on Black had loosened the broken dental bridge even more. Taking hold of his top teeth he pulled them out and slipped them in his breast pocket. Maybe some dental surgeon could reattach them.

Finally, his head was clearing of that hippy drug shit. He'd check on Morgan, fix Black properly, and make the call to Gould. Once that was sorted they'd get back on the road.

One foot on the step up to the diner, Jimmy shook his head and gave a brief, sardonic smile. That blonde bitch Josie was something else. He was

going to enjoy tracking her down. Her and that flop-haired lanky freak she travelled with.

‘Hey, Jimmy.’

Jimmy turned round. Black was up on one knee, he held a gun in a two-fisted grip.

Shit, Jimmy thought. Where’d Black get a gun? Jimmy held up his hand in a peace sign. ‘Chill, man. Don’t be, like, so infra-dig-‘

Black shot him. Like, a lot.



*Exclusive! It's Official!! The Steel Nymph is the biggest woman in the world!!!*

*In this issue, Venus Maxima is proud to announce twenty-three year old Ellen Hutzenreiter Crane, secretive daughter of Canadian mega-trillionaire Palfinger Crane, has surpassed Carol Yager's alleged peak weight of 1,600 lb. Eat your hearts out, all you wannabees, the 900 club has a new paragon of amplitude. Ellen Crane is the Empress of Embonpoint!*

*Self-proclaimed celebrity fat watcher, Wesley Strosner is delighted. 'This is great news for Ellen. Now she really is the biggest and the best. What an amazing family!'*

*Known by her fans as the Steel Nymph because of her multi-million dollar life-support exoframe, Ellen has allegedly eaten nothing but vitamin and mineral supplements for the last two years. Even Strosner admits his ambition to become her Feeder and make her 'big, bigger, biggest' is unlikely.*

*'I'm moved by love,' Strosner announced. 'I live in hope.'*

*Doctors continue to be baffled by Ellen's astonishing weight gain.*

*Editorial,  
Venus Maxima magazine*



'Unbelievable.' Novik was lost for words. The Cadillac's tyres slewed across the loose gravel of the enormous mall's gigantic parking lot and headed towards the onion-domed, floodlit entrance.

He'd been trying to avoid Roswell. The car kept telling him they were nowhere close but he didn't believe it. Four o'clock in the morning, and Novik had no idea where he was.

Josie was asleep in the passenger seat, her feet up on the dash. She wore a paisley scarf over her hair, ray-bans covered her eyes. All Novik could make out of her face was a dreamy half-smile, high cheekbones, and her left ear, decorated with nine silver rings.

The change in motion woke her, she swung her bare feet down from the dash and focused on the distant neon glitter, the cloud scrawl of laser lights from the multi-domed mall. 'Where are we?'

'Ultra-mall 20-19, between Midland and Abilene,' Mr Car said. 'Seventeen hundred hectares of Tech, Fash, Chill, Trans, Pharma, Meeja and Mil.'

'Main or .alt?' Josie said.

'Main, .alt, .eth, .ret, and .X.'

'This is where we need to be.'

Novik dug around in the glove compartment and pulled out a fistful of loose change, sticky candy wrappers, and dried peyote.

So this was what heavy dudes in suits lived on. He opened the door and dumped the lot on the ground. It was time to begin. 'I need some juice. Fresh fruit, vitamin green, whisky. Some shades,' Novik said.

'All of that, and more,' Josie said. 'We're here to shop.'

They'd put the camper in storage and driven through the night, anxious to put as many miles between them and the diner as they could. Still mildly spaced and paranoid from the f-LSD, sustained by psychedelic rock from the orbital pirate stations, Novik instinctively dog-legged west and east

down dirt roads and two-lanes, the Cadillac easily coping with the terrain as they headed for the southern border like any punk with a trunk full of stolen cash and a picogram of common sense.

Mr Car was a dream ride, the passenger compartment a smoked glass womb of comfort, an upholstered cocoon of atmospherically controlled ambient security. It was what Josie needed; she kicked off her shoes, curled up in the armchair-like seat, and slept the sleep of the emotionally exhausted.

The retro sounds faded as they got out of the car, the last few bars of the Doors' LA Woman segueing into Hillage's Glorious Om Riff. They'd driven fourteen hours straight, stopped only for food, legals, and to freshen up. Josie had to shop when Novik became convinced he was in a submarine. She'd put on gloves before handling the dust-covered money. By now the shopkeeper's spirit guides would be in low orbit over Albuquerque.

When Novik felt better they stopped again and he cleaned the money. Masked and gloved, he laid the boxes out on the ground, stood upwind and swept them with a long-handled feather duster. Thin plumes of drug dust and a dozen hundred-dollar bills blew into the sky and across a flock of crows perched on a power line.

Novik repacked the trunk and they sped away. Behind them, the crows stared at each other with glassy black eyes. One by one they toppled forwards and swung upside-down from the line, softly cawing.

Mica in the Ultra-Mall pavements glittered like diamonds. Ahead of them stood the Mall itself, a gleaming dazzle of red, gold and blue neon, the sky above swept by searchlights, and laser-projected logos and testimonials written on the clouds.

Josie studied the vast franchise, as beautiful as Camelot, as dangerous as Chapel Perilous, and felt an overwhelming euphoria. Fear of the future, of failure, had left her. All that existed was the moment, that eternal fleeting instant called 'Now'. In her heart she knew all that mattered was that she was with Novik. She began a slow, turning, dervish dance, and it was as if she stood still and the world revolved about her.

Novik watched purple and green caterpillars of light stream from her fingertips and transmogrify into camo-patterned moths wearing mirror shades and army boots. The boots were too heavy for flight. Fluttering gamely the moths imploded with faint 'poink' sounds as they hit the ground. Each corresponded to the last drug-affected receptors in Novik's brain as they flushed free of psychoactives. His cerebral cortex resumed normal service.

All around them obese families from the condos, apts and bungalow ranch-styles stared enviously at the muscular Cadillac as they lumbered

towards the mall. Flashlights twinkled as they snapped the trunk and hood marquee logos, the 'AFC-16' embossed hubcaps and wing detail.

Novik watched Josie's slow trance dance. 'What can you see, babe?'

'I'm blinded by the beauty of Mammon. His retail palaces are so vast their delivery bays are concealed by the curvature of the earth. His hairs are fibre-optic cables and his teeth are zirconium. His voice is made of brass and all I hear is the sound of three-for-two debit authorisations.'

A small crowd of libertarians had gathered. 'Amen, sister,' they whooped and chorused.

Novik set his jaw. This was what they had come to fight. The Cadillac's trunk swung open at his touch, Josie loaded her shoulder bag with bundles of cash.

When she was done, Josie took Novik's hand. She thought about what they were about to do, and where it would lead, and squeezed tight. Together, they walked towards the waiting Mall. Returning pedestrians parted around them: families loaded with enough food for a month who would return in a week; single-product completists, weighed down by expanded series re-issues, retro-media variants, tie-ins, spin-offs, and collectable merchandise; upgrade warriors trading in, back, and up; blindfolded mystery-shoppers, white canes tapping as they hurried home to discover their purchases.

Behind them, Mr Car extended a multi-jointed arm from the offside 'C' pillar and began cleaning the solar cells on the roof.



Benny the Spoke knew his lift was due. It might be today, it could be tomorrow, but it was definitely coming soon. He disconnected from the FreeFinger Jamboree tower, removed his headphones, stretched, yawned, and looked around.

FreeFinger left him dissatisfied. The service had everything you could want - demos, try-outs, beta-products, time-expiring loss-leader gadgets, bolt-ons, strap-ons, medical, leisure, financial and spiritual service packs, legal and a-legal Pharma, holidays, non-doctor implants, auto-loans, freemium tasters, the list went on and on. Freefinger was compulsive, and, just like the man said, it was free.

Benny considered his acquisitions: an AI/solar auto-mulch combo upgrade to a lawnmower he didn't own; a series of online counselling services for expectant fathers; and 'Larger Than Life', the official autobiography of Zeppelina, the nineteen-year-old pop diva of the Meeja mega-group, the Bariatric Babes. He didn't need them, he didn't even *want* them. He'd

shipped them straight to self-storage.

FreeFinger was methadone for the retail addict and it was all that was left for Benny to do. He'd squandered his funds on shopping, the resources that were supposed to see him through his entire mission. He hadn't been adequately prepared for the malls, he could see now his profile was wrong, he was too easily led, his personality too addictive. They should have sent somebody else, someone more ascetic, less like the natives.

Nobody had appreciated the sheer depth of the problems here. There was so much stuff and it was so very easy to buy. He'd known the waiting would be hard but not that failure could be so very, very easy. Or that it would feel so good.

It came to him, perhaps nobody really liked him and he'd been set up to fail. It made a pitifully lonely kind of sense. All he could do now was wait, and hope this really was the place where the butterfly would first beat its frail wings.

He had wandered the mall for days. Wherever he walked, there was mood music, announcements, sonic logos, focused purchasing suggestions from the transponders embedded in his shopping.

When he was tired he crashed in the chill bays, he ate at the three-4-two grill and cleaned up in the washrooms. And waited.

Now the music, celebrity testimonials and adverts blended into a composite structure. New genres formed in his mind: metal baroque, thrash a cappella, speed-rap opera and death-folk hip-hop.

It was more than he could bear. He had to tell someone.

A young couple walked through the hundred-foot-wide, ever-open mall doors. She was fair, he was dark. Both were slim, unusual enough to make Benny look twice.

The woman radiated the transcendent inner glow of someone who had come to terms with fate. The man had the set jaw and determined stride of a gunslinger stepping into the saloon.

'I've g-got this musical Shoggoth inside my head,' Benny stammered as they walked past.

'That's a heavy vibe,' Novik said.

Benny held out his hand, 'I'm Benny.'

'Novik.'

Benny looked down at the collection of bags, boxes and holdalls at his feet. He couldn't remember what he had bought, only that he had wanted it at the time.

'This isn't why I'm here,' Benny said. 'I couldn't help myself. I haven't come to shop, I'm supposed to bear witness.'

Josie felt a sudden empathy for the confused, loose-limbed young man in cavalry pants and denim. She put her hand on Benny's shoulder, 'Hang out with us, we're shopping for the USA until the malls come down.'

With a growing sense of wonder Benny realised that this might be it - First Contact. He had to be sure. 'If you want something, why not just get it from FreeFinger? Get it for nothing?'

