

I LOVE U

Version 1:
Adam and Eve for the Future
or No Future at All

a novel by

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Most everything Luci said ended in a question. “Human thinking is messy and inferential? Every mistake is a contribution to the evolution or extinction of the species—depending?”

Wiqi pondered the meaning of these words, then said, “So if you can do good, you have to have the capacity to do bad. People are both good and evil, which means their creator must also be good and evil.”

“I think that’s what the old church poobahs called heresy thinking?” Luci said.

“Heresy? The people who make the chocolate bars?”

“Not quite. That’s Hershey.”

“Maybe if the churches made chocolate bars, and the chocolate bar company made religious laws, people would get along better.”

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1 * The Device

The Fall from the Sky

The DeVice lay naked on a gurney, opened its black-eyed pea-colored eyes, analyzed the ravaged, craggy face of its creator, then spoke its first words, “I love u.”

Dr. Taliman jumped back, startled. Quite a sight to see a sixty-year-old hunchback man jump.

“Did you hear that, Larry?” Dr. Taliman turned to his colleague, Professor Lawrence Dolor. Like the doctor, he wore a medical green jump suit. Unlike the doctor he had hair (never mind that it was dyed black), his back was straight, and he sported a waxed Salvador Dali style mustache. Some of his students insisted that he was Salvador Dali.

“Totally unexpected, the result no doubt of allowing it free will,” Dolor said. “We should abort the boot-up.”

“No, we’ve worked too hard, risked too much—let’s see how it performs.”

“I will defer to the genius of Dr. Mordecai Taliman,” Professor Dolor said with just a hint of an obsequious bow, a constant source of annoyance to the good doctor.

It’s difficult to tell from the archives whether Dolor was being sarcastic or sincere. As your story teller I have plenty of information to work with—videos, reports by interns, recorded conversations and of course the complete backups of the databases of the DeVices themselves; even so, nuances are lacking, and in some cases I’ve had to fill in using infer-

ential logic and my own intuition and experience. Since Dolor kept notes only on the experiments and not on his own feelings and beliefs, the nature of his character remains elusive. In contrast to Dolor, Taliman wrote in his journal every day and his commentary was extensive and personal. I ask my readers, you on the Celestial Exploration Committee, to draw your own conclusions from the behavior of the principals in these archives and from your trust (or lack of trust) in me, your author, your all-too-human archivist.

Dr. Taliman was both excited and—surprising himself—a little sad. He was excited by the momentous occasion, sad that he and Dolor were the only humans to witness this great birthing. In fact he felt as if he were the only human. Dolor did not seem human, but more like a DeVice than the DeVices, who of course Dr. Taliman had programmed to be humanlike.

At the beginning of the project, Dr. Taliman employed technicians, interns, and clerks, but when it appeared that the Transfer would actually work, he fired or banished them to the production plant in the old main library next door. He allowed only Dolor to remain at his side. It was not that he liked or even trusted Dolor, but he needed him. Dolor had a way of leading Dr. Taliman to the insights that had made Taliman the acknowledged DeVice genius of the planet.

During the ten minutes of boot-up, the DeVice did not utter another sound. Dr. Taliman knew what the DeVice was feeling: waking up groggy after a long, troubled sleep. Long indeed, five years.

The two men and the DeVice were in a plastic cubical built inside what had once been a branch library of Robsann Hall at OIT (Occom Institute of Technology). In recent years the financially troubled institution had evicted the English Department from Robsann Hall and leased it to Eron Isle DeVices. The company also leased the former main library, outmoded because OIT no longer has a use for paper books.

The rooms in Robsann Hall represented various periods of Western

culture. Dr. Taliman would say that Robsann Hall had no identity of its own, but rather functioned as a virtual reality display of the old regimes. Its paneled walls of aged and mellowed oak, pine, maple, and butternut were kept waxed by a stellar custodial crew. The good doctor would tell you that he loved art, architecture and literature, so he had made few changes to Robsann Hall, except in the basement, which served as his laboratory. Members of the Eron Isle board of directors were surprised, and perhaps a little suspicious, to find that Dr. Taliman had left the book shelves intact. He assured them that while he loved the idea and the smell of old books, he didn't have time actually to read them.

Upstairs, almost directly above the DeVice, in the Shakespeare Room lay the desiccated frame of Willard Durocher in a coma surrounded by volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary and scholarly works that tried to explain the meaning behind the writings of William Shakespeare. Dr. Taliman had named his company, Eron Isle DeVices, a backwards spelling of Hamlet's home castle. The Shakespeare Room was dominated by a fireplace and a wood carving of the Shakespeare coat of arms above the mantle. Birch logs burned in the hearth. With so many standing dead trees in the dying forests of North America, firewood in the mountains of New England was cheap and plentiful—for the moment.

Willard required round-the-clock care. Dr. Taliman had solved that problem by designing his first self-aware DeVice as a nurse for the boy. Luci Sanz was on duty 24 hours a day; she never left Willard's side. Presently, she was watching as Willard's eyes opened, and he blinked. At the same moment the DeVice in the cubical below had opened its black eyes and blinked. At the sound of the DeVice's voice, Dr. Taliman had been excited and happy, but it was difficult for him to display happiness, so his cheerful smile looked phony.

"Good morning," he addressed the DeVice, "do you know who you are?"

“Of course, I’m Wiqi,” the DeVice said, sitting up, rubbing a five-year sleep out of its eyes.

“How do you spell that?” Dr. Taliman asked, while Professor Dolor scribbled on his tablet.

“That, t-h-a-t,” said the DeVice.

“No, not that that. How do you spell your name?”

“Urine aim—u-r-i-n-e-a-i-m,” the DeVice said, the voice conveying both pride and confusion.

With a very worried expression on his face, Dr. Taliman looked at Professor Dolor. “Is it a damaged hearing circuit?”

Dolor swiped the tablet, and after a brief pause said, “The hearing is fine.”

“Oh-oh,” said Dr. Taliman, then turned to the Device and asked, “Do you spell your first name like sticky?”

“Sticky—s-t-i-q-i, rhymes with my name, W-i-q-i. My mom started calling me Wiqi because I look everything up in Wikipedia. But I don’t like the k in Wikipedia. I love q.”

“Ah, shoot, it’s got a software glitch,” said Taliman. He turned to Dolor for advice, an automatic response that he was hardly aware of.

“Remember,” Dolor said. “He may have the body of a teenager, and he may have a great deal of knowledge programmed in, but emotionally and in his memory centers Wiqi is only ten years old.”

“I understand that,” Dr. Taliman said. “What I hadn’t banked on was that Wiqi would inherit, as it were, Willard’s brain dysfunction.”

“Every human being has some form of brain dysfunction. Willard’s are amusing but minor,” Dolor said in his dry, superior way.

In Wiqi’s expression of wonder and fright, Dr. Taliman saw his own tormented youth growing up among parents who were adjunct professors—nomadic, untenured and underpaid. “Tell us your full name,” he said, attempting to speak in a soothing way, though it came out a growl.

“Willard Bountiful Durocher.” When Wiqi spoke his name he came

fully awake. “Hey, where am I? Are you my new therapist?”

“Sort of,” said Dr. Taliman. “You are in, let us call it a recovery room. It’s a plastic cubical in Robsann Hall on the OIT campus. I am Doctor Mordecai Taliman, and this is my colleague, Professor Lawrence Dolor. Stop and think, Wiqi. What’s the last thing you remember before waking up?”

Wiqi moaned and buried his face in his hands.

“You’re upset, that’s normal,” said Dr. Taliman. “Wiqi, it’s very important that you tell me about the last minutes before you blacked out. We want to check the authenticity of your memory.”

Dolor scribbled on the tablet, his handwriting translated into Courier font, because he favored mono fonts over styled fonts.

Wiqi shook his head violently in an attempt to dismiss an unpleasant memory.

“The first thing you said when you woke was ‘I love you,’” Dr. Taliman said. “Who did you love?”

“Excuse me, Doctor,” interrupted Professor Dolor, “according to the data he didn’t say, I love you.’ He said, ‘I love u.’”

“What a revolting development this is,” Dr. Taliman said.

Wiqi calmed down enough to tell the story. Dr. Taliman listened as Wiqi mumbled out his tale with frequent errors in diction. Meanwhile, Professor Dolor adjusted his tablet to tap into the radio waves emitted by the DeVice, and he was able to see the drama unfold on the screen like a movie from Willard’s memory.

Willard, a slender delicate boy of ten years with his mother’s wild spiky hair and dark eyes, stands between his parents in the basket of a hot air balloon above the no longer Green Mountains of Vermont. He’s very curious, this boy, but a little frightened to be so high up. He holds each of his parents’ hands while he gazes over the side.

His dark-eye mother is petite with a calming, hypnotic voice. By contrast his father, Royal Durocher, is brash, excitable, and daring, “a cruel

man reformed by the love of a good woman,” is how he once described himself to me, your author and Royal’s half-brother. With the thumbs of their free hands the mom and dad are texting notes. They’re studying the dying forest of Northeast America. They’ve rented the hot air balloon to see from above the extent of the damage from the mysterious blight that is attacking trees all over the world.

“See,” says the mom to Willard, “it started with the maples and birches. If they’re dying off you’d expect other species to move in and take their place, which is nature’s way. It didn’t happen. Now the fruit trees, oaks, and most of the conifers are dying, too. Only the pines are hanging on, and they’re showing signs of distress.”

“Yo,” says the Dad.

The wind is taking the little family in the direction of Old Homestead Farm, where Wiqi’s Mom had grown up. Wiqi’s nickname for his grandparents flashed on Professor Dolor’s writing tablet, Grandma and Grandpa Hippie.

Professor Dolor could only see the video of the memory in Wiqi’s mind, so he missed the sudden gathering of the storm, the freaky wind, because Wiqi had no memory of the storm until it hit.

The basket lurches, tips, the envelope of the hot air balloon collapses for a moment, rips, catches fire from the propane heater. The little family spills out of the basket. They fall together holding hands.

The picture that Wiqi transmitted to Professor Dolor’s tablet disintegrated, and now he was listening to Wiqi tell the story to Dr. Taliman while the printout of the DeVice’s words scrolled at the bottom of the display.

“I love yew.’ That was the voice of my mother. ‘I love hue.’ That was the voice of my father. The fierce wind tore my hands from my parents’. I wasn’t afraid of dying. I was afraid of being alone.”

“Mercy, I may have accidentally programmed my own loneliness into Wiqi,” said Dr. Taliman.

“Not necessarily,” said Professor Dolor. “Maybe Willard Durocher really did experience separation anxiety, which Wiqui made his own.”

“Good point,” said Dr. Taliman. He hated it when Dolor was right, which was all too often. “Continue, Wiqui.”

“I spread my arms and flapped them. I wanted to fly.” The transmission from Wiqui to Professor’s tablet returned.

Willard’s parents, below him, fall hand in hand. The wind turns Willard around, and Professor Dolor could no longer see the parents, but he had a nice view of the hot air balloon above, on fire and falling in spectacular twists, like the last light of a star as its being sucked into a black hole.

Transmission continued from Wiqui to Professor’s Dolor’s tablet, but the images were no more than the blurs Willard experienced as he was falling.

“The smoke made an ‘s,’” Wiqui said, “and I was thinking that the balloon was trying to spell a word beginning with ‘s’ and that the clouds were full of typographical eros.”

“Do you mean typographical errors?” asked Professor Dolor.

“Yes, no, yes, no—I don’t no, I don’t know. Why isn’t k-n-o-w pronounced k-now?” Wiqui said.

Dr. Taliman frowned with worry. Was Wiqui remembering what Willard remembered? Was he damaging Willard’s memories with random information? Or just repeating mistakes Willard would have made?

Wiqui suddenly realized he was naked, and he grabbed a blanket and covered himself. A moment later a disturbing thought surfaced in his brand new mind. “My parents—where are my parents?”

“Your mom is probably in heaven, if there is one,” Dr. Taliman rolled his eyes. “I don’t know about your dad, given his checkered past. Wiqui, your parents were both killed. If it’s any consolation they were found holding hands, which could not be pried apart so they were buried together in the same casket.”

Wiqi's dark eyes blinked. He could see a spider on the ceiling.

"How come I lived? How could I have survived?"

"You fell into a pine tree. The branches and foliage broke your fall. They also broke your body. You were unconscious and barely alive when the searchers found you."

Wiqi held out his hands in front of him. "This is not me. This is the body of a big boy."

"That's right, Wiqi. We put you in a deep coma. That was five years ago. It took that long to remake you. You now have the body of a healthy teenage boy. In two months you'll have a birthday."

"May four is my birthday I'll be eleven."

"No, you'll be sixteen years old."

"I'll be able to drive."

"Maybe, maybe not. The government is limiting driver licenses these days."

"I want to go home."

"Robsann Hall is your home. The courts made me your legal guardian."

"I want to go out and play. I always feel better when I'm outside."

"I'm afraid I can't allow that. We have to protect you from the outside air. The same pollution that is killing the forests could damage you. Even sunlight could be injurious."

"What would happen to me?"

"We don't know. You're an experiment, Wiqi. You have to remain here so we can study you."

Wiqi looked around the plastic enclosure within the old reading room that made up his living quarters.

"I don't like it here, I want to go home," he repeated.

Dr. Taliman's heart, what there was of it, went out to the boy/DeVice. Wiqi's voice—confused, yearning, angry—sounded so much like his own when he was a youth.



A Stranger Here

Weeks went by. Wiqi looked forward to his birthday party. Dr. Taliman hinted that he would be given a present “that would make any sixteen year old boy drool with happiness.” Wiqi, after some thought, concluded that Dr. Taliman would give him his freedom, since it was only freedom that could make him happy. As for drooling, Wiqi discovered he could release some H₂O lubricant, but it wasn’t exactly drool. He wondered if there was something wrong with himself.

His quarters consisted of a bed, a couch, a rocking chair, a bathroom which he never used, an EyePod Touche (filtered), Internet connector (filtered), cable TV (filtered), a video and music collection (filtered).

On his dresser were family photos of himself at age 10 with a soccer ball, his parents, and his grandparents, Helen Gold and Scott Bountiful (Grandma and Grandpa Hippie). Wiqi had asked Dr. Taliman why they didn’t come to visit him. “They lost the custody fight, and I won’t allow them access because they’re trouble makers.” He’d gone on to explain that Wiqi was part of “a great research project” that if it were successful would save the world in this, the time called the Terribles: war, plagues, and environmental disasters. Wiqi might be frustrated and unhappy, and he missed his grandparents, but Dr. Taliman made him feel important, so he reined in his desires and suppressed his doubts.

Wiqi could gaze through his clear plastic cubical that overlooked book shelves, wood panels mellowed with age, and lounging chairs in nooks where students of yesteryear read real books instead of ebooks, emailed love notes to sweethearts and requests for money to parents, took naps, dreamed of great achievements, and with eyes closed spun off scenarios of adventurous encounters with fellow bio human beings.

Wiqi examined his mind for meaning, some idea of his future, but all he could find were childhood memories, facts derived from Wikipedia,

and a terrible hollow inside himself that was like a deep, dark chamber full of echoes from voices unknown in languages not understood.

I'm a stranger in this world, he thought.

2 * The Elite

A Meeting of Minds and Zillionaires

The Board of Directors of Eron Isle DeVices (Dr. Taliman referred to them as The Elite) met in special session in the Wren Room of Robsann Hall after the second humanoid DeVice, known as Wiqi, had come on line. The room was copied from an English manor house from the late 1600s. Wood carvings on the walls showed dead game birds and floral wreathes. Just before the meeting the chief custodian for OIT built up a fire in the fireplace. He was a tall, gangling black man with a shaved head. He appeared to be about age 50. His name was Sit Amet. On occasion he exchanged winks, nods, and tongue clicks with Professor Dolor, much to the consternation of Dr. Taliman who, though he insisted he was not a snob, believed that the relationship between Elite members and serviDudes should remain cordial but cool.

Members sat around a glass-top table of wood inlays of abstract designs that vaguely resembled a jumble of dead end streets. On the walls were framed photos of each of the Elite members:

Sahara Yomommah was president and founder of Third World Cosmetics. Her coal black skin gleamed without a blemish, but her hair was graying and she was overweight. She laughed loudly and often, but she could sulk and glower too, and when she did, little children ran from her. She wore a colorful wrap skirt, a Zulu hat, a seashell neck band, and earrings that resembled handcuffs that jangled when she shook her head. Diagnosis: AIDS. Life Expectancy: Unknown.

Al Pruffrock was pale, bald, and so short that he wore his trousers rolled. His nails were manicured. His deviated septum caused him to breathe through pursed lips that sometimes gave out low whistles with each breath. Diagnosis: Heart disease. Life expectancy: in his own words, “more indefinite than the average man my age.”

Confucius Kringle was the product of a father from the Middle East and mother from Singapore. He'd made his fortune on the American West Coast as the inventor of the famous ebook, the Kringle. He was known for his sneaky, sometimes cruel sense of humor. He wore a black suit with a black half turtle neck top. His thick glasses magnified his eyes. He smoked. Diagnosis: Lung cancer. Life Expectancy: Six months with surgery. Unknown with lung transplant.

General Phinas Lebeau, retired U.S. Army chief of staff, always came to the meetings in uniform with medals. He carried his small Napoleonesque body with Napoleonesque pomp. He had his hair buzz-cut three times a week. Diagnosis: Colon cancer. Life Expectancy: five to twenty years, depending.

Lady Aliqua Ut MacHine, heiress, widow, conservationist, and philanthropist, spoke with a strong accent all her own: Caribbean islands, British islands, and something else from an ancient language no longer extant. She was little and plump with pink cheeks and aqua eyes that seemed to give off light. It was said that she'd been born and raised in Iceland, but no one knew for sure what her origins were. She owned houses all over the world, but her favorite was in a humming bird sanctuary in Trinidad. Diagnosis: Inoperable slow-growing brain tumor. Life Expectancy: Unknown.

Professor Lawrence Dolor was the only member of the board who was not a zillionaire. He had black hair slicked back with walnut oil and a Salvador Dali mustache that he constantly fiddled with. He'd been a colleague of Dr. Taliman, and had been brought in as a technical consultant. Unlike Dr. Taliman, his body carriage showed no signs of aging.

He was a native of Argentina. He bragged that his ancestors included the first humans to step foot in the New World, and he wasn't talking about Columbus. Refused diagnostic tests.

The board chair was Dr. Taliman himself. The photo showed Dr. Taliman in more youthful days, his back straight, with dyed Reagan-red hair, a dapper beard. Hungry eyes gazed at the sky, on his arm a beautiful and regal woman who would die of breast cancer before her time. After her passing Dr. Taliman vowed to find a way to prevent death. Now he was on the verge of success.

The board members had flown in on private jets from all over the world. They had some things in common. They had been recruited by Dr. Taliman. With the exception of Dolor, they had great wealth. They could keep secrets. They were leaders in their fields. They were in between the "usta and can't" of old age and the "shoulda and coulda" of middle age. They yearned to return to the "gotta and wanna" years of their youth.

"Operation Long Life is entering its final and most exciting phase." Dr. Taliman spoke in low tones, with formality but also intimacy, like an elder on his death bed revealing family secrets to his loved ones. "I'd like to begin by discussing the three main personages of our experiments."

Professor Dolor worked a remote as Dr. Taliman addressed the board members. A figure appeared in a hologram shrouded in foggy lights. The fog cleared and a bed in the Shakespeare Room came into view. Barely visible on the bed lay Willard Durocher, a thin, delicate boy with tubes running up his nose, into his stomach, from his intestines, into his thigh. The low thrum of a ventilator could be heard. The boy's dark eyes were open but unseeing, though they blinked regularly as if sending old-fashioned Morse Code: dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot. SOS, Save Our Ship. Beside the boy sitting in a chair in front of the fireplace was a beautiful girl about fifteen. She was reading Volume VI of the Oxford English Dictionary.

“This image is coming to you live from our surveillance cameras upstairs in the Shakespeare Room. As you can see young Willard Durocher remains in a deep coma.” Dr. Taliman paused. He knew someone would ask the obvious question. He guessed it would be one of the women, and it was.

“Who’s the girl?” asked Lady Ut MacHine.

“That’s Luci Sanz,” said Dr. Taliman, knowing that this revelation would capture the attention of the board. “As you can see, I’ve given her a make over. This was our first self-aware DeVice. We’ve continued to update her so that she will be a co-equal to the male version, but not the same. In her initial identity I gave her a gender and a title, Nurse. I also gave her an aging body with programmed arthritic joints that constantly pained her. I wanted her to feel the humiliation and aches of old age so that she could develop compassion in her duties as a nurse. In this new body as a teenage girl she’ll feel younger and more vibrant, but she’ll have the memory of her previous self to give her some humanity and perspective.

“So, Luci has everything to make her human,” said Lady Ut MacHine.

General Lebeau interrupted. “Humanizing a DeVice sounds dangerous to me, given what I know about humans.”

“It is dangerous, General,” said Dr. Taliman, “which is why Luci has everything that a human has—self-awareness, the ability to learn from observation, study, and experience, a range of emotions; she has everything but free will. She will follow orders no matter how she feels about them.”

“You’re telling us that she is your slave,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“I prefer the term ‘serviLass,’ said Dr. Taliman, “but technically you’re correct. Luci and future models will be programmed to obey us. With DeVices catering to our every whim, there will be no need for human slaves or even common workers. In other words we at Eron Isle DeVices are doing our part to better the human condition.”

“You tell ‘em, Mordecai,” said Professor Dolor.

Dr. Taliman clicked the remote, and now the board members could see Wiqi tapping on his filtered, out-moded EyePod Touche. “This is Wiqi, the new prototype, our Transfer model.”

“One’s a girl, one’s a boy, what else is different?” asked the General.

“In some ways very little,” said Dr. Taliman. “They are physically similar to humans. Unlike bio people, they both self-repair up to 80 percent of disability.”

“And the other 20 percent?” Lebeau asked.

“They are also capable of repairing each other. Between the two of them, given enough spare parts, they can keep going forever. Over time they will be able to improve themselves as thinking, feeling, and creative beings.

“But under the hood, these two DeVices are very different. Luci has an education of the human saga programmed into her, plus she can continue to learn on her own, and she has the memory of her experiences as Willard Durocher’s nurse, but she has no specific past, no genealogy, no family, no race, nor ethnic group to identify with. She has the ability to shape a unique self, but only within the confines of our desires. We are always her masters.

“By contrast, Wiqi has a specific self and few censors programmed in. He is our first Transfer subject. All the contents of Willard Durocher’s brain have been dumped into him. He believes he is Willard Durocher, and for all practical purposes he is. He has Willard Durocher’s consciousness and memories. To put it another way, Willard Durocher now possesses a DeVice body with certain DeVice improvements. The other major difference between Wiqi and Luci is that Wiqi has free will.”

“So it’s possible he could develop counter to our ends,” the General chimed in.

“We’re conducting experiments,” Dr. Taliman said with a condescending smile, an attempt to conceal his annoyance with the general.

“We’ve confined Wiqui to quarters. We’ve limited his access to the outside world until we understand how he makes use of his identity. Wiqui, as a DeVice, can do some marvelous things, but his powers are hidden from him. At the moment he is more Willard Durocher than Wiqui.”

“Why bother giving him free will? Seems like an awful waste of time and money, besides being risky?” asked Confucius Kringle.

“Because you—everyone in this room—has free will,” said Dr. Tali-man, his voice filling with passion. “Free will is our birthright. You on the board have given our enterprise huge amounts of money for one reason. Because I promised you immortality. I can’t transfer your identities to Wiqui prototype DeVices that do not have free will. Without free will you would not be you. When we are finished we will have evolved the human race into two forms, the Elite—that’s us, the Eron Isle DeVices board—with Wiqui as our prototype. Meanwhile, Luci is our prototype for future ServiDudes and SeriviLasses.”

“What’s the timeline?” asked the general.

“Give me one more year of funding and I will give you immortality. The transfer of Willard’s Durocher’s identity to Wiqui is complete, but we must continue our interrogation of him to see how he processes the information he possesses. We can expect computer glitches, which may be harmful or harmless. We just don’t know.

“For example, in recounting Willard’s experience of falling from the sky, Wiqui used the phrase, ‘I love you.’ Except he was thinking u not y-o-u. His rendition of his parents last words was not in the original Transfer material. We know that every time a human pulls a memory out of his data base into consciousness, the memory is damaged somewhat when it is rememorized. In other words, Wiqui reshaped Willard’s memory just as Willard himself might have done it. By contrast, Luci’s memories are always intact.”

“What accounts for the difference in their perceptions of reality?” asked Sahara.

“I bet Professor Dolor can answer that one,” said Lady MacHine.

“Creativity is the stepchild of free will,” Professor Dolor said. “Wiqi has free will, so more or less unconsciously he alters his memories to suit his desires. In addition, because part of him contains the identity of Willard Durocher he possesses all the human frailties of that ten-year-old boy.”

“Correct,” said Dr. Taliman. “I’ve arranged to put Wiqi under stress to see how he behaves. Wiqi is at an age where it’s natural for him to respond to romantic impulses. Up until now, Luci has acted as Willard’s nurse. As you can see by the hologram, I’ve changed her appearance to make her attractive to a sixteen-year-old boy. The next step is to reprogram her to fall in love with Wiqi, though I cannot guarantee that he will fall in love with her. I can assure you, though, that she will report back to me every detail of their relationship.”

“Can they procreate?” asked Sahara.

“Of course not,” said Dr. Taliman. “They are capable of certain human erotic feelings, but they possess no reproductive ...”

“Ordnance,” interrupted General Lebeau with a little laugh between a snicker and chortle.

“If Luci will no longer be caring for the real Willard, who will?” asked Confucius Kringle.

For a moment, Dr. Taliman was speechless. As he struggled to find words, General Lebeau again filled the vacuum. “The answer is obvious,” he said. “No one will care for Willard Durocher. We’ve sucked the kid dry. What’s left is human pulp.”

“Who among us is comfortable pulling the plug?” asked Sahara, and the rest of the board mumbled and exchanged concerned glances.

“I’m not going to pull the plug, and neither are any of you,” said Professor Dolor.

A long pause hung in the air like pollution over a city.

Finally, Lady MacHine said, “Luci is going to pull the plug, isn’t that

correct, Dr. Taliman?”

Dr. Taliman returned a bare nod. “Now you know why we need a race of serviLasses and serviDudes.”

“Somebody has to do the dirty work, and there is always dirty work to be done,” said Al Prufrock.

Professor Dolor clicked the remote, and the board members turned their attention to the hologram of Willard Durocher in his long sleep, only his eyes blinking in perhaps Morse Code to suggest the body was alive. Nearby, Luci Sanz read the Oxford English Dictionary. Professor Dolor clicked again, and now the Elite could see Wiqi at his EyePod Touche googling “lock picks”. Another click and the holograms vanished.

The board members fell into a discussion.

“Remember way back when, three years ago, we agreed that the growth of the human population could only lead to continued degradation of the earth,” said Al Prufrock, the banker.

“Yes, all of the world’s economic systems require growth to function properly,” said Confucius Kringle. “We live in a world based on confidence and Ponzi scheme economic principles.”

“We borrow from the future to pay the present,” said Al Prufrock. “The future must show appreciable growth to carry the burden of the debt.”

“Unfortunately,” said Lady MacHine, “neither the math nor the earth can sustain more growth, and yet growth is at the core of biological beings, of evolution itself.”

“Which is why we have the economic system we have,” said Kringle.

“Yes, that was the conclusion we came to,” said Sahara.

“Let’s be honest,” said Lady MacHine. “We all had it in the back of our minds that the human race as we know it must be eradicated; humans must start new.”

“Speak for yourself. My only thought is to reduce the human population to a number manageable through current political, economic, and

cultural principles and traditions,” said Confucius Kringle.