Novik shook his head. 'Palfinger Crane is not the solution. Companies and Corps, Pharma, Fash, even .alt, all give it to Crane, and he gives it away for free. He's just chumming the water so you buy even more in the feeding frenzy.'

Benny felt like a novice crouched at the foot of his guru. The foyer filled with a silvery light.

'FreeFinger doesn't break the loop, it reinforces it,' Novik continued, 'We're going subvert it, we're going to reverse entropy and collapse the retail-wholesale wave form.'

Now Benny was certain. This really was it, his one chance turn things round. If he failed, there would be no pickup, no going home. They wouldn't come for his body because once it was all over, they wouldn't be able to find his atoms.

It was time to reveal himself.

'My name is Benny the Spoke. I am an Ambassador from far Achernar, and I have travelled across the dark gulf to observe an incipient phase-change in the human race.'

Novik shook Benny's hand, happy to humour the harmless stranger. 'I'm not sure what that means, but I like the way you said it.'

'You're a pair of butterflies, what you do next-' Benny shut his mouth, already he had said too much.

Josie studied Benny carefully. A guardian of secrets, he also projected an aura of vulnerability, a poor combination for a store detective, though excellent for a scamster. 'We can do what?'

'I meant, if you spend enough money, you can change the world.'

Josie extracted a fistful of hundred-dollar bills from her shoulder bag. The sooner they started, the quicker it would be over. Even so, she was determined to have some fun. 'Watch and learn.'



*“As the sources of supply and demand become more and more centralized and we face the inevitable shortages of raw materials and energy, the question is to what extent our society has become inflexible. How will we adapt to the necessary changes in our life style? How will we light a fire in a house with no fireplaces?”*

*J. Burke,  
Connections.*



Back in the day, Clinton said the Oval Office was his favourite room. Guinevere Snarlow, 51st President of the United States of America, leaned back in her chair in that same room and spoke into the air.

‘Coffee.’

‘Yes, madam President,’ a male voice, high and nasal, replied from the intercom.

Clinton had it easy. Despite the scandal he still had the power, he had been the most powerful person in the world. Just like Queen Victoria on the British throne, the Ottomans at Topkapi, and the Emperors of Rome.

She wondered what it felt like.

Coffee arrived, wheeled in by a thin, middle-aged man with little hair and less chin.

‘Thank you.’ Guinevere’s smile was broad and genuine, her gaze direct. It came easy, she could smile all day, it was one of her campaign assets.

Guinevere sipped her coffee slowly, and enjoyed a minute of calm and solitude. Then she straightened her blouse, tugged down her jacket and made her way to the latest meeting with the Executive, to see those who had bothered to turn up.

None of the few still-loyal generals and advisors were her friends, she had long ago realised true friendship was one of the sacrifices one made in politics. They were allies at best, the enemies of her enemies, united by power, desire, and self-belief. They were pretty pissed off too.

‘Those tree-hugging European pussies are selling out the futures of our sons and daughters,’ General Andriewiszcz’s pale eyes glittered under a furrowed brow. ‘We bailed them out twice and now they won’t even buy our goddamn sun buggies.’

Secretary of State Cheswold Lobotnov agreed. ‘Henry Ford must be spinning in his grave.’

And so it went, bad news on every front: economic, political, legal and

military. The business of America might be business but nobody else wanted to do it with them anymore. South America was federating, China was full of geriatrics, Europe was so green people called it the Emerald Union. India and Brazil had GDPs to die for, Oman was the new California. It went on and on, and it was depressing as hell.

‘What about Crane?’ Guinevere said.

Lobotnov shook his head morosely. His jaw was narrow, his skull above the temples high domed. Together they gave him the appearance of an ancient, wise child. ‘Crane won’t help us. I’m not even going to ask.’

Vice President Oscar Gordano took off his glasses, ran his fingers through his wiry grey hair, and put them back on again. He was handsome as hell and looked great on any sized screen. It was why he was there, to take off his glasses, smile, and put them back on again. He still thought he could contribute.

‘I can understand the Europeans wanting us to use more wood,’ Gordano held up his hand at Andriewisz’s reflexive guffaw, ‘No, I really can. It’s this zero-C thing, they’ve chosen their way and we need to respect it. But Crane? Crane’s mother was from Montana, he’s half American, he needs to do his patriotic duty.’

‘His father was Canadian, he’s a Canadian citizen,’ Lobotnov said.

‘What leverage have we got on him?’ Guinevere asked.

Lobotnov blew out his baby-smooth cheeks. ‘How about this: None at all. What can you offer the richest man who has ever lived? His personal wealth is greater than our total GDP, and it’s growing while ours is shrinking. His business interests are so vast I doubt anyone knows exactly what they are, not even those Wall Street AIs. Squeeze him and he’ll put our nuts in a vice. Seize his USA assets and he’ll shut us down. Face up to it, Ginny, we’ve got nothing he wants.’

‘There’s that fat blimp of a daughter. Maybe we can do something for her?’ Gordano said.

Andriewisz jabbed at the table with his finger. ‘People got a right. People got a right to buy stuff. We make it, they buy it. Then we buy their stuff back and all.’

‘What are you saying?’ Guinevere said.

‘We rebuilt Europe. When they beat the crap out of each other, we propped them back up and dusted them down. We did it twice. Now they won’t buy a new gadget until the old one’s wore out, and it’s got to be compostable into the bargain. What’s the sense in that? Where’s the gratitude? How can I give my boys and girls some back-pay?’

Gordano tried to explain: ‘It’s a steady-state economy, zero-C, negative

impact. The Eurozone transitioned to a post-consumerist growthless model-

Two unnaturally red spots appeared on Andriewisz's cheeks. 'That's just my point. They got all this stuff recycled back out of the ground, chromium, lithium, copper, osmium, mercury. They've been mining their own landfill and stockpiling the purified waste.'

'Is that really true?' Guinevere said.

'Yes, it's true,' Lobotnov said smoothly. 'The Congo just quadrupled the price of coltan, and the Euros have purified tantalum they don't even want.'

Guinevere smiled sourly, 'Meanwhile we're dying on our feet.'

'They're doing a fine job of cleaning the land up, and it's made good economic sense too. One industry shrinks, another emerges,' Gordano said.

Tendons stood out on Andriewisz's neck. 'Whose damned side are you on, Ozzie? Our citizens got a right to consume. They work hard, they see things in the shops they want to afford. It's a better life.'

'OK,' Lobotnov broke in, 'OK, I agree that's where we are. We've got ourselves an economic model of bigger, faster, better, more, and we can all agree it's not working. We're not growing, we're shrinking, and we got to do something about it.'

'Lord, give me strength,' Andriewisz looked up at the ceiling. 'For Chrissakes, Cheswold, that's exactly what I'm saying.'

'It is?'

'Don't you ever listen, you smart-assed ivy-league creep?'

Guinevere Snarlow slapped the table with her hand. 'He's not alone, general. What exactly is your point?'

'Jeez, ma'am, are we losing our balls? When the Brits had an empire, they took what they wanted. The world used to be a great market, *Europe* used to be a great market. We rebuilt it twice, I say we do it again.'

Lobotnov studied his nails, 'I take it you've got a plan a little more coherent than redneck bullshit?'

Andriewisz felt like he'd been playing war games all his life.

'Cheswold, I got a list of strategic scenarios longer than your boyfriend's cock.'

'OK, I want to take a look,' Snarlow said.

'At the plans, I hope,' Gordano sniggered.

Snarlow let the gap in the conversation grow. The grin on Gordano's face died by degrees.

'Oscar, this is not a game, and we're not in the playground. I was elected because I made certain promises to restore the moral, political and economic strengths of this great country I love. I intend to keep all those promises, whatever it takes. If you can't say or do anything useful, then I suggest you

say and do nothing.’

Snarlow looked round the table and took in Lobotnov and Andriewisz’s approval. ‘How long for the plans, General?’

‘I’m ready now, ma’am.’

‘Bring it on. I want something provocative, but I don’t want us to be the aggressor, not at first. It’s got to come at us in a plausible way, then we’re justified.’ Snarlow was enjoying herself, thinking out loud. This was the way it was supposed to play in the Oval Office, making plans, leading from the front, taking control. ‘Do we have to go abroad? Has it got to be an expedition?’

Andriewisz was visibly swelling with happiness, ‘No, ma’am, there are several Canadian and Mexican scenarios.’

‘Canada would piss off the Union, guaranteed.’ Lobotnov said.

‘We got substantial resources tied up down south,’ Andriewisz said.

One thing at a time. Snarlow sat back in her chair, happy for the first time in months. ‘They’re not tied up, general, they’re ready and in place. Mr Lobotnov, would you order in coffee and donuts?’

‘Certainly, Ginnie.’

‘Gentlemen, let’s start making America great.’

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Twenty stories up the last intact post-Katrina III arcology of Nu-Orleans, Mitchell Gould's office was an affair of black leather, white fur, chrome and mirrors. On interview days he kept a few girls on the couches – black, white, Hispanic, Asian, oriental; high boots, teddies, open robes, bare-breasted.

Gould looked them over and found them adequate. 'Ready, girls?'

'Yes, Mr Gould.'

One of them gave him a bright, direct smile, a slender oriental with waist length black hair and a heart-shaped face. There were a hundred like her, a thousand.

The girls arranged themselves indecorously on the couches and leant on the walls in postures of faux decadence. Gould's gaze went back to the oriental and she flashed him a look of such coy fakery he laughed out loud. You had to respect a girl who could play the hand she'd been dealt.

Gould teased up his spiky blond hair and sat on the edge of his desk. Broad-shouldered and narrow hipped, he was still young enough to have a loose-limbed, athletic look. He wore black boots and slacks, a white, v-neck jumper, a navy jacket.

Like the office, his style was just a look. His young guns expected to see something special, they valued objects, possessions, and ostentation. They themselves wore drawstring pants and hooded sweat tops, or, when they wanted to impress, a short-sleeved check shirt four sizes too big.

A pair of radio handsets and a semi-automatic lay in a row on his desk. Gould clapped his hands. 'Bring them in, Manalito.' The enormous Mexican Indian standing against the wall turned, and pulled the door open.

Three wiry Latinos, an overweight black, a Central American Indian, and a white guy filed in. That last, muscular and crop-haired, was unusual. Even more so in that from somewhere he'd found a clean, dust-pink shirt and khaki cargoes.

They stood in the middle of the big room. One of the Latinos was

barefoot, all but the white guy dressed in torn and stained clothing. They looked through the picture windows across the rooftops of old, drowned Nu-Orleans, out across the gulf at the years-long eco-disaster of Hurricane 'permanent' Larry. They scoped Manalito, and they checked out the girls. And finally, without fail, they looked at Gould.

It was a universal rule - they had to look him in the eye.

Gould had fed them and given the opportunity to clean themselves up, the first test. This interview was the second. They might be steady, humble, or full of it. It was time to find out.

'Where you from, white boy?' Gould said to the one in the fresh shirt. He never bothered with names until after the interview.

The white man straightened up, hands clasped behind his back. 'Originally? Rhode Island, Mr. Gould.'

'Nice shirt.'

'The other guy thought so too.'

That was impressive, keeping the shirt clean. Even so.

'I don't use Staties,' Gould said.

'Sir?'

'I do not, as a habit, employ citizens of the USA.'

That shut him up.

'What was it, boy, women or law?'

'Law, sir. I don't hurt women.'

Gould resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Every punk had his rule, the one thing they would not do, a personal code that helped them feel there were still moral lines to be crossed. Kill a woman, kill a man, dead was still dead and all that mattered was why, and how you felt about it. For Gould, killing was only ever a business transaction. Manalito had a different point of view, Gould didn't care as long as the job got done.

'What happened with the law?' Gould said.

The white guy shifted his feet and grinned, 'I was an asshole.'

With luck and cojones you could avoid the storm winds of Permanent Larry, and cross the bay. On dry land, once Gould's sweeper crews had spotted you, you didn't keep breathing by not paying attention. Most people realised their journey wasn't over.

Everyone except the barefoot Latino was eyes front, watching and listening. That one just couldn't keep his eyes off the girls.

No group made it through the interview intact, it was Gould's policy.

'So how are you with taking orders?' Gould said to the white man.

'I'm good with orders, yes sir.'

Gould gave him one of the one of the radio handsets and the gun.

The white man hooked the handset onto his trousers, took the clip out of the gun and checked the chamber. His actions were confident and practiced, his expression unchanged as he noted the clip contained a single bullet. He pushed the gun into the back of his waistband. 'Ready, Mr Gould.'

'OK. We don't mind assholes, but we do expect focus.' Gould pointed to the Latino with the wandering eyes. 'Take this hot chilli horndog outside and chuck him off the roof.'

The rest of the group moved back. The Latino was isolated, he turned, confused. 'Hey, mon, no-'

The white guy moved fast. He punched the Latino low in the gut, kned his face, then clubbed his neck with the pistol. Once, twice, and he went down.

Manalito held open the door, his own gun hung casually in his big hand. 'This way, white man,' he rumbled. The white guy hoisted the stunned Latino in a fireman's lift and followed Manalito out of the room.

The apartment next door had no exterior wall. Welded to the building's steel frame, an H-girder projected twenty feet into clear air.

The white guy pushed the Latino out onto the girder. Two hundred and fifty feet below, the brackish flood waters were dotted with partly submerged wreckage - concrete and rusting steel, broken roofs and old autos, all swept into jagged heaps by the tides and storm surges around the legs of the arcologies.

Brave men walked to the end of the girder and stepped off. There were patches of clear water among the wreckage, but this high up it was windy, and down below, the water was shallow.

You could grow fascinated by how hard some people tried to live, that they still planned, still made calculations, right to the bitter end.

'Watch this, guys,' Gould ordered the remaining recruits to the window. Some of the girls came too.

The Latino crouched three feet from the edge, facing inwards, one hand clutched the beam, the other his broken, bloody cheek.

The white guy grinned, slapped his thigh and did a little jig. Some of the recruits laughed. One of them called him a prick and Gould noted that. Then the white guy drew his gun and shot the Latino. The gunshot was faint through the triple-glazing, the Latino's yell inaudible. His hand snatched at the girder and he was gone.

Gould pressed the call button on his hand set.

'Yes, sir?' the white man said.

'Give the handset to Manalito. Stand against the wall.'

'Mr. Gould,' Manalito said into the handset.

‘Yes or no, Manalito?’

‘No.’

‘Correct as usual. My decision is no.’

Moments later Manalito appeared. The white man struggled in Manalito’s grip, held overhead by shoulder and thigh. Nothing of his screams, his threats and profanities could be heard through the glass. The silence gave his furious mouthing and flailing a surreal calm. Gould watched the recruits and the recruits watched Manalito as he walked to the end of the beam and pitched the white man into the air.

Nobody was laughing now.

Lightning flickered silently in the storm clouds deep in the bay. The oriental girl pressed her hands against the glass and looked intently down at the distant water.

Gould faced the silent recruits. ‘I changed my mind about assholes.’

The four remaining refugees nodded thoughtfully, as if Gould had said something wise.

Manalito returned through the door.

‘Ok, you’ll do,’ Gould said to the recruits. ‘Go with the big man and do as you’re told.’

*Xalapatech CEO Jose X. Casavantes presented a new generation of bipedal canines to a sceptical audience of senior police officers. His assistant, 'Chapman', a Super-Doberman, operated the console.*

*'We can no longer consider these partner beings as anything less than para-humans,' Casavantes says. 'Put simply, they are canine people. Smart, loyal and hardworking, they are far less susceptible to third-party influences than your average human cop.'*

*Major Elrond Gunningham of Baltimore District was unimpressed: 'You're not suggesting we give them guns, are you?'*

*Casavantes replied that although they were not quite as fast as normal dogs, they could outrun any man and put the cuffs on him too.*

*To date the UN has refused to be drawn on the issues of para-human rights, saying only that the matter is 'under review'.*

*DogsBestFriend militant Wanda Vermont said 'DBF demands Xalapatech slave masters free our four-legged friends.'*

*'Do we look like dogs?' Chapman retorted. 'Keep that woman away from me.'*

*(Xalapatech is a subsidiary of Naismith Industries, an independent over-holding of the CraneCorp Buisplex.)*



Cash in hand, Josie and Novik looked across the mall, through surging crowds of shoppers. Fash, Meeja, .life, .ret, and auto-boutiques shared the concourse with walk-in surgeries, re-re-financing, XY techno, speedsex, as well as the trads, like porno, sport, and faith. At every corner, every junction, stood the booths and screens of FreeFinger Jamboree towers.

Fake palms and clumps of shamboo were planted around water troughs and fountains. Beneath them, the day-trippers ate their Qwiknics™, and uploaded reviews and show-and-tell pictures of their newest possessions.

Novik looked around uncertainly, 'Now we're here, I'm not sure where to start.'

Josie thought for a moment, then set off across the marble atrium. 'This way.'

Walking a crowd is a skill. Josie slipped through the swarms of shoppers gracefully. Novik did the same. Benny made eye-contact with every approaching shopper, and was blocked, bumped and forced to apologise with every step.

He caught up with them outside a shoe shop.

'This is where it all begins,' Josie said, and stepped inside.

The interior of the shop was quiet, the mood reverential yet exciting, the atmosphere tweaked with aerosols of leather balm, endorphins and swarm-serotonin.

Overweight boys fondled the logos of supawhite trainers. Two businessmen in formal shorts tried on Roman sandals trimmed in gold leather. A trio of young girls worked their way through the fetish boots in the children's zone.

Josie breathed deep. Arms spread, and head thrown back, she wanted to absorb the air-born hormones, to use the strength of shop's own retail armaments against itself.

The shop assistant, a middle-aged man with a mild face, hurried over and

tried to manoeuvre her out of the shop.

'You're over-reacting to the atmospherics. It's your genome's fault, for which you have sole legal responsibility. Our aerosol-densities are guaranteed to be no more than eighty percent legal maximum in up to ninety percent of retail volume.'

'That's meaningless,' Novik said.

'Entry onto the premises implies consent,' the assistant droned, a reflex monotone.

Josie waved a sheaf of notes under his nose. 'I've got money and I want to spend it. If you're going to stop me, go get the manager.'

'I-,' the assistant scowled over his shoulder, then faced Josie: 'Do you have issues with anger management or false epiphany, a family history of brain bleeds, or SUKS?'

'What's that?'

'Sudden, unexpected kleptomania syndrome.'

Josie indicated the gold sandals. 'Those are nice. What sizes do you have?'

The shop assistant stuck out his chest, 'Those are part of our Mascu-Line range, footwearage for individuals self-defining as male.'

Josie looked at him deadpan. 'Fascinating. I'll take two pairs in every size.'

'You will?'

'And the same for the trainers.'

'Those also are Mascu-Line,' the assistant said.

'Do you have anything more feminine?'

'Indeed, we do.' The assistant cleared his throat, he swept his arm across the room in a flamboyant gesture, 'May I present Laydee-Stylee.'

Josie put the sheaf of notes in her mouth and bit down. 'Nice,' came her muffled reply.

'You've really thought this through,' Novik said. 'Will any of your mass-produced products enhance my unique individuality?'

'What about me?' Benny said.

The assistant looked Benny up and down, his smile a frozen grimace. 'One moment,' he said, and scurried into the back of the store.

Almost immediately, a pudgy young man in a blue silk suit emerged. On his feet were white patent leather slip-ons, with dorsal tassels and gold heel chains.

Hands clasped, he gave an unctuous smile, revealing pearl-braced teeth. 'I understand you have an interest in our Mascu-Line footwearage?'

'I love your footwearage-' Josie read his name badge, 'Cloudio. Both Mascu-Line, and Laydee-Stylee.'

A pair of red ankle-bootlettes caught Josie's eye. She clapped her hands and pointed, 'Those, I must have those. All sizes, two pairs.'

Cloudio's eyes dropped to the wedge of money in Josie's gloved hand. Novik caught his look and gave him an encouraging nod.

Cloudio leaned close to Novik and cupped his hand beside his mouth, 'Should I recognise madam?'

'Burned-out FreeFinger addict,' Novik said. 'I'm her therapist. It's a delicate phase.'

Cloudio's smile turned sickly, 'Is she going to-?'

'ShopAmok? We don't know yet. Play along.'

Josie was beginning to enjoy herself. She touched Cloudio's arm. 'I've decided. Why waste time with half-measures? I love all your styles, all the colours. I'm going to self-define as Tally Up Your Stock List. Tell me how much it is, I'll take the lot.'

Cloudio grinned like a nauseous chipmunk, 'The women's shoes?'

'Women's, men's, children's.'