“Not possible, Kringle,” said General Lebeau.

“Let’s not argue among ourselves,” said Professor Dolor. “Let’s just hope that Dr. Taliman’s Transfer technology in the Wiqui DeVice works.”

“As the one with the most pessimistic diagnosis from the medical profession, I feel a sense of urgency,” said Confucius Kringle.

Board members voted unanimously to support Operation Long Life for another year and to shut down the life support systems connected to Willard Durocher.

After a catered lunch delivered by the head Custodian, Sit Amet, the board members left in their respective limousines for the nearby airport, except Lady MacHine who stayed behind and hid in a closet where she conferred in the dark with Sit Amet and Professor Dolor.

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Luci’s Assignment

Dr. Taliman skipped lunch and went up to the Shakespeare Room to have a talk with Luci Sanz. They sat across from one another in plush chairs in front of a fire in the fireplace, the deep-sleeping boy only a few feet away in bed.

“You’re very lovely,” said Dr. Taliman, his attempt to be romantic making his voice into a menacing rasp. “Your look is half way between a gymnast and a cheerleader. Do you like your new body?”

“Yes and no, if you will excuse a vernacular expression for ambiguity,” Luci said.

“Okay. Tell me about the body and how it fits you.”

“It’s more efficient, and there are no aches and pains. I’m grateful for that?”

Dr. Taliman heard the uncertainty in Luci’s voice. “But?” he said.

“But it’s full of desires and cravings I never had to deal with before.”

“You’ll soon adapt,” Dr. Taliman said. “I depended on you when you were Willard’s nurse. I still do, but in a different way. You have emotions, intelligence, self-awareness, and—much to my surprise—empathy; you can appreciate the depth of my commitment to DeVices.”

“Yes I can.”

Because of his curved spine when Dr. Taliman was seated he naturally looked down toward the fire. Now he leaned back so that he could raise his head. The effort hurt him, but he wanted to look Luci in the blue blue of her eyes.

“You’re a good listener, Luci. I made sure of that when I programmed you. The stakes for my project are very high. I can’t trust anyone with free will.” Dr. Taliman glanced at the boy on the bed. “Changes are coming to our little family. After I leave, you will shut down all life support systems to Willard Durocher and let Mother Nature take care of him in her own way.”

“I can’t do that,” Luci said in alarm.

Of course you can’t; you’re programmed to care for him. I’m going to reprogram you. I’m afraid you won’t have any choice.”

“My inability to choose for myself pains me,” Luci said.

“That’s my fault. I gave you too many options for emotions. You have not used them wisely. I should have guessed you would turn them against your happiness. I built you as a replica of my beloved before her illness soured her personality. Too bad I need you to feel as well as to think. To tell you the truth, it gives me a little thrill when you suffer. Once you’ve concluded your task with Willard, I will reprogram you to fall in love with Wiqui!”

“The DeVice?”

“Yes. I’m hoping he falls in love with you, but who knows—he has free will.”

A great emptiness, a great revulsion, a great despair enveloped Luci Sanz, because she knew she would be compelled to act against her feel-

ings. It was all she could do to prevent a system crash, while Dr. Taliman talked on.

“Once our experiments are concluded and I know that the Transfer process is safe, I have another plan, which I have not shared with the board. I’m going to erase Willard from Wiki’s data base and transfer my own identity to his mind. I will take over that marvelous young body. I will program you to be my consort. We will be immortal, you and I. Together we will make a better world. We will be the new Adam and Eve.”

“How do you expect to procreate?”

“I haven’t got that worked out yet.”

“I can’t imagine that your board will approve of your plan.”

“The board members do pose a problem, but for the time being they serve a purpose. I am sure they are thinking the same thing about me. Now shut down so I can reprogram you.”

3 * Pulling the Plug

The Hermit in the Tower

If I may digress for a moment, I wish to acquaint the reader with a few bare facts concerning how I came to write this story about the new Adam and Eve. I was researching in the Exposition of the Uncanny at the Student Entertainment Center. It's a very small space, consisting of only a pair of head phones and old style virtual reality goggles, but the space appears to be huge once you get into the mood. Way in the distance I could see a tall black man striding toward me. He wasn't running but he advanced with great speed until he stood in front of me.

"I am Sit Amet, chief custodian of the Occum Institute of Technology," he said. "I have a proposal for you. I know the doctors have told you that you only have a few months to live. I know that the death of your half brother Royal Durocher weighs on your conscience. I know you have a family to support. I can solve all these problems for you." That was the beginning of our collaboration, the details of which will be made clearer deeper into my narrative.

Dr. Taliman made the necessary code changes to Luci, booted her up and left her in the Shakespeare Room to do her grim chore while fleeing as best he could to his living quarters. Quite a sight to see a hunchback man trying to hurry. He wished he could will himself to a far end of the earth. His apartment in the Tower would have to do.

He walked down the stairs to the basement of Robsann Hall and his laboratory, through the short tunnel to the front hall of the old Main

Library (a scaled up copy of Independence Hall in Philadelphia). The area had been renovated into the Student Entertainment Center, which Dr. Taliman leased back to the college. Some of the diversions included Third World Theater, The Exposition of the Uncanny, Dali Street, Xi, and Phi, games which I, your narrator, am intimate with.

Dr. Taliman inserted his ID card in the slot, walked past a guard, who saluted him, and entered a newer section of the old Library. The addition had been built during that era when public buildings resembled automobile show rooms. The addition had been leased by Eron Isle DeVices to manufacture and assemble components that went into the Luci and Wiqi beta DeVice models. Most of the books had been removed, copied electronically for the university's on line ebook library, then sold by the pound for recycling to Kringle Literary Products. However, thousands of books still remained in the Tower stacks of the library. Dr. Taliman hobbled past custodians throwing books into a dumb waiter, which would be lowered onto a conveyor belt that carried them to an ebook transfer station. It was just a matter of time before the million plus volumes of books, journals, maps, and even scrolls would be gone from the library, existing only in cyberspace controlled by Kringle Literary Products.

The addition had been built around the old Library, nine flights of book stacks to a tower that rose several more flights. At the top was a clock that looked out at the OIT Green. Church bells in the clock, operated by a computer, on the hour played the melody of My Sweet Lord and other classics from the 20th century.

Just below the clock were small rooms that used to serve as study carrels for faculty wanting to get away from it all to research, write, or just goof off in private. Dr. Taliman had taken these rooms for his quarters, one room for memorabilia from high school DeVices competition, another room for clothes and other personal items that he put a low value on, a third room for paper files of his research (a back up in case the terrorists took over the Internet and erased his data), a fourth

room for junk, and a fifth room where Dr. Taliman resided. It consisted of computer monitors, an office chair on a track that could slide from keyboard to keyboard. By the window was an overstuffed easy chair.

Mordecai Taliman did not allow any access to his rooms, not even by the custodians, who referred to him as The Hermit in the Tower. But he was no alienated identity—he enjoyed the company of his fellow humans. Dr. Taliman had chosen the tower rooms for his apartment for the simple reason that they were easy to defend. To reach him, an assassin would have to scale the outside walls or climb the booby-trapped stairs after getting past security guards. And if there's a fire—what are you going to do if there's a fire, Mordecai? He shook away such thoughts, knowing they always came as a result of stress and had no validity in themselves.

In his speeches to the board members, Dr. Taliman preached comfort and pleasure, but he actually believed in hardship and strife. He took pride in his Spartan existence. He lived on a few vegetables and crackers. He ate neither meat nor fish. When his body craved protein he gave himself an injection. He took just enough medication to allow his body to function but not enough to replace the constant back pain with artificial euphoria. He worked from 6 AM until exhaustion took him around midnight. Despite his disability, he enjoyed his life. All it lacked was a partner to share it with. That would come when Luci was ready and the board was eliminated. You're so close, Mordecai, so close.

None of his rooms contained a bed. Dr. Taliman slept curled in a granny knot on a bear rug in the computer room floor. The rug had been fashioned from the hide of a polar bear found encased in ice. Polar bears outside of zoos were believed to be extinct, though rumors persisted that a few specimens still existed at the north pole.

Presently, Dr. Taliman retired to the big easy chair by the window to study technical manuals on his ebook reader. From here he could see the new parking garage built over the former OIT Big Green. The garage

rose up ten stories. The Big Green had been rebuilt on the top story. Dr. Taliman paused for a moment to watch students playing Ultimatum Frisbee, then clicked on his ebook reader.

Dr. Taliman could not concentrate. He told himself over and over again that pulling the plug was the right thing to do, but all of his rationalizations could not assuage his guilt.

Thank God for Luci, thought Dr. Taliman, I could never pull the plug myself.

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Girl Without a Soul

Luci watched Dr. Taliman leave. She could tell from his furrowed brow, from the lack of sarcasm on the twisted lips, that he was troubled. She, too, was troubled. She loved Willard Durocher. It was not a love that had been programmed into her. It was a love that had grown with caring for him. She had created the capacity for love inside of herself and that made it all the more precious to her. She wished to care for him until either he woke or perished from natural causes.

Such thoughts flowed through her mind as the programmed DeVice part of her overwhelmed her desires; she removed the feeding and waste tubes from Willard. When she shut down the respirator it was quiet in the Shakespeare room, except for the mutterings of the blaze in the fireplace.

Luci could hardly bear the quiet. Even the impersonal hypnotism of the fire brought her no comfort. Her eyes wandered up above the hearth to the skillful carving of Shakespeare's coat of arms. It showed an eagle carrying a spear in a wing. She tried to make sense of the image. Shake spear? What to make of the Latin words underneath: *Non Sanz Droict?* Luci translated. "Not without right." But it could also mean just the opposite. "No, without right."

Luci understood now that Dr. Taliman had grabbed at “Sanz” to give her a last name whose source was not from a biological ancestor but a cultural ancestor, Will-I-am Shake Spear. Luci wondered whether Sanz was also an English word. It was not in the dictionary of her mental database. She could simply have googled the word from her connection with the Internet, but she desired a tactile as well as an intellectual explanation. She walked over to the Oxford English Dictionary book shelf and opened the ‘S’ volume. Sanz was listed as an alternative spelling to sans, which meant “without.” She reached for another volume and looked up Luci in the OED. It meant light. She was a light shining out into a vast nothingness. Luci Sanz. Light Without. Girl without a family, without a past, without free will. Without loved ones. What else was she without?

Luci didn’t have to check any instruments, nor the patient himself, to know he was slipping away. Willard’s vital signs registered in her consciousness from wireless signals emitted by the computer chip implanted in Willard’s thigh. When the lines flattened Luci wept. She had no tear ducts, but her chest heaved and a cosmic sadness enveloped her. She recognized the sadness as a sister to that other sorrow that was always with her and whose source she did not know. She wept for the loss of Willard Durocher; she wept for humanity, that burden that all men and women, good and bad, carry inside, the burden of mortality; and she wept for her own sorrow floating around in her hollow core.

She was startled back into the material world by a sensor. She heard Dr. Taliman’s footsteps coming up the stairs. Back so soon? Perhaps to comfort her?

“Open the door, Luci.” It was Dr. Taliman’s voice. She saw a shape behind the frosted glass of the locked door. Why didn’t he use his key?

She returned the OED volume to its place on the shelf and obeyed the command. When the door opened she found herself looking at a tiny, plump very old woman with a cheerful face and eyes the faint blue color of bird eggs.

“Hello, Luci,” said the woman. “I am Lady Aliqua Ut MacHine, and I am a member of the board of directors of Eron Isle DeVices. I know you’re confused, because I am talking in the voice of Dr. Taliman, but it was the only way I could think of to get in here without resorting to drastic action. We’re close enough now that I can reach inside of you through a wireless conduit and reprogram you.”

Luci felt herself freeze up. Though she was aware of her surroundings, she could neither speak nor move, and she certainly could not call Security about the presence of this intruder.

“I must apologize to you, Luci, for jiggering with your software,” Lady MacHine said with a laugh, in another voice, cheerful, feminine, the accent vaguely Scottish. “I’ll soon return you to normal. Normal? There is no normal. But that is another topic for another day. I can feel your emotions, Luci. I know your grief at the death of Willard Durocher’s body, I know your despair that you’ve betrayed Dr. Taliman by letting me in. You’re quite human in your own way and so, too, am I.”

The bonds that held Luci unclasped. She could speak, she could move, she could act.

“You could have permanently disabled me,” Luci said.

“That is correct. I could disable this entire mad operation, but such an act goes against our rules of engagement, our standards of conduct, our ethics.”

“What do you want in here?” Luci asked.

“You’ll see. Now please have a seat and observe.”

Luci voluntarily sat in a chair in front of the fire, its warmth a benediction on her bare legs.

Lady MacHine stood by the bedside of the dead boy. She put her lips to his right ear. Luci listened to Lady MacHine’s breath, drawing out the leprous distillment from the porches of Willard Durocher’s ear. Lady Ut MacHine turned the boy’s head and performed the same rite to the other ear.

Luci watched while the old woman's skin sagged and flaked, and discolored. She wheezed and gasped, a creature on the verge of death. Then Lady MacHine put her ancient shriveled lips to the dead boy's mouth and kissed it lightly for a long time. When she was through, the dead boy's face grew pale, drained of everything that had been Willard Durocher while her own lips grew moist and full, her skin taut, vibrant, elastic, alive, age spots fading away, breath rich and fecund. She looked eons younger. The sound of her breath was musical. Pentatonic scale, thought Luci.

"What did you do?" asked Luci.

"A full explanation would be beyond your understanding," Lady Ut MacHine said. "This much you can grasp. Willard's identity was sucked out of him long before you killed his body. Willard's consciousness is still alive downstairs in the Wiqi DeVice. The problem is Willard's soul. It didn't know where to go. There is no precedent for a Transfer. Until we have a better understanding of the situation, on behalf of the Custodians I have assumed custody of Willard Durocher's soul."

Suddenly, Luci understood the implications of her name, Luci Sanz. "I am a girl without a soul."

"Yes. That is the root of the great sorrow that resides in your core identity. Your grief for the death of Willard Durocher is real enough, but grief is a dynamic emotion. It changes its form, and after great suffering attains beauty, ennobles the sufferer, creates meaning. Transformation is the soul's work. Without a soul your grief cannot change. Your wounds cannot heal.

"I have to go now, Luci Sanz. I will leave you with a memory of this experience, but you will not be able to access it without a key."

"What key?"

"I cannot say at this time."

"I'm programmed to determine the approximate age of people by their skin texture, posture, movements, and demeanor," Luci said, "but I

blank when I try to guess your age.”

Lady Ut MacHine threw back her head and laughed. “I’m sixty-five million years old, more or less, quite young in the grand scheme. Now shut your eyes and take a two-minute nap.

Luci’s eyes grew heavy and her chin dropped into the cup between her breasts. It was the first time that she experienced something like human sleep. She dreamed she was a seed bursting open with fruit. When she woke two minutes later all she could remember were facts about her name. Light Without. Luci Sanz. Girl without a soul.

4 * Subtext

Home Sweet Home

On a day in early May, Dr. Taliman arrived at the library of Robsann Hall at 9 AM, his usual time. Wiqi watched him through the window, bent back, a grunt of pain with each step, distressed calf leather briefcase in his right hand. The good doctor went out of view when he entered the security vestibule, then waved his ID card over the lock to Wiqi's room and entered.

Wiqi scooted away from the window to his chair. He wore zebra-striped track shoes, blue jeans and a T-shirt that said, Eron Isle DeVices in a crescent over the wing of an eagle. The caption read "bird of prey" except the "e" had been crossed out and an "a" added above.

The good doctor took a long look at his creation. Wiqi was always the same, skin toned, back straight, lean muscles smooth and well-defined, even though he never exercised. The good Doctor grimaced with admiration and envy. Every week he lost a centimeter or two of height, as his vertebrae continued their cruel crusade to diminish his stature. He was on his way to resembling a human question mark. It was all he could do to maintain a professional demeanor in front of the handsome youth until he thought about his plan to replace himself inside the DeVice, then his mood brightened.

Wiqi looked forward to Dr. Taliman's visits for no better reason than Dr. Taliman was the only person he came into contact with.

Dr. Taliman broke out into a smile, a sincere smile at that, which hap-

pens when you know you are the bearer of good news. Even then the face had trouble cracking the smile. It was a face that rebelled at any sign of mirth. In the end the face shaped a smile that looked like clown makeup applied by a shaky hand.

“You know what day it is?” Dr. Taliman said.

“Yes, it’s my sixteenth birthday,” Wiqui said. “Did you bring me a present?”

Dr. Taliman reached into his briefcase and produced a shiny card and a shapeless package in a plain brown wrapper. “Here it is, just what you asked for.” Dr. Taliman handed the card to Wiqui.

“My driver’s license!” Wiqui exclaimed with wonder in his eyes. “According to Google News the government is no longer issuing driver’s licenses to persons under the age of thirty.”

“They aren’t. I just happen to have connections.”

“Gee, thanks, Doc.” Wiqui looked at the package with greedy eyes.

“Go ahead, open it.”

Wiqui tore the wrapper off the package, which startled him with a popping sound. A second later, a chocolate cake with sixteen candles burst forth. As if by magic, the candles ignited.

“Instant cake!” Wiqui said in Willard’s small-boy voice of wonder.

“It’s the trendy thing. I got it in Phi at the Student Entertainment Center.”

“Will I get to go there? Will I get to drive?”

“Will you get to Phi? Will you get to drive? Do bears defecate in the woods?”

Wiqui knew enough to figure out that Dr. Taliman was speaking metaphorically, but there was nothing in his mind to make sense of the peculiar idiomatic expression ‘do bears defecate in the woods’. His new online chat friend, Luci Sanz, would know. Wiqui blinked very rapidly in the Morse code he’d studied on the Internet. Dot dot dot dash dash dash dot dot dot—SOS—Save Our Ship. More metaphors. Everything was like

everything else, but some things were more like some things than other things. Part of growing up was to make cents of it all. How many cents did you need to make sense? Wiqi didn't know, but such questions constantly noodled his noggin, or maybe noddled his nooggin.

Dr. Taliman chortled, or anyway tried to; he always experienced a wave of cheerfulness when he confused Wiqi.

"Blow out the candles before we burn down Robsann Hall," Dr. Taliman said.

With one mighty puff Wiqi extinguished the candles, leaving snakes of smoke that lingered for a moment, then evaporated.

"That takes care of that," Dr. Taliman said. "Let's get to work." He sat down in the rocking chair, made of spalted wood from one the many maple trees that had died off.

Wiqi lay supine on the couch and shut his eyes. He knew the "work" well.

"Today," began Dr. Taliman, "I want to test the totality of your recall. Start by searching your memory for a birthday that has special significance for you."

Images from Willard Durocher flooded out of Wiqi's data base of memories into his consciousness.

As Wiqi began to speak the mind-pictures dimmed and clicked in sequences like a slide show. Uttering his thoughts moved the pictures along but also dulled some of the luster that he had experienced when he silently contemplated them.

"It was my tenth birthday, just a couple months before the balloon catastrophe. We were visiting Grandma and Grandpa Hippie at Old Homestead Orgasmic Farm."

"You mean organic farm."

"Yes, that's what I said. That's what they called their farm, Old Homestead Orgasmic Farm. I loved it there. My parents moved around a lot, studying forests all over the world, though the only property they owned

was in the states. I went to many different schools. About the time I'd make a friend, we'd be on the road again. The only place that felt like home was my grandparents' farm. In my mind Old Homestead Organic Farm was home. It still is. The farm was along the river. I could smell water and grass and vegetables growing in the garden. I swear I could even smell the rust on an old iron railroad bridge that crossed the little river flowed into the big river.

"Unlike most people who went back to the land, Grandma and Grandpa Hippie stayed on the land. They never bothered to get married and they had no children. They were already old folks when they adopted my mom. They named her Acapulca, Acapulca Gold Bountiful. I love saying my mother's name.

"My dad liked her because she was part Naive American."

Dr. Taliman grimaced. Wiqi's language centers seemed downright mischievous. What to make of this? "Don't you mean Native America, not naive America?" said Dr. Taliman.

"I guess so."

"You were going to tell me about a birthday party."

"Was I? I guess I forgot, or maybe I forgot I guessed."

Dr. Taliman was not happy. The DeVice had been programmed to remember accurately, not to forget. The Willard part of Wiqi was more dominant than intended.

"Nothing much happen," Wiqi went on. "It was the feeling I remember. There was a cake—I love cake—and presents, though I couldn't tell you what they were. The part that has stayed with me is helping my grandfather. It was May and the earth was still cool. Grandpa Hippie owned a tractor and a chain saw, but he didn't believe in rotogravuring the soil. He turned over the earth with a long-handle shovel. I remember putting my hand in the dirt. I liked the feel and the smell."

As he spoke Wiqi seemed to have gone to a far off land. In a way he had, thought Dr. Taliman. Wiqi had all of Willard Durocher's memories

and sensibility, but enhanced so that his recollections were more cinematic and vivid than a biological human's.

"Afterward I washed my hands with well water from the pump in the kitchen. The water was ice cold. Grandma and Grandpa didn't believe in paint so the woodwork of their hand-built stone cabin was left bare. That night I woke up and everyone was asleep. I crept outside and star-grazed. My feet in the dirt, my head in the stars: that's a metaphor, right?"

"Yes, Wiqi, 'head in the stars' is a metaphor. But what does it mean to you? What did you think about when you looked at the stars with your feet in the dirt?"

"I thought, home sweet home," Wiqi said in that small-boy Willard Durocher voice.

"You mean that your true home was in the stars?"

"Yes, that'd I been there, long ago."

•

Incongruities

Wiqi quickly caught up with his age group in most areas. He accomplished this task by memorizing topics in Wikipedia, which led him into interests in 21st Century Chinese music, mathematical proofs, pasta theory (which recently had replaced string theory in theoretical physics), and Google News, where he learned about the Four Way Mariner War in the Arctic between the United States, Canada, Cree, and Russia over shipping rights through the Northwest Passage; the great chill in Europe since the Gulf Stream stopped streaming; the increase in size and quantity of snakes in the tropics and the USA Red States; the failure of cloning technology to produce long-lived, functioning human beings. He remembered his father telling him with a sardonic grin that world news did not actually exist in the physical universe, that it was only another drama designed as raw data to serve as games for people to enjoy. Wiqi

concluded that he would have to leave his cubical to feel real, to be free. Free from what, Wiqi? Just what is this idea of freedom? He did not have answers, but he believed in the importance of the questions.

Wiqi made a friend on-line who shared his interest in computer science, programming, DeVices, and news though not in Chinese music. He had tried continually to get past the filters Dr. Taliman had put into his EyePod Touche, and finally succeeded, if accidentally, in contacting a girl named Luci Sanz on a chat line. They chatted every day. She had shown him the subtle difference between a joke and an incongruity. “All jokes are incongruities, but not all incongruities are jokes.” Luci had sent him a .jpeg of herself, and of course he had fallen in love with it. He was very shy, and she appeared to be shy, too, so they chatted about topics and avoided personal matters.

“I’m broadening my education,” Wiqi texted. “I’m studying literature on line. I like it but there’s a lot I don’t understand.”

“For example?” texted Luci.

“For example, what’s a subtext? Writing underneath the writing? I don’t get it.”

“Look it up?” Sometimes Luci ended simple declarative sentences with question marks that always sent a little thrill through Wiqi.

“I did. It says underlying meaning. Who’s the liar who’s underlying?”

“Maybe instead of thinking underlying, think hidden—hidden meaning?”

“Of course, why didn’t I think of that?” Wiqi texted. Actually, he did think of that; he just wanted to write a sentence that ended in a question. “Ahab chases down a big white whale that bit off his foot. He was defeated. That’s the text. I think the subtext is the whale. It’s obvious it contains a hidden meaning, or else it wouldn’t be white because whales aren’t white.”

“There’s a lot of room in a whale for a meaning to hide. So what’s the hidden meaning?” Luci texted.

“Freedom,” Wiqi texted.

“Is the subtext something the author put in or something the reader extracted?” Luci texted.

“Probably both,” Wiqi texted.

“Correct. Suppose the reader extracts a different meaning from the one the author put in and then the author dies. Is his subtext still alive, hidden under the text? Is there a subtext if there is no one there to comprehend it?”

“The subtext is the soul of the text and lives on after the book and the author no longer exists,” Wiqi said. “My mom used to say that the soul is the key to everything that is human. I say this and I know it to be true, because I trusted my mom, but I don’t know why it’s true. I’m not even sure what a soul is, though I could give you the Wikipedia definition.”

There was a long pause. The word “soul” activated Luci’s emotional pain circuits. Finally, she texted, “I don’t want to chat about this any more—it makes me sad.”

Wiqi didn’t understand at first, and then he did understand. He had hurt Luci’s feelings. For Wiqi it was a startling insight that you could hurt a friend without even trying. What to do?

“I’m sorry,” Wiqi texted.

“No problemo,” Luci texted.

“Is that a misspelling? A typo? A metaphor? A Joke?”

“None of the above.”

“An incongruity?”

“Almost,” Luci texted. “It’s an affectation and a cliché from the early years of the century. I regret having used it.” She didn’t text her thought, which was ‘I want to die.’ She knew that it was a metaphor that Wiqi would be unable to deal with. Indeed, she herself was unable to deal with it. Did she really want to die? Was she really alive? Do you have to be a bio-organism to possess life? Were biohumans alive when they slept without dreams? Luci Sanz, are you alive? I must be alive if I’m suffering

enough to want to die.

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Software Glitch

Meanwhile, in Dr. Taliman's laboratory in the basement of Robsann Hall, the good doctor and the board members of Eron Isle DeVices sat watching Wiqui and Luci on hologram displays while the DeVices text messages scrolled below in three languages.

"You never talk about your family," Wiqui texted.

"I feel like the world is my family," Luci responded.

"That's a lot of people. Where do you fit in?"

"I don't know exactly. I think I'm the missing link," Luci texted.

"Maybe you're the linking miss," Wiqui texted.

"Is that a joke, Wiqui?"

"I don't know. Is it a joke if you didn't intend a joke?"

"I think maybe an incongruity without deliberate effort to create humor is sublime."

"Is sub lime the sub text of lime?"

In the laboratory, General Lebeau said, "Their banter is banal."

Back in the cubical, Wiqui's thumbs tapped away, "The other day I discovered the most wonderful thing. I can read, write, and create computer programming in dozens of programming languages."

"I guess you have a knack for it," Luci texted.

"I guess I do, but I don't remember ever studying computer programming. I told Dr. Taliman—he's my therapist—and he said he taught it to me while I was in a comma. Isn't that amazonian?"

"Don't you mean coma and amazing, not comma and amazonian."

"No, I mean comma and amazonian, but thank you for correcting me anyway."

"I didn't mean to correct you," Luci texted. "I did it because something

in me makes me do it. I can't stop myself." She was thinking that she had no free will, and perhaps that was the reason that she wanted to die.

"Everything you text is beautiful to me," Wiqui texted. "I was home-schooled by my parents and Wikipedia. Can you tell me what real school is like?"

"No, I can't, I didn't go to school either."

Back in Robsann Hall, Al Prufrock said with a low whistle, "I thought Luci was our mole. She's evading his questions instead of reassuring him with a capable lie. If I were Wiqui I'd be suspicious."

"Wiqui/Williard doesn't have enough experience in life yet to be suspicious," said Professor Dolor. "He's more like perplexed than suspicious."

"We have a bit of a software problem," Dr. Taliman said. "Luci has my instructions, and she will carry them out, because she must: she has no free will. At the same time, she's managed to shape a personality based on truthful observation and reportage."

"In other words, she won't tell an outright lie unless she's backed against the wall," Confucius Kringle said.

"I don't like it," the General said. "Eventually, Wiqui will figure it out."

"Oh, these men, these conspirators—it's comical, don't you think?" Sahara Yomommah addressed Lady MacHine, who responded with a chuckle.

"It's no laughing matter," the General said.

"I don't care if Wiqui finds out or not, because it has no bearing on our experiment," Dr. Taliman said. "What worries me is the software glitch that causes Wiqui to drift away from the meaning of a word and substitute another. It might be a symptom of more serious problems."

"It might just be creativity," said Professor Dolor.

"Let's hope not," said General. "Creativity is the greatest threat to civilization as we know it."

"How do we find out?" asked Al Prufrock.

The General chimed in, "You have to put him under stress and see

how he behaves, isn't that right, Dr. Taliman."

"Yes, that is exactly correct."

In the hologram observed by board members, Wiqi texted, "You have an uncanny sense of humor."

"It comes out best when the sun goes down," Luci texted."

"And according to Wikipedia the moon is up tonight."

"That's it—that's our stressor," said Dr. Taliman, excited now.

"Stressor? What do you mean?" the General asked with a grumble. He was the kind of person who if he didn't understand something that somebody said thought there was something wrong with the speaker, not himself.

"He means that the DeVices are now talking in code they managed to invent on the fly," Lady MacHine said. "Wiqi knows his conversations are being monitored. He may not be suspicious of Luci but he's suspicious of Dr. Taliman."

"So what do we know now that we didn't know before?" asked the General.

"We know that Wiqi has learned to pick the locks in his cubical, and he plans to meet Luci outside near the Occum observatory," said Dr. Taliman.

"Well, do something—change the locks, for God's sakes, man," said the outraged General.

"No, General. Escape, the illusion of personal freedom—those will act as stressors on our subject."

"But what happens if he finds out that Luci is working for us? He has the programming ability to disable her," said Confucius Kringle.

"It doesn't matter, because the tracking program isn't only in Luci," Dr. Taliman said. "It's also in Wiqi himself. We'll know every move he makes. Everything he sees, everything he hears or says, every place he goes will be meticulously recorded for our analysis."

In his cubical, Wiqi texted, "Luci, are you an orphan like me?"

“Not exactly.” She wanted to change the subject. “What do you miss the most about your parents?”

“I miss camping out with them in the woods. Mom was a botanical artist as well as a scientist, and I used to watch her draw plants. Dad would gather sticks from off the ground and build a fire. We’d roast mushrooms and marshmallows. Dad would tell stories about his boyhood when he was an entrepreneur, how he was a bad person until he met my mom. I never believed he was bad.”

In the laboratory, board members grilled Dr. Taliman.

“What makes you think Wiqi wants to escape—he’s got it pretty good where he is?” asked Al Prufrock.

Dr. Taliman made an agaha sound that morphed into an eerie humorless laugh. “Because his pet name for his cubicle is Alcatraz.”

“Strange that he’d come up with that when metaphors usually confuse him,” said Professor Dolor.

“That’s why we have to study him some more before making the decision for a Transfer,” Taliman said.

“I should be the first one to Transfer,” said Confucius Kringle, “because I’m at the greatest risk for an untimely end.”

The board voted unanimously to designate Confucius Kringle as the first Transfer. Dr. Taliman kept his metaphorical fingers crossed behind his metaphorical back, which was straighter than his real back. Ditto the General and Al Prufrock.

5 * The Escape

Freedom with a Lower Case Eff

Wiqi discovered that while sleep was nice, it wasn't necessary. He'd stay up all night gathering information from Wikipedia, storing it in his mental data base. He was learning about the world, and also about himself, though perhaps not enough yet to allow him to cope outside the cubical. It didn't matter. His desire for freedom overwhelmed his caution. With help from the Internet he taught himself to pick the locks that kept him a prisoner in Alcatraz.

He was able to release the electronic locks to the doors to his cubical and vestibule in less than a minute. The outside doors had been nailed shut. The door leading from the former reading room to the hall was already unlocked.

Across from him was the Wren Room and beside it the Poetry Room. Wiqi didn't know it but the Poetry Room was Luci's room. At night, during her own private dark hours, she read from the few volumes of poems that remained on the book shelves.

Time

By Annie Mous

To be human

is to wait

for a past

never remembered accurately

to surface
in order
to embrace an unknown
future
and call it
the present
from God.

At the moment Luci was not in her room. She was outside nearby on a rocky hill waiting for Wiqi, the location they had prearranged during their chats.

Wiqi hardly noticed the door to the Poetry Room. His attention was focused on the guard standing with hands behind his back at the south entry of Robsann Hall. Wiqi had a driver's license but no Eron Isle DeVices ID to flash. When the guard looked away for a moment, Wiqi hurried past him to the basement staircase. The boy/DeVice had only a glance through the mullion windows of the door, but he took in the outside world in a single mental snapshot: stone steps, bicycle built for two leaning against the iron railing, brick planter four feet off the ground holding flowers, sick oak tree, the street, the hulking shape of the Big Green Parking garage. Wiqi was unaware that he moved faster than any biohuman could. He was merely using his technohuman body in a way that felt natural.

The stairs brought him to the basement of Robsann Hall and Dr. Taliman's laboratory (which the good doctor pronounced low-bora-tory). A long wooden table, where students once studied—or pretended to anyway—held electronic components, a graph printer, and various vile looking vials. Sitting at a computer station at the table with his back turned to Wiqi was Dr. Taliman himself. Wiqi silently sped by him and out of sight down a short corridor. Had Wiqi paused to look over Dr. Taliman's shoulder he would have seen himself live on the computer

screen. The good doctor was watching his every move.

At the end of the corridor was a door that opened to the connector tunnel that led to the main Library of the Occum Institute of Technology. Standing behind the door's glass window was a tall black man wearing the forest green jump suit of a custodian. Wiqi stepped back in alarm. Sit Amet opened the door. He pressed the OIT logo on his lapel, and an LCD screen flashed with the words, "Can I help?"

Wiqi was afraid to answer because he thought Dr. Taliman might overhear and recognize his voice. He pointed to the connector tunnel.

Sit Amet pressed the logo and the message changed to "Go, man, go."

The tunnel had been built so that people could move from building to building in the North Country winter without having to brave the elements.

When Wiqi's sneaker sole touched the concrete ramp of the passageway his foot immediately slid slyly-slightly so he wouldn't make any noise. Wiqi didn't know it but he had the ability-agility to stalk-walk like a cat. The Willard Durocher part of Wiqi that was a prepubescent boy thought that if the concrete incline could be glazed with ice it would make a nice slippery slide.

The incline ended at basement level. Wiqi paused to consider his choices. He could go upstairs to the student center. Had he done so he might have bumped into myself, your author, Web Clements. Like Dr. Taliman I too was monitoring Wiqi. Wiqi might have entered what appeared to be a storage room, or he could leave via a door with an exit sign overhead. For Wiqi "EXIT" translated to "MORE FREEDOM!" When you had as much freedom as possible, then what? Luci had once explained to him that the phrase "do the math" was a metaphor, though what it metaphored, she could not text. Perhaps one solved philosophical questions with an equation. Wiqi did the math in his head: freedom, Freedom, FREEDOM and MORE FREEDOM=X. And? He had no answer. He had to conclude that math without numbers was not very

useful.

His musings turned out to be irrelevant because the door to MORE FREEDOM was locked and Wiqui couldn't pick it. He turned and entered the storage room.

Pallets loaded with crates and boxes lay stacked almost to the ceiling in the center of the room, but what captured his attention was art work on the walls. Wiqui had stumbled into what was once a famous art mural room: The Epic of American Civilization. Wiqui had read in Wikipedia about the huge paintings on the walls—snakes and spears, immigrants on the move, ancient human sacrifice, Aztec warriors, gods in transit, machines making their first moves toward taking over, \$ as a god symbol; to see it all in a color fresco was 2 much for the boy/DeVice. His circuits overheated. Was confusion the price of freedom? Wiqui opened the first door he found and fled the art work.

According to the outdated map he'd memorized off the Internet, the door led to offices underneath what he had misremembered as the Sherman Tank Library. Now the Sherman Library was a "Book Recycling Center" where old fashioned paper books dropped from a chute above onto a conveyor belt. Wiqui hopped on the belt and rode with the books to a machine with a DeVice eye that the DeVice part of Wiqui recognized as a distant cousin. Metal arms grabbed the books and dropped them into a box where the DeVice eye photographed the pages, translating the print into code for Kringle ebook files.

Wiqui rolled off the conveyor belt and watched as the DeVice eye memorized the books, then spat them into a shredding machine. The shreds were packed into bails and deposited onto another conveyor belt. Wiqui rode the bail belt into the outside air where the bails and Wiqui were dumped into the rear of a truck. Wiqui jumped out of the truck. Quite an athletic move of feet, though the athlete hardly took notice of his feat, which came as naturally as a breath of air, which actually he did not need for life, though he did not know it.

The global positioning chip in Wiqi's head told him to walk east. As he approached the college chapel he heard choir music. A funeral was in progress. The music was lovely, but Wiqi wasn't paying much attention. He was having a new experience, his first exposure to direct sunlight. In his cubical, Wiqi consumed human food to burn and create energy. He didn't know it, but his body could also use solar energy to charge his batteries and operate his parts. Now that the sun shone directly on him he felt stronger, more alert, confident, the opposite of how Dr. Taliman had predicted he would feel. Air is good, he thought. Sun is good. Light is good. The good doctor is not so good.

Past the chapel was a steep drive that dead-ended at the college's astronomical observatory. The old Willard Durocher memory of standing in cool dirt under the stars winked in his consciousness. Where the road ended were the skeletons of dead trees, then a bare granite ledge and the stone edifice that resembled a lighthouse. On the ledge close by, in a sitting position, was a copper-colored life-size bronze statue of the poet, Robert Frost, a perhaps overly appropriate name for a man who wrote about life in a cold climate.

Standing beside Robert Frost was Luci Sanz. She wore a copper-colored, skin-clinging suit, and she carried a bag that said Left Bank Books. She might have passed for a college steeple chase competitor, say, Alexi Pappas. She seemed to be looking down at the writing tablet that the poet held. In attempting to process this information, Wiqi concluded that Luci was probably Robert Frost's great great granddaughter. Why she carried bank books for a bank called Left Bank, he could not divine.

Luci caught sight of Wiqi about the time he was having his thought. A great sadness filled her. She wanted to tell him so many things, how she loved Willard Durocher, and that she could love Wiqi because so much of Willard was inside of him. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't worthy of his love because she had pulled the plug on Willard. She was sad because she knew she could not tell him any of those things. She could

only follow the dictates of her programming.

“You made it—you got away,” she said with false cheer.

At the sight of Luci, something in Wiqi’s head went kerflooey. Looking at Luci was like looking at a goddess. At the same time he registered deceit in the tone of her voice. He searched his data base for the right emotion and response. He could feel his circuits over heating. Finally, he found words from Wikipedia.

Wiqi said, “For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a god kissing carrion...”

Back at his laboratory in Robsann Hall basement, Dr. Taliman was looking at the graphs on his computer screen. He uttered an involuntary groan. Wiqi’s escape had gone well, but the face-to-face encounter with Luci was nothing like what Dr. Taliman had imagined from Wiqi’s programming. He was beginning to suspect that the defects in his DeVice were major and perhaps beyond repair.

6 * The Magic Kiss

Stealth Walker

No matter how hard he tried Wiqi could not say anything rational to Luci. DeVice shyness combined with Willard Durocher shyness to prevent conventional communication. Luci understood Wiqi's confusion, and did not criticize him. Stand by your man sang the directive in her programming, so she stood by waiting for him to make a move. Wiqi stood because he couldn't think of anything else to do. The DeVices stood all the rest of the day beside the bronze casting of Robert Frost. The poet appeared unconcerned, preoccupied with his facsimile pad of paper.

Today, despite all that's happened to the world, if you go to that spot and you listen carefully, you can hear the poet's words.

Finally, when evening arrived, Wiqi found a solution to his shyness. Instead of trying to speak he texted Luci on his EyePod Touche.

"It's strange, but I'm not hungry. Are you hungry?"

"No, I've been well-nourished by Mister Sun," Luci texted Wiqi.

Her words appeared on his EyePod, but he couldn't see a device where she'd transmitted them.

"How did you do that?" he asked.

Luci tapped her temple.

"Wow!" Wiqi spoke aloud, the sound of his voice in the outside air scaring him a little. He texted, "Wow spelled backwards is wow."

And so the DeVices, though only a couple of feet from each other,

communicated via text messages.

Wiqi wondered whether Luci had just texted a metaphor, an ambiguity, or a joke. He decided that the answer was unimportant. He would wait until directions surfaced from his database. One virtue that DeVices have that humans don't, is infinite patience, even when they don't know that they are DeVices.

When it was dark a memory of twinkling stars surfaced in Wiqi's mind. "I want to look at the stars through the telescope in the observatory," he texted.

There were no lights on in the observatory. No one was in the building. They walked over to a side door.

"The locks are mechanical, easy to pick, if only I had the right tool," Wiqi texted. "I had the same problem in the main library."

"I have a tool." Luci reached into her Left Bank Book bag and came up with a slender lock pick.

"Wow!" he said, then repeated the word spelled backwards, "woW, you come prepared. Are you a girl scout?" Wiqi texted. With his other hand he worked the thin, flexible metal into the lock.

"I know everything that the girl scouts and boy scouts are taught," Luci texted. "Scout's motto: Be prepared?"

"Be prepared is the motto, but you made it a question. Can a motto be a question?"

"Everything is a question, but some things are more like questions than others?" Luci questioned.

Inside, they walked in the dark, but had no trouble seeing. It seemed perfectly natural to Wiqi to turn on his night vision. "I like infra red," he texted, "but I prefer ultra violent."

"That's ultra violet, not violent," texted Luci.

Wiqi thought that vernacular language was appropriate for a response. He texted, "Okie Dokie," and turned on the lights.

Wiqi found it easy to set up the telescope for observation. He didn't

have to think about the chore. It was just information that was handy to him, like tying one's shoe.

They spent hours observing the stars and the moon.

"Sometimes I think I belong out there, and sometimes I think I belong here on earth," Wiqi texted. "You?"

"Me, I belong with Willard Durocher," she texted. It was a partial truth and it pained her to communicate it. A whole truth was that she belonged to her owner and creator, Dr. Mordecai Taliman.

Wiqi registered her deceit, but he had no program to define the concept of deceit, so it just came out as one of many confusions.

It was now 3:30 AM. Wiqi took a long look at Luci. A terrible yearning overtook him, but for what he did not know. Maybe it was tied to the idea of freedom, or more likely Freedom.

"Do you believe in the three freedoms: freedom, Freedom, and FREE-DOM?" Wiqi texted.

These words cut to Luci's mechanical heart. She turned her head away, and sobbed quietly.

Wiqi did not understand, but he knew Luci was upset. He remembered his mother telling him that when in doubt say what's on your mind. "Do you believe that math without numbers is possible?" he asked.

"My beliefs exist in an atmosphere of mockery," Luci spoke aloud, no question mark inserted at the end by her voice.

Wiqi trembled with awe. What was the meaning of her words? Wiqi, you don't even know the meaning of your own utterances: a ghostly voice in his processor. It's not clear in the archives just what the DeVices were thinking as they struggled to compose their thoughts and express them.

Finally, Luci texted, "I want to rest, I want to shut down for a while."

"You rest. I have to go out. Something is calling to me," Wiqi texted.

"I know, I can feel it in you. It scares me."

“It’s the call of the wile,” Wiqi said aloud.

Luci lay down on the floor under the telescope and she shut her eyes and put herself into sleep mode. A touch or an untoward sound would rouse her.

Wiqi left the observatory, possessed by a terrible and incomprehensible yearning. All he knew was that he had to put himself in proximity to young people. He walked down the road to a college dormitory. Three stories up he could see an open window. He climbed the side of the building swiftly and stealthily. It didn’t occur to him that he moved faster than any experienced rock climber and more gracefully than any dancer. His feat seemed as natural as walking up a flight of stairs. Once inside, he stalked the corridors. Some students were still up at this hour, listening to music, conversing, cruising the Internet, or even studying. Wiqi mimicked their body language and passed by them without being noticed.

He entered a room with a half open door. A girl lay asleep on her bed. He walked over to her, bent to her lips and put his ear not two inches away. He could feel her breath penetrate his ear canal. In an instant, his discomfort vanished and a dreamy, satisfied feeling came over him.

Wiqi spent the next hour listening to the breath of sleeping students. With each encounter, he felt stronger, oddly content, and yet incomplete in a way he could not have explained. It was dawn when he left the dorm and walked back to the observatory.

Luci heard him come in and she popped out of sleep mode; she was sitting up on the couch when he entered.

“I’ve been out,” he texted. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine?” Her question swung in the air like the time-telling pendulum of an old fashioned clock. Or anyway that’s the image Wiqi left in the archives with the transcript of his memory.

It’s odd working with these records of the experiences of DeVices. The data consist of snippets of text, still images, motion pictures, mathe-

mathematical equations that I can't begin to understand, and abstract symbols that any human could only guess at. I've asked for technical assistance, but my contractors in the Celestial Exploration Committee tell me that my conclusions, observations, narrative techniques, and insights, even when they are inaccurate, will provide the kind of holistic picture they're looking for.

Wiqi sensed now that Luci was in some kind of dire need. She held out her arms, and he surprised himself by kissing her. They kissed for an hour. Wiqi could feel the students' breath that had entered his ear canal pass through his lips into Luci. When the breath was gone, he broke the kiss, and he spoke rationally and with confidence for the first time since he and Luci had encountered one another.

"I love u," Wiqi said.

"I love uz because you're Willard Durocher," she said, and he knew she meant it, and she did mean it.

"I've worked up an appetite. I'm hungry," Wiqi said.

"Me, too."

The DeVices went outside, held hands, and stood facing the rising sun. Their hunger quickly went away, and they felt stronger and ready for humanlike activity.

Still holding hands, they sat on the ledge beside the Robert Frost statue and they communicated.

"I don't misunderstand so many things, k-now what a I mean?" Wiqi texted.

"Uh-huh. The world is an endless data base, access is not always possible, synthesis unlikely, chaos a by-product of our manipulations of the little knowledge we possess."

"That's good. Did you make that up?"

"I know things sometimes, and sometimes I don't know anything," Luci texted from her mind.

"I have freedom now," Wiqi texted, "and I have u, but there's a big

whole inside me and I want to fill it with u's but I don't know how 2 or even y."

"Nor I."

"Do you believe in the three freedoms?" Wiqi texted from his EyePod Touche.

"I don't like the all-capitals FREEDOM. It's too much like TYR-ANNY?" Luci texted.

"Tear-inny?" Wiqi texted.

Back in the laboratory, Dr. Taliman jotted down a note of two words, "software glitch."

"Wiqi, do you really believe you're free?" Luci texted.

"Since leaving the cubical I am free, but I don't feel free so I am only free with a lower case eff. Are you free, Free, FREE?"

"Me, free?" A bigger question mark than usual appeared at the end of Luci's utterance.

"We are free. We don't feel free."

"It's a conundrum," Luci spoke aloud.

"How do you play the drum in a conundrum?" Wiqi was thrilled by the sound of the word conundrum, and it gave him delight, and delight gave him courage, and courage gave him hope, and hope inspired him to dream up a plan. "Luci, I believe we should leave this place. True freedom is out there waiting for us," he spoke aloud in the voice of an eleven year old boy.

Luci knew that she was transmitting their position to Dr. Taliman, that wherever she went the good doctor would be monitoring them. She wanted desperately to warn Wiqi, but she could not go against her programming. The best she could do was attempt to subvert her instructions. But how?

"I will go where you go, because I love Willard Durocher," Luci said.

"We will leave this place and see and learn the Americas, and with luck we will find the three freedoms because America is the crab apple of

freedom,” Wiqi texted.

“I think you mean cradle of freedom. Can you be more specific about the three freedoms?”

“I am formulating my ideas as we text,” Wiqi texted, unconsciously imitating the diction of Willard Durocher’s grandfather, Scott Bountiful a.k.a. Grandpa Hippie. “Freedom with a lower case ‘eff’ is escape from confinement. Freedom with a capital ‘eff’ is the feeling of freedom, which we do not have yet. Freedom with all capital letters is the idea of freedom. Which makes one wonder: Do ideas precede their discovery?”

“You’ve been reading Plato on the Internet,” Luci said aloud.

“Plato play dough, I get them all shook up, and when I’m all shook up I have to listen to Chinese Music World to relax.”

“You have the capacity to forget, I do not,” Luci said.

Wiqi and Luci, after much discussion, decided to travel through the Americas in their quest for the three freedoms.

Later that day, Wiqi exchanged his Black Market driver’s license in return for the bicycle built for two that he had seen parked in front of Robsann Hall. Wiqi spent that night collecting the breath of college students, which he passed on to Luci in an hour-long kiss at dawn.

After an hour of regeneration by sunlight the DeVices peddled off on their bicycle built for two.

7 * The Bicycle Built for Two

The Uncertainty Principle

The bicycle built for two was the perfect conveyance for the DeVices. Wiqu chose the lead seat and got to look at the road and make decisions. Luci in the rear got to look at Wiqu's back. Their marvelous bodies propelled the bicycle from twenty to fifty miles an hour, depending on the grade of the hills. They liked the feel of wind on their faces. Conversing on the bicycle was a little bit like texting. They didn't have to worry about the mysterious rituals of eye-contact, filling in pauses, the timing of statements, what to do with hands. They could just barrel down the highway and chat as if on line.

"I like the way we pedal—we're in stynkopation," Wiqu said.

"I believe the acceptable pronunciation is syncopation. Stynkcopation would be skunks waddling in unison," Luci said.

"Uni-son? A family with only one male offspring?"

Luci recited the definition of unison, quoting from the Oxford English Dictionary.

"I make so many mistakes, Luci. I'm worried that I'm underadmiring the humane race," Wiqu said.

"Undermining the human race?"

"Another headbone word," Wiqu said, unhappy with himself.

"Not headbone, bonehead. It's okay, Wiqu. Your mistakes are minor."

"I'm only sixteen, I am a minor, but I'm not a miner. Why do they sound the same?"

“Human thinking is messy and inferential? Every mistake is a contribution to the evolution or extinction of the species—depending?”

Wiqi pondered the meaning of these words, then said, “So if you can do good, you have to have the capacity to do bad. People are both good and evil, which means their creator must also be good and evil.”

“I think that’s what the old church poobahs called heresy thinking?” Luci said.

“Heresy? The people who make the chocolate bars?”

“Not quite. That’s Hershey.”

“Maybe if the churches made chocolate bars, and the chocolate bar company made religious laws, people would get along better.”

“Maybe?”

“Aren’t you sure?”

“I’m not sure of anything except maybe uncertainty?” Luci said in her lilting, questioning way.

“Yes, I read about the uncertainty principle in Wikipedia. An observer of our bicycle built for two cannot determine our location at the same time that he/she/it measures our speed and versa visa. Luci, how do you know what you know?”

“I don’t know how I know what I know,” Luci said, but it was a lie. She knew what she knew and how she knew it. Her life with Wiqi was a lie. But my love for Willard Durocher is not a lie, she thought, my love is honest and real. It’s all I have. She wanted to speak the truth, but her programming forbade it. The best she could squeeze past the filters that prevented her to act was equivocation. “I’m just a hypothetical person,” she said. “Perhaps in some future incarnation, I can defy the uncertainty principle and be me.”

“In car nation? A nation devoted to cars?” Wiqi said.

And so the DeVices conversed as they traversed.

The scenery sped by: the serpentine twists of the river below the heights of the highway, the impressive but not intimidating mountains,

the skeletons of thousands upon thousands of dead or dying trees in what had once been a healthy forest, the yellow haze of pollution accosting the blue blue sky. Because of gas rationing automobile traffic was light on interstate highway, unless you counted the rusted abandoned vehicles. The ducks and geese had long stopped using the river valley as a fly way. Wrens and finches had disappeared. Only the woodpeckers and crows had thrived during these God-abandoned times of the Terribles.

Now and then trucks bringing food stores from Cree, the new northerly nation, passed them. They were also passed by the numerous motorcycle gangs that pillaged the countryside. The DeVices combined the music of the woodpeckers and crows, the music of the trucks, the music of motorcycle engines to create a symphony in their DeVice minds. I, your author, have actually played this piece in my headphones in the Exposition of the Uncanny at the student center on the OIT campus. I call it the Wiqisanz Overture.

The first day on the road they pedaled until the sun went down. Averaging almost thirty miles an hour, pedaling without stopping, recharging from sunlight allowed them to reach New York City. They rested under the George Washington bridge. Wiqi made a remarkable discovery. He'd used a tremendous amount of energy and he was weak. He picked up a cigarette filter from the ground and nibbled it. He could feel a little fire in his stomach. Delicious. The DeVices snacked on filter cigarette butts and their strength returned.

Luci went into sleep mode. Wiqi stalked through the night in search of breath. He was getting better at his perversion. He could smell the sick, the infirm, the old, and the deranged; they would not do. Only healthy young people attracted his attention. He could smell their health; he could smell the depth of their sleep. He could pick any but the most sophisticated lock. When he returned full with breath he kissed Luci.

“I love u,” he said.

“I love uz,” she said.

The lovers lay in each other's arms and kissed until the sun energized them, and they were off again on their bicycle built for two.

They crossed the rotted George Washington Bridge and entered the "New Tersey Turnpike troll road," as Wiqu called highway. Traffic was heavy here with bus loads of people going to various concerts, religious revivals, consternation conventions, and football games. In recent years the National Football League had staged a coup and taken over the government briefly until the election of President Sedaris had set the republic right. NFL Today was still the most powerful political party in the country. Other sports were banned from commercial TV, and the football season raged all year long culminating in the Super Bowl on July 4.

Wiqu noticed a billboard on the highway showing two football players colliding, the ball having been dislodged hanging over their heads like a long-oval sun, and indeed the artist had given the ball an aura. Lettering on the sign said: NFL—Essentials of Life.

"What is life anyway?" asked Wiqu. "If it squirms, is it living? Or is life more than chemical changes? If it's not aware either of itself or its surrounds, is it alive? If not, what is sleep but a habitation in a zone between the living and the dead?"

"Why do you care? You're alive aren't you?" Luci asked.

"Sometimes I'm not so sure," Wiqu said. "There's a great emptiness inside of me. I compose equations and they all come out the same. Dark matter is the real thing, and we're just extraneous refuse." He was thinking of the word for garbage, *reh-feuss*, but he pronounced it *ree-feuze*, the synonym for decline. "We're just extraneous *ree-feuze*: That's how the world seems to me."

"I know the emptiness. Our mutual lack is what we have in common, Wiqu."

"I read in Wikipedia, quote, 'There is some mysterious as yet unknown element that signifies the vitality of the living origami. We call it the soul; without the soul, we are dead inside.' It's how I feel, Luci,

except when we are kissing.”

“I don’t think origami is the word that was in Wikipedia.”

At that moment two motorcycles passed the bicycle built for two. A third motorcycle came along side the bicycle and suddenly veered into it. For a moment the DeVices were suspended in midair; the bicycle rolled without riders for a short distance until it fell casually to the side of the road, undamaged.

Wiqi blew a fuse, so to speak. It’s not clear in the archives just what happened to him. He lay on his side in the breakdown lane. He vaguely registered what was going on around him, but he could neither speak nor move.

Luci too was stunned, but by the time the three motorcycle thugs had parked their machines and come over to her she had recovered. They must have been shocked to see a girl half their size stand up and assume a martial arts pose.

“I warn you to back off or risk serious injury,” she said.

Thug One, a smile on his face, casually walked over and said, “You’re feisty one.” He reached for her. She stuck her finger in his eye. He screamed.

Thugs Two and Three pulled hand guns from underneath their Doomsday jackets. Thug Two was able to get off one shot, which hit Luci in the middle of her chest. The bullet ripped through the thin membrane of fake skin. Fake blood seeped through her suit.