'Perhaps-' Cloudio glanced at Novik, who gave him a thumbs-up, 'We also have InterLace, a gender-plus range.' Cloudio stood on one foot and spread his hands, 'For those days when you just want to be different.'

Josie pinned Cloudio to the spot with her gaze. 'I am different, Cloudio. Add them in.'

'All?' Cloudio's voice wavered.

'All.'

'I-' Cloudio's composure disintegrated. 'Fuck it, if that's what you want.'

'Ten percent for cash?' Novik said.

Cloudio gave an indifferent shrug, 'Sure thing. No problemo.'

Half an hour later Josie placed a thick wad of bills into Cloudio's damp hands. An enormous stack of shoe boxes occupied the centre of the shop. At the very top were Cloudio's own white slip-ons. Novik had insisted.

As Cloudio counted the money his mouth began to twitch. He blinked, he grimaced, his toes curled inside his socks. 'We have a special offer on our buy-to-store option. This week we can deliver straight to the self-store warehouse of your choice.'

Novik was incredulous. 'People do that?'

'Everyone's doing it. It's like, uber-popular.'

'For shoes?'

'Particularly for shoes. Especially for shoes.' Cloudio grew enthusiastic. 'It's a virtual wardrobe, but it's full of real shoes. Think about it – simply the most perfect way to own your purchases without the inconvenience of keeping them in the finite volumage of your domicile. They're there for

you, waiting in a low-light, humidity controlled environment, ready for the day you want to visit them. To touch them, smell them.' Cloudio's eyelids fluttered, 'Slip your feet inside them-'

Novik took a step back. 'Go home, Cloudio. You're done here.'

'What about all your shoes?' Cloudio exclaimed, 'Don't you want them?'

'We'll come back tomorrow,' Novik said.

The concept was so novel Cloudio became temporarily catatonic.

'Thanks,' Josie tugged the receipt out of Cloudio's unresisting fingers and lead the way out of the shop.

Outside, around the corner, Josie and Novik embraced. Novik was ecstatic, they'd had this plan, now he'd seen it working.

'That was brilliant,' he said. 'You were awesome, I couldn't have done that.'

'I enjoyed it. It was fun,' Josie said. To her own surprise, she actually meant it.

Benny looked back at the shop, already the lights were out, the shutters coming down. 'That was a smart plan. You bought his stock and blocked resupply. That retail outlet is out of action.'

Josie had spent a lot of money, and it had felt good. A year's wages spent on shoes in under an hour. It had taken a small dent out of the cash, more of a nibble, but it was start. The closed shop unsettled the passing shoppers, young and old. Skittish and unruly as spooked colts, they made impulse-buys in adjacent shops and hurried away, defensively hugging their unwanted purchases to their chests.

'We'll have to move fast, people are getting nervous,' Josie said.

'A lightning raid, and move on.' Novik liked the idea. 'Like Parker and Barrow, Dillinger and Frechette.'

'Except the police won't hunt us down, they'll provide escorts, an honour guard.'

Novik surveyed the mall like a lion of the Serengeti. He saw what he wanted. 'Over there. Power tools.'

The sun was setting when they made their way back to Mr Car. All afternoon shops had ceased trading as they had bought them out. Now the entire mall was closing. Weary shoppers tramped across the parking lot, whole families of day-trippers, coach parties of excursion purchasers. Security guards manned the barriers of the entrance lanes to the car park and turned away confused and disappointed arrivals.

Back at the Cadillac, 'Peace Dog' was playing on Mr Car's stereo. Benny

listened to Duffy's licks and power chords, peered inside the vehicle then stood back to admire the external lines.

'The next war will not be cool but you are one awesomely cool piece of techno, Mr. Car.'

'Thank you for noticing, sir. I also believe it to be true.'

'When will the next war be?' Josie said.

'Probably quite soon. Maybe never,' Benny said. 'When I find out, you'll be the first to know.'

Novik slipped behind the wheel. Josie tossed her bag onto the passenger seat beside him. It was empty of everything but long strips of paper. A million dollars exchanged for a dozen metres of till receipts.

Shopping usually left Novik drained, right now he felt energised and empowered, an endorphin high. Doing something, taking a stand, making a point - they had proved it could be done. 'We can do this, I know we can, but we need a real plan, a scheme, a strategy. Then we'll come back and really take it to the man.'

Josie thought it over, her smile half worn-out. If Novik took a break he might slow down, lose momentum. Maybe this one gesture was all he needed. In his subconscious it was already over, he just needed time to realise. She kissed his cheek, 'Let's keep heading south. We'll hit Mexico, strip down and party. Catch some rays.'

'And make a plan.'

'Sure thing, hon,' Josie's voice was light, carefree. 'We'll make a plan.'

'So this new guy's coming with us?' Mr Car said as they buckled up.

'Benny? Sure. Why not?' Novik said.

'Ah. No reason,' the Cadillac replied as they pulled away into the traffic.



*That colour? It's just you, it so is. That perfume? Absolutely! That automobile, I can see you in it! Darling, it defines you. It is you.*

*Well, no.*

*These days, does anyone of sound mind really believe owning a single, high-end, branded commodity will embellish their social personhood?*

*Of course not. How ridiculous. How naïve. We've moved on, today's society is far more sophisticated.*

*My own research indicates that, at any one time, you need to display thirty to seventy mid-tier, or twenty to thirty-five brand-iconic logos on your combined physico-virtual personage - your McLuhanite para-social media extensions.*

*Yes, that's display, not own. Ownage should be significantly higher. How else are people going to discover who you are, where you're coming from and where you're going to?*

*Today the challenge is to macro-balance all those designs into a gestalt 'Moi'. Tomorrow it will be synergistic integration with Meeja-II.*

*Fortunately, today's solution is actually quite simple: Context-sensitive Logo-montage feedback loops!*

*Teh Poon Leet,  
Logo-me-beautiful consultant.*



Just like O5 and 24, the National Guard were on the levees of the ever growing shoreline of Pontchartrain-Maurepas. Hugely extended, the earth ramparts flanked Interstate 12, broke south-west past Raymond and followed the high ground over to Sorrento, where construction still continued.

The difference was this: instead of spades and sandbags, the Guard had assault rifles and night-vision goggles. Overhead, the searchlights of helicopter gunships played across the dark water as they patrolled the perimeter of the permanently flooded, and officially abandoned, city of New Orleans, like giant black dragonflies.

Some miles east, along the southern banks of the hugely expanded lake, Jericho Wilson sweltered in the heat and humidity of the saturated night air, and watched the uneasy waters.

His amphibious pickup was parked a hundred yards away, under some trees. Wilson himself hunkered down in some scrub cypress overlooking a concrete slipway that ran up out of the water, over the broad top of the earth levee and down to a dirt road. He thought about a cigarette, but didn't want to risk the glow, or the smell.

Wilson might be in the middle of a swamp, it didn't mean he was alone.

Above him, reflections from the searchlight beams moved in glowing patches across the heavy cloud base. In the city centre, scattered lights showed on a few of the failed storm arcologies, tapered glass and steel cylinders of thirty and forty stories. Targeting lasers flickered from their roofs and upper levels. The ruby beams stayed well away from the military choppers, just letting them know they were there, that Mitchel Gould, Lord of Nu-Orleans, accepted them under sufferance.

Out in the gulf, the miles-wide storm columns of hurricane Permanent Larry blanked out the southern sky like a brooding god.

Slowly, quietly, Wilson eased his legs. This kind of work didn't get any easier. Thick in the waist and greying at the temples, he had a bushy moustache like that of an old-time Marshall.

Wilson looked at the hurricane and thought it was closer. He wondered how many little boats were out in the gulf that night, how many hand-made rafts and dinghies chugged towards the Louisiana coast from central America and Haiti, their failing, third-hand outboards paid for with sex, children, or a promise to pick up the phone one night and do whatever you were told. *Sure, we can get you to the Nortamericanos, señor. The price is the same for everyone: all you own and a little bit more.*

Wilson thought about what it must be like to be so desperate, how many times Permanent Larry had to wreck your house, sink your boat and destroy your crops before the chance of making it to the USA as an illegal, compared to drowning in a cockleshell boat, felt like a good bet.

The vegetation round Wilson was recovering from Larry's last visit. Broken stumps were shooting green from new buds, spear-fronded fern colonised bare ground, one of several new species pushing north with the weather.

Larry hadn't rolled along this part of the southern littoral for over a year. Maybe it wouldn't come again this year, almost certainly it would the next. When it did, in its wake, amongst the flotsam and storm-beaten wreckage, people would stagger out of the angry surf, abandoning their waterlogged rafts and leaking boats. Nobody knew how many set out, or how many arrived, but they kept on coming.

Wilson grimaced at his own imagination, chided himself for letting his mind wander, and settled down to watch and listen.

It had been a long while since he had feelings that deep. These days he just wanted to do his job. He found his man and brought him in alive. Always alive. It had become his reputation, and when people found out who had come for them, it sometimes made things go easier, and sometimes not.

The time had come long ago when there had been one death too many. Now, apart from Mitchell Gould, Wilson wanted nothing more to do with killing. People would still get hurt, fair play. Wilson was pretty good at hurting.

After a while there was a change in the texture of the darkness. Wilson became very still.

Drifting out of the night, outboard on tick over, a battered, flat-bottomed green metal dinghy swung towards the slipway. Before it grounded, a man dressed in a dark jacket, trousers and beanie slipped into the water. He lifted a holdall out of the boat and balanced it on his head. Then he took hold of the boat's painter and waded ashore.

As the man dropped the bag onto the slipway, the night lit up with a pulse of light towards the city. Moments later, the rumbling crackle of the explosion followed. The brief illumination showed Wilson the man's heavy

jaw, cropped hair and bandido moustaches. It was Meineck, the man his sources said would be here. Meineck might have arrived by boat, but he was no climate refugee. He was a wanted man with a price on his head.

Meineck sloshed back into the water and swung the boat round. He set the throttle up a notch and sent the empty craft put-putting away into the night.

As Meineck stood with his back to the shore Wilson moved down the slipway. Drawing his neural mop, Wilson aimed it at Meineck's back. 'Hold it there, Meineck.'

Meineck turned fast, his right arm coming up. Wilson shot him in the chest. Meineck squawked as the barbed vial struck home, gave a whole-body twitch as sodium ions vented from his synapses, and flopped face down into the water. He got his knees back under himself, so Wilson shot him again. Lacking all muscle control, Meineck blew bubbles from both ends and sank.

Wilson waded into the water, hauled Meineck onto the slipway and slapped an electrolyte patch on his neck.

Meineck tried to curl up on the concrete. 'Oh sweet Jesus,' he groaned.

'Quite a rush, eh?' Wilson cuffed Meineck's wrists with cable ties, found and removed a knife and a telescopic cosh from his utility jacket, a second gun from the back of his waistband. He threw them all into the water and hauled Meineck to his feet.

'Expecting trouble?' Wilson said.

The muscles on one side of Meineck's face were slack from electrolyte loss. 'Don't take me back,' he slurred.

'One thing you got to know about me, pal. I never take them back.'

'God, no, not that!' Meineck tottered towards the water. Wilson suspected fakery and let him go.

Meineck fell to his knees. 'Not like this, not here.'

Wilson jabbed Meineck in the neck with his neural pistol. 'Shut up, you punk. You think I work for that sonofabitch Gould? I'm taking you to prison.'

The urge to slug Meineck, get him down on the ground and slam his fists into the crook's ugly face, was hard to resist. Wilson wanted to bust Meineck up good, pulp him, kick his god-damned teeth in. Teach him to be quicker with the gun, to aim faster and just shoot it. Shoot it at Wilson, shoot him in the head, just like Wilson had done to Mandy on that awful night long ago.

Pale as a ghost, Meineck looked up at Wilson, terrified by the rage in his captor's face.

Mentally and physically Wilson took a step back. 'Christ, Meineck, if I worked for that scumbag, I'd zap you again and hold you under until the bubbles stopped. You want I do that, you low-life bottom-feeder?'

Meineck's eyes had gone hollow. He swallowed hard, he shook his head, 'No, I don't.'

Another flash-bang lit up the sky.

'What's that?' Wilson said.

'Gould's men, dynamiting the levees. Trying to lower the water levels.'

By any standards Mitchell Gould's operation was impressive. When the USA effectively withdrew from the coastline, when civilisation moved twenty miles inland, all the way from Corpus Christi to Tampa, Gould had seen an opportunity, and moved his operation down from Birmingham. Now he ran his own law from one of the abandoned high rises, the self-contained and weather-immune arcologies built after Katrina III. When Permanent Larry returned again, and then again, the flaw in the arcology plan was revealed: nobody wanted to live in a wasteland.

Gould moved drugs, climate refugees and contraband across what had come to be called the Southern Littoral, a three-mile-wide no-man's land between the ocean and the USA. His fief extended from the ruins of Morgan City to the Gulfport marshes, fifty miles in each direction.

Low concussion waves from the levee charges broke on the slipway. Meineck shifted uncomfortably.

'You OK?' Wilson said.

Meineck gave a grimace of revulsion. 'I shat myself. When you shot me.'

'It happens. I got spare clothes in the pickup. You going to mess me about?'

Too weary to speak, Meineck shook his head. Wilson helped Meineck up the ramp, dropped the dry clothes at his feet, and cut the ties binding his wrists. After Meineck had changed, Wilson re-cuffed him and put him in the passenger seat.

The beat of rotors swung overhead as Army helicopters homed in on the explosion sites, the flickering red targeting lasers following behind.

Meineck shut his eyes and leaned back, 'It's a relief, you know? Not having to run anymore, not having to keep looking over your shoulder. Jail is going to be easy. I'm ready to go back, I can do the time.'

Wilson pulled a half of scotch out of the door pocket. 'You want a drink?' 'Sure.'

Wilson held the bottle to Meineck's mouth until he nodded. There were a couple of inches left, Wilson drained the bottle and tossed it out the window. 'So you think I've done you a favour?'

'Yes, sir. I think you have.'

Wilson gave a short, harsh laugh, 'You're an even bigger fuck-up than me.'

The whisky did its job on Meineck's sodium deficient system, and he

quickly fell asleep. It also did its daily job on Wilson's scarred emotions. An hour's driving brought Wilson to the local bondsman pens in a mellower mood. While Meineck was booked, processed and logged for onwards transportation, Wilson collected his fees and scanned the lists for his next job. Among the usual dealers, illegals, thieves and gangsters, someone on early release gone AWOL caught his eye. Here was yet another person who thought cutting the tag necklace in the bath meant it couldn't send a signal. Now he had broken parole, damaged government property, and dragged any accomplices down into the system with him.

It was exactly what Wilson was looking for. He accepted the job, printed the information sheet and vacated the booth.

Another bondsman waited to use the console. His massive frame, plaited blond hair and full beard gave him the appearance of a latter-day Viking.

'Curtis, how's it hanging?' Wilson said as they shook hands.

'Like a small banana. What you take?'

'The parole bust,' Wilson said.

'What's he done?'

Wilson read from the sheet: 'Behaviour or opinions promoting or deemed to promote un-American commercial modalities.'

'Part of Snarlow's round up. Poor bastard. My brother-in-law was a charity worker, now he's doing three to five on the same charge.'

'I hope he's got the sense to sit it out,' Wilson said.

'He's daft, not stupid.' Curtis chuckled sourly, 'Then again, he did marry my sister.'

'How's she doing?'

'Family's pulled together. She's a good kid.'

'Let me know.'

'You be careful,' Curtis said.

'You too.'

Wilson climbed into his truck, started the engine and read through the sheet again. He knew what Curtis meant, parole breakers often got violent. They had done a stupid thing, when they realised how stupid, it made some of them desperate.

Just what he was looking for.

Wilson folded away the paper into his breast pocket, put the vehicle into gear and pulled out the lot. He had a little ritual at the start of any job, a phrase he always spoke. He said it now: 'Mr Novik, my name is Jericho Wilson, and today I'll be your nemesis.'



## *Meeja 101*

*With hindsight, we can say the internet was never a place, it was a platform. You could contribute to it, consume it, or comment on it, but you could never go there for your holidays.*

*If publishing is simply “the act of making a created item public” then all the internet ever was, and ever could be, was a method of publication. Nevertheless, it was incredible, transformational, a genuine innovation. It was magnificent, it was gigantic, and in its day it ruled the world.*

*All the Cloud let you do was aggregate what had been published. Data, and data storage, became utility commodities. Commercials and governments run the cloud for free because they want your data, and they can make money, or gain leverage, from it.*

*Meeja, and especially Meeja-II, is a lot smaller, but there’s more of it. It’s standalone in usage, aggregated in concept. Paradoxical? Only on the surface.*

*Think of Meeja as a script. You’re the actor, and you’re also in the audience. In fact you are the audience. That guy sitting beside you, he’s you too. And so are all the other actors.*

*So who wrote the script? What script? This is the trick – there is no script.*

*Carrie Styvesant, ‘  
An Introduction to Meeja Studies’*



The border with Mexico at Ciudad Acuna was even more chaotic than usual. Long queues of goods trucks and passenger vehicles waited to cross on both sides. Several hundred pedestrians milled on the Mexican bank of the Rio Bravo.

'I'm not sure this is such a frosty idea,' Novik said as the lines of American traffic inched towards the bridge.

Up ahead lay the human-built obstacles to crossing from one country into another: American customs, interrogation and command posts; the twin, eight-lane toll bridges across the river; the Mexican versions of the immigration and emigration customs and law-enforcement.

The near side of the river was flanked by chain-link fences, fifty feet apart, topped with razor wire. The space between was stripped of vegetation, the bare ground churned with the tracks of half-tracked fast-pursuit vehicles.

Josie had tried to dress them for the car, a light suit, shirt and brown shoes for Novik, a calf-length grey skirt, buckskin boots, white blouse and dark jacket for Josie. Benny had refused to change, insisting the fabric of his clothing contained nanotech bio-flagellates that would keep it clean and in good repair. For certain his jeans, shirt and jacket looked smart and neat, his trainers gleaming white. As far as Novik was concerned that was because he had stood Benny up and slapped some of the dust out with his hands.

Josie fidgeted with her neck-line, doubtful of her costume change. 'I feel like a criminal.'

'That's because you are,' Novik said. 'So am I.'

'And I am the aspirational automobile for the career hoodlum,' Mr Car said. 'You not only are criminals, you look like them too.'

'We just found some stuff,' Josie said unhappily. 'We found an abandoned, ownerless car, and there was some cash in the trunk.'

'One hundred and ninety million dollars. It makes me pucker.' Novik felt a little nauseous, a tic pulsed under his left eye. Two days of weird pastel

beauty from the f-LSD combined with anxiety of pursuit had taken him to a flawed and paranoid paradise he was only just beginning to rationalise. The tic was invisible, he'd looked for it in the mirror but it wasn't there. Novik didn't get off on things happening to his body he could feel but not see.

Homeland security, smart in their teal-green uniforms and mirror-lensed sunglasses, patrolled the traffic lines. Every now and then they rapped on a vehicle window and questioned the occupants. Sometimes they just chewed the fat and moved on, other times they ordered a redirection to the customs interrogation bays.

'They're going to open us up, I know it,' Novik said. 'I got a vibe.'

Sprawled on the back seat Benny opened one eye. 'No they won't.'

'How do you know?'

'They just won't. I know it.' Benny yawned and stretched. 'I got a vibe too.'

'Sure you have,' Novik hissed through his teeth. Benny might be a harmless fruitcake, but he was too obsessed with his millennial mission for practicality, let alone reality.

Uncomfortable with personal authority, distrustful of authority structures, Novik had the growing conviction Benny already thought of him in that very way. The idea was weird, spooky. The more he thought about it, the creepier Benny's current complacency seemed. Something was going on, something he didn't understand. Despite Mr Car's atmospheric controls, Novik's palms were clammy, his pulse raced. On a sudden impulse, he got out of the car.

Outside the air was humid and close. Sweat prickled Novik's collar almost immediately, even so, the heavy, warm breeze was more welcome than the chilled and claustrophobic climate inside the Cadillac.

Novik headed towards the bridge, past lines of dented, rust-scarred pickups and battered saloons, each filled with families of poor white and Hispanic economic emigrants, young education refugees, and agricultural nomads. A quarter mile from the border the sound of the Mexican crowd surged like a breaking wave, the air-horns of the backed-up trucks like foghorns of distressed ships.

Chest-high rushes and grass covered the banks of the shallow Rio Bravo. Closer beside the bridges, non-native plants had taken hold – ornamental lilies and daisy cultivars, watermelons and sapling orange and apple trees, all grown from discarded flowers and half-eaten fruits thrown from vehicles, a rich mulch for new growth. The tattered leaves of wild bananas and young date palms tossed in the new, wetter gulf-winds that blew steadily from the south and east.