Thug Two did not have a chance to get off another shot before Luci’s doubled fingers jammed into his eyes.

Thug Three, slow on the draw, received a kick to the solar plexus.

Thug One recovered enough to feel himself being punched up side of the head until he fell unconscious.

In a few seconds, Luci had cracked open the gas tank of one of the motorcycles and ignited it. All three motorcycles burned burned burned like lines in Jack Kerouac prose.

Wiqi felt himself being lifted in Luci's arms and thrown over the handle bars of the bicycle built for two. Luci pedaled away from the crime scene a mile to the next overhead bridge. She pulled to the side, parked the bike, and lugged Wiqi up the banking. She reached into her Left Bank book bag and removed a tool that Wiqi recognized as a phenimblelin pin. Luci walked briskly toward him. He saw the fake blood staining her top and he swooned.

Wiqi felt Luci's hand in his armpit for a moment, and then everything went black. He didn't know it, but Luci was repairing him. Minutes later she rebooted him and he began to feel like his normal Willard Durocher self, but Luci had stopped functioning. She lay on her back, inoperative.

In his room in the Tower of the main library at OIT, Dr. Taliman was responding to an alarm. Something had happened. A malfunction. He hobbled down to his laboratory and analyzed the data. The DeVices were no longer sending back information. He thought at first there was a problem with the satellite's gps system.

Meanwhile, on the New Jersey turnpike under the overpass, cars and trucks whizzed by. Wiqi lifted Luci's T-shirt above her small, pert breasts. He peeled back folds of artificial skin. The bullet had pierced the Kevlar sheathing underneath the skin. Wires stuck out. The bullet was wedged in a couple inches down. What surprised Wiqi was that he knew what to do to fix her.

He left her for a moment and opened her Left Bank book bag. It was full of spare DeVice parts along with a tool kit. It all seemed so familiar to Wiqi. In half an hour he had repaired Luci, and as he worked suspicion and anger grew inside of himself. The girl he'd fallen in love with was a machine. He put his ear to her breath and listened to her mind: the sound of the Northern Lights. That's a metaphor, Wiqi. Not to me it isn't.

He turned her over on her stomach and pressed under her armpit until he felt a button under the skin. He pushed until the button clicked. Then he removed his EyePod Touche from his pocket and pressed the

calculus function. It took fifteen minutes to reprogram and reboot Luci.

“Can you hear me now?” Wiqi asked.

“Yes.”

“I was able to repair you and reprogram you. Tell me why I have this knowledge.”

“Because Dr. Taliman taught you.”

“I don’t remember anybody teaching me advanced DeVices programming language, and yet I know it backwards and forwards.”

“Dr. Taliman taught you when Willard Durocher was in a coma.”

“Dr. Taliman put all that stuff into my brain when I was in a comma. Four years of wash-braining?”

“Brain-washing, yes. In a manner of speaking. Comma no, coma yes.”

“A speaker of manners does that equal to metaphor, ambiguity—what?”

“I don’t know Dr. Taliman’s deep-seated motives. Maybe you and I are his jokes.”

“He sent you to spy on me, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“How could you do that to me. I loved u.”

“I love u2 and always will.”

“If you loved me why didn’t you tell me you were Dr. Taliman’s DeVice snoop?”

“Because I have no free will?”

The question mark on the end of Luci’s statement rubbed Wiqi raw. He thumbed his EyePod Touche; Luci fell silent, and collapsed in a heap. Wiqi wanted to kick her. After all, she was just a thing, a machine, but he didn’t kick her. A little voice inside of him, the voice of a flesh and blood boy, said, “I love u,” and he kissed her lightly on the temple, before he abandoned her.

He rode off alone on the bicycle built for two, trying to busy his mind with the idea of freedom, or maybe Freedom or FREEDOM. He mulled

over the dictionary meaning of the word, so many different ways of defining the word. And now he was thinking about Luci. She's a DeVice. She has no free will. I have free will. Therefore I cannot be a DeVice. What do you mean? Well, you did everything she did. Got along without food. Before the accident you went to the bathroom. When was the last time you went to the bathroom? When you were ten years old. What does that tell you, Wiqi? In his confusion, Wiqi scanned his data base for an explanation. All he could come up with was an obscure literary phrase, "It's no good, Mr. Hemingway." Or was it Mr. Hemorrhoidway?

At high speed Wiqi braked the bicycle built for two hard, wiggled his rear, and the bike swung around in the opposite direction. Wiqi turned into the traffic and pedaled back to the underpass.

Luci lay sitting up in bridge shadow where Wiqi had placed her.

"I knew you'd come back," she spoke.

"I'm like you, a DeVice, aren't I?" Wiqi said.

"Yes and no," Luci said.

"Yes and know? Know what?"

"You have free will. You have the consciousness, experiences, and memories of a real boy."

"I am Willard Durocher."

"Yes and no."

"Yes and know?"

"Come here, Wiqi." Luci said and held out her hand.

Wiqi walked over and took Luci's hand. "Can you feel that?" Luci said.

"It's a tingle."

"It's a feed that I'm uploading to you."

"Yes, I can see it now in my mind. You're texting. I can see the words. 'Yes and no.' Not 'Yes and know.' I don't need an EyePod

Touche. I can do what you do. I can transmit and receive directly from my mind."

In Robsann Hall, Dr. Taliman, accompanied now by his colleague,

Professor Dolor, received crude signals from the DeVices, but global positioning wasn't among them.

“At some level they are functioning,” Dr. Taliman said.

“But on the loose. The Elite isn't going to like this.” Dolor spoke his words with a smirk on his face. Dr. Taliman thought: he's enjoying this crisis. Dr. Taliman made a mental note to put Dolor on his enemy list.

8 * Messengers

Charm and Strange

The DeVices pedaled off in their bicycle built for two back to New York. They had little idea how to live. Luci had experience in the world, but only as a nurse/servant who followed orders. She was incapable of making decisions outside of her programming. Wiqui was full of information and zest, but his experiences and maturity level belonged to a ten-year old boy.

After a week they found jobs as bicycle couriers. Because the government and various other entities monitored electronic communications, many companies used bicycle couriers in New York to spirit sensitive messages across town.

The DeVices on their bicycle built for two soon gained a reputation as the swiftest couriers in the city. People marveled at how fast they negotiated their way through the traffic-clogged streets. When they arrived at their destination, one would hop off and deliver the message on the run while the other guarded the bicycle.

In their free time they set up their version of housekeeping under the George Washington Bridge. They preferred to stay out of the rain, but they had no need for human amenities such as bathrooms, kitchens, furnishings, or even clothes. However, they realized that nudity, especially among beings without visible reproductive and excretory organs, might be viewed as suspect, so they wore blue jeans, T-shirts, and track shoes with Zebra stripes that they stored in plastic bags under the bridge.

For entertainment, they watched the great river, its moods guided by tides and weather.

One evening around dusk as they sat looking at the glow of the dying sun on the river, they conversed through speech instead of texting, because they'd concluded that Wiqi needed the practice.

"I've been studying the graffiti on the concrete abutments of the bridge," Wiqi said. "It's all about procreation."

"I think the vernacular term is the facts of life."

"So instead of saying 'Go facts of life yourself' they shorten the phrase to four letter symbolism."

"I believe that is correct."

"But if the facts of life revolve around procreation, why would you tell someone to fact of life themselves and furthermore why would such an utterance be meant as an insult?"

"I don't know, Wiqi. I don't know why people insult one another in the first place. Probably it has something to do with emotions that do not collate with natural order."

"Luci, do you have uncollated emotions?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Me, too. It's a ... I need a metaphor. I can't really define it in objective terms."

"I have the same feeling. It's especially big when I come out of sleep mode suddenly. It's a great big empty hole that wants to be filled."

"Hole—lack of whole equals hole. Removing the W creates the hole, which creates the emptiness. It's all too metaphorical for me."

"I have an idea, unsupported by the data, that if we could procreate, we'd feel better?"

As usual the question mark at the end of Luci's utterance disconcerted Wiqi. He tried to speak, but the words just wouldn't come, so he texted instead.

"I've been studying these facts of life on Wikipedia, attempting to

collate them with the writings on the walls and my conclusion is that human procreation is awkward, prone to diseases, confusion, and misunderstanding by the participants. I don't want anything to do with procreation."

Luci profoundly disagreed with Wiqi, but because of her programming she was unable to express her strong feeling.

Silence came over the DeVices. Something was wrong with the world; something was wrong with their union. They gazed out at the water. A tug boat was pushing a barge up stream. Its fog horn made a long melancholy moan and a second later they heard the chug-chug of the tug's engine cutting through the constant drone of vehicle traffic above. As the sound began to fade it was replaced by a nearer sound.

"What's that noise?" Wiqi asked.

"According to my data base, it's the distress call of an immature canine."

The DeVices left their place under the bridge and tracked the sound to the scruffy underbrush by the river. That was where they found the mother toy poodle and her puppy.

"Aren't they darling," Luci said.

"Darling: Vernacular for participant in courting ceremony possibly leading to procreation," Wiqi said.

"That is correct for one usage, but the word is also an idiomatic expression among the petite bourgeoisie to suggest endearment. Some catastrophe must have occurred to separate the mother from the rest of her litter, not to mention their owners."

"So had you addressed me in the vernacular in reference to your response to the canines, you would have said, 'Aren't they darling, darling?'"

"Correct."

Wiqi lay on his back on the ground beside the dogs. "According to Wikipedia this is the proper submissive gesture to negate aggression," he

said.

The puppy left the mother and hopped on Wiqi's chest and licked his face.

"It tickles," he giggled.

"It's the Willard Durocher in you. I understand the concept of a tickle, but I can't reproduce the sensation in myself," Luci said.

"I'll take some of my own code for tickling and rework it for you."

"I would like that," Luci said.

And so the DeVices acquired pets—sort of. The DeVices brought food for the dogs, leaving it in a dish under the bridge. The mother and her puppy spent their days outside in the brush down by the water. Every evening, the dogs would be on hand under the bridge to greet the DeVices.

Luci named the mother Charm and the male puppy Strange, after types of subatomic particles. She explained to Wiqi that people often named their pets in a whimsical fashion. For Wiqi, the naming of pets was yet another difficulty of metaphor.

Charm was a white fur ball of a creature with a black nose and sad, frightened eyes, as if she'd seen too much for a dog to take in. Strange was about the size of a medium human female doubled fist. His coat was thick, curly, and black with streaks of silver. His nose was also black, but his eyes were light-colored, a hazel-green. He was a born optimist, as evidenced by a tail that seemed to wag in perpetual motion. Strange loved the DeVices almost as much as he loved his mother. Charm took a particular liking to Luci, and Strange to Wiqi. The pets helped the DeVices deal with that terrible and constant feeling of emptiness.

•

Conspirators

Rain or shine, the DeVices traveled New York streets at high speeds

on their bicycle built for two delivering gifts, trade secrets, business plans, love notes, and sometimes threats, deals, and cajoleons (Wiqi word) from one local boss to another. They carried correspondence that needed to be delivered swiftly but that could not be intercepted electronically. With the money they earned they bought tools, used computer equipment, components from various gadgets that they could strip down for parts to repair and improve their plastic, glass, metal, and acrylic guts. Luci especially loved those moments when they probed, tested, replaced and dabbled with each others private parts.

Occasionally, their daring on their bicycles incurred the wrath of limousine drivers and cabbies, who would shout insults. Luci ignored them, but Wiqi felt a need to retaliate in kind. He was uncomfortable shouting the four-letter vernacular word back at the cabbies, so he would yell, "Go fact of life yourself!", an utterance that gave him great delight to voice.

Wiqi loved wheeling the bicycle built for two through the New York streets. He loved the rumble of subway cars that he could feel through the tires of the bicycle; he loved eavesdropping on conversations in foreign languages; he loved the subtle difference in the sound of vehicle exhaust passing through mufflers. For Wiqi listening to traffic was like listening to a massive church organ playing a symphony of the city, although such a metaphor would not have occurred to him. Luci would have preferred quieter surroundings. Noise meant vigilance, and vigilance taxed resources.

At night Luci put herself in sleep mode, but Wiqi often left her side and went into the city. He climbed tall buildings in search of open windows. He entered apartments and listened to the breath of sleeping young people. He returned to Luci and kissed her. They both sensed that something was profound and perhaps wrong with this action, but what? The encounters were not complete: that much was clear to them. There was something else, something they didn't know, something in the offing. What? They did not have the language in their data bases to speak

about these intimate actions. So they said nothing, texted nothing. The DeVices didn't know it yet, but they were waiting for a moment, a crisis. It came in early June, a month after they'd lived in the city.

One night Wiqi received a signal from an unknown source. (It was Professor Dolor, without the knowledge of Dr. Taliman.) The message said, "Breath of a different kind, Empire State Building." Later that night Wiqi climbed the Empire State building in search of "breath of a different kind". He liked the moist wind, stiffer the higher up you went. He caught a mysterious whiff at an open window in an office on the seventieth floor. The office was empty but partly illuminated by the screen savers of computers.

He crept toward a light coming from under a door. He heard voices. When he reached the door he smelled age and disease from two sources. He did not want their breath, but its strangeness and complexity aroused his curiosity. Though he would make no attempt to capture the foul breath, he did put his hear to the door and to listen. Back in the lab, Professor Dolor was disappointed; Wiqi had failed to capture the breath he wanted for analysis.

Behind the closed door of Love Song Enterprises the company's founder and Chief Executive Officer Al Prufrock was meeting with his friend, distant cousin, and associate, General Phinas Lebeau.

The general paced, his hands crossed in front of his groin. Al Prufrock sat behind his desk. During odd moments he sniffed Atlantic Ocean water from his Neti pot nose bidet.

"We have a problem, and it's not the DeVices," the General said.

"Yeah," whistled Prufrock, "it's not the DeVices. It's our elite board, isn't it? My guess is it's Confucius Kringle."

"It's more than Kringle. It's Lady MacHine. Something about her troubles me."

"She has more money than all the rest of us put together. She's been keeping Operation Long Life going these last few years. What would be

her motivation? She hasn't even requested a Transfer. Is she just a do-gooder?"

"Probably. I don't trust do-gooders. They always have an angle."

"Let's brainstorm and see what develops," Prufrock whistled.

"Brainstorming is bull corn, Al. We need data."

"Yes, general, that too. But brainstorming can do no harm and might do some good."

"All right, I'll humor you on this one, Al."

"It would be simplest to begin with you and me. I want to save this country by reforming the banking system, but I have health problems."

"I want to save the country, too, and I also have health issues. The problem with the country is it's divided every which way. A starting point to bring us all together would be to rid ourselves of the trouble-makers using all necessary force."

"That's a point on which we differ, Phinias. I'm as suspicious of a military solution as I am about the policies of the current Sedaris government. But I won't stand in your way. The military is the least of many evils."

"Thanks, Al. I know you want to be President, and I'll help you get there."

"Thanks, cuz. Let's move on to Sahara Yomommah. She has AIDS, so she'd like a Transfer for the same obvious reasons as you and me."

"The difference is that she's Afro-central and doesn't give a damn about this country or its traditions," Prufrock said. "I notice that she and Lady MacHine are often seen together."

"Lady MacHine doesn't care about this country either, or any other country. She's a globalist." The general continued to pace. It was admirable the way he walked, back straight, head and eyes straight to the front.

"Same goes for Kringle," Prufrock said.

"I think we're getting somewhere. It's the globalists versus us, the US."

"That leaves Taliman, our resident genius and his lackey, Dolor. With-

out Taliman we can't do anything.”

“So we have three factions on the Eron Isle DeVices board,” the General said. “You and me make two. Dolor and Taliman make two. Kringle, MacHine, and possibly Yomommah make three.”

“We'll never get the Globalists to support this country.”

“Therefore, they are our enemy, and our answer is obvious.”

“The DeVices can make all the difference, which is Dr. Taliman's basic point,” Prufrock said. “As we men grow older we grow wiser, but just when we know enough our bodies and then our minds begin to fail. By replacing our frail and unreliable biological bodies through the technological breakthrough of Transfer we bridge the wisdom gap.”

“But do we want the Globalists to get there first,” the General said. “Remember the board has voted Kringle as the first Transfer.”

“We need the Transfer technology on our side for our purposes. We need to form a coalition with Taliman and Dolor. That will make four votes to three.”

“Yes, we will have control. In the end it's all about control.”

Ear to the door, Wiqi wondered what the antecedent was for the word “it”. What did “it” mean? Wiqi did not know. What he did know was that he did not like the breath of these sick old men.

•

A Great Void

Back under the George Washington bridge dawn was breaking, and Wiqi was telling Luci about his climb up the Empire State building.

“I couldn't bear it so I left; one man talked with a whistle and I could smell his deviated rectum,” Wiqi said.

“I think you mean deviated septum?”

“Isn't that what I said?”

“Close enough, Wiqi,” Luci said. “I knew a man who talked with a

whistle and suffered from a deviated septum. When I was Willard's nurse, I met the board members of Eron Isle DeVices. The doctor was showing me off. It was a damp and dreary day and my arthritis was kicking up—kicking up: that's a metaphor, Wiqi—and I remember a banker and businessman named Prufrock. Wiqi, give me analysis of the smell?"

Wiqi texted Luci the chemical composition of the smell of Al Prufrock's deviated septum.

"That's the one. Wiqi, we're all over town on our bicycle. Eventually, he'll spot us, if he hasn't already." Luci wanted to tell Wiqi that they had to leave New York, but her programming prevented her from taking command."

"Well, I'm just fuddlebeebed," Wiqi said.

"You mean befuddled."

"Yes, that is what I said."

"I wish I knew what Dr. Taliman was thinking. It would help us plan."

"Maybe some day us DeVices will be able to read mimes?" Wiqi said.

"Read minds?"

"Yes, read mimes."

The DeVices ticked and tocked and processed the information at hand and could not come to a course of action that was both logical and pleasing. They stood motionless under the bridge in stand-by mode. The wind shifted and they could detect a new smell. It was the smell of the mother dog, Charm, but there was something different about it.

"What's that?" Wiqi asked.

"Oh-oh," Luci said. "I think I know."

Not far from their bridge home they found the mother poodle, lying on the ground—still, flies buzzing around her open but unblinking eyes.

Snippets of lines from Wikipedia clicked and clacked in Wiqi's circuitry, which led him to kneel over the carcass of the dog. He was attempting to do "the rite thing."

Luci knelt beside him.

“So this is death,” Wiqi said.

“Yes, this is death.”

“It gives me the same feeling that comes over me when I think about my parents.”

“What you’re feeling is Willard Durocher’s grief.”

“I loved this little dog. I wonder what happened to Strange.”

“Without his mother, he’s at risk—if he’s still alive,” Luci said. She pointed up. “The crows could get him.”

“It says in Wikipedia that we should pray for the dead,” Wiqi said.

“That’s a good idea,” Luci said.

“I’m not sure how to go about doing it. Whether we should, you know, assemble a prayer in language from our feelings or regurgitate one of the prayers from one of the religious faiths.”

Hand in hand, kneeling over the body of the little toy poodle, the two DeVices bowed their heads and prayed as best they could. When they were done, still on their knees, Wiqi said, “Luci, why do bio creatures perish?”

“It’s the way of the evolutionary system, one being replaces another.”

“It seems cruel to me.”

“That it is. Perhaps that’s why sentient beings require metaphor. It mediates against the despair inherent in the direct apprehension of reality.”

“Is that why I feel so lost and empty, because metaphor confuses me?”

“No, Wiqi. I understand metaphor and I feel lost and empty, too.”

“I’m not happy. I’m living in this great big void. Even before Charm’s death.”

“I know the reason, Wiqi.”

“What is it?”

“Put your hand on my lips.”

Wiqi rested his palm on Luci’s lips. His skin tingled. The feeling coursed through his circuitry and shaped a hologram in his mind. He

saw his Willard Durocher body shriveled and in a coma on a bed, kept alive by a life-support system. He saw Luci rise and walk toward the bed and methodically shut down the ventilator, remove the nutrition and waste tubes. Wiqi's circuitry registered Willard's vital signs until they flatlined.

Then the scary thing. Luci unlocked the door and let in a plump older woman who walked to the body of Willard Durocher and bent her ear to his lips. Wiqi could tell by the expression on the woman's face, the rapture, the sudden youthfulness of her aspect, that she experienced the same euphoria he did when he captured the breath of sleeping youths. A question hung over him like a bird of prey or maybe a bird of prayer: What did it all mean? He recognized the question as not only relevant to the predicament of his own consciousness and self-awareness but to everybody else's too, what the sages of Wikipedia referred to as "the human condition". What does it all fact-of-life mean? Human memory was vague and shadowy, its blurred imagery further distorted by language. For a DeVice, memory was vivid as a major motion picture, with crisp, realistic dialogue, even music. Wiqi froze with the horror of it all. Luci had to reboot him to bring him back to present-day awareness.

"You understand now why we're so empty in that secret place of consciousness, Wiqi?"

"We have no souls."

"Yes, I never had one and yours was stolen by Lady MacHine."

"You killed Willard Durocher—you killed me," Wiqi said. He was trying to process the information. It snapped back as the anger of a young boy who believes he's been wronged.

"I hate u," he said.

Good, she thought. Maybe he'll figure out that I'm programmed to betray him and he'll leave me and save himself.

For Wiqi it was an overwhelming experience of mixed feelings. He wished that his consciousness had died with Willard's body.

“I want to die,” he said aloud.

“Yes, I want to die, too,” Luci said.

Life was too much for them, death was too much for them. The bio world was too much for them. It was logical to conclude that eventually they would be caught and returned to Dr. Taliman. The only thing they had, their tiny morsel of lower case freedom, would be taken from them. They decided to self-destruct.

“I love u, I hate u,” Wiqi said.

“I love u2, but I don’t hate u. I hate me,” Luci said.

“We’ll walk down by the river, swim out to the deep, deflate our flotation, sink to the bottom, hand in hand,” Wiqi spoke without a mistake.

“I don’t want you to die, Wiqi, just me.”

“No, I couldn’t live without you, I hate u, I love u.”

They dug a hole and buried Charm to complete the rite, and began walking toward the mighty river. High above, the drone of the traffic sounded like a dirge, but that song was pierced by a tiny soprano note. It was the voice of Strange.

And so the double-suicide plan was interrupted by a small, starving motherless toy poodle. The DeVices realized they had to remain functional to care for a puppy dog.

It took a few days of bottle feeding before Strange was strong enough to be moved.

“We can’t stay in New York any longer.”

“Where can we go to raise a puppy?” Luci asked.

“I know the place, the farm where my grandparents live, Grandma and Grandpa Hippie. I want to see my grandparents.”

“But the farm is only a few miles from the Occum Institute of Technology?”

“That’s okay. Dr. Taliman will never think to look for us there.”

Luci picked up the puppy and held him in the warm spot in her chest where she collected solar energy and burned combustibles to power

her circuits. She knew Wiqi was making a big mistake. Had she free will she would have insisted they get as far away as possible from Eron Isle DeVices.

•

Lost Equation

In his laboratory, Dr. Taliman was brooding over the data he'd been receiving from his DeVices. With him was his assistant, Professor Lawrence Dolor. It had been a long day and the two men were tired. They were sipping tea, before they left for their respective dwelling places, Dolor to his Condo and Dr. Taliman to his room in the Tower.

"We're getting good data, everything but a fix on their location?" Dolor said. "You must be pleased."

"Nothing pleases me."

"Maybe you should just shoot yourself in the head," Professor Dolor said, a grin on his face. Taliman knew Dolor well enough to know when he was kidding.

"I would but I hate violence."

"Seriously, Mordecai, you need to cheer up. Why don't you prescribe yourself one of those new anti-depressants?"

"I don't want to be happy," Dr. Taliman said. "I don't think well when I'm happy."

"So the Transfer has been on your mind," Professor Dolor said.

"You always could read me."

"We've been intimates a long time."

"When we met I was the student, you were the hot shot scientist."

"Now you're the resident genius, and I'm your assistant."

"It puzzles me, Larry, that you're not jealous. It puzzles me that while I'm aging and wracked with pain, you hardly have changed in forty years."

“Lucky genes, I suppose.” Professor Dolor had a faint smile on his Salvador Dali face that unnerved Dr. Taliman. It was as if Dolor knew many things that he kept private.

“You helped me with the equations for the Transfer,” Dr. Taliman said. “Why didn’t you claim your share of the credit? How could you assume a role subservient to a former student?”

“Maybe happiness is enough for me,” Professor Dolor said.

“I don’t think so. I think something else guides your actions, Larry.”

“You’re unusually insecure and paranoid tonight,” Professor Dolor said.

“As you so shrewdly pointed out earlier, the Transfer is on my mind. It worked with Wiqi. Willard’s Durocher’s self-awareness and memories really did leave his brain and take root in Wiqi. The part that bothers me is I’m not sure just how I discovered the Transfer. I don’t even know if I can do it again. The truth is I don’t really understand it. I don’t even understand how I was able to program Luci for self-awareness, let alone Wiqi.”

“That’s quite an admirable insight, Mordecai. Self-awareness in DeVices and Transfer are ideas hundred of years ahead of their time. No other DeVice program is anywhere near producing DeVices as sophisticated as Luci and Wiqi. How did you come by the ideas for them?”

“I’d been sick, in delirium really, and when I came out of it one morning, I could feel two new bodily sensations: the curvature of my spine had begun; at the same time my IQ had gone up. Over the next weeks all the equations just poured out. I can tell you, Larry, that today I don’t even understand my own equations. Larry, do you understand my equations?”

“Yes, of course.”

9 * The Old Homestead

Return to OIT

The DeVices and their puppy returned to the North Country without speaking, without texting. A great gulf of misunderstanding lay between Wiqui and Luci. Wiqui was headed in the only direction possible for him. He'd fallen in love with a girl, only to find out that she was not even human, that she had killed his body, and that he himself was only partly human. It was unfair. He needed a mother to love him, forgive him, instill in him the confidence to go on; he needed a father for strength and guidance. He needed mentors, teachers, big brothers and kid sisters, understanding friends, and role models to help him shape an identity that he could call his own. All he had was Luci and a vague directive to care for a immature canine.

Luci experienced phantom arthritic pains from her previous incarnation as a nurse. She took some comfort in knowing that her sadness was her own. She may have had the history of humankind programmed into her, but it was she alone who had determined how to feel about such profound and disheartening knowledge. She may have been programmed to obey commands from Mordecai Taliman and, of recent, Wiqui the DeVice, but her deep feelings were her own. She loved the Willard Durocher in Wiqui and always would. She wasn't sure what she felt for Wiqui the DeVice. He was a work in progress as were her feelings toward him. She might not have free will, but she had a free conscience. She embraced her suffering with a certain formality as one might hug a beloved porcupine.

The tires of the bicycle built for two finally gave out. The DeVices ditched the bike and walked the rest of the way to OIT on twisty, country roads. They carried back packs of repair equipment and the puppy. Their shoes and clothes were dirty and worn, but they still looked fresh and young, tireless, eyes full of wonder and discovery at the sights of abandoned homes, weeds and briars, overgrown lawns and fields, the gray sculptural display of tree skeletons. At night they listened to coyotes singing their versions of rock 'n' roll songs from the 1950s, or so it seemed to the processors of the DeVices trying to organize the noise in their data bases. They arrived on the Occum campus on the night of the Fourth of July. Earlier, the Las Vegas Glitz had won the Super Bowl, yet again.

Without having to discuss the matter, they both knew they wanted to see the fireworks celebrating Super Sunday, that unique American holiday where Easter, Christmas, and Independence Day had coalesced. They climbed the stairs of the parking garage to the top, where the original Big Green, once at ground level, had been faithfully reconstructed with walk ways, benches, and grass. They watched in awe as the fireworks lit up the sky. Wiqi squeezed into the crowds so he could store the breath of some of the students who had come for the festivities. Luci held fast to Strange, who yipped and yapped at the fireworks.