Out in the lanes of creeping traffic, a cop worked his way towards Novik. Heavily built, with a middle-aged paunch and cropped silver hair, the cop slipped gracefully between the fenders and bull-bars of pickup trucks and mini-vans.

The one thing you never do when a cop sees you is turn around and walk away. Novik raised his hand, leaned on the rail, and waited.

‘Howdy, officer.’

‘Why did you leave your vehicle, sir? Have you broken down?’ The cop’s tone was authoritarian and brusque. A wireless mini-cam on the epaulettes of his right shoulder panned left and right.

‘A cramp in my leg,’ Novik noticed the cop’s hand resting lightly on the holster at his right hip. A sense of dread grew in his stomach, a feeling of predestined doom. ‘What’s happening down at the crossing? That big crowd, is there trouble?’

The cop’s name badge said ‘Miller S’, he gave Novik a gray-eyed flat stare. ‘Not that I’m aware, sir.’

Low dark shapes patrolled through the sword grass on the Mexican side. ‘What are those?’ Novik said.

‘First-gen Dawkins-dogs from Xalapatech.’ Officer Miller tucked his thumbs into his waistband, ‘Mexi-cops got them last year. Smart puppies, loyal as hell.’

‘We got those?’

Miller pulled a sour face. ‘We got the robo-canines. Congress supports home-grown tech.’

‘I hear they trip over kerbs.’

Miller stared into the middle distance and sighed, ‘That’s them.’

‘So it goes,’ Novik began to relax, Officer Miller seemed to be a reasonable man.

Miller looked Novik up and down. ‘Which is your vehicle, sir?’

Novik gestured vaguely back down the line. ‘The drophead.’

‘That new model Caddy? Sonnofabitch, where’s the logo? Let’s go take a look. I want to see the hub badges. Who’s the designer, Pedro Agenbite, Ben Broccoli?’

‘I’m not sure. Agenbite, I guess. Maybe Phuqthard.’

‘You’re not sure?’ Miller regarded him with a mixture of suspicion and pity. ‘Are you traveling under your own cognizance?’

‘I’m with friends.’

‘And that’s your car?’

‘Yes. Absolutely.’

‘Let’s go say hello.’ Miller indicated the way with his hand. ‘After you, sir.’

There was no choice, no other options. Novik began to walk. Ahead, behind, and to the sides, the drivers and passengers of the trucks and automobiles glanced at Novik and looked resolutely away.

‘Pick up the pace,’ Miller ordered.

As they drew level with the Cadillac’s hood, Benny leaned out the rear window, beaming amiably, ‘Excuse me, Officer Miller.’

‘Sit down and close the window, sir.’

Benny narrowed his eyes and passed his hand through the air, ‘This is not the car you are looking for.’

Novik wished Josie and himself far away. This was so messed up, they were so screwed. Prison felt so real he could taste the concrete. This was where he had brought Josie with his fine ideas. He had persuaded her, the realisation this was all his doing a dead, putrid weight in his gut.

The cop actually laughed, ‘Nice try. What’s your name?’

‘Benny the Spoke, sir. Pleased to meet you.’ Benny held out his hand. ‘You want my autograph?’

‘Should I know you?’

‘No, but one day you will. Everyone will.’

‘That’s the American Dream, son. Nevertheless, even if you were Benny the Superstar, I still require you to sit down and close your window.’

‘Just let me sign-’

Officer Miller’s hand dropped to his holster. ‘Right now.’

Benny withdrew, the window slid up.

Miller scanned the car with his head-cam. The lens zoomed in on the hubcaps, door-handle and fender details. Miller gave a grunt of satisfaction, ‘Nice. Agenbite for sure.’

‘You idiot’, Novik mouthed at Benny.

Miller paced around the car and spoke into his mike: ‘Office Miller, S, Border Patrol, Ciudad Acuna. Charcoal Cadillac drophead limousine. Three occupants, one self-defined female, two male. Speech patterns, extra-vehicular activity, and incongruous bonhomie suggest possible duplicitous intent.’ He fixed Novik in the eye, ‘Open the trunk, sir.’

‘Yes, I’ll just get-’

Before Novik could move, the trunk lid smoothly swung up on damped servos.

Novik numbly followed Miller to the rear of the car, a short walk through eternity to the waiting scaffold. As he did, the chaotic noise from the border surged louder than ever.

Miller halted, intently, he listened to the feed on his earphone. Novik worked moisture into his mouth and looked around. In the other vehicles

passengers and drivers stared intently at their phone screens.

‘Mr Car, what the hell are you doing?’ Novik seethed under his breath.

‘I am obliged to obey any reasonable request from a duly notarised officer of the law. Is that an issue?’

‘Yes, that is a f-‘

A sound like fire crackers burst from the crossing point.

Novik dropped to a half-crouch, he knew that noise. He’d heard it before, when Snarlow closed down the protests with the National Guard. He hadn’t believed it then, not at first. He didn’t want to believe it now. There was so very much of it.

White-faced, Miller drew his gun. ‘Get in your car and lock the doors,’ he ordered, then ran towards the bridge.

Novik didn’t want to go, yet the need to see, to bear witness, pulled him. Keeping low, he crept towards the border.

The firecracker sound burst out again, then settled to an intermittent spatter. Down at the crossing, truck horns blared, engines roared into life. Over it all came the howl of the Mexican crowd, a beast in pain.

Then Josie was in front of him, wild-eyed, pushing him back. ‘That’s gunfire,’ she yelled. ‘It’s all gone crazy. Come back to the car.’

All around them was madness as cars tried to turn out of the queue. Fenders locked, horns blared, drivers cursed, children grizzled in fear.

Josie dragged Novik back to the Cadillac and slammed the door shut, ‘Get us out of here.’

The line of traffic was bumper to bumper. Novik thumped the steering wheel, ‘There’s no room to turn.’

‘Four-wheel steering engaged,’ Mr Car said.

Novik turned the wheel on full lock, dabbed the gas, and the Cadillac slid sideways onto the dirt beside the road.

Novik gunned the engine, the wheel still hard over, and the big car slewed round in a fast turn. They sped away from Mexico, against the traffic, along the roadside, tyres spewing plumes of dust.

Novik felt cold, ‘What the hell is happening?’

Benny looked back through the rear window, ‘The beginning.’

‘That was gunfire,’ Josie said flatly. ‘I saw bodies on the ground.’

‘I didn’t see anything,’ Novik said.

‘I am equipped with a surveillance drone,’ Mr Car offered.

‘Deploy it,’ Josie said.

A metallic ‘plang’ came from the roof, a flat black oval whirred up into the sky.

‘When can we see?’ Novik said.

‘Gaining altitude. Assuming station. Streaming data,’ Mr Car said. ‘Ready for display on the total-HUD.’

‘What’s that?’ Benny said.

A soft chime sounded, an incongruously bright west-coast voice began to gabble:

‘T-HUD is a new development in information display management featuring seamless autopilot engage, wraparound screenlets with opaque, translucent and analogue overlay modes. T-HUD is an optional extra from THUD Avionics, a tertiary subsidiary of Bharti Airtel, a member of the CraneCorp Buisplex.’

‘What the hell?’ Novik said.

‘My apologies,’ Mr Car’s normal voice resumed. ‘I was momentarily pre-empted by a commercial override.’

Up ahead, a coach began to turn, struck a flat-bed truck and shunted it across the speeding Cadillac’s path.

‘Hold on,’ Novik pulled the Cadillac further out into the scrub. Out of nowhere a dry gulch appeared, four feet deep, and twice as wide. Novik braked hard, the Cadillac began to slide, there was not enough room to stop. ‘Holy crap, hang on,’ Novik cried.

‘Intervention,’ Mr Car said. The steering wheel went slack in Novik’s hands, seat belts snatched everyone tight against the seats as massive acceleration pushed them deep into the upholstery.

For an instant it was quiet. Novik and Josie watched the loose items on the dash float in the air.

Then they were back on hard dirt, the Cadillac jounced, fishtailed madly, and resumed its high-speed course. Josie screamed, Novik swore, Benny whopped and hollered.

Gasping with adrenalin, Novik impotently gripped the sloppy steering wheel.

‘You have the con,’ Mr Car said.

Responsive weight returned to the wheel. Novik eased off on the accelerator, swung across the road, through a gap in the median strip, and onto the correct side of the road.

‘Holy everything that’s Holy, that was fun,’ Benny exclaimed. ‘You sure give good tech, Mr. Car.’

‘Standard GOOJ feature, sir. Other options, such as BriefFlight are not installed. May I also say that totalHUD is upgradeable from demonstration to perma-feature via a simple debit transaction.’

Josie’s mouth hung open, ‘Mr Car, did you say you can fly?’

‘No, ma’am, but I could.’

'I can see why naughty people like you.'  
'Thank you so much.'



*Eugene, Oregon: Urban Flash Farmers caused chaos overnight when a tuned myco crop fruited all down Franklin Boulevard.*

*Triggered by recent rain, two-meter diameter Portobello mushrooms pushed through concrete and tarmac rendering the road impassable. Rising as high as first floor windows, the giant, edible mushrooms formed a surreal vista.*

*'We think they're seeding the streets using doctored gum,' Jefferson Ives, deputy Sheriff stated. 'Kids chew the gum, spit it on the sidewalk and the spores go underground.'*

*DNA analysis is expected to confirm the flash farm was the work of the Natural Forces Combine. The notorious bio-activists have already claimed responsibility for this crop.*

*'Tastes like chicken,' local resident D'Wayne Cheeseman observed.*

*Syndicated feed,  
KUWjones.org*



Gould's phone rang. The screen showed Jimmy Fee's number but there was no picture. The Old-fashioned Boys had come down from Birmingham when Gould had set up in New Orleans. He liked them, they knew how things worked, expected shit for shit and dealt it straight back. Trusted soldiers, the kind that endured.

'James, how's it hanging?' Gould spoke into the phone.

There was a hesitation, then: 'Id's, ah, Blag, sir.'

'Blag?'

'Bladk,' the voice said very carefully, then tried again. 'This is Black.'

Now he knew who it was, Gould found he could understand him.

'What's wrong with your voice?'

'There was a dispute. It got physical.'

Gould's voice grew flat with menace. 'Tell me.'

'Mother's not going to make the show.'

Gould took a long slow breath. 'Not at all?'

'No sir.'

'Why not?'

'She's gone off with some new friends.'

'Is Jimmy with them?'

Another hesitation. 'No, sir.'

'Let me talk to him.'

'He's, ah, late.'

'Understood. Listen carefully, Mr. Black. Mother is more important to me than anyone. I want you to catch up with her and make sure she's safe. Find out who is looking after her and thank them properly.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'm sending you Manalito.'

'I don't-'

'Don't what, Mr. Black?'

‘We’re still the Old-fashioned Boys, Mr. Gould.’

‘And you still work for me.’

‘We’ve never-’

‘So does Manalito.’

Coldly furious, Gould ended the call. If some little bit-piece player had been in the room he’d have happily killed them just for stress relief.

A few girls were on the couches, bored and watchful. The more observant looked nervous.

‘Get them out of here, Manalito,’ Gould ordered. ‘And pack for Stateside.’

The girls filed out, trying not to look at Gould. The long-haired oriental was at the back, wearing an open-fronted bolero top, lilac silk micro skirt and platform sandals. Of them all only she dared give Gould a lingering glance.

So be it.

‘Not you,’ Gould told her.

At the door, Manalito looked back. Gould gave a curt shake of his head and the big Mexican ducked out the room and closed the door. Gould knew the girl had had caught the exchange. He turned to the window and looked out across dead New Orleans, a drowned and rotten corpse. Out in the gulf Permanent Larry held steady, its own energies pitched against the prevailing winds.

Why was nothing ever easy? The plan had been simple enough: take the cash to Vegas and lose it in Gordano’s Casinos, a laundry operation that had worked well for years. What had gone wrong?

Gould realised the girl was saying something.

‘You want a back rub, Mr. Gould? You look real tense.’

Gould fought down the urge to tell her to shut up and mind her own damned business. She was right, he was wound tight, and it was he who had told her to stay.

‘You any good at it?’ he said.

‘I’m a trained masseuse. You want to lie on the couch?’

‘No. Do it here.’ Gould reversed one of the upright chairs and sat down.

There was strength in her hands and as she worked on his shoulders he started to relax. She was good at this, he acknowledged. He hadn’t known that.

Knowledge was everything. That’s what had gone wrong with the money. Something had happened, something he hadn’t known about had come along and screwed with his plans. For fifty miles along the foreshore, beyond the levees inland, he had people, electronic eyes, movement sensors. All sent back information to his analysts, nothing happened on the coast

that he didn't know about. It was Gould's own data cloud, a sensory web he took considerable effort to make sure remained private. Each year it reached a little further as he seeded buildings and landscapes with solar-powered micro-sensors, tac/strat bugs and mobile away teams. And each day, sometimes each hour, those teams, and his home techs, tracked down and ripped out soft hacks, data aggregators and transmission devices planted by military data sappers and persons unknown. Gould let the army patrols alone. Everyone else was open season.

And now the Old-fashioned Boys had screwed it up. Gould clenched his fists. It was a good job Jimmy Fee was dead, otherwise he'd rip his lungs out.

'You're tensing up again, Mr Gould. Am I doing something wrong?' the girl said.

Something snapped in Gould, he surged to his feet. 'What is it with all the losers in the world that none of them can do anything right?'

She didn't even falter. She just stood and did her best to look pretty and happy and his. 'You really want me to answer that?'

'No, you stupid bitch, I want you to shut the-' Gould slammed his fist into his palm, 'Forget that. This is absolutely not your fault.' He bared his teeth, a forced smile. 'I trusted some people, they let me down.' He reached out into the air, his fingers like claws. 'I just wish I could-'

She slipped out of her bolero, her waist length hair falling over her shoulders to cover her breasts. Then she took his hands and put them round her own throat.

'Like this?'

That annoyed him. He'd apologised and in return she tried to play him. Spinning her round he locked his elbow round her neck, his other hand against her bare stomach.

'What's under here?' Gould pulled at the material of her short skirt.

She looked back at him, lips parted. 'Just me.'

Gould used his blank voice again, the one he'd used on the phone with Black. 'You like I get two more guys in here, and we make you airtight?'

Just a flicker then. The smile never faltered but those dark eyes betrayed her.

'Sure, Mr Gould.' She became bright and brittle. She gyrated her bottom against his groin, an artificial, contrived movement. 'Anything you want,' she breathed. 'Anything at all.'

Content with her reaction, Gould pushed down on her shoulders. 'Another time. Right now, this is what I want.' She sank to her knees and turned to face him.

She was good at that too. Exquisite. He told her.

Life could be good. It would be good again.

Afterwards she tried another play. He was relaxed now, and didn't mind.

'You know what I think you should do, Mr. Gould?'

He sighed with mock exasperation. 'Whatever it is, I know you're going to tell me.'

'Even if your people are good at what they do they are not much use if you don't keep them in awe.'

'Agreed.' Idly Gould parted the long black hair hanging across her chest. Her nipples were hard, the areolas of her small breasts swollen and shiny. He took one between his finger and thumb.

'In your position I think you should do more killing.'

Startled, Gould laughed out loud. She darted her head forwards and kissed his mouth. A faint taste of himself lingered on her lips. He kissed her back, taking his time.

'What's your name, girl?'

'Ayesha, Mr. Gould.'

'Call me Mitchell.'

*Palfinger Crane – just how rich is rich?*

*The short answer is, like you can't imagine. He's that rich.*

*Pretend you earn a million dollars a year. That's not too hard, lots of people do that. For Crane, it's a drop in the ocean. Make it a BILLION dollars a year. You save every cent, after a thousand years you're not even close.*

*There are three things to remember about Palfinger Crane: he's the richest person alive; he's richest person there has ever been; and he's the richest there ever could be (probably).*

*So how rich is that? Nobody knows. Crane doesn't even know. It's a lot. What we do know is that last year 67.819% of the GDP of the entire planet flowed through, or was generated by, that massively interlocked and ever-expanding cascade of corporations called the CraneCorp BuisPlex. The Global MegaCorp arrived years ago and we didn't notice. One man owns the planet, lucky for all of us he seems to be a nice guy.*

*One Man and his Wallet – Special Feature,  
BFBM magazine*



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The land of the Totally Rich is another world. You may hear the horns blowing, you may run as hard as you can, but you will neither meet the King nor marry his daughter.

You can't take anyone there, it's a state of mind and a point of view, far more a frame of reference than a piece of dirt.

The people you knew, the kind who used to be your friends before you became TR, they can walk by your side and see what you see. They can meet the same people and eat the same food, but unless they are Totally Rich like you, they are simply outsiders looking in. There's so little overlap it gets embarrassing. The best thing for you both is to leave them behind.

Life as a Venn diagram.

It's all about you.

It's a land where nothing happens unless you want it to. You've got everything, including things you didn't even know you had, because someone you employ has anticipated your desires. The car, or the person, or the country house is already yours: gravel raked, stones whitewashed, staff in a line on a lawn where every blade of grass is the right height. You own the land and the land and its inhabitants are watching you. They make sure everything is just so, that the crisp things are crisp, the smooth are smooth, and all the other things are hot, or lemony, or naked enough so you don't have to worry about trivial things like that ever again.

So you can be free.

Weather can't reach you here. Life, on the other hand...

Palfinger Crane stood at the top of a wide fan of marble and limestone steps and watched his pretty, dark-haired daughter cross the palm fringed lawn. He wore cream linen slacks, open-toed sandals and a pale blue Nehru jacket. His frame was slender, his fair hair and beard close cropped. He was as worried as any father could be.

Despite her 1,750 lb bulk Ellen Hutzenreiter-Crane moved easily across the daisy-free grass. She walked with the strange, graceful daintiness of the super-obese, a hippopotamus en-pointe on her load-spreaders, every movement assisted by the steel and carbon-fibre exoframe that supported her body and balanced her metabolism. The discreet pistons, servos and fuel cells did most of the work for her youthful, and immensely corpulent, body.

The Caribbean breeze blew mild and fresh, the sea below the cliffs a vivid azure. At the top of the steps a large, domed conservatory held cycads, tree-ferns, dendrons, horsetails, lycopodium and the other ancient plants Crane collected.

Today he was accompanied by three remarkable doctors, all dressed in chinos and colourful short-sleeved shirts. Sam Yeo, aged 35, was American, short and dumpy, his skin baby-smooth - a renowned neuronc psychosurgeon and parasitologist. Beside him was Chandra Smith, tall, with steel grey hair, and more handsome in his late middle age than in his youth. He was a genetic teratologist, morphic developmentalist, and the finest transplant surgeon in the world. The third person, dark, sleek and brilliant, was Olivia Karpozy-McNichols, hormone nutritionalist, Chi-balancer, and renal, lymphatic and blood-plasma nexialist.

It was irrelevant that they were the best money could buy, because they worked for free. Palfinger Crane funded the universities, hospitals and research institutions where they worked. He had come to know them personally, they liked him and they liked his daughter. They felt honoured to be his friends. Crane felt honoured too, he was the only one without a Nobel prize.

Palfinger Crane, the world's first and only trillionaire, the only man ever to be declared Totally Rich had made his first fortune by giving away company products for free. He made his second by buying those companies. He knew there were still some things money couldn't buy, and it seemed that a normal-sized daughter was one of them.

Crane watched Ellen leave two-inch deep footprints in the perfect lawn. 'You're out of ideas,' he said.

Beside him, the three doctors made awkward movements, winces, grimaces, shrugs and silent gestures.

'Yes, we are,' they confessed.

'Suppositions? Intuition?'

'Not really,' said Chandra Smith.

'Wild guesses?'

'Palfinger, we've been there,' Olivia said.

Crane folded and unfolded his hands. Olivia was right, they really had

tried absolutely everything. Hormones, diet, exercise, surgery, analysis, infections, parasites, acupuncture, cancers, mutations, voodoo, dowsing, prayer, meditation, drugs, minerals, transfusions, infusions, and every scan, analysis, assay and biometric measurement it was possible to take. Everything. They had tried it all and then they'd done it all over again.

Hell, they had even tried homeopathy.

None of it made the slightest difference. Ever since Crane's billions had turned to trillions Ellen had put on weight relentlessly. It felt so very unfair.

Ellen reached the base of the steps and trotted up the flight, assisted by the near-silent exoframe, surgically attached to, and through, her body.

The edge of one step crumbled under her weight. It would be repaired overnight just as the gardeners would re-lay the lawn. In this land all problems were solved, all issues turned to opportunity.

All but one.