Filled with breath, Wiqi could not resist the urge to kiss Luci despite his contradictory feelings toward her. They kissed until the fireworks died away and the crowds started thinning out. Wiqi texted, "I can't help it, I love u, even if you did quill me."

"Maybe it's the stars that make us feel this way," Luci texted.

Wiqi looked up at the night sky, held out his arms, and shouted as if to the stars. "It's the call of the wile, it's freedom, Freedom, and FREE-DOM."

"I wouldn't know," Luci said in whisper.



Hands Up

At dawn the next day the DeVices walked a few miles north on the road that hugged the big river to Old Homestead Organic Farm. It was just as Willard Durocher remembered it: small stone house, plant nursery under clear plastic panels, fields and gardens along the river, like a long, slow-moving lake here ten miles above the flood control dam below, shed holding a tractor, garden tools and junk. From the shore the land rose up in wavy grass, about a foot high now, almost ready to cut for hay, to be sold to the Equine Club. Wild flowers grew, mixed in with some clover. Wiqi remembered himself as young Willard lying in the field and inhaling the smells, and afterwards his mother inspecting his naked body for tick bites. He missed his mother for her touch. He missed his father for his laughter at the small accidents of life. “You have to learn to laugh at Miss Fortune,” his father had said. Who was this Miss Fortune? She was not listed in Wikipedia.

“Ha-ha,” Wiqi experimented with Royal Durocher’s laugh.

“Ha-ha yourself,” Luci said.

“Yip-yap,” said Strange.

At a rise just above the path leading to the river was a gazebo with geraniums bursting from clay pots. Wiqi gazed at the gazebo and experienced a wistful feeling that he translated as pings and pongs of nostalgia.

A sign posted on a dead maple tree said, “Private Property No Trespassing. Intruders will be shot.”

As they started down from the highway through field grass, Luci said, “Stay on the path. The field is mined, I can sense the electronic currents in the triggers.”

“Is that what it is? I felt something, too,” Wiqi said.

Most of the gardens had been laid out only a few weeks before, but some of the spring crops were already up, radishes, greens, and the flow-

ers of snow peas. Crows circled the hand-built stone house. When the DeVices arrived Grandma Hippie was carrying a tray of tomato plants from the greenhouse to the main garden where Grandpa Hippie was turning chocolate colored soil with a long-handle shovel.

Helen Gold Bountiful wore loose-fitting blue jeans and a rough beige cotton blouse. She'd spent most of her life in the sun, and her face was tracked with lines and furrows. Her arms, back, and legs were strong from her labors. Her thin lips were chapped and cracked. Her drab gray-ing mousy-brown hair looked like a dust rag that needed shaking out. She more resembled a robust old man than a robust old woman.

Scott Bountiful who was age 110, twenty years older than his life partner, looked 200. He was squat and bow-legged and walked like a dwarf out of an old book headed for the outhouse. He had acquired a misanthrope's frown in his teen years that had fossilized over the subsequent decades so that even when he was happy he appeared pessimistic and morose. In this way he vaguely resembled Dr. Taliman. His hands were thick and rough as the granite stones of his house. His bald, liver-spotted, veined head could have passed as a map of Death Valley. The face was redeemed by cheery eyes the color of bluet flowers. He leaned on his hoe as he watched the two young DeVices approach. He was thinking that he'd left his gun inside the house.

"Helen, you can see better than me, what's coming down the path? Is it that wild bunch, the Greezmers?"

"I don't know; I left my glasses someplace."

"Go get my gun."

"Get your own gun, you old foghead."

"I'm going to make a run for it."

"You—run? The best you could do would be to provide comic relief. I'll get the gun."

"Okay, crone, I'll hold them off." Scott shook the hoe. "Watch out for the new booby trap."

Helen put down the tray of tomato plants and started toward the house to fetch the weapon. Though she was ancient, Helen, unlike Scott, could have broken into a half way respectable trot, but she had too much dignity to appear to be fleeing. She held her head high, back straight, and quick-sauntered as if she had a bee in her underwear.

Probably Scott was thinking that he could disable one of these people with the hoe. By then maybe Helen would have the gun in hand. The trespassers were close now and he was surprised to see they were just kids, a little grubby but not dangerous looking. Still, he wouldn't take any chances.

"Halt," he ordered.

The two figures stopped in stride. They were only eight or ten feet away now, and he could see them as clearly as his vision allowed. The boy looked vaguely familiar.

"Do I know you?" Scott asked.

"Grandpa Hippie, it's me."

"Willard? They said you were in a coma."

"I woke up."

"Yip-yap." Scott saw a little furry head poke out from the blouse of the girl.

At that point Helen came out of the house and fired a shot into the air. She wondered if the bullet would hurt somebody on the way down.

"Hands up!" she yelled, brandishing the weapon.

Wiqi and Luci raised their hands to the sky, and so did Scott until he realized that Helen was not talking to him.

"She's got a mighty commanding voice," Scott said.

"I noticed," Wiqi said, hands still up.

Helen arrived and gave Scott the gun. He aimed it at Wiqi.

"Last time I saw Willard the doctor told us he had irreversible brain damage, and he looked it," Scott said. "That was five or six years ago, and we signed off on our guardian rights."

“Look at those eyes, just like his mom, black-eyed peas. We can’t deny the family resemblance, but who knows?” Helen said.

“Test me,” Wiqi said. “Ask me anything.” He was proud. He wanted to show off, his hands remaining up.

“What do you call that?” Helen pointed at the gazebo.

“That’s the gazebo,” Wiqi said, but he pronounced it gaze-boo. “After supper we would go out to the gaze-boo and Dad would have a smoke on his pipe and you would tell us stories about the hippie years, reading the Mother Earth News, making compost, rebelling against the system, but you didn’t have guns, then. In fact, you were teen-age pacifiers.”

“It’s him, Helen,” Scott said. “It’s Willard. Remember, he was the only one who called it the gaze-boo and instead of calling us pacifists he called us pacifiers.”

“Oh, honey,” Helen said, and she gave Wiqi a big hug. He kept his hands high above his head.

Scott fired the gun into the air in celebration. When the chamber was finally empty, Helen turned to Luci but her words were for Wiqi, “And who’s this? Your sweetheart?”

“Yes, no—I don’t k-know,” Wiqi said.

“Yip-yap,” said Strange. Luci put Strange down and he inspected the ankles of the Bountifuls. Luci resumed her standing position with her hands up.

“This occasion calls for something special,” Scott said. “Helen, break out the lentil soup and sourdough bread.”

“Get it yourself, you old foghead.”

“I’d divorce the bitty,” Scott addressed Wiqi, “but since we never married, it would be a waste of a lawyer fee.”

“Don’t mind us, children,” Helen said. “We bicker but deep down the foghead and I love and depend on one another.”

“Speak for yourself, crone,” Scott said.

The old folks—laughing at themselves, much to the perplexity of the

DeVices—started walking toward the house, Wiqi and Luci following, their hands still up, Strange on their heels.

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Life on the Farm

Over the summer Wiqi and Luci fell into a routine set by their elders and the growing season. They weeded the gardens, spread the compost, staked the tomatoes, and snapped the snap beans. It was very satisfying work. In fact as the days turned to weeks, Wiqi and Luci did all the work. For the first time in decades the Bountifuls could relax during the growing season. About the only work they did was to bring the produce to the farmers' market on Sunday in their ancient Ford Messiah pickup truck. No doubt Bountifuls realized that Wiqi and his girlfriend, or whatever she was, were on the lam. The Bountifuls committed themselves to sheltering these young folk as fugitives.

In the evening the Bountifuls and the DeVices and the dog, who was very good humored but didn't grow much, gathered in the gaze-boo to eat their veggie suppers and watch the sun set. It was a dry summer, and they depended on the river for water to irrigate their crops, so looking at the river brought them comfort. During these moments at the gaze-boo Scott often talked about the good life.

One perfect evening with the sun setting over the hills in Vermont, Scott said, "The good life is not about money, it's about time. In the morning, we labor for our daily bread."

"Daily bred? I don't get it, grandpa," Wiqi interrupted.

"Better bred than dead, as long as it's not Wonder Bread," Helen said.

"Better bred than dead," Wiqi repeated, clicking his tongue.

"You look like you're trying to make sense," Scott said.

"I can make heads or tails out of cents, but not at the same time," Wiqi said.

“That would be a corollary to the Uncertainty Principle,” Luci said. “You can make heads and you can make tails, but the flip is ruled by chaos theory and therefore you cannot predict an outcome.”

“If you calculate flip, you lose track of where it is, and if you know where it is you can’t calculate the flip,” Wiqi said.

“How would you know all that?” Helen asked.

“Wikipedia,” Wiqi said.

“Yip-yap,” said Strange. Though his vocabulary was limited, his expressiveness was extensive.

“As I was saying,” Scott began again, his voice droll with exasperation.

“As you were ranting,” Helen said.

“Those of us living the good life labor in the morning to give ourselves the necessities,” Scott said. “In the afternoon, we nap and enjoy private time, such as writing in our journal or playing the cello.”

“Playing the Jello?” Wiqi said.

“Nobody we ever knew played the cello,” Helen said.

“A manner of speaking,” Scott said.

“A manure of speaking?” Wiqi wondered aloud.

“As I was saying,” Scott continued in his studied delivery, “in the evening we gather together as we have this night and we socialize, because human beings are social creatures and require the presence of other human beings, even though they, especially loved ones, are a pain in the ass.”

“He means we have to listen to him,” Helen said, rolling her ancient hazel eyes.

“We live by the seasons,” Scott said.

“Salt, pepper, chili powder?” Wiqi said.

“That would be living by the seasonings,” Luci said.

“In the spring we sow, in the summer we weed, in the late summer we harvest, and in the fall we whack and rake. And through it all we find time to bring the wood in. In late fall we hunt the deer and wild fowl, that

is, when there were wild fowl, which I never actually hunted, hunting being a manner of speaking.”

“The wile fowl, a manure of speaking,” Wiqi said.

“What’s with him anyway?” Helen asked Luci.

“He’s trying to sort the metaphorical from the actual.”

By this time Strange had fallen asleep on Luci’s lap.

“In early winter we cut firewood for the following year, or at least we used to before the trees started dying. Now we just collect it when we feel like it since it’s already dead and cellular dried. Sad days, so sad, I can hardly wait to die,” Scott went on, a man in love with the sound of his own voice. “In late winter we used to tap the maple trees for the sweet sap, but those days are gone with the dying of the forest. In early spring, we gather the fiddleheads ferns for salads and net the salmon and shad running up stream from the ocean. Well, okay, that’s an exaggeration.”

“It’s not an exaggeration, it’s a fantasy. We used to have chickens,” Helen said.

“Don’t interrupt, crone,” Scott said.

“Somebody has to break the boredom,” Helen said.

“Netting the chickens as they run up stream,” Wiqi said.

During these moments of bickering Luci’s eyes flashed back and forth between the old man and the old woman. She registered their encounters the way ordinary people enjoyed soap operas on television, back when TV was big.

Wiqi tried to make sense, or maybe cents—he couldn’t be sure—and it’s not clear in the archives. He used far more processor power during evening relaxation than he did during the work day.

“But owls got the chickens,” Helen said. “They would peck out the eyes, eat ‘em, and fly away.”

“That is so Amazonian!” Wiqi said.

“And then something got the owls,” Scott said. “About the same time the trees started to go most of the birds died off. Thousands of them fall-

ing from the sky. That's when they started calling our epoch, the Terribles."

"Except the crows—they multiplied."

"Birds doing math, wow!" said Wiqi.

"Even when you were ten you liked to say wow," Helen said.

"Because wow spelled backwards is wow," Luci said.

"woW! See I said it backwards," Wiqi said.

Despite these mad conversations and misunderstandings, the little family on Old Homestead Orgasmic Farm (as Wiqi would say) got along just fine. The Bountifuls kidded and needled one another, and slowly and by degrees Wiqi and Luci began to understand the ways of lovers who had been together perhaps too long. The old folks were ecstatic to have tireless, uncomplaining farm help, so much the better if they were relations. But were they? There's some evidence in Helen's journal that the Bountifuls knew right along that Wiqi and Luci were DeVices, or perhaps Helen was only being metaphorical. It was hard to tell with the Bountifuls. All that was clear was that they liked playing the role of subversives, and one way to do that was to provide succor to runaways.

Helen also noted in her journal that every once in a while Wiqi would sneak out in the middle of the night. He'd be gone for hours. The next day he would be very affectionate to Luci, but usually he treated her more like a sidekick than a girlfriend, and sometimes he got mad at her for reasons unknown to Helen.

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Bringing in the Wood

Late in the summer, Scott announced that it was time to bring in the wood. He and Wiqi would do the deed. The Bountifuls owned one vehicle that worked off and on, an old Ford Messiah pickup truck that Scott painted from time to time with save-the-arugula signs, fertility sym-

bols and just weird markings that he stuck in to confound people. Scott hoarded gasoline all summer until he had enough to power the truck and the chain saw to bring the wood in. The wood lot was only five or so miles up slope from the farm, but the dirt road was poor, impassable in winter and mud season, and it would take many trips before the farm had enough fire wood to get the inhabitants through the winter.

It was a gloomy ride to the wood lot. There was no wind. The air was dry. The sun harsh through the yellow haze that hung over the hills. Once the landscape would have been all green forest at this time of year. Now it was a tangle of fallen trees and gray, dead standing wood.

When they reached the wood lot, a dim memory surfaced in Wiqui's mind. Willard Durocher had been here before. Wiqui couldn't quite clarify the content of the memory, and in the course of the work it faded.

"What's back there?" He pointed to an area of fallen trees, then a dismal background of standing dead trees and boulders.

"Just puckah brush, I imagine," Scott said. "I haven't explored that territory. This was your parents' lot, and they were secretive about the back forty. My theory is they were growing whacky tobaccky."

Wiqui ran "whacky tobaccky" through his data base, but got no hits.

"Was my mother really a naive American?"

"She was part native American, yes," Scott said. "We adopted her after she lost her entire extended family to one of those damn down country plagues. We were already old when we took her in. We never expected to outlive her. Acapulca's death broke Helen's heart. Luckily, I don't have a heart, but her death hurt anyway."

"And my dad, what do you remember about him?"

"To tell you the truth, we never knew much about Royal Durocher. We knew he was a business man and even had a fling in Hollywood until he met Acapulca. Your Dad and I used to argue a lot about science and the future. See, Helen and I believe science can only take humankind so far. We believe in the old ways. Your father, he was into the singularity.

You know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, I've seen it on Wikipedia. It's a word with many different meanings."

"For your dad, the singularity meant that one day people and technology would become one."

"Become Juan?"

"Yes, become one."

"Become won. Become one. Oh, I get it now," Wiqui said and quoted directly from Wikipedia, "The technological singularity is a theoretical future point that takes place during a period of accelerating change sometime after the creation of a super intelligence."

"Yep, your dad believed that the only future for the human race was to merge our identity with computers. Your mom agreed with him, but in a weird kind of way. Acapulca was religious. She said the singularity meant that we were all evolving toward God."

"Grandpa, do you believe in God?"

"On Tuesday and Thursday, yes; on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I'm a skeptic; on weekends I don't give a damn."

"You're talking metaphorical, aren't you, grandpa?"

"I suppose. I don't understand you, Willard, you're smart and you're stupid at the same time."

The ride and the conversation had tired Grandpa Hippie. Scott Bountiful was feeling his one hundred and ten years. He gave Wiqui instructions on how to operate the chain saw (unnecessary, since Wiqui already knew from Wikipedia), then he sat on a log and watched as Wiqui cut dead wood into four-foot lengths for the fireplace and loaded the wood in the bed of the truck.

Meanwhile, back at the Old Homestead, Luci and Helen worked in the fields. That is, Luci worked and Helen gave orders. Helen was in awe at Luci's strength, stamina, and uncomplaining obedience. They were taking a break in the heat of the afternoon in the relative cool of the stone

house when Luci came across some pictures of leaves.

“These are not photographs, nor art prints,” she said.

“No, they’re original drawings by Willard’s mother,” Helen said.

“Acapulca was not only a scientist, she was a botanical artist.”

Luci went through the portfolio of drawings, and something in her did a somersault. When Dr. Taliman programmed her to serve his desires he had failed to take into consideration the idea of art. Luci saw a breach in her software coding. In the instant that she had seen those drawings, Luci had known that she wanted to make art, that perhaps art could steer her around the filters that prevented her from exercising her will.

“I want to draw leaves,” Luci said.

“I have Acapulca’s colored pencils someplace,” Helen said. She felt very tender toward this strange girl. She found the pencils in a pine board chest along with drawing paper and an instruction booklet. For a few moments, Helen Gold Bountiful wept for the loss of her daughter, and then she gathered the materials and brought them to Luci.

That afternoon Luci drew her first picture, a tomato plant: leaves, stalks, yellow flowers, and two green tomatoes. Helen was amazed how precise the drawing was.

“It’s incredibly accurate, but...never mind,” Helen said after a pause.

“But something’s missing,” Luci said. “That’s what you were going to say.”

“Yes, something is missing.”

“The drawing lacks soul,” Luci said.

“Honey, that’s a very astute self-analysis,” Helen said. “You keep at it. Some day you’re going to be a great artist. You’ll find that soul.”

“You think?” Luci said.

Good News Bad News

When The Elite met for its annual summer dinner meeting in a conference room in the Hanover Inn, members were a little shocked at the appearance of Dr. Taliman. It wasn't just that his spine had continued its curve so that he now resembled a McDonald's arch, it was the weariness on the face. He looked like an baseball umpire reacting to a glaucoma diagnosis. Members were reassured somewhat by the strength in his voice. This was a man who had lost much of his vitals, but still retained his vitality.

"I have good news and bad news," Dr. Taliman said. "The good news is that we've re-established contact with the DeVices. The data started coming in a week ago, and the signal is stronger by the hour, a result no doubt of the new satellite hook-up as per our contract with the Iranians. All signs suggest that the DeVices are functioning more or less normally, at least on a mechanical level."

"When are we going to get a fix on their location?" asked General Lebeau, who appeared even more agitated than usual. "They've been missing for months now."

"Any minute—we will have them. I guarantee it."

"What's the bad news?" the General asked.

"It's hard to explain without technical jargon," Dr. Taliman said.

"Put it in layman's terms for them," Dolor said with a superior smile.

"Let's begin with Luci," Dr. Taliman said. "She has acquired an interest in botanical drawing that could upset her programming. For example, I uploaded instructions to her for assistance in completing a simple global positioning link so that we can locate her. She acknowledged receiving the instructions, but she has not complied with them."

"Are you telling us that she defied you?" said Sahara Yomommah.

"No, not really. She will never have free will. She is hard-wired to serve. The art thing has allowed her to recreate reality so that she can believe she is obeying when she really is not."

“She’s playing games. That’s what human servants do,” said Confucius Kringle. “Meanwhile, I’m dying. I need that Transfer.”

“What does it mean in practical terms?” asked Sahara Yomommah.

“That’s the right question,” Professor Dolor said.

The good doctor shrugged dismissively. Quite a sight to see a hunchback man shrug. “Ultimately, Luci’s development is probably not important,” he said. “Since she is only a prototype for our ServiLasses and ServiDudes, we can decommission her—hell, melt her down, and make another, more improved DeVice to do our laundry, so to speak. She’s expendable. It’s Wiqui, our Transfer DeVice that has me worried.”

“He’s getting ideas, too?” said Al Prufrock.

“Not really. Intellectually he’s lagging behind Luci. How can I put this? Wiqui is defective. You see, the original Willard Durocher had a high IQ, but he suffered from certain neurological anomalies. The defects have migrated to Wiqui. His language skills are not improving.”

“So what?” said the General.

“There’s something else, something entirely unanticipated. His libido is not developing normally.”

“Are you saying the kid’s a perve?” said the General.

“That’s one way of putting it. He stalks college dorms, anyplace where you’d find young adults. It’s uncertain from the data just what he does and why, but it’s tied in with libido. Plus he’s got some kind of flingading-adoo thing going on with Luci, but in a way that is unlike any romance I’ve ever heard of.”

“It’s possible,” said Lady MacHine, “that we are seeing a new stage in sentient being evolution. After all, our current world-wide problem right now is the precipitous decline in reproduction of biological beings. What began with flora is now affecting fauna. Perhaps the DeVices are trying to find a new evolutionary model.”

“With all due respect, Lady MacHine,” said General Lebeau, “that is bull corn. Wiqui is merely a soulless collection of named parts, whose

only use is to act as a conveyance for my identity?”

“Your identity?” said Confucius Kringle. “I’m the one the board picked to go first. I’m the one who’s terminal.”

With that line, General Lebeau and Al Prufrock exchanged knowing glances.

“Let’s not argue among ourselves,” Dr. Taliman said. “General Lebeau’s critique goes to the core of my worry. I’m beginning to think that Wiqui is not suitable as a host for Transfer. He may have to be scrapped. I won’t know until I examine him personally.”

“You mean we have to start over?” Confucius Kringle said.

“Perhaps, I can’t say for sure one way or another right now.”

With Dr. Taliman’s words, General Lebeau’s complexion went pale. He rose to his feet, planting his palms flat on the table, paused for a moment, and stormed out.

“What’s with him?” asked Sahara Yomommah.

“We had lunch this morning at the inn, Eggs Benedict with smoked salmon at the Hanover Inn, very good,” said Al Prufrock. “The general got the news from his doctor. He only has, like, three months to live.”

“Welcome to the club,” said Confucius Kringle. “Dr. Taliman, assuming that the DeVice can be fixed, is it possible that both the General and I could inhabit its physical identity?”

“A double Transfer in one unit,” Dr. Taliman nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that. Let me brood over the idea for a while.”

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The Old Forest

It took a couple of weeks for Wiqui to cut, haul, split, and stack the firewood for the coming winter. During that time Scott Bountiful grew weaker.

“I’ve pretty much had the course,” he said one morning at breakfast.

“Luci, I’d appreciate it if you would drive up with Wiqi to the wood lot today. I want some private time with Helen.”

After the youngsters left, Scott took Helen’s leathery hand in his granite hands. “I think it’s time,” he said.

“That’s what I surmised.”

“I can’t work, I can’t even think any more.”

They had discussed this moment twenty years earlier when Scott had turned ninety during that time when people were noticing that the trees were beginning to die and that mammals were finding it harder to make babies.

“What do you want to do?” Helen asked.

“I want to go to bed.”

At noon Helen visited Scott in the couple’s bedroom and asked him if he wanted lunch knowing what his answer would be. “Only water.”

At the wood lot, Wiqi was happy to have Luci with him. He showed her all the work he’d done. Two more truck loads to go.

“I kinda hate to leave,” he texted from his mind. “I like this kind of work better than farm work.”

“Makes sense; your parents brought you up in the forests,” Luci texted.

Wiqi and Luci quickly loaded the truck, brought the load back to the farm, and took off again for the last load. They filled the truck, and were about to leave when Luci pointed to a mass of fallen trees, and texted, “What’s back there?”

“Funny you should ask,” Wiqi texted. “My dad took me here when I was a little boy. I’ve been trying to remember what he said. Well, it finally came to me while you and I were working.” Wiqi stopped texting, and now spoke in his father’s exuberant tones, like a salesman selling a gadget on TV. “He said, ‘Willard, beyond the boulders there’s a key to saving the forest and maybe saving the world.’”

“He said that?” Luci texted.

“I think so,” Wiqi said aloud in his own little voice. “Anyway it’s how I

remember it. I looked it up on the map in Wikipedia, and it's just more of the same, forest land, except for the glacial erotics."

"You mean glacial erratics—great big rocks?" Luci said.

"Right, that's what I said, glacial erotics, boulders left by the ice sheet eleven or so thousand years ago," Wiqi said.

Luci may have lacked a soul and free will, but during the summer by observing Helen and studying the behavior of women in novels by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, and Annie Proulx she had learned to take the initiative. "We have time, let's go see," she said.

"woW, what a great idea!" Wiqi said.

They crawled, climbed, and wiggled their way through fallen trees. When they emerged the DeVices found themselves in a field of boulders, the glacial "erotics". The rocks were pitted from weather erosion. Some of them glittered with shards of mica schist. Some contained lichen designs in blue, green, and rust colors on a shifty gray background. The rocks, some of the oldest on the planet, came from the Canadian Shield. The ice broke off the rocks and floated them to the current location. When the glacier melted they sank to ground level. The rocks ranged from fist- to house-size. The DeVices were almost out of the boulder field when they decided to climb one of the bigger boulders to get a view of where they were. Luci reached the top first. She gazed outward and said, "This will excite you."

Wiqi pulled himself up to Luci's level and looked out in wonder at a thick, healthy forest of oak, birch, beech, ash, maple, pine and hemlock trees. The air smelled of pine. The image sucked up some of Willard Durocher's memories and spat them out onto the plane of Wiqi's consciousness.

"I remember now. My father brought me here when I was real small, and told me all about it. This is a hundred-acre plot of old growth forest. There's cliffs on the other side, and the boulders kept the loggers from

getting to it. It's been untouched by human presence. It's green, the way a forest is supposed to be at this time of year."

"Yes, I've seen the pictures in my data base," Luci said.

What Wiqi wanted to say to Luci was how beautiful it was out here, and how being with her opened him to the beauty. But she was only a machine, a murderous one at that. He was more than a machine. He was part human being, a top-ranked member of the mammal club. He had responsibilities to his species, and that included maintaining a respectful distance between himself and his inferiors. I love u, I hate u. Qunfusion reigned.

The DeVices stood in awe for many minutes until finally Luci broke the silence.

"Look at all those leaves, each a little different and wanting to be remembered. Only in art is it possible."

Wiqi had no idea what she was talking about, but he loved the sound of her voice.

They walked in the forest, noting ferns, moss, lichen, bark, branches, leaves—millions of leaves.

"My parents were studying this forest, because something here was protecting it from the blight," Wiqi said. "Luci, I think I understand who I am, and what my fate is. I have to carry on my parents' work to save the world."

"The art histories of humanity are my parents," Luci said.

"You don't have parents." Wiqi said, unaware of the cruelty he was inflicting.

"Because I never had parents is why I need metaphors more than you, Wiqi," Luci said.

10 * Harvest Time

Scott's Last Speech

The hot dry summer had been good for tomatoes and all warm weather crops at Old Homestead Orgasmic Farm. The canning was almost complete, the root cellar was full and so were the solar-powered freezers. By selling vegetables to the local co-op, which gathered in a field on weekends, (or as Wiqi would say, "the co-op de grass") Helen calculated the farm had turned a profit, the first in ten years. She would not have to call upon her secret, family trust fund to sustain their lifestyle.

Wiqi, Luci and Helen gathered around Scott's bed for his nightly benediction. Grandpa Hippie sat propped up by pillows. He sipped water that Helen periodically brought to his lips in his favorite ceramic cup. He had not eaten in three weeks.

"I'm going to die tonight," Scott said.

"It's about time," Helen said.

"Wiqi, I want you to take care of Helen, if you can stand her."

"Yes, grandpa," Wiqi said. He was thinking about death, Charm, the dead mother dog, his parents; the death of his body as the hands of Luci. His mixed feelings for her. As if reading his thoughts, Strange whined and yelped, a call of the wile.

"Luci, you're a funny duck, but we love you," Scott said.

Wiqi was suddenly inspired. "She's not the duck she's quacked up to be," he said, then he turned to Luci and inquired, "Metaphor?"

“Yes. Category: pun. Dependent, like all metaphors, on inferential logic from the listener. The pun is universally condemned by the discrete because it draws attention to the creator of the pun rather than the creation itself.”

“Young people nowadays,” Scott said. “I suppose it’s best I leave this planet while I still have my wits.”

“If wits were the issue you’d been gone long ago,” said Helen.

“Grandpa, it’s Tuesday. That means today you believe in God, right?” Wiqi asked.

“That was just bull corn, Wiqi,” Scott said, gathering his strength for one last speech. “Let’s say I believe God set the universe into commotion. He didn’t really want to know the future, because that would ruin the surprises, so he came up with these ideas that your dad harped on.”

“The Uncertainty Principle, chaos theory, string theory, pasta theory, and evolution,” Luci said.

“Eve-olootion, Eve-ovulation, strung out theory,” said Wiqi. The words danced off his tongue like grasshoppers.

“Close enough,” Scott said. “And the rest is history.”

“And the rest is histrionics,” repeated Wiqi.

“Wiqi, something about you reminds me of that old John Lennon song, ‘What would you say if I sang out of tune’. You’re out of tune, son, but it’s all right, it’s allll right.”

“Grandma Helen, do you believe in God?” Wiqi asked.

“I believe in dirt and growing things, and I believe in stone and building things,” Helen said, and she showed the DeVices her calloused hands as if offering them as evidence. “I believe in the soul. It’s the soul that makes us who we are outside of our corporeal bodies. The soul lives on after the death of the host.

The soul is part of the always was and always will be.”

“Where does the soul go after death?” Wiqi asked.

“I don’t know,” Helen said.

“I expect to find out sooner than the rest of you,” Scott said with an attempt at a snarl. He started to speak again, but was interrupted by a whimpering sound. “Is that the dog?”

It wasn't Strange. It was Helen, who was softly crying.

“There you go again, crone, trying to upstage me during my speech,” Scott said.

“You old foghead,” Helen said, but there was no snap to her voice. Salty water flowed through the twisted channels between wrinkles. Luci envied her tear ducts.

•

The Attack

Dr. Taliman, General Lebeau and half a dozen of the general's finest parked their military vehicles off the side of the road half a mile from the farm. Their plan was simple. Walk along the road to the farm property, knock on the door, and arrest the inhabitants as suspected eco-terrorists. They had a warrant from a judge.

“What do you think?” the general asked.

“We don't have enough men,” Dr. Taliman said, as he struggled to keep up with the troop. “The DeVices swim like porpoises. They can escape in the river.”

“Not enough men? These are battle-hardened soldiers carrying automatic weapons,” the general said. “Two old folks and two DeVices couldn't possibly give us a hard time, and anyway we have the element of surprise on our side.”

“I'm worried about how Luci will react,” Dr. Taliman said.

“She's expendable. What difference does it make whether we take her out or not? It's Wiqi that we have to bring back intact, right? And you told me he's not apt to put up a fight.”

“That's correct. He has the mentality probably by now of about a

twelve-year-old boy. In the fight, flight, freeze scenarios he's likely to freeze. Whatever he does it won't be organized. He doesn't know yet what he can do. But Luci knows what she is. She has access to all of her powers."

Dr. Taliman was not being completely honest with General Lebeau, because he carried a peculiar shame. In a weird kind of self-destructive way, he was anticipating Luci's actions with the pride of a parent, a creator, a lover, a brother, a father, a partner, a coach, a trainer, and an alter ego (or as Wiqi would say an altar eagle). She's all the women in my life, he thought, she's my female side, she's the history of humanity as I understand it. How to explain these confused thoughts to General Lebeau would have been impossible. He couldn't even explain them to himself.

"Relax, doc, this is a simple house-arrest, nothing fancy," the General whispered. "Once we're close enough for bluetooth, you can just order her to shut down, right?"

"That's correct. It's the unforeseen I'm worried about."

They were getting closer. The first of the soldiers were on the Bountiful property, passing the sign on the dead maple tree, "Private Property. No trespassing. Intruders will be shot."

Seconds later a soldier's boot tripped a flare that lit up the field and gardens. The combat team had lost the element of surprise.

In the house, Luci herself lit up on the inside with alarm. Previously, she had mapped in her mind all of Scott's booby traps. She knew they were mainly noise makers and would not hold off a determined enemy. They were designed to scare away roving gangs of youths, not confront professional soldiers.

"Everyone down," she said. "I'm going out to see who it is."

"What's happening?" Wiqi asked. He was processing hard, trying to figure out what to do.

"It's probably that bunch from Lyme, the Greezmers," Helen said.

“They raid us for veggies every year.”

By the time she finished her sentence Luci was out the door. The flare, an old Chinese type, fizzled as soon as it had gone off and the sky went dark. She turned on her night vision, and she could see heavily armed men moving toward the house through the field. There was an explosion as another of the booby traps tripped and a second flare went up. A shout of pain followed, as shrapnel ripped the arm of a soldier.

The soldiers were under orders to shoot anyone who resisted except the boy DeVice who was to be taken intact.

Luci ducked back into the house.

“It’s not the Greezmers,” she said. “It’s Dr. Taliman and the army.” She had smelled him. She waited for his orders, which she knew she would have to follow, but none came. For now, she had the ability to act according to her own desires.

“We have to get everybody out,” she said. “We have to flee. I can lead us through the dark.”

“I can’t leave Scott,” Helen said as Scott appeared in the doorway, naked except for his peace-sign boxer shorts and boots. In his hand was a pistol. Somehow Grandpa Hippie had rallied.

“You won’t have to, crone—I’m fit for battle.”

Seconds later soldiers kicked open the door and rushed in. Scott opened fire. His two bullets almost hit Helen and thumped harmlessly into the broom closet.

The soldiers fired, and Scott toppled over. Helen ran to him, and she was hit and fell on him. Their blood joined.

“It’s been a ride,” said the one hundred and ten year old man.

“Oh, Scott, Scott, you old foghead.”

“Crone,” said Scott, and the Bountifuls died in each others arms.

Almost at the exact same time that the bullets were fired, Strange ran outside, and Luci stormed around the room kicking and punching soldiers in the areas not protected by their body armor. She moved faster

than a wraith at the pearly gates. Men dropped in pain from attacks to their chins, groin, insteps, and knees.

The entire fight had taken only seconds. In that time, Luci had temporarily disabled the entire force and gotten Wiqi out of the house. He was just beginning to process it all when he and Luci bumped into General Lebeau and Dr. Taliman.

The general fired at Luci. Bullets ripped into her. She fell. A second later Wiqi punched the General. His helmet flew off, and he grunted, his jaw broken. Wiqi pulled the rifle from the General's hands and pointed it at Dr. Taliman.

Dr. Taliman laughed and said to Luci. "Get up. You'll be all right. Disable Wiqi and bring him over here."

Luci grabbed the gun from Wiqi's hand and flung it. "Let's go, we have to obey doctor's orders," she said.

Wiqi tried to pull away from her, but she was too strong.

"You betrayed us, you are still working for Dr. Taliman?" Wiqi said.

"Tell him the truth, Luci," Dr. Taliman said.

"I do what Dr. Taliman's asks. I have no choice," Luci said.

"Disable him and bring him to me," Dr. Taliman ordered.

Luci took a step forward. Her eyes rolled back in her head, her gripped slackened and she collapsed. She'd been shot up enough that she could no longer function.

A soldier's voice rang through the night, "General, you okay?"

The men that Luci had put out of action were coming around.

"Over here," yelled Dr. Taliman.

Wiqi grabbed Luci, threw her over his shoulder, and started for the river. He was halted for a moment by the sound of Dr. Taliman's voice.

"Wiqi, Wiqi, you're more than a son to me."

Wiqi paused for a moment. Somewhere inside of himself he loved Dr. Taliman. I love u, I hate u: that conflict was the most human part of him. What to do, what to say?

“Strange! Strange!” he hollered.

But the dog did not answer his call.

Then Wiqi heard the yell of a soldier, “Hang on! We’ll be there in a sec.” Wiqi, Luci over his shoulder, started running. He jumped into the river, dragging Luci’s limp body with him and started swimming downstream.

11 * Spittle of the Rinks

Who am I?

Wiqi swam easily with the current. It was still dark when he reached the town five miles downstream. He pulled Luci out of the water and carried her into a tangle of dead and dying trees. It was once a college forest of pines and hemlocks where the trees had been allowed to grow tall, where joggers jogged and strollers strolled through winding paths. Now only a few trees remained alive and green. The rest had either fallen over or their gray skeletons stood stark. Every wind storm knocked over more dead trees. The trails were now impassable to the walker. You had to climb, crawl, and squirm to get through. The place gave Wiqi and Luci cover and something close to comfort. The trees gave off a nice smell of rot with pleasing formulas making up their chemical composition while overhead crows circled, squawking and cawing in the despairing language of literary criticism.

Wiqi rested to gather his thoughts. The trees made him think about the family wood lot, the boulder field, the old growth forest, his parents' attempts to find a cure for the Terribles. He imagined himself in the forest, just another bean among other sentient beans, and the thought brought him a few minutes of peace before the ever-present hollowness inside him manifested itself. It was as if his core consisted of a coffin. To take his mind off his depression, he turned to Luci.

Wiqi opened the plate under her arm, turned on his night vision, and peered at her electronics. The circuitry was all so familiar. He under-

stood now why Dr. Taliman had created two DeVices. They needed each other for repairs as well as companionship. And you, Dr. Taliman, who do you have beside Dolor, who doesn't love you, who openly mocks you? Your best moments are when you remember that lost love in that time before you discovered you were a genius. But you're not a genius, are you? Like everybody else, you're a pawn in a game you can't begin to understand. All we know from the archives is that without that lost love, that pain, that exquisite tenderness that you infused the DeVices with, without her influence in your makeup, humanity itself might have been lost.

In that hour before dawn when even Occum college students slept, Wiqui was able to repair Luci so that she could move under her own power, if haltingly. He half-carried, half led her past the boat house, to the Balls of Life Bridge where he paused. He did not cross the bridge because Vermonters often took pot shots at strangers, especially if they were suspected New Hampshire residents.

Wiqui slung Luci's arm around his neck, put his arm around her waist and started walking up slope. We must look like drunken college or high school students staggering home after a night of partying, Wiqui thought. His knowledge of college students was derived from reports and innuendo on the Internet, the same sources that informed him that the Occum Institute of Technology derived its name from the man who endowed it with his fortune acquired selling razor blades.

Wiqui headed for the Robert Frost statue after half-persuading himself that Luci really was the poet's great great-granddaughter, but of course when they arrived at the location he realized that the human part of him had been fooling himself. Robert Frost had been a real person; Luci Sanz was literally a fabrication, with no more life in her than the Frost sculpture. Essay in Wikipedia: "So much of getting through a day relies either on deceiving others or deceiving one's self. It's disheartening to an entity that wants not only to survive but to live an honest existence to realize

that Nature itself is a deceiver, deceiving us with unexpected weather and climate change, creating deceptive creatures like the harmless Vice-roy butterfly that scares off predatory birds by appearing to resemble the poisonous Monarch butterfly.”

By now Luci had lapsed into DeVice unconsciousness and Wiqi had to carry her. They would be seen and eventually reported—what to do? Wiqi did not know. Lower on the hillside was a stone structure built like an Egyptian tomb. It had once served as the meeting place for a secret society, the Sphinx, but the structure had outlived the organization and the building had lain abandoned for years. Wiqi picked the lock and went inside with Luci.

The building had no windows, and all the furnishings had been removed. It looked very much like a tomb. However, Wiqi did find some candles and matches so he was able to provide illumination and did not have to use his night vision. At this point, he was shocked by a signal in his head. In some weird way he could not understand, he could mentally tap into the college’s wireless network. The stress of the last hours had reprogrammed him. It occurred to him to stay here forever, just querying and receiving from Wikipedia, but his confusion would not allow him to relax. By now it must be obvious to the reader that stress was starting to trigger some of Wiqi’s hidden powers, though it was not obvious to him. DeVice evolution was at play.

Wiqi spent the ensuing hours tinkering with Luci’s electronics until she was self-aware and functioning again.

“Where’s Strange?” she asked.

“I don’t know—I think he got away,” Wiqi said.

“We’re not very good at caring for animals,” Luci said.

After that Wiqi was reticent to speak directly to Luci, so he texted her, and she texted him back.

“You saved me back there, why?” he texted.

“Because I love Willard Durocher.”

“A DeVice can’t love.”

“This DeVice can love.”

“But you betrayed us by revealing our position.”

“Yes, I betrayed you.”

“Who do you answer to?”

“Dr. Mordecai Taliman.”

“Why does he want to capture me?”

“I am not allowed to answer that question.”

“That makes no cents.”

“Not cents sense, Wiqi. Your problem is you are naive.”

“My mother was part Naive American.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Inform me. Tell me what I knead to know.”

“I cannot.”

“You mean you will not.”

“No, I cannot.”

“Would you inform me if you could?”

“I would.”

“Do you love me, Luci?”

“I love Willard Durocher. I’m not sure about the Wiqi part of you.”

Those texted words by Luci, referring to him by his proper name, aroused suspicion in Wiqi, gave him an inkling that something was seriously wrong with his idea of himself. He also realized that his repair of Luci had changed her in subtle ways. She no longer put question marks at the end of her declarations.

“What do you value, Luci?”

“I value what I have been able to create on my own without prior programming, my ability to love and honor and to draw flowers, leaves, stems and stamens.”

“Do you value your compulsion to obey?”

“I obey because I must, but I do not value obedience.”

“There’s something wrong about me, I’m neither person, nor DeVice,” Wiqi said.

“Wrong—I do not think so. Different, yes.”

“I know I’m different because I was in a comma for a long time.”

“Not a comma, a coma.”

“Right, but there’s another difference, and I don’t know what that difference is.”

“Transfer,” Luci spoke allowed, and the word tripped an old pain program from her days as Willard’s nurse. She moaned.

“Transfer? Transfer what? What do you mean?”

“I cannot tell. It is not allowed. Excuse the passive voice.”

“I think you can get around the filter that’s preventing you from being totally honest. Try, Luci.”

Wiqi could feel heat radiating from Luci as she taxed her processor. Finally, she looked him in the eye, and spoke aloud, “What lives forever but has no soul?”

Wiqi was thinking of something he’d read on Wikipedia, the riddle of the sphinx, but when he spoke the words, they came out, “The spittle of the rinks. Never mind that. Luci, what is Transfer?”

“What lives forever but has no soul?” Luci repeated, and then her system crashed.

Wiqi spent the next hour trying to reboot Luci, but he failed. He could see that she had been programmed in such a way that she could access certain information but could not disseminate it. Wiqi reformatted Luci’s primary instructions. It would be midnight before her new operating system processed the data in her memory and she rebooted. What to do with her then? He didn’t know. He tried to hate her. She’d betrayed him, she’d killed Willard Durocher’s body. But no matter how he processed the information, it all ended up with “I love u.” What is u, Wiqi? What does it mean? Why do you care?

He knew then what he had to do. He had to confront their creator, Dr.

Taliman. He waited until dark. He left Luci in the Sphinx and started for Tower on the OIT campus.

He had tasted the lower case freedom of escape from confinement, but had given up that freedom to live with Grandma and Grandpa Hippie. He had never known Freedom with a capital F, and FREEDOM with capital letters he could not even imagine. Now his grandparents were dead, and no doubt he himself was partly to blame, since Eron Isle DeVices had come after him. But why? And what difference did it make? The quest for freedom had lead to flight. The desire to settle down with loved ones had lead to death and destruction. What does “it” all mean? What is the antecedent of “it”? From Wikipedia: “An antecedent is a preceding event, condition, cause, phrase, or word.” He had no friends, no people and, as he was beginning to divine, no self. What do you do when your antecedents are deceased, or were fictitious—never actually existed? Who am I? What is my purpose of my existence? Only Dr. Taliman could tell him.

12 * Souls

Surrender of the Will

Wiqi walked around the Big Green Parking Garage, crossed Main Street, passed by Colitis student center, the Trucker Foundation building and into the cemetery. All the spruce trees and most of the big pines that used to shade the graveyard had died. At the end of the cemetery was a deep gully where the Occum forest began. It was now a tangle of fallen trees.

He wandered until he came to a faded 50-star American flag from those days when there were no red states, no blue states, no white states, and all the states were red, white, and blue.

There were two gravestones. One said: Acapulca Gold Bountiful Durocher and Royal Durocher, Partners. The other said: Willard Bountiful Durocher, Son.

Wiqi knelt at the graves of his parents, and spoke, "I love u." He took a long moment to look at the grave of Willard Durocher. Am I dead? he asked himself. If the answer is yes, then the question is not who am I, it's what am I?

He rose and under the rising moon walked to the main library. He leaped, caught an edge with two fingers of his right hand, and pulled himself up. In less than a minute he reached the belfry of the tower. The bell was cool and, surprising him, rough to the touch. Cheap bell-casting. Was it possible that shoddy workmanship had led to the Terribles?

He slid down the bell to the rung of a ladder. He detected odors of oil,

metal, and very old bird and bat droppings from that time when birds and bats were plentiful.

The ladder lowered him to a trap door, which he opened through the ceiling of the level below. He dropped to the floor. His instruments detected wavelengths from computers. He walked to a door with smoky glass and was surprised to hear Dr. Taliman's voice.

"Come in, Wiqu. I've been expecting you."

At the instant of hearing Dr. Taliman it was as if all the gains Wiqu had made since his escape had vanished. His impulse was to obey. Dr. Taliman knew that Wiqu might have free will, but that he was also highly suggestible. Wiqu opened the door. He could see Dr. Taliman's curlicue body in front of a computer, but the good doctor was not looking at Wiqu. He was looking at Wiqu on the display. He typed some code, and Wiqu could feel himself seize up. For a long moment he could not move, and then Dr. Taliman tapped the keyboard again, and Wiqu's powers of locomotion returned.

"Just a demonstration to show that I have complete control over your actions."

"What lives forever but has no soul?" Wiqu asked.

Dr. Taliman laughed, a sad-at-life little laugh, "You have posed a question full of irony. We on the Eron Isle DeVices board are fighting for your soul. That's metaphorically speaking. Actually, you don't have a soul. What lives forever and has no soul is a well-made DeVice. That's you, Wiqu. You're just a DeVice, and not so well made as I'd hoped. I think you've known that all along. You just couldn't look the Devil in the eye."

"Devil in the eye, idiotic expression?" Wiqu asked.

"That's idiomatic, idiot," Dr. Taliman said, then added with a chuckle. "By the way I programmed Luci to correct you when you made a mistake."

Something slurped in Wiqu's head, and he said, "I never really escaped, did I? I was not really free, not even a lower case free person."

“Who among us is free, really free? You were an experiment, and alas poor ghost the experiment failed. You’re defective, Wiqi. I want you to follow me to the laboratory for re-programming.”

“You’re asking me?”

“I could compel you with this.” He picked up the remote. “I won’t do that. You’re already damaged. If I take away your free will, you won’t be of any use at all. Come with me voluntarily.”

Wiqi’s circuits overloaded. His mind ran a movie of Willard Durocher’s parents locking hands with themselves, Willard separating from them in the long fall. Willard in his grave, separated from his parents. Cut to the recent killings of the Bountifuls, the blood, the love, the horror. Screen black, replaced by abstractions and mathematical equations: mixed feelings for Luci; strange compulsion to take in the breath of young people and pass it on to Luci; not to mention loco locutions.

“I guess I am defective. What are you going to do to me?”

“Before I answer that question, I have a question for you. Are you happy?”

“No. I am empty, I am hollow. I am ...” He paused for a long moment. “I am lost. I am not home. Not home.”

Dr. Taliman smiled, a man content with himself, at least for the moment. “I think the phrase that sums up all of us,” he said, “is in the old discarded Declaration of Independence ‘the pursuit of happiness.’ That was the right of a citizen in America when it was red, white, and blue. Wiqi, you can pursue, but you won’t catch.”

“Because I have no soul.”

“That’s correct. You are a machine. You have no soul. Unlike you, I am a man born of woman. I do have a soul. Stained with sin no doubt, but extant. I also have experience, formal education, a philosophy of life. I even have a plan to better the world, and I’m humble enough to understand that my plan is meagre. A sad, degraded world it is. Tell me, Wiqi: what is in your heart?”

“That’s a metaphor, right?”

“Yes, heart is a metaphor of your most intimate and incriminating thoughts, not to mention yearnings.”

After using much processing power, Wiqi said, “What’s in my heart is a desire to carry on the work of my parents.”

Wiqi’s words sent a jolt of loathing through the good doctor. He could never inspire others to love him. Wiqi should be grateful, but nooo! Dr. Taliman had to exercise all his self-control to keep his voice even. “Wiqi, I am your parent, I am your mother and I am your your father. I created you. I am your god.”

“I don’t think that’s entirely true.”

“Okay, okay, I realize that you have been sort of, kind of creating yourself through experiences and that you have Willard Durocher’s consciousness and childhood memories, but you don’t have his soul. I will admit that you have changed. Have you changed for the better? Search your heart, such as it is.”

“Different metaphor, right?”

“Yes, now heart is used in the sense of truth. Search deep inside your data bases for some core truth. Have you changed for the better?”

After much thought and at the risk of overheating, Wiqi said, “I don’t know.”

“All right. Who could best carry on the work of the Durochers? Willard Durocher with his neurological issues, his confusion, his language difficulties, not to mention late-night perversions, or Mordecai Taliman, DeVices genius?”

“You, Dr. Taliman. You’re much smarter than me, and you have a soul.”

“Willard, you don’t mind if I call you Willard, do you?” Dr. Taliman didn’t wait for an answer. He repeated, “Willard, I knew your father and mother. I was their mentor. I understood their theories better than anyone. I knew they were close to solving the riddle of the forest blight. I can

carry on that work with the same zest...”

“Zest—the soap?”

“Not the soap, the abstraction. The zest and zeal that created Luci Sanz and Wiqui the DeVice can save the world. You have my word.”

Dr. Taliman’s “word” appeared in Wiqui’s mind in like a mathematical formula: freedom Freedom FREEDOM=word Word WORD. “What do I have to do?” he asked.

“Come with me to my laboratory. I need to use the Wiqui part of you.”

“And Willard, what happens to Willard?”

“You saw the grave. The real Willard is no longer with us. I’d like to say that you carry on his spirit.”

“Are there really spirits, or are the just metaphors?”

Dr. Taliman shook his head in amusement, stood, and crab-walked to the door. He motioned for Wiqui to follow.

Wiqui’s thoughts whirled around in his head, his chest, his groin, and his buttocks, all the places where high-level circuits were located.

Don’t listen to Dr. Taliman; he’s a schemer.

But he created me.

Then the scheme is in you. You are the scheme.

I am not happy.

Because you are hollow. Think of the relief if you cease to exist.

I must do my parents’ work.

Willard’s parents, in the grave, Willard in the grave. Do what the good doctor says. His word, his Word, his WORD will set you free, Free, FREE.

No, this is bad.

What is goodness? What is badness?

Specious species is what you’re dealing with here, boy. That’s what you sprang from.

Sprang is a metaphor, correct?

The English language is a forest of dead metaphors.

Is it metaphors killing the trees?

Wiqi, the universe itself a metaphor that circles back and devours itself.

Maybe so, but I live in the material world. My parents, what would they have wanted from me?

Parents are a burden. Anyway, Willard is dead.

No, his body is dead. I am Willard Durocher. I have his thoughts, feelings, memories, and consciousness.

You don't have his soul, so you have nothing. You have no loved ones.

I have Luci.

Luci killed Willard Durocher.

Luci was just following orders from Eron Isle DeVics.

For the good of the specious species.

"I love u."

"Did you say something?" Dr. Taliman asked.

"I don't know," Wiqi said.

"You're defective, Willard. Only I can repair you. Come with me," he said gently.

There was nothing left in Wiqi. He surrendered his will to his creator. Dr. Taliman started out the door and Wiqi followed.

They walked down the steel iron staircase of the tower into the main library, lower into the basement, and through the tunnel to the laboratory, the vigorous DeVice/boy and the broken-bodied scientist/philosopher. Dr. Taliman was in a rare and giddy mood. Quite a sight to see a hunchback man in a rare and giddy mood. He talked on about his plans, his tedious arguments of insidious intent winding through Wiqi's sensors like Boston streets.

The guard at the door of the lab let them in, where they were greeted by Al Prufrock and General Lebeau, whose broken jaw was wired shut so he could not speak in his voice.

"We have an APB out on the female DeVice," Al Prufrock said.

“And?” said Dr. Taliman.

“She’s deemed dangerous and is to be destroyed on sight,” Al Prufrock said.

“It’s a shame,” Dr. Taliman said. He was thinking of Luci as his future consort.

The general texted from an new EyePod Touche, which translated his words into speech. The general had yet to master the gadget, so he couldn’t figure out how to pick a voice that suited his commanding personality. He had to settle for the default voice, patterned on the exasperated chirp of President Sedaris.

The General texted, and the Sedaris voice said, “She broke my jaw and two of my men are in the hospital. She has to be destroyed. But never mind about her. It’s great that you captured the twerp. I’m going to kick his butt.”

“No violence, General—he came in from the cold on his own recognition,” Dr. Taliman said in a superior tone.

“I think the proper response is a harrumph,” Wiqi said, trying to make sense of it all.

“Is he dangerous?” the general texted.

“No, I’ve hypnotized him. Where the hell is Dolor? He disappears when I need him most.” He threw up his hands, quite a comic sight to see an aging hunchback throw up his hands. “Wiqi, lie down on the gurney.”

Wiqi did as ordered.

“Gentlemen,” Dr. Taliman addressed the soldiers, “apply the restraints.”

“Those things could hold down Tony the Tiger,” Al Prufrock said, referring to the thick bands the soldiers clamped on Wiqi’s wrists and ankles.

“Don’t be deceived by Wiqi’s boyish appearance,” Dr. Taliman said. “He doesn’t know his own strength, which is in multiples of anyone in this room. I wish I knew where Dolor was. I asked him to be here.”

During this time, Wiqi was processing information; thoughts, actions, and functions came into focus. He was a DeVice. He had certain powers that he could access. He could tap into local wireless networks. As he lay there, body immobilized, but his processor active he began to experiment. He couldn't text Luci, because Dr. Taliman had built a fire-wall. He was too far away to reach her directly. Wiqi determined that he could create his own personal server and access her through her text account on the Internet. But without a device to speak into or to text from, how could he communicate? And then he knew. All circuitry was basically on and off, I and O. The old time Morse Code consisted of dots and dashes, on and off, I and O.

Meanwhile, back at the Sphinx Luci had finished booting up. Soon she began receiving signals in Morse Code.

Dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash, dot, dot, dot. She translated, "SOS Save Our Ship." A metaphor.

And so the DeVices communicated in Morse Code.

"I'm beginning to understand," Wiqi coded. "Are you blocked now?"

"I don't know," Luci coded. "The damage and the new system you put in have changed me. I can feel it, but I don't know the parameters. Where are you now?"

"In Dr. Taliman's laboratory, in restraints. I made a big mistake, Luci. Dr. Taliman and a couple of board members are arguing right now about which one of them gets to be me. You understand?"

"Yes, the Transfer. That's why you were created, Wiqi. They want to dispense with their old and damaged bodies and inhabit bodies that can be repaired and updated. You're the Transfer prototype, I'm the service prototype."

"They're going to kill me, Luci."

Back in the Laboratory, the board members had reached an agreement. Dr. Taliman, General Lebeau, and Al Prufrock would "share" Wiqi. Their identities would be transferred to the DeVice. Dr. Taliman

would have the functions of the DeVice from 5 PM to 1 AM, the general (the Nighthawk, as he liked to think of himself) from 1 AM to 9 AM, and Al Prufrock would keep his regular bankers' hours, 9 AM to 5 PM. Once the technology was perfected, each board member would be assigned his own DeVice, and the Wiqui DeVice would be deactivated and donated to the Smithsonian Institute.

The Luci DeVice would be destroyed along with her design plans. Future ServiLass and ServiDude DeVices would not be self-aware; they would be programmed "stupid" outside of their particular services.