'Hi, Daddy. Hello, Sam, Chandra. Hi, Olivia.' Ellen's dimpled cheeks shone, her eyes were surrounded by pads of fat. On the shoulder of her frame a red light pulsed, the soft roar of fans wafting cool air through her clothes.

Palfinger Crane loved his daughter. He loved her far more than her estranged mother, Bianca, currently eking out the last millions of this year's allowance to save the coral atolls of Micronesia.

Crane had a lot more to give than anyone who had ever lived, more than corporations, more than nations. He'd already given a great deal and, for Ellen, was willing to give much more.

On days like these it seemed there was little point.

Ellen took in the sombre expressions of her father and his guests. 'Shall we go in?'

Crane led the way into the conservatory, where the central plaza had been reconfigured for an informal conference. Crane sat in a wicker armchair, the legs of Ellen's exoframe locked into an optimal resting position. The doctors stood beside a tall screen softly lit from within by pastel light.

Ellen was intelligent and educated. She was inherently cheerful, and had been brought up to be forthright and assertive without being demanding. She preferred to receive bad news without prevarication.

'You don't know what to do,' she told the doctors.

'Ellen,' Palfinger said, 'something new is bound to turn up. Just give it-'

'No, you're right,' said Chandra. 'We don't know what to do.'

'What's going to happen to me?' Ellen said.

Olivia began pressing buttons on a keypad. 'We've put together a presentation. Statistical-spread prognoses, time-adjusted whole-body trend

analysis. Meta studies-

'Just tell me the results,' Ellen said.

Olivia squared her shoulders. 'We think...' She started again, 'I think we can maintain a steady state, health-wise, for some time, despite the continuous weight gain.'

'How long? Exactly?'

Olivia's smile flickered and died. 'A good time, Ellen. A long time.'

Sam Yeo raised his hand. 'I believe aquastatic therapy still has something to offer.'

'Which one was that?' Ellen asked.

'It's one of the hydro-suspension treatments. It relieves strain on the heart, skeletal and circulatory symptoms.' Sam lifted an invisible object with his hands. 'We'll float you-'

Ellen shook her head. 'I'm not a whale, Sam. I might look like one but I'm not going to end my days in a fish tank.'

Chandra Smith gave a dry cough. 'You've got linear weight-gain, nearly a kilo a week.'

'I know what that means.'

'We can mediate metabolic distortion, manage the diabetes.' Chandra coughed again. 'There are still some avenues we haven't explored. They're radical, very radical, but they may help. They must. Surgical bulk mass reduction. It will keep you mobile. We'll give you fully cybernetic limbs, bio-silicon nerve interfaces. With just your torso-'

'Stop, please,' Ellen begged, her voice pitifully small.

Sweat plastered Chandra's hair to his scalp. He coughed again and again. Olivia handed him a glass of water.

'This weight gain, Ellen, we don't understand it, we can't stop it,' Olivia said. 'In the end it's your heart. It's already hyper-enlarged, even with all the assists it's getting exhausted.'

'So tell me.'

'Your suit needs an upgrade.' Chandra wiped his face with a paper towel. 'Six months. A year at the outside.'

'And then I'll die?' Ellen said.

Palfinger Crane steadfastly looked up through the roof of the conservatory. 'Yes,' Sam Yeo said. 'Then you'll die.'

'I see.'

'We'll upgrade the suit.'

'Thank you, Sam.'

*Federal sources described today's incident at the Ciudad Acuna border crossing as a premeditated armed invasion by a large group of CCRs.*

*A spokesperson for UNHCR described this as 'Frankly incredible. Climate Change Refugees simply want a place to live.'*

*'Talk to the gun,' commented the tearful widow of Stephen Miller, one of seven US officers killed in this latest development of the on-going environmental and political crisis caused by Hurricane 'Permanent' Larry,*

*US troops continue to occupy the Mexican side of the crossing. 'We'll stay until we go,' President Snarlow has stated. 'Mexico is colluding with the CCRs to destabilise our southern border. Enough is enough.'*

*Formed nine years ago, Permanent Larry is the world's first, and so far only, type 7 hurricane.*

*KUWjones.org*



'Mr Wilson.' It was a statement.

Jericho Wilson lay on his mattress on the floor and looked up at the young, white, female intruder.

Her body language kept him there, her aura of competence and disdain. Slim, muscular and poised, hair short above her high forehead, he knew she would take him apart before he moved. Wilson, unshaven and hung over, naked under dishevelled sheets, felt highly vulnerable. A few years back it would have been a different story. Then again, a few years back he wouldn't have been alone and he wouldn't have been living like this.

She was trained, this one. Trained and drained. Whatever she used to be, now she was the type for whom pain and disablement were tools of the trade.

A young black man stood in the open doorway behind her. He was lightly built, a wisp of beard and moustache, round, wire-frame glasses. 'Where's your gun, Mr. Wilson?'

'He doesn't use firearms,' the woman said before Wilson could answer.

'I know. I meant his neural mop.'

The woman prodded the mattress with her shoe. 'Tell him. And get up, coffee's on.'

Wilson knew they wouldn't leave him alone to dress so he didn't bother asking. He stood up and pulled on yesterday's jockeys and socks while they watched, the woman by the window, the man at the door. He took a perverse pleasure in taking his time, letting them get a good look at his paunch and heavy thighs.

Out in the main room coffee was indeed on. Wilson tried to be polite. 'You want a cup?'

They ignored him. The man still leaned on the door frame, the woman paced the room. Both looked at the heap of unwashed laundry in one corner, the cheap desk and filing trays in another, three night's unwashed plates in

the sink. Wilson had lived here for two years but the place looked like he was in transit. Furniture, curtains, white goods, all were cheap, with bold colourful logos. The desk held some photos - Mandy's portrait with her hair all done; holiday snapshots of her and Wilson on beaches, at bars and scenic views; Mandy in uniform before they went plainclothes. The woman picked that last one up.

'Don't tell me, you're therapists,' Wilson said.

She didn't look up. 'A man unhappy with solitude should choose better company.'

'So what do I call you?' Wilson said.

'Johnson,' the black man said.

It figured.

'Masters.' The woman looked at him, daring him to laugh, to say something. It wasn't humour, they were just checking to see what kind of an asshole he was.

'I bet you like your Martinis dry,' Wilson said.

Master looked down at the photo then back at Wilson. For a moment she looked puzzled, as if she couldn't remember the connection.

Wilson helped her out. 'I quit. I burned out.'

'Yeah, we know,' Johnson said.

Masters put down the picture. 'That's why we're here.'

So they weren't going to beat him up. Whoever they were, whatever they wanted, Wilson just wanted them to go away. 'I've already got a job.'

'We've got a better one,' Johnson said.

'I don't work for you.'

'You will if we want you to.'

This was too good. Wilson chuckled as he unscrewed the cap on the cheap blended malt and poured some into his coffee.

'I get it. There's this case of supreme national importance that requires total deniability. A case only a middle-aged loner, a retired, widowed, hard drinking fuckup of a former Federal Agent can solve. A man who works as a part-time bondsman to service the mortgage on his bar bill.'

The faintest look of amusement crossed Master's face. 'Not really. Anyone could do this, we just thought you'd like to.'

Wilson stirred cream into his coffee. 'Like I said, I got a job.'

Johnson grinned, 'Chasing a parole bust. Yes, we know.'

'Your man Novik is on the edge of our gig. We don't want him, or you, tripping us up.' Masters took the coffee mug from Wilson's hand and poured it down the sink. 'Mitchell Gould has an Away Team chasing loose change. We want to render them down and you're motivated. Help us out and you

might get a chance for a crack at Gould himself.'

Mitchell Gould. It wasn't anything near what Wilson expected.

That long-ago night in Birmingham, under the sodium lights. Wilson had Gould in his sights and his finger on the trigger. When he pulled it, Mandy was there, right between them. In that instant the meaningful part of his life was over.

Wilson needed to sit down, to lean on something. Blindly, his hand knocked against the kitchenette worktop and he let it take his weight.

'I'm in,' he managed. 'I don't care about the deal, but tell me anyway.'

'No special deals,' Johnson said, and pulled a flat white electronic pad from his inside breast pocket. 'Do the job and get paid. You're reinstated to resignation rank for the duration, without authority and for purposes of remuneration only.' He held the pad out at arm's length. 'Agent Johnson affirming recruitment of Jericho Wilson to perform any and all duties as and when required under executive order Glass Onion.'

Holding the pad out to Wilson, Johnson said, 'Jericho Wilson, do you swear to perform your duties as an irregular agent?'

This is meaningless, Wilson thought. I don't play ball I disappear. 'I do so swear, so help me.'

'Eye scan.' Johnson held up the pad and a red light briefly dazzled Wilson.

'Thumb print.'

Wilson pressed his hand to the pad.

Johnson snapped the pad away into his jacket. 'OK, you're in. Welcome back, agent.'

Wilson poured himself another coffee. This time he omitted the booze. 'What's going on?'

'Gould's men lost a cash box headed for laundry in the Vegas casinos. It seems Novik lifted the car, spree-shopped an entire mall, bounced off the Mexican border and is now headed back north. Gould is so pissed he's sent his top man out of the southern littoral. We want that man.'

'How do you know where the package is?'

'The car's smart, so is some of the money. They've been talking.'

'I'm going to need more than that if I'm out there on my own.'

'Dream on, Rambo,' Masters said. 'You've got me.'

After all the bullshit Wilson couldn't help himself. 'Sugar, that's the best offer I've had this week.'

She went up on the balls of her feet, 'Do not ever try and-'

'Come on to you?'

Johnson slapped his thigh, 'It's good to see a new team bond.'

Masters went to fetch her bag from their car. After a moment Johnson

followed her.

‘You OK with him?’ he said.

‘I’m good. Any issues I’ll cut him loose and he’s just another deluded loser gone rogue.’

‘We don’t need any issues.’

Masters swung the holdall onto her shoulder, one foot on the kerb. ‘No insurmountable opportunities?’

‘Something like that. Don’t underestimate Wilson. He brought Meineck in from the levees. He’s still a player.’

‘He’s an old man who’s scared to use a gun,’ Masters said. ‘Somewhere inside, there’s a death wish.’

Johnson frowned, ‘Cop suicide? It’s just guns. Wilson still hurts people good.’

‘That’s the anger.’

Johnson looked back at Wilson’s shabby little tract house. ‘What do you think it’s like, to shoot your own wife in the back of the head?’

‘By accident,’ Masters said.

‘Yeah, sure. That’s what I meant. By accident.’