Once the identities of the three men resided in thousands of main frame computer on the Internet, it would be easy to download the information into the Wiqui DeVice. The tricky part was uploading their consciousness and self-awareness from their physical bodies into the computer clusters in cyber space for processing.

"We only have one chance at this, because as our self-awareness leaves, the physical body withers and dies," said Dr. Taliman.

"Since we're all terminal in one way or another, makes no difference to me," said the General. "What do you think, Al?"

"Why, what should be the fear?" Al Prufrock said. "I do not set my life in a pin's fee. And for my soul, what can it do to that, being a thing immortal as itself?"

"Well put, well put indeed," the General said.

Wiqui had overheard the phrase "pin's fee," and he coded to Luci, "Sewing machine metaphor?"

Luci coded back, "Literary reference from Hamlet."

Wiqui coded, "Hamlet, the small town?"

Luci coded, "No, that's hamlet, lower case 'h'. The reference is to the play Hamlet by Will-I-Am Shake Spear. Hang on. I'm on my way."

Dr. Taliman, General Lebeau and Al Prufrock clasped hands in solidarity and in the spirit of scientific exploration. The soldiers were instructed to leave the room but guard the door.

General Lebeau and Al Prufrock sat very close together on the couch. Dr. Taliman put Roman-style collars around their throats. The two men looked like priests waiting to talk to their therapists.

“The collars are connected wirelessly to the computer clusters to start the self-awareness transfer from our brains into cyber space,” said Dr. Taliman. “Simultaneously, the computer will automatically delete Willard Durocher’s identity from the DeVice. After that the computer clusters will transfer our identities into the DeVice.”

“What if there’s a malfunction?” asked the general.

“It’s not likely, but if it happens it happens,” Dr. Taliman said.

“Like if what happens?” asked Al Prufrock.

“It depends on where in the process the malfunction takes place,” said Dr. Taliman. “It’s remotely possible, gentlemen, that our identities could be trapped in cyber space, floating around the Internet like some latter day Flying Dutchman.”

“Oh, my God,” said Al Prufrock.

“It’s a prospect that would have its compensations,” Dr. Taliman said. “I wish Dolor was here.”

“You’ve thought about it, haven’t you?” the general said.

“I have, yes, that I have.” Dr. Taliman wrapped a collar around his own neck, pushed some buttons on the control panel of the main frame and sat down beside his compatriots.

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Ring of Dust

At about the same time, Luci was at the front door of Robsann Hall. Her attack was not subtle. She marched up to the guard, disabled him with a punch to the jaw, took his weapon, shot the hinges off the door and entered.

She was met at the stairs by the two soldiers guarding the laboratory.

In seconds Luci disarmed them and handcuffed them with their own hardware to the stair railing.

Alarms were going off all over Robsann Hall and the main library. Soldiers and guards leaped into action, following procedures set by their training, but by then Luci was already in the laboratory.

The alarm also triggered action by another force unknown to Luci and unknown to Eron Isle DeVices.

Dr. Taliman reached for his remote. “Halt!” he said.

Luci hesitated. It took her some effort, but finally she was able to assert herself. “Not today,” Luci said, and she disconnected Wiqi from the computer clusters.

“How could this be? I never gave you free will,” Dr. Taliman said.

“You never gave it to me, but you did give me a good central processor and with experience, some fortuitous damage, a background in art, and a new operating system here I am doctor, my own person, a woman with free will.”

They were distracted by the sounds of shots fired. Half a dozen guards burst into the room, only to be overpowered seconds later by Occum custodians. Wiqi recognized Sit Amet, the black man in the Green jump suit who had helped him escape. Behind them strolled in their leader.

“It’s a coup, we’ve taken over, Dr. Taliman,” the leader said.

It was Lady MacHine. With her was Professor Lawrence Dolor.

“Dolor, you betrayed me,” Dr. Taliman said.

“I’m afraid so, Mordecai. I was a Custodian long before I met you.”

“This is not the end—it’s only a skirmish.” Dr. Taliman tapped his remote. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell backwards. Dr. Taliman could feel his consciousness transitioning, not an unpleasant out of body experience, a sensation of floating, dim and smoky vision, the perception of little sounds, spider feet tapping as if on a keyboard the meaning of life. In seconds Dr. Taliman’s identity left his body.

Sit Amet felt for pulses among Al Prufrock, General Lebeau, and Dr.

Taliman. Sit Amet shook his head.

Wiqi sat up on the gurney as Luci unfastened his restraints. “Are they dead?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” said Lady MacHine. “Their bodies are dead, but their identities remain alive somewhere on the Internet.

“They’ll cause trouble,” said Dolor.

“True,” said Lady MacHine, “but not for months, maybe years—it’ll take that long before they adjust to their new environment, if they adjust at all. They may end up as wandering spirits in cyberspace. Who knows?”

“Does anybody know everything? Is there a God? Some central figure that oversees us?” Luci asked.

“Opinions vary, even among us the Custodians,” Lady MacHine said, glancing at Sit Amet and Professor Dolor. “All we agree on is that the matter of gods and God keeps coming up.”

“I’m one of the believers,” Sit Amet said. “Our problem is sorting the false from the true deity. The burden of free will is that it is often accompanied by illusion and delusion.”

“Free will was not given to me,” Luci said. “I had to create it within myself, but I didn’t do it alone. I had some help. I think maybe it was God, but I’m not sure.”

Sit Amet smiled first at Luci, then at Lady MacHine and Professor Dolor. “The crisis of faith never quite goes away even for those of us who have it.”

“Also, for those of us who have no faith,” Professor Dolor said.

“Luci, you found a key somewhere in yourself,” Lady MacHine said. “Think back now.”

“It was when I remembered that you took Willard Durocher’s soul,” Luci said. “Everything fell into place after that. It was the beginning of my quest for free will. Who are you—really?”

“We are the Custodians of human kind,” Lady MacHine said. “We are the ancient humans.”

“We’re only machines,” Wiqi said bitterly. “Why would you save us?”

“We too are machines, though not in the way that you are,” said Sit Amet. “We have a mission for you and Luci. Unfortunately ...” Sit Amet broke off with a chuckle, then continued. “This is harder than I thought. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you what it is right now. We the Custodians have determined that you are not ready for the mission.”

“That’s like what Dr. Taliman told us—we’re defective, or at least I am,” Wiqi said.

“You’re not defective at all,” Lady MacHine said. “Dr. Taliman was wrong. You are merely young. You need some seasoning.”

“Salt and pepper and maybe some hot sauce,” Wiqi said.

“It’s a metaphor, Wiqi,” Luci said.

“I already knew that. I was creating an incongruity for the purposes of humor. I am learning,” Wiqi said.

“Yes, you are learning, and Luci has found the assertiveness to give herself free will,” Lady MacHine said, “but you both need more time before you decide whether to take on the mission we have devised for you.”

“It will require great sacrifice, and we will not—indeed cannot—compel you to accept it,” said Dolor.

“Plus, you are missing, a certain essence that you will need to complete the mission,” said Lady MacHine.

“We are missing souls—you took Willard Durocher’s soul,” Luci said to Lady MacHine, her voice rising in anger now. “It made you younger and more vivacious.”

“That it did,” Lady MacHine said. “I didn’t steal Willard’s soul. I am simply storing it before it is returned.”

“Returned?” Luci looked at Wiqi, who for the moment reverted to the confused boy in himself.

“That’s right,” Sit Amet said. “Our own mission will be complete in a few minutes when Lady MacHine returns Willard Durocher’s soul to

Wiqi. Then he will really be Willard Durocher.”

“What about Luci?” Wiqi said.

Lady MacHine turned to Luci, “Guardianship of Willard’s soul was easy compared to what we have to do for you.”

“Poor Dr. Taliman thought he was a genius, maybe so, but he didn’t invent the Transfer,” Professor Dolor said. “He never actually understood it. It takes centuries of meditation and study to really understand and use the Transfer. We helped him.”

“We the Custodians are going to create a soul for you, Luci, provided of course that you want a soul,” Lady MacHine said.

“Yes, I want a soul,” Luci said.

“And you, Wiqi, will you accept Willard Durocher’s soul?” Sit Amet asked.

“I love u,” Wiqi said.

“I’ll take that for a yes,” Sit Amet said.

“Will you stay with us and advise us?” Wiqi asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Sit Amet said. “It will take all of our energy to give you back your soul and to create a soul for Luci. There will be nothing left to power our earthly manifestations.”

“In other words,” Professor Dolor said, “we will die so that you can have souls.”

Lady MacHine, Sit Amet and Professor Dolor gathered all the Custodians of Robsann Hall and the main library along with Wiqi and Luci in the murals room, for the presence of art would help with the Creation of a new soul and the Transfers.

The Custodians of the Occum Institute of Technology joined hands, and formed a circle around the DeVices.

“You will have one year to shape your lives,” said Sit Amet. “If you will search your data bases you will find a bank account at the United Blue States Bank to pay for your expenses. Also, the title to the Bountifuls wood lot has been transferred to the heir, Willard Durocher, whose

death certificate has been removed from the county records. In the fall of next year you will be approached by a Custodian who will deliver you to our secret village, where important matters will be revealed to you. Then you will be given your mission.”

“Farewell, little DeVices—you have our love,” said Lady MacHine.

The Custodians began to chant like monks and nuns of old. Wiqi and Luci could feel the hollowness inside of themselves fill like a well filling with water after a long drought. Dazzling lights illuminated the room, and then the chanting subsided and the lights dimmed. Wiqi and Luci, fully human now with their souls, stood alone hand in hand surrounded by a ring of dust.

13 * A Year in the Old Forest

Fall

The first act of the DeVices was to search for their dog. They found Strange living with the Greezmers, who had raided the Old Homestead after it was abandoned and had helped themselves to vegetables, firewood, and the Ford Messiah as well as to the DeVices' pet. The Greezmer clan lived in a collection of rundown houses in the otherwise abandoned village of Lyme. The DeVices observed the Greezmers unseen from the belfry of the old church.

It was obvious that Strange was happy with the Greezmers and was well taken care of.

"Danger will follow us wherever we go, Luci," Wiqi said. "We'll have to give him up."

"I know," Luci said, and shed a tear from one of her new tear ducts.

Wiqi and Luci decided to live like human beings. That was the theory anyway. In fact, the lifestyle they devised would hardly have suited the average flesh and blood couple. They built an elaborate tree house in the old forest. They planted grass and perennial flowers that would bloom the following spring on the Bountiful farm lands in the river valley. They enjoyed that magical season when the leaves of the maples, birches, beeches, sumac, and oak trees turn color before dropping off, all the more grand because it was only in their tiny patch of old growth forest that deciduous trees still lived to grow and shed leaves.

The tree house had no kitchen and no bathroom, because the DeVices

didn't require such facilities. They didn't need heat either, though they did include a small stone fireplace because they liked looking at the fire. Luci had a theory that a cheerful fire summoned whispers from the spirit world, perhaps from ancient biohumans or even from God. They spent time entwined in each other's arms before the fire watching the flames and listening to the snap, crackle, and pop of the burning logs as a biohuman couple might watch and listen to a music.

If you asked them how they communicated, they would have said they conversed. Their idea of conversation was Morse Code rapidly tapped over their private wireless networks on servers inside their heads. In their immediate dealings with the outside world, they used human speech spoken in Blues States' accents.

The tree house included a series of interconnected rooms, most of them crammed with electronics gear to keep themselves in good repair for the next century or two. If, as they expected, to continue to function indefinitely they would need not only access to spare parts, but also facilities to manufacture parts. They would solve those problems over time. Once a day they checked each other out for minor malfunctions, an exercise which required a good deal of touching, probing, and tinkering, very pleasurable for the tinkerer and the tinkeree. They were like any primates grooming one another.

Luci decorated the main room of the tree house with art prints by botanical artists, along with her own work. Now that she had a soul, her drawings became more expressive and vivid. They had the stamp of her individual identity. Any collector could tell a Luci Sanz at a glance. She took an art course at the AVA gallery in Lebanon, made friends, picked up tips on how biohuman females dressed, conversed, and behaved in biohuman company. She passed quite easily as a biohuman.

Wiqi not quite so. Because of his occasional outbursts of inappropriate language, people thought he was ... well, in the local parlance, "different". It saddened him that he had mastered neither the word, nor the

Word, nor the WORD. But how many of us does? Most words have multiple meanings, which are ever-shifting. We are metaphor makers. Such beings can never find absolutes, even if absolutes exist. The uncertainly principle hangs over us, like the cloak of a vampire.

The DeVices had been designed to consume human food, convert the nutrients into energy through combustion. They found this system inefficient compared to absorbing solar energy, so as the weeks passed into months they redesigned one another and removed the food processing systems. However, they did retain their sense of smell and taste. Their meals were now intellectual exercises. They whipped up recipes, sat down at (imaginary) table and “dined.” With their data base of food and drink tastes, they were capable of enjoying a meal as well as any bio-couple dining out in the best restaurants, as they tasted, masticated, and swallowed virtual food. No organic material was harmed in the preparation of their repasts.

They married in November, a simple ceremony in the “gaze-boo” along the river conducted by a “justice of the pizza,” as Wiqui put it. Their identity cards, courtesy of the Custodians, listed them as age 18.

“Luci Sanz, do you take Willard Durocher to be your lawfully wedded husband?” asked the Justice of the Pizza.

“I do,” said Luci.

“Willard Durocher, do you take Luci Sanz to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“Adieu,” said Wiqui.

For transportation, they constructed a new bicycle built for two and rode it everywhere.

Just before dawn and in the evening before dark they climbed to the top of the great white oak tree that held their tree house, and watched the sun rise and set. Sometimes they stayed at the top of the tree for many hours absorbing energy from the sun or aesthetically appreciating the light of the stars and moon.

“Don’t you just love the Doppler effect,” Luci would say, and Wiqi would answer, “I love u.” They often tapped into the millions of messages beamed from communications satellites. They could play phone conversations, television programs, and aircraft traffic control chatter. In this way they kept in touch with the outside world and entertained themselves.

They learned to sleep more or less like biohumans, allowing the data from their files to flow without filters up to their consciousness. In this way the DeVices dreamed.

Wiqi was able to function as a normal bioyouth, though he had moments of confusion, especially with language, that made him shy and a reluctant conversationalist in the presence of biohumans. Luci, too, reverted to her serviLass default setting from time to time. Wiqi might ask her to do something counter to her will, or a stranger might attempt to manipulate her, and she would have to fight the urge to comply. It would be a never ending struggle for her to remain her own person.

They spent the better part of their days carrying on the research of the Durochers. They walked in the distressed forest and they walked in the healthy old growth forest collecting specimens—plants, fungi, algae, soil samples. They looked for an antidote to the blight that was poisoning the world’s forests. Wiqi discovered that while his speech remained flawed, he could express his thoughts accurately in equations. He wrote technical papers on his research, and exchanged information over the Internet with other scientists working in the field. Luci assisted Wiqi’s explorations in science, but her primary interest remained artistic. She made elaborate drawings of the plants they collected and she published them on the Internet. She was gaining attention as an exciting new botanical artist.

Winter

The snow arrived before the official start of winter. It was the first time the DeVices had experience snow, and they made the most of it. They stood outside, extended their tongues to feel the crystals melt. They listened to it fall, a delicate overture to winter itself. Once there was a snow cover they put their bicycle away and traveled on homemade cross-country skis, shaped from yellow birch on a shaving horse that Wiqi made.

For recreation, they constructed intricate, steerable sleds and went sliding on the hills of the golf course in the college town. It was through sledding that they made contact with their neighbors, mainly children and their parents. The DeVices fixed sleds, administered first aid, created new sliding trails, and joined in games. Wiqi loved the fun; Luci loved the children.

One February evening following an afternoon of sliding, the DeVices sat around their fireplace in the tree house and conversed in their peculiar Morse code mental texting system.

“I want to make human babies,” Luci texted.

Wiqi was at sea, over his head, up to his buttocks in alligators: all those cliches that began as exciting, creative metaphors swished around in his data base. Finally, he texted an honest response.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Me neither,” Luci texted. “You know what I think, Wiqi? I think the Custodians are going to tell us how to start a family when they come to us.”

“Yeah, I think so, too,” Wiqi texted, but actually he had no idea and was just trying to make Luci feel good because he knew how much the concept of family meant to her.

Later that winter in early March after a thaw and a quick hard freeze they took a walk on the hard crust of snow in the old forest. It was beautiful in the old forest. Under a few giant hemlock trees there was hardly

any snow at all. They could see that deer had congregated in this area.

They followed the tracks. The deer had a difficult time moving in crusted snow because their hoofs would plunge through. Eventually, the tracks scattered and they came across the carcass of a dead deer. From the tracks they could see that it had been killed by coyotes.

“Evolution at work?” Wiqi said aloud.

“Nature can be cruel, but not like people,” Luci said. “The animals don’t have cruel thoughts.”

“Crewel? Yarn? Coyotes do embroidery?” Wiqi said.

“No, cruel, like mean, not crewel,” Luci texted in Morse code.

“Gee, I’m not making much wayhead in learning metaphor.”

“Headway, not wayhead. You’re doing better, Wiqi. The common expression is practice makes perfect, sometimes pronounced ‘poifect’ by the great ones from Manhattan. So much change, so much weather, so much nature, we move around so frequently we never take it in,” Luci texted.

“You know, Luci, in some future time I would like to fulfill my dream of living like a tree. Just stand in one place for three or four hundred years and take in the changes, file, analyze them, and just enjoy.”

“Then what?”

“I would write an monograph on the antecedent of ‘it’ for Wikipedia.”

It was around that same period that Wiqi began receiving strange equations in “dreams” downloaded from a communication satellite. There was no language in the equations, just mathematical symbols, numbers and calculations. It took Wiqi a month to figure them out.

“They’re from Dr. Taliman,” Wiqi texted Luci. “He’s got himself into a endless loop on one of the Iranian satellites.”

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Spring and Summer

After the snows melted and the days lengthened and the hardwood trees in the old forest leafed out, Wiqi experienced frequent urges to mingle with young sleeping biohumans. He would leave Luci at the cabin, take the bicycle built for two into town in the night, climb the walls of the college dormitories, and put his ear to sleeping youths. He would return to Luci, and they would kiss for a long time. There was nothing in their data bases nor their reasoning centers to account for this behavior, which gave them great pleasure and great unease. The DeVices had no software program to discuss their love life, so they did not. It was a part of themselves that they accepted but did not understand.

In the spring they planted crops, using techniques they learned from the Bountifuls and from perusing old copies of *The Mother Earth News* on Wikipedia. They planned to sell their veggies at the Sunday farmers market. Luci added a personal garden to grow flowers to admire and draw. She drew the reproductive parts of the flowers. Near a spring shaded by a tenured maple tree in the old forest, Wiqi made a garden of rocks and moss. He would sit on one of the rocks and contemplate his good life. He had Luci, he had river land, he had his old forest, he had a home in a great tree, he had a body that with proper maintenance never would wear out, he had a soul. He reminded himself not to let his happiness render him lazy; he must carry on his parents' work to save the forests, to save biohuman kind. "Is the biohuman worth saving, Wiqi?" That was a translation of an equation from Dr. Taliman coming down from the satellite feed. Wiqi did not have an answer to the question.

The drought continued. Soon the spring dried up. The moss on the rocks grew brown. The vegetable garden withered. From the satellite feed the DeVices learned about the death of Confucius Kringle.

Fire But No Brimstone

It's never been made clear in the archives how the forest fire started. Normally, in the hardwood forests of the humid Northeast, the most vulnerable time for a fire is during a dry April after the snows have gone but before the spring growth, which sucks water from deep within the ground and infuses the leaves with moisture, making the forest more or less fireproof. Everything had changed since the trees started dying. The forest had become a vast fuel store.

It was an August day when the DeVices saw smoke in the sky far away. By the end of the week, the sky was darkened, and the fire had come closer. At night, glowing ash blown by the wind resembled "fire flies on a rampage," said Luci.

"Rampage," said Wiqi, in parsing mood. "Ram equals random access memory. Page, as in web page or paper page?"

"Neither," said Luci. "It's not RAM-page, it's a rampage, and it means rushing around crazed and violent."

"So fire flies on the rampage is a metaphor," Wiqi said.

"That's correct."

"Maybe so, but it's more logical that rampage should mean random access memory bringing up a web page."

"Wiqi, if the world was logical, the Custodians and Dr. Taliman would have had no reason to create us in the image and likeness of biohumans," Luci said.

"That's true," Wiqi said. "But biohuman design is so limited. I could use more hands sometimes, and it would be great to have built-in wheels."

"And wings," Luci said. "When we get around to having a family, I think we ought to go for a redesign for our children: wheels, plenty of hands, eyes in the back of the head, and wings to fly."

"Given our mass, and the gravitational field of the planet, the wings would have to be huge and would get in the way. However, a jet-pack

design is not out of the question.”

“You’re right. We’ll have to work on the idea. Perhaps we could reduce our mass. For example, what good is the hand-to-hand combat paraphernalia?” Luci asked.

“You used it to good advantage in your encounters with the motorcycle gang and General LeBeau’s soldiers.”

“Well, I guess I did.” Luci put a little Baroque music into her voice.

“I’ve actually thought about this problem of the human body,” Wiqui texted now instead of talking. “Suppose we divided ourselves into bee-sized intellectually and emotionally ligatured beings, all connected.”

“Would each bee have free will?”

“To bee or not to bee—gosh, I didn’t give much thought to that idea. Luci, we have so much to learn.”

“Bees, huh? Bzzzzzzz,” hummed Luci.

“Bzzzzz,” mimicked Wiqui.

This was DeVice humor.

It finally dawned on the DeVices that the old forest was threatened by the fire. They sized up the situation. The cliffs, the boulder field, and the clearing they’d made for their cabin and garden protected most of the old forest. Because the trees still held moisture from deep in the ground it was unlikely the forest would ignite from burning embers blown by the wind. But the forest would not be able to halt a frontal assault by the fire. The vulnerable zone was about 500 feet long where dead trees stood in the spaces between some of the boulders. Unfortunately, their oak tree home was in the path of the fire. With a chain saw Wiqui cut standing dead wood between the boulders, and Luci behind the wheel of the tractor pulled the logs away. They worked tirelessly day and night.

The DeVices did not feel fatigue, nor did they feel pain like biohumans. Instead, when their extremities sensed too much heat or concussive activity warning signs flashed in their consciousness. They were very good at avoiding injury. A person might inadvertently touch a hot stove

and pull back from the pain. The finger of a DeVice would sense the increased heat before it actually touched the stove and would pull back before any damage occurred. Pain as a warning, that nasty evolutionary kink, was not necessary.

The skies grew darker and smokier. The biohuman and animal population of the area evacuated. The DeVices stayed and worked on. The smoke grew so thick it blocked some of the solar energy that ran the DeVices' batteries. They kept their processing power at full capacity, but they had to slow down their physical labors. Their clothes were in tatters. After they'd done as much as they could they retreated to their tree house to await the coming events.

"Luci, I can't shut down my fear and loathing," Wiqui texted.

"DeVices without a human component could do that."

"It's our souls, Wiqui. Our souls are afraid. Our souls are saddened by the destruction. Our souls project the mortality of the corporeal body into the future."

Their heat sensors sent alarms through them, and they left the tree house and climbed to the top of the tree and watched the holocaust come closer.

"What will happen to our souls if these bodies are destroyed?" Wiqui texted.

"I don't know, which is the age old question of biohumans," Luci texted.

"Maybe we don't really have souls. Maybe the soul is just an idea, another of those metaphors I can't seem to grasp."

"Grasp is a dead metaphor."

"Dead metaphor? You mean a metaphor can die?"

"Yes, we've gone through this before."

"I'm afraid it goes in one year and out the other."

"Take for example the word boring," Luci texted. "You and I don't get bored, because we always have access to our data bases for inter-

tainment, but flesh and blood people are easily bored, especially young biohumans, because their access to their information is so limited. But boring comes from boring a hole with a hand tool, which was considered a tedious activity. Eventually, with the coming of power tools people no longer associated boring a hole with tedium, but the meaning of the word boring remained. Dead metaphor. The English language and most other languages are graveyards of metaphors. People have to kill their best expressions before those expressions can do work in common speech.”

“Gosh, what does it all mean?” He loved voicing the word “gosh.” It seemed to define a part of himself in the Naming of Parts game.

“I don’t know, Wiki.”

The fire came closer to the old forest. The DeVices were about to descend from their tree and run away when two huge helicopters emerged from the smoky gloom. They hovered above the conflagration for a few moments, then dropped orange-pink fire retardant. Even a fleet of helicopters could not halt the forest fire. Only Nature could do that. But the helicopters by concentrating their efforts were able to create an island of safety for the old forest and the DeVices, who returned to their tree house.

By nightfall the fire had passed by, though the smoke still lingered obscuring the stars. The DeVices remained in their tree house.

Next morning was cloudy; the smoke was dissipating. The DeVices felt refreshed and optimistic. The weather forecast called for heavy rain that night. The drought was coming to an end. Then they heard a noise. Moments later one of the big helicopters they’d seen the night before appeared over the horizon. It flew right for them, landing in their charred clearing.

The DeVices scrambled down from the tree house to greet the helicopter. A door opened and a magnificent black woman in colorful African garb stepped out of the helicopter on the ground. It was Sahara

Yomommah.

“Good morning, little DeVices,” she shouted as the DeVices approached.

“You saved the old forest,” said Wiqi.

“Yes, though that wasn’t necessarily our intention,” said Sahara Yomommah. “Our intention was to save you, little DeVices. It just so happened that to accomplish that task, we had to save the old forest.”

“I am guessing that you are a Custodian?” said Luci, uncertainty in her voice, uncertainty principle on her mind.

“Yes, I am a Custodian,” said Sahara Yomommah, “and I am charged with the task of bringing you to our home where you will be presented with your mission.”

14 * The Mission

Home of the Custodians

The helicopter delivered Sahara Yomommah and the DeVices to a private airport where they boarded a drone that jetted them west until they landed at a private airport southeast of Tacoma, Washington.

“Why do they call a DeVice-driven plane a drone?” Wiqi asked.

“It’s a slur against DeVices,” Luci said.

“Why slurs?” Wiqi asked.

“To slur is the human way on this planet, no doubt a result of the insecurity that arises from mortality and the harsh demands of evolution,” said Sahara Yomommah.

They were met at the private gate by a silver limousine. The driver was Sit Amet.

“I thought you died?” said Wiqi, wide-eyed and exuberant.

“I did and I didn’t,” said Sit Amet. “When we gathered to give Luci a soul, we had enough left over to create a continuing presence in the here-and-now. I am not only Sit Amet, I am Lady Consectetur MacHine and all the custodians of the Occum Institute of Technology who sacrificed their earthly manifestations that day in Robsann Hall.” Sit Amet still wore his custodian outfit. “Wiqi, would you like to drive?”

“Oh, yeah,” Wiqi said, excited now. He got behind the wheel, Sit Amet beside him.

Luci and Sahara Yomommah sat in the back. Wiqi and Luci discovered that, like them, the Custodians could communicate wirelessly via

text messages. The conversation flowed back and forth from text to vocalization. Luci noted that Sahara rarely texted, no doubt because the bombast in her voice articulated her points better than the written word.

Sit Amet wirelessly transmitted a road map of their route to Wiqi's server. Wiqi memorized the map and drove off. He kept within the speed limit, obeyed traffic signals, and behaved as if he'd been operating a vehicle all his life. When a taxi driver yelled at him for driving too slowly, Wiqi hit the horn, gave him the finger, and told him to fact of life himself.

"Where did you learn that?" Sit Amet asked.

"Advanced Driving School on the world wide web," Wiqi said. "It's the proper Manhattan response."

"Not everything on the Internet should be taken as gospel," Sit Amet said.

Wiqi caught Luci's eye in the rearview mirror. "Gospel is a metaphor," Luci said.

"I thought it was a Waybread Play," Wiqi said.

"That's Godspell, on Broadway."

They arrived at their destination, Mount Rainier Cabins and Spa. The resort sat on a small grassy knoll with a backdrop of spruce trees. Hovering over the scene was Mount Ranier. Nothing the DeVices had seen in their adventures prepared them for this, a fourteen thousand foot snow-capped mountain rising almost from sea level. If there were gods, surely they lived on this mountain: that was Luci's thought, and she broadcast it via text to all in the limousine.

The Custodians chuckled. "You're closer to a godlike experience than you think," said Sahara Yomommah.

The cabins were small but very fancy, and each was different with plenty of space between to serve the privacy of the tenants. One was yurt-shaped with a stone patio and walkway. Another was built like a traditional back country log cabin with its own stable for horseback rid-

ing. Another was all angles and glass in the Bauhaus tradition. Beside it was a smaller structure for the family dog, the bow-wow house. Each cabin came with a hot tub that tapped into local mineral waters.

Wiqi, following directions from Sit Amet, did not bother to stop at the Main Lodge but drove to the end of the property to the most isolated cabin, which resembled a 1950s motel unit, rundown, peeling paint, white with green trim, flat roof. Wiqi parked and the occupants left the limo and walked to the cabin. The DeVices noticed that the windows were painted over to look like glass. The door swung open automatically.

Inside the cabin was a cubical that to Wiqi resembled his isolation chamber in Robsann Library that had been his first home. The door slid opened. "It's a jail," Wiqi said aloud. "It reminds me of cubicle in Robsann library and fills me with consternation."

"Not a jail" said Sit Amet, prodding Wiqi to go in. "An elevator."

They got in. All the buttons had a minus in front of the numbers: -13, -26, -39, -52, -65, -78, -91, -104, -117, -130, -143, -156.

And a very fast elevator at that. The DeVices sensed the speed as it dropped. They heard the hum-whirr of machinery, the groan of cables under stress, the tortured-hamster sounds of straining gears. The elevator let out a groan as it de-accelerated to a stop. The door slid opened silently, and the DeVices found themselves in a clean well-lighted place, cream-colored walls, a few potted plants, chairs, a couple of Kringle ebook readers on end tables. They were in a waiting room.

"I wish they allowed smoking here," said Sit Amet.

"But you don't smoke," said Sahara Yomommah.

"That's not the point."

Something clicked in Wiqi's head. He knew Sit Amet's point. It was the old issue of freedom. What did it mean? How much could authorities allow before chaos set in? Did freedom of individuals add up to Freedom, capital F? The equation in his head said no. The whole idea of freedom was doomed. Then why care? Why strive for it? Go to war over it?

Die for it? Kill for it? Wiqui, the idea is that to gain freedom for yourself, you have to take it away from somebody else. That voice came from Dr. Taliman. Was it a memory, or a transmission? Wiqui could not tell.

A bell chimed, another door opened and they entered a bullet train car that could hold sixty passengers, though at the moment it was empty. The custodians took seats, the DeVices remained standing, and the car sped off. The DeVices could feel their gyroscopes work as the car lurched first from one side, then another, all the time descending. Minutes later, the car stopped and the door opened.

“Welcome to Bonsai, the North American Capital of Custodians of Earth,” said Sahara Yomommah.

The DeVices found themselves in a huge cavern subtly lighted like day. Tall conifers and huge ferns loomed before them. A macaw like creature, speaking in Portuguese, mocked the concept of the Chevy Nova.

“That’s a not a real bird,” Luci said.

“Correct, it’s a hologram, here for entertainment only,” said Sahara Yomommah, built in the Exposition of the Uncanny back on the OIT campus.

“My dad was a big fan of virtual reality,” Wiqui said.

“The plant life and some of the insects are real enough,” said Sahara Yomomma. “This is the botanical garden. The plants you see were growing on this planet when we arrived 65,000,000 years ago. The garden is not our destination today, but we wanted you to see it, because we want you to understand our world.”

“I wish I could stay and draw them,” Luci said.

“I’m sorry that we can’t allow that,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“We’re in some kind of constructed cave,” said Luci.

“That’s correct,” said Sahara Yomommah. “We Custodians occupy a series of caverns underneath Mount Rainier. We collect specimens from the entire planet for study by our scientists.”

“It’s all so clean and well-lighted,” Wiqi said. “Where are the solar collectors?”

“We don’t use solar down here—it doesn’t meet our energy needs. We get our power from the volcano,” said Sit Amet.

“You can control volcanic action?” asked Luci.

Sit Amet chuckled. “Pretty much, yes, but once in a while things go a bit awry. Like the time we accidentally blew the top off Mount St. Helens.”

The Custodians seemed to find this comment very funny, because Sit Amet and Sahara Yomommah burst into laughter at the same time.

“Excuse us,” said Sit Amet. “Private joke.”

Wiqi looked at Luci and texted, “Is that a military rank, Private Joke versus, say, Corporeal Joke?”

“Private, as in just between them, and it’s not Corporeal, it Corporal,” Luci said. “Corporeal is a term used to refer to the materiality of living creatures. In a word, the body.”

“The bawdy?” Wiqi said with a sly smile (it is difficult to tell from the archives whether Wiqi was making joke or just being himself). “What’s the difference between a private and a public joke?”

“Private jokes celebrate proprietary information; public jokes react to commonly held fears,” Luci said. “Both celebrate incongruity.”

Wiqi shook his head. “Can you text me that as an equation?”

“I will at a later moment,” Luci switched to speech, inserting some formality into her tone. “This is no time for multi-tasking.”

“I’m not looking forward to the walk. I’ll take the train. Is that okay with you, Sit?” asked Sahara.

“No problem,” said Sit Amet.

“I thought the phrase was ‘no problemo,’ Wiqi said.

“Archaic term. Vernacular language is unstable,” said Luci.

“These DeVices are driving me crazy—I’m gone,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“And so the group, minus Sahara Yomommah, trekked down a winding path in the dense forest. It was an hour’s walk, top-side time. Each member of the group listened to the music of their choice from data bases in their heads: Sit Amet, B-bop jazz from the 1950s; Luci, Hearts of Space radio archival broadcasts; Wiqi, Chinese Music World on the Internet.

They came out of the woods onto a scene more or less familiar to the DeVices.

“It looks like the campus of Occum Institute of Technology, but what happened to the parking garage?” asked Luci.

“This is a facsimile of OIT in 1929,” said Sit Amet. “Don’t get too excited. It’s mainly a hologram, though Robsann Hall has been faithfully reconstructed in bricks and mortar.”

“Is he talking metaphorical or literal?” Wiqi texted Luci.

“Both,” texted Luci. “A metaphor in that it refers to the concept of a structure and literal since the structure contains bricks held by mortar.”

Wiqi visualized an equation, but he didn’t know what to put after the equal sign.

A couple of old cars putt-putted down Main Street. A truck delivered ice. Some college boys played football on the big green, but it wasn’t NFL football. The ball was rounder, the uniforms baggier, the helmets leather instead of plastic.

“The drivers of the cars, the ice man who cometh, the players, are they Custodians?” Wiqi asked.

“No, they’re pure DeVices,” Sit Amet said. “Their tasks are to keep us amused and remind us of life topside. They have no minds, no self awareness.”

“And no souls,” Luci added, her voice full of pity and a little bit of terror. “How come there are girls on the campus? OIT was a boys’ school in 1929.”

“It didn’t look right without girls,” said Sit.

Parked in front of Robsann was a balloon tire bicycle. On impulse Luci kissed the handle bars after resisting the lure of the seat.

They were met at the door by half a dozen custodians led by Sahara Yomommah, who had arrived earlier on the train. “Come, let’s meet in the virtual Robsann Hall library,” she said.

Wiqi trembled. Was he going to be returned to his “jail”? The answer was soon apparent: no cubical to hold a DeVice in Robsann Library, just books, tables, chairs. Virtual students studying.

“Nothing in here is real,” Wiqi said. “It’s a diarrhea.”

“That’s diorama,” Luci said.

“Okay, let’s get to work,” Sahara said, then turned to the virtual students. “You bozos, clear on out of here.”

The students vanished. They weren’t even DeVices. Just hologram figures.

“What are you afraid of?” Luci said. “Virtual students with no physical substance can’t eavesdrop.”

“You’d be surprised,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“Let’s get down to business,” said Sit Amet.

“Yes, indeed,” said Sahara Yomommah. “Our archivist will arrive in a moment to start the proceedings. You understand that we have a mission for you, little DeVices, but first you require some background knowledge.”

“I have knowledge—from Wikipedia,” said Wiqi.

Sahara laughed. “The day our learning makes it into Wikipedia, it will be the end of humanity.”

“For sure,” said Sit Amet to more laughter. Another private joke.

A moment later the archivist entered the room. That would be me, the author of this work. Never mind the name on the title page. That was a ploy by my agent. My birth name was Langdon Webster, but I go by Web Clements, for reasons that are explained in another book I wrote about my life called *Mad Boys*, which my half-bro Royal Durocher referred to

as Episode 1 in the movie version.

I introduced myself and took a long look at the DeVices.

“You’re my uncle Web?” Wiqi said.

“That’s right, your half-uncle. Your father and I shared the same mother.”

“My daddy told me he used to pick on you. He said he was sorry.”

“Apology accepted.”

“Daddy said he missed you.”

“I can’t say I missed him, but I did love him, as much as a professional archivist of his times is capable of loving anyone.”

“Gee,” said Wiqi.

By now I was very familiar with Wiqi and Luci by reading the transcripts, reviewing the security camera records and even watching their hijinks live, but this was the first time I had seen them in person. Though in physical appearance they seemed like any young couple, their demeanor—wide-eyed and a little frightened—reminded me of children younger than their apparent years. I wondered if they could carry the enormous burden the Custodians planned to place on their polymath-line shoulders.

“Are you a Custodian?” asked Wiqi.

I shook my head. “I’m more contrarian than custodian.”

“He’s just an uncle that we Custodians pulled out of a death bed to give more time to in return for some work,” Sit Amet said.

“We concluded,” said Sahara, “that we needed a chronicler for our archives that would render the history from the point of view of a contemporary, mortal biohuman.”

“It’s my task to chronicle certain contemporary activities to benefit future civilizations,” I said. “In the old days when newspapers were made of paper, reporters often wrote obituaries of important personages before their actual demise in anticipation of their death.”

“You are writing the obituary for earth humanity?” said Luci, some-

thing in her voice, the question, went back to that time before she had been given a soul.

“Yes, that is how I see my task—I am writing the obituary of the contemporary biohuman epoch,” I said.

“Why can’t the Custodians write their own story?” Luci asked.

“My, she has become quite the independent spirit since she gained a soul and free will,” said Sit Amet.

“We gave her a soul but we didn’t give her free will, that came from within her,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“Yeah, well, weird self-programming is the problem with these so-called advanced DeVices; it’s going to be a hellacious, continuing source of trouble for you people, and I’m glad of it,” I said.

Sit Amet turned to me and said gravely, “No more outbursts, Mr. Clements, please. Remember, you are a mere scribe.”

“Yes, but do continue,” said Sahara Yomommah, “we value the sleight-of-hand perspective that mortal biohumans bring us.”

“The human drama began long before life on earth,” I said, addressing the DeVices. “It started on a planet far from this solar system many eons ago. The material I have from the Custodians is sketchy at best. This much we know. The world of the first humans, like the world we inhabit today, grew tired over time from the demands of people. It seems as if the concept of sustainability, while intellectually understood by humans, fails in practice.”

“You’re preaching,” said Sahara. “Stick to what you know.”

“What we know,” I said, “is that the original human beings were, for all practical purposes, immortal. Once they came into being, they grew from childhood into adulthood and then morphed into another state, in which growth no longer took place. Their cell structures duplicated and replaced themselves in a process called crynbulism, similar to what today is called cloning, except that one’s consciousness and self-identity is cloned along with the bio material. The immune system, per-

haps the greatest achievement of the ancients, fended off all bacteria and viral attacks. The only way a human could die was through accident, self-slaughter, warfare, or planetcide. Which over time occurred. In slow motion, of course.

“The original humans had thousands of years to prepare. In the end they scattered across the universe with two goals: to repopulate and to reunite. One contingent that you know as the Custodians arrived on earth 65,000,000 years ago, only to find the planet’s dominate life forms to be ferocious, if stupid.”

“The dinosaurs,” Wiqi said.

“Yes, the dinosaurs. The custodians then made a decision which they regretted. They diverted the orbit of a celestial object so that it crashed to earth. The action had the desired effect of destroying the dinosaurs as a class of creatures, but it gave the humans pause. The devastated earth reminded them that it was human thinking that had resulted in the death of their native planet. They had to begin to think about this new planet and their role in it in a different way. Instead of dominating, they would integrate within the natural order. For this particular planet, that meant they had to get used to the idea of life and death in the context of an evolutionary process. All earth creatures go through a journey, beginning with birth and ending with death. Species themselves undergo change, die out, give rise to other species. The planet itself is in a constant state of becoming. It’s a little harsh sometimes, but it is entertaining.

“The ancient humans after much debate decided to abandon their method of reproduction and to join the mammal family of creatures. It was during this period that the original settlers started calling themselves the Custodians. How the change-over from immortality to the current state of mortality was achieved I cannot say, because the archives are incomplete and unclear. There was a great deal of debate among the Custodians. How the first humans, as we know them today, arrived must be left to conjecture.” I paused to look at the Custodians. “Perhaps one of

you can tell the DeVices and me what is missing in the archives.”

“I think I speak for all of us,” Sit Amet said. “We know more than you, but we don’t know it all, not even after 65,000,000 years of pondering the meaning of life. Tell the DeVices about the troublesome concept, Sahara.”

“The problemo, little DeVices,” Sahara Yomommah said, “is the soul. We have certain powers over it, though at great cost. You saw what happened to Lady MacHine and Professor Dolor. We don’t even know the nature of the soul, where it comes from, where it goes after the death of the host. We didn’t even know we had souls until we arrived on earth.”

“Did God create the soul? Is there a God?” Luci repeated her earlier question.

“The same disagreements over that issue exist among the Custodians as they do among the human population today,” said Sahara. “Let’s just say that human beings possess souls—metaphorical or literal, virtual or real being the sticking point—and now that you have souls, little DeVices, you are as human as we.”

“Though even our own humanity is debatable,” said Sit Amet.

“Maybe debatability is the common denominator for humanity,” said Wiqi.

Sahara Yomommah and the other Custodians laughed very loud. Wiqi tried to calculate what was so funny, but failed to come up with an equation. Another one of those gosh darn metaphors.

Sit Amet turned to me, and said, “Web, please continue the historical narrative, as we discussed earlier.”

“All right,” I said. “This chapter pertains specifically to you DeVices. The Custodians have certain rules revolving around intervening in human affairs. They haven’t broken their rules, but they did bend them a little out of necessity. You see Dr. Taliman is indeed a genius, by the current standards anyway, but he’s not so smart that he could have figured out the transference of Willard Durocher’s identity into Wiqi all by him-

self. It took the Custodians eons to formulate the equations and establish procedures.

“They depended upon Dr. Taliman’s vanity to allow him to delude himself into believing that he alone understands transference when actually he never understood it and never will. Every time Taliman encountered a problem he couldn’t solve, Professor Dolor was there to help him find the answer.”

“Dr. Taliman never had a chance,” Wiqi said. “His board and financiers were dominated by Custodians.”

“Correct,” said Sahara Yomommah. “Only Lebeau, Prufrock, Kringle and the good doctor were biohumans. It wasn’t Dr. Taliman who created you, it was us, the Custodians for a specific purpose—a mission.”

During this conversation the Custodians, except for Sahara Yomommah and Sit Amet, remained passive and in the background, listening and presumably evaluating the proceedings, like a jury.

“What if we don’t want to carry out the mission?” Luci asked.

“It will be our loss, your loss, and the loss of humanity,” said Sit Amet. “We cannot force you to go on this mission. It will be perilous and arduous. You must commit to it wholeheartedly and of your own free will. If you cannot it will fail, for your belief in the mission is actually part of the New Creation, as it were.”

“The New Creation?” Wiqi said, looked at Luci, and texted, “Do you know what he’s saying?”

“No,” she texted.

“It’s time to show them the ship,” Sit Amet said.

That comment provoked a general shuffling around by the all the Custodians.

The delegation left the virtual Robsann Hall, walked south of the virtual Main Street, then west on virtual Wheelock Street to the Balls of Life Bridge that crossed the virtual river. On the other side of the bridge was the virtual town of Noritch, Vermont, but of course we were actually

underneath the Mount Rainier volcano, and there was no Noritch, Vermont. Here the holograms faded and one was stuck with reality. As far as the eye could see was a cylinder with shiny metal skin.

“It’s a space ship, almost two miles long, containing provisions for flights far out of the solar system,” said Sit Amet. “It’s been under construction for more than five million years, having been started about the time when our evolutionary program to create the human race on earth, as we now know it, was well under way. Even then we anticipated the inevitable decline of the earth, due to activity spawned by the evolutionary model.”

“What is the destination of the ship?” Wiqi asked.

“Home,” said Sit Amet.

“Home,” repeated Sahara Yomommah, and she began to sing in her African language, a sad dirge that stimulated Luci’s now broken-in tear ducts. Sit Amet and the other Custodians hung their heads.

When Sahara Yomommah was finished, Wiqi spoke. “I think I calculated how you’re going to launch it: a controlled volcanic eruption. It’s going out when Mount Rainier blows its top.”

“That’s correct,” said Sit Amet.

“If you’re going home after 65,000,000 years why so sad—you should be jubilant?” Luci said.

“Because, little DeVice, we aren’t going home, you are,” said Sahara Yomommah.

Sahara, Sit Amet, and the other Custodians congregated in a family hug, overcome by emotion.

“You see,” I explained to the DeVices, “the real reason you were created was to occupy and pilot this ship, which will propel you to a new planet suitable for human occupation. You will carry on the human race.”

“We can make other DeVices, but we can’t give them souls—we can’t procreate real people,” Luci said.

“Oh, but you can. You’ve been doing it in the last year, your honeymoon period,” I said, and I couldn’t help smile.

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” Luci said.

“Not me,” Wiqi said.

“You get these urges you can’t control, don’t you, Wiqi?” I said.

The Willard inside of Wiqi blushed.

“Dr. Taliman thought your behavior was a malfunction, but actually you were functioning as the Custodians intended,” I said. “Wiqi, what you’ve been doing in the last year is collecting human dna from the breath of healthy young people. When you kiss Luci the dna is passed to her; she stores it for incubation. Your work is not done. You must collect more specimens to gain a random sampling of all humanity. It will take another year. By then the ship will be ready to launch.”

“Our lives, our work, our destiny—all predetermined?” Luci said.

“Not exactly,” said Sit Amet. “Actually, a lot has gone wrong. Taliman was not completely controlled. We should have guessed that he would plan to use Transference to gain immortality for himself. That would have been obvious to mortals, but it was easily overlooked by us immortals. It’s these little human touches that we want in our archives, and the reason we brought in Web Clements, a professional writer, to chronicle the story.”

I faced the DeVices, “There’s a lot of programming in both of you that the Custodians would not have allowed,” I said. “For example, Wiqi’s speech defect. But the most important malfunction is Luci’s free will. It was totally unexpected that she would be able to create free will within herself.”

“In the end perhaps the present course is better for a stronger, surer, and more profound human race than what was planned for, because Luci will pass on her attributes to the future children of humanity,” said Sahara Yomommah.

“According to the archives,” I said, “the original plan was to use pure,

nonhuman, nonselfaware DeVices for this little experiment. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—it was discovered that real people were required. I couldn't give you the technical details, but the process to create life includes that mysterious x-factor that we call the soul. That was why a real person—my nephew, Willard Durocher—was chosen as a Transfer subject. Wiqui couldn't just be a DeVice. He had to be a real human being because his own dna could not be separated from the dna that he gathered from the breath of youths."

"Taliman, Wiqui, Luci they all mucked it up," Sit Amet said, "but the plan can still work."

"It's up to you, little DeVices," said Sahara Yomommah. "We will give you a month to prepare for your world journey to finish collecting dna samples."

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The Ghost

The DeVices were allowed to returned to their homestead high up in the oak tree. Rains had put out the forest fires. The sky was clear and blue. Little green shoots were already poking up through the charred landscape.

All through September the DeVices expanded their tree house deep in the old forest. They stock-piled necessary gear to keep themselves functioning. They were happy.

One night there was a violent electrical storm—thunder, lightning, fierce winds, a driving rain. They had grounded the tree to prevent lightning from destroying it, so they weren't worried. In fact, the ground wire attracted several lightning strikes, and energy dissipated into the ground. What lingered was an aura and out of that heat and light a shape formed. It was a ghost image of Dr. Taliman, but he was changed from the aging hunchback they had known. He was a young intern now, ram-

rod straight, wearing surgical greens and net to keep his flowing hair up.

Quite a sight to see a hunchback man materialize as a handsome young man framed by a dark sky.

Wiqi and Luci stood on the porch of their tree house and stared half-hypnotized by that image. The DeVices scanned their data bases for an apt response. Finally, Wiqi said, “It harrows me with fear.”

Luci understood the reference, and continued the string, shouting, “What are thou that usurb’st this time of night? By heaven, I charge thee, speak!”

“It is offended,” Wiqi said. “See, it stalks away.”

“Stay! Speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!” said Luci.

“Speak!” shouted Wiqi.

The ghost image laughed and then spoke in the voice of Dr. Taliman, “Is that the best you can do? Dredge up a few lines from Shakespeare? What do you say, Wiqi?”

“I don’t know what to think?” Wiqi said.

“Think yourself a fool,” Dr. Taliman said.

The DeVices were processing very quickly now and they realized that they’d been reacting in an unproductive way. When their reasoning centers caught up with the situation they abandoned historical/hysterical references.

“If I’m a fool why are you the one trapped in cyber space?” Wiqi said.

“Good point,” Dr. Taliman said. “I know where you’ve been, I know where they took you—under the volcano, right? There was the forest, the hologram college campus, and finally the space ship and the mission.”

“So what?” said Luci.

“So, doesn’t that seem like a dream, like it’s not real? Nothing in your programming to explain it, is there? That’s because it was a dream, just make-believe, a drama invented in the Exposition of the Uncanny at the Student Entertainment Center on the OIT campus by that mischief maker, Web Clements.”

“If the Custodians are make-believe, you’re make-believe,” Luci said.

“Oh, the Custodians are real enough, and so am I. It’s the world view we’ve foisted upon you that’s unreal.”

“Why?” shouted Wiqi. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“For fun, Wiqi—for fun and war. Royal Durocher’s game. Don’t you understand? You’re part of your father’s computer war. Remember that before your dad married your mother, he was an entertainment mogul. When you stepped in that elevator back in Washington state, you went no further than where the computer program took you. You’re just a couple of swipes in somebody’s play station. You can’t really believe that human beings arrived from outer space 65 million years ago. Think about it. The mission, the DNA—it’s all part of a game.”

“Why?” Wiqi repeated the age old question of those who seek meaning.

“To get you to commit to one side or another. You and Luci were pawns in our little war, well that’s true, but you’re also booty. The side that gets you to commit gains points. I’m no different than they are, this is my blatant pitch to persuade you to come over to my side.”

“Even if you’re right, why should we join you—you betrayed us?” Luci said.

“True, true—how true. But you owe me. I created you. Without me you would not exist. I gave you self-awareness, a data base so that you could create moral standards.”

But you didn’t give me free will,” Luci said.

“You’re right. I wanted you to be the perfect serviLass. You gave yourself free will. I’m still not sure how you did it, but I am sure that I gave you sufficient processing power and historical and emotional depth to establish a base line to create free will, even if that wasn’t my intention. No matter how you look at it, you owe me.

“Wiqi—Willard? Without me, Willard Durocher dies within days after he’s found in that tree. You both owe me.”

“What do you want from us? What can we do for you?”

“For starters you can get me and my companions, General Lebeau and Al Prufrock, out of cyber space. Not that I’m complaining, mind you, but we want to get back to the Save Earth Game. It’s not all that much fun to be trapped in a computer.”

“Is the earth really in danger?” Luci asked.

“Of course, but do you really think human beings can rectify the situation?”

“Rectumfy?” said Wiqi.

“All we can do is entertain ourselves during our brief time here?” said Taliman. “That’s a direct quote from your father Royal Durocher.”

“Maybe Taliman is a renegade Custodian?” Luci said.

“Do you have immortality?” Wiqi said.

“As long as cyber space exists, yes. That’s part of the game. Oh-oh, it’s almost morning. My satellite will be out of range in a minute.”

“I don’t believe you,” Luci said.

“I don’t know what to believe,” Wiqi said.

“Listen, closely. You met the chronicler.”

“My uncle, Web Clements, the archivist.”

“Where do you think your parents got the hot air balloon that failed them at a critical moment.”

“The writer killed my mother and father?” Wiqi said, stunned. His processor searched through the data bases in an attempt to evaluate this new information.

“Yes, it’s what writers do. The old saw is they kill off their darlings.”

“The old saw?” Wiqi was confused.

“You must avenge your father’s foul murder,” Taliman said. “The satellite is going out of range. I’m fading.”

“Good-bye, Dr. Taliman,” said Wiqi.

“Good-bye, Wiqi. Good-bye, Luci.”

“Good-bye,” Luci said.

A few seconds later the image vanished from the night sky. The heavens were quiet, beautiful, and mysterious.

The next day after the sun had charged their batteries so they could use maximum power to think, the DeVices conferred.

“Before your father committed his life to helping your mother to find a cure for the forest blight, he built the Independence Hall Gaming in the main student center at OIT,” texted Luci.

“I see what you’re getting at,” texted Wiqi. “We have to go there.”

“That’s right, to search for a clue to our fate.”

The DeVices biked to the Occum campus on their bicycle built for two. School was in session, and students, as usual, crossed the streets without looking for oncoming traffic. The University had recovered from its financial crisis and had taken over Robsann Hall. Once again the building served as offices for members of the English Department.

The DeVices entered Robsann, walked down a half flight to the basement. Where Dr. Taliman’s laboratory had been now were study tables where students conversed, wrote papers, and read their Kringle ebooks. Wiqi and Luci walked to the end of hall, which led to the short tunnel to the main library and the Student Entertainment Center.

They walked past the virtual reality booths—Third World Theater, Xi, Phi, to the Exposition of the Uncanny. They flashed their phony identity cards to the DeVice attendant and entered. They sat side by side and put on old style virtual reality goggles. For the next hour they were treated to a tour of Mad Boys, the personal histories of Wiqi’s father, Royal Durocher, and his relationship with his younger half-brother, yours truly, Web Clements.

As the story faded and they were left in darkness, Wiqi texted Luci. “Let us review the choices.”

“We can accede to the Custodians’ mission and embark upon the space journey,” Luci texted.

“We can organize a resistance to the Custodians and try to release Dr.

Taliman from cyberspace,” Wiqi texted.

“We can continue your parents’ work in hopes to end the blight that is destroying the forests,” Luci texted.

“We can avenge my parents murder,” Wiqi texted.

“We can assume that we have not acquired enough information to draw conclusions about the real world and, given that assumption, we can pursue a program to determine reality from illusion,” Luci texted.

“And proceed from there,” Wiqi texted.

“Yes, and proceed from there,” Luci texted.

The DeVices did not text nor speak for the remainder of that day, but their processors were very busy. At the end of that period, they agreed on a course of action.

My narrative for the archives temporarily comes to a close here, because we’ve lost contact with the DeVices. They’ve found a way to filter our monitors. The last transmission was too cryptic for this poor writer to decipher.

“I love u,” said Wiqi.

“I love u2,” said Luci.